

Subversion, Carnival and Resonance: Interpreting the Phenomenal Popularity of Ne Zha 2 from Carnival Theory

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Abstract. Under the globalised communication environment, the Chinese animated film 'Ne Zha's Magic Boy Troubles the Sea' has quickly become a global cultural carnival phenomenon by virtue of its phenomenal market performance and cultural influence. Based on Bakhtin's theory of carnival, this article explores the carnivalisation mechanism behind the phenomenal popularity of Ne Zha 2 from the three dimensions of character setting, plot expression and audience resonance. Through the construction of the marginalised identity and rebellious discourse of Ne Zha, the film has inspired strong emotional resonance among global audiences; in the process of media communication, short video platforms, secondary creation and discourse reproduction mechanisms have led to extensive audience participation in carnival communication, thus promoting the film's cross-cultural and global carnival craze. At the same time, the rebellious discourse and cultural symbols in the film are constantly deconstructed, restructured and consumed in the global dissemination, forming a global carnival community beyond the text. This not only verifies the applicability of the carnival theory in cross-cultural communication research, but also reveals the possible paths for Chinese cultural products to break down cultural barriers and go overseas through the strategy of carnivalisation in the context of globalised communication.

Keywords: Carnival Theory; Intercultural Communication; Ne Zha's Magic Boy Haunts the Sea.

During the Chinese New Year in 2025, the Chinese animated film Ne Zha 2 became a phenomenal cultural phenomenon, as it became a craze at home and abroad. The film quickly swept through social media in China, dominating the Hot 100 for a long time, and spawned a large number of secondary creations on short-form video platforms, such as character parodies, adapted limerick poems and audience interpretations[1]. This universal participation in content production reinforces the film's cultural carnival atmosphere, making it much hotter than the average commercial film.

With the worldwide release of Ne Zha 2, its overseas box office performance has also attracted widespread attention. As of 23 February 2025, the film's global box office (including pre-sales) reached RMB 13.646 billion (US\$1.91 billion), surpassing Pixar's Inside Out 2 and topping the global box office charts for animated films. This commercial success not only demonstrates the film's market influence, but also highlights its wide acceptance of cross-cultural communication. However, the phenomenal popularity of the film is not only determined by its box office performance, but also by the emotional resonance it has inspired in the global audience, creating a binge-style cultural communication effect[2].

Unlike traditional animation adaptations of myths, Ne Zha 2 is a profoundly subversive film in terms of characterisation, narrative structure and expression of values. It breaks away from the original mythological framework and constructs a highly marginalised and anti-heroic image of Ne Zha, a demonic child. The core theme of the film, 'My destiny is mine but not God's', quickly became an emotional outlet for the audience, stimulating identity resonance and social debate. Why is it that an animated film that breaks the traditional mythological narrative and challenges the authority of mainstream discourse is able to trigger a national frenzy and create a wide cross-cultural resonance? This question deserves in-depth exploration [3].

Based on Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnival Theory, this paper explores the cultural mechanism of the phenomenal popularity of Ne Zha 2 from the three dimensions of character subversion, plot carnival, and audience resonance [4]. Carnival Theory argues that carnival is essentially a dissolution and rebellion against authoritative discourse, and is a cultural strategy enacted by commoners in order to build an equal and free world. Through the structural deconstruction of the traditional mythological

narrative, the film creates a decentred carnival atmosphere, enabling the audience to reinterpret the tension between 'fate' and 'self'. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to reveal the carnival dynamics and emotional resonance mechanism behind *Ne Zha 2*, to explore the applicability of the carnival theory in the study of phenomenal films, and to provide a certain reference for the dissemination mode of contemporary Chinese cultural products [5].

1. Carnivalised Characterisation in *Ne Zha 2*

1.1 From 'Son of God' to 'Magic Child'

In traditional Chinese mythological narratives, Nezha is often portrayed as the guardian of the divine order, and his identity is inextricably linked to the Mandate of Heaven. For example, in the 'Feudal Art of the Gods', *Ne Zha* is given the sacred status of 'reincarnation of the spirit pearl', and his mission is to subdue demons and eliminate devils, as well as to support the Zhou family, reflecting the moral expectations of heroes in feudal society. However, *Nezha 2* completely deconstructs this image through identity dislocation, discourse subversion, and marginalisation, transforming Nezha from a 'divine son of heaven' to a 'social deviant'. Bakhtin argues that the core of rave culture lies in the subversion of identities, the dissolution of authority, and the reconstruction of discourse. Bakhtin believes that the core of carnival culture lies in the subversion of identity, the dissolution of authority and the reconstruction of discourse. In carnival narratives, marginalised characters often become the vehicle for challenging the mainstream order, and their deformed and grotesque images are symbolic expressions of the spirit of carnival. In *Nezha 2*, Nezha's identity is misplaced between the Spirit Pearl and the Magic Pill, and he falls from a 'son of a god' recognised by the Heavenly Court to a 'devil child', thus being stigmatised and marginalised by the society. However, this dislocation of identity does not lead to the character's demise, but rather makes him a symbol of rebellious discourse and a new cultural identity that resonates with the audience's emotions [6].

The film reinforces *Ne Zha*'s carnivalesque marginal identity through visual symbols. While *Ne Zha* in traditional myths is usually portrayed as a handsome, heroic young man, in *Ne Zha 2* his face, eyes and body are fierce and full of flames, and his image is closer to that of a grotesque, scandalised carnival figure. This visual 'de-sacralisation' is in line with Bakhtin's definition of the 'carnival character', which means that carnival characters usually rebel against the mainstream discourse in a scandalous, grotesque, and marginalised way, and manifest the spirit of carnival by disrupting the established order.

In addition, the mismatch of identities further enhances the carnivalesque nature of the characters. In *Nezha 2*, Nezha was originally a 'reincarnation of a spirit pearl' but became a 'demon child' due to the introduction of magic pills, and his identity fluctuates between 'god' and 'demon'. The identity of the character is in between 'God' and 'Devil'. This dislocation not only enables the character to gain the audience's sympathy on an emotional level, but also gives the character a stronger narrative tension of carnival - reinventing himself in the process of rebellion, and ultimately breaking the established framework of myths and realising the reconstruction of his identity.

1.2 From 'Divine Mastery' to 'Self-Mastery'

In traditional mythology, the identity and fate of characters are often shaped by the logic of heavenly destiny. In the case of 'The Feudal Reign of the Gods', *Ne Zha*'s every move is within the arrangements of the Heavenly Court. Even if he kills himself for disobeying his father's authority, he has to return to the established order through his lotus incarnation. In *Ne Zha 2*, however, the situation is very different. It goes in the opposite direction, deconstructing the logic of 'heavenly order' and giving *Ne Zha* the power to speak on his own, transforming him into the representative of rebellion in rave culture. Nezha has become a representative of rebellion in the carnival culture.

In the film, lines like 'My fate is my own, not God's' and 'So what if I'm a devil' are a positive impact on the traditional mythological view of fate. These carnivalesque discourses are not only a rejection of the mythological fatalism of 'heaven's will cannot be disobeyed', but also a symbolic

breaking down of the hierarchical discourse system, with an emphasis on the re-establishment of the individual's subjectivity. Carnival culture often employs identity reversal and discourse inversion to dissolve the mainstream order and give those marginalised individuals the opportunity to make their voices heard. Nezha's discourse of 'self-mastery' is a perfect fit for this carnival mechanism, which, while subverting the original mythological structure, also allows the individual to re-establish his or her right to speak.

This shift in discourse is also evident in the film's narrative. For example, when Nezha encounters social rejection, he does not seek recognition from Heaven, but rather reinvents his identity through his own actions. This process not only demonstrates identity rebellion at the character level, but also symbolises the audience's psychological struggle against the inherent identity discipline when watching the film. Carnival theory suggests that carnivals are not just a textual phenomenon, but also a psycho-social phenomenon, which allows the audience to release their emotions and realise their self-identity through the experience of carnivals by dismantling the established authority. From this point of view, the 'self-mastery' discourse in *Ne Zha 2* is not only a subversion of traditional myths, but also a response to the identity anxiety of modern audiences.

2. Narrative Perversity and Structural Deconstruction in *Ne Zha 2*

2.1 Breaking down linear logic and dissolving traditional cause and effect

Traditional mythological narratives generally follow linear time and cause-and-effect logic, with the characters developing according to their established identities and returning to order in the end, thus upholding the authority of mainstream culture. *Ne Zha 2*, however, breaks away from this traditional pattern by constructing an ecstatic narrative mechanism through the use of temporal dislocation and the deconstruction of cause and effect. In this film, this carnivalesque character is mainly reflected in two aspects: one is the reversal of time, and the other is the misrepresentation of cause and effect.

Let's start with the time reversal. Through the setting of the 'misplaced spirit beads and magic pills', the film dissolves the traditional mythological chain of cause and effect in which 'fate is determined by heaven'. In the orthodox mythological narrative, *Ne Zha*, as the reincarnation of the 'Spirit Pearl,' is tasked from the outset with the mission of protecting the country and the people by subduing demons and eliminating devils, and his development follows the fixed path of good triumphing over evil. But in *Ne Zha 2*, things take a 180-degree turn. Because of the misalignment of his spirit bead and magic pill, Nezha is identified by the Heavenly Court as a 'demonic child', and is rejected and labelled as a bad person in the process of growing up. Such a setting not only challenges the notion that 'Heaven's destiny dominates everything', but also fills *Ne Zha*'s journey of growth with a sense of absurdity brought about by his misplaced identity. This prompts the audience to question the established value system, which in turn leads to an emotional catharsis. A few more words on causal misdirection. The film dissolves the moral causal logic of traditional narratives. Traditional mythological narratives place special emphasis on karma, as in the saying 'no good deed goes unpunished, no evil deed goes unpunished', with the aim of maintaining the moral order of society. But in *Ne Zha 2*, this law of cause and effect is completely subverted. For example, although Nezha is labelled as a 'demonic child', he does not fall into depravity because of his so-called 'demonic nature', but instead achieves self-redemption by relying on his own tenacious will to change his destiny against the will of heaven; and there are also characters such as Taiyi Zhenzhen, and the son of the Dragon King, who have a double reversal of identity and morality, breaking the dichotomy of good and evil in traditional myths. This non-linear, de-moralised narrative not only undermines the original authority of moral judgement, but also greatly enhances the carnival atmosphere of the film, allowing the audience to resonate with their identities and obtain spiritual release in the chaotic narrative.

2.2 Reversal of order and discourse

In traditional mythological storytelling, the plot tends to follow a linear timeline, strictly following the logic of cause and effect. Characters are given a fixed identity from the very beginning of the story, and the plot develops according to that identity, eventually returning to a certain order, thus solidifying the authority of mainstream culture. *Ne Zha 2*, however, breaks away from this long-standing tradition. It cleverly employs the techniques of temporal dislocation and causal deconstruction to create a narrative mechanism that is full of carnivalesque meaning. The carnivalesque nature of the film focuses on two key aspects: one is the reversal of time, and the other is the misinterpretation of cause and effect.

Let's talk about the unique feature of the reversal of time. With the creative setting of the 'misplaced Spirit Pearl and Demon Pill', the film cuts through the traditional mythological chain of 'heaven's will determines destiny'. In previous versions of orthodox mythological narratives, *Ne Zha*, as the reincarnation of the Spirit Pearl, was tasked with the sacred mission of fighting demons and defending the country, and his path of development seemed to be pre-determined, following a fixed pattern in which good would always triumph over evil. But in *Ne Zha 2*, the situation has changed drastically. As a result of the accidental misplacement of the Spirit Pearl and the Magic Pill, *Nezha* is characterised by the Heavenly Court as a 'demon child', and is rejected by those around him and relentlessly labelled as a negative person. Such a setting not only challenges the traditional notion that 'Heaven rules all', but also makes *Ne Zha*'s entire journey full of absurdity due to the huge mismatch in his identity. As a result, the audience is naturally prompted to question the established value system, which in turn leads to a carnival-like catharsis on an emotional level.

Let's move on to the narrative highlight of causality. The film successfully dissolves the logic of moral cause and effect upheld by traditional narratives. Traditional mythological narratives have always valued karma, saying that 'no good deed goes unpunished and no evil deed goes unpunished', as a means of maintaining moral order in society. But in *Ne Zha 2*, this well-known law of karma is completely reversed. *Nezha*, despite being labelled as a 'demonic child', does not fall from grace because of his so-called 'demonic nature', but instead redeems himself through his own strong will to change his fate against the odds. There are also characters such as *Taiyi Zhenzhen* and the son of the Dragon King, who have a double reversal of identity and morality, breaking the traditional mythological dichotomy between good and evil. This kind of non-linear narrative that abandons traditional moral concepts not only weakens the authority of the original moral judgement, but also greatly strengthens the overall carnival atmosphere of the film, allowing the audience to develop a strong sense of identity and achieve a complete release of the spiritual dimension in this seemingly chaotic narrative rhythm.

3. The Psychological Dynamics of the Global Craze of *Ne Zha 2*

3.1 Emotional catharsis mechanisms of rebellious discourse

Carnival culture has always relied on the subversion of mainstream discourse, allowing individuals to release their emotions at a time of rebellion. Take '*Nezha 2*' for example, the discourse system it creates, 'My destiny is mine but not God's', is a blatant challenge to the theory of destiny, which greatly strengthens the subjectivity of the individual, and this kind of carnival-like expression makes the audience feel a strong sense of rebellion and identity when they watch the film.

The film is superbly emotional because it is a clever metaphor for the dilemmas in reality. In our modern society, the problems of identity regulation, class solidification and power constraints are everywhere. *Nezha*'s spirit of defiance is like a symbolic outlet for the audience, through which the anxieties and repressions of everyone can be projected and released. This mode of individual resistance, followed by collective resonance, and finally emotional catharsis, has become a key mechanism for the film's global ecstasy effect.

In addition, the film adopts a non-linear narrative and a counter-conventional plot, which pushes the carnival atmosphere to a climax. As Nezha challenges authority, refuses to obey, and teases those rules and regulations, the viewer is left with a brief sense of freedom that comes with the deconstruction of order.

3.2 Identity Mechanisms for Identity Resonance

In carnival culture, marginalised characters often become objects of emotional identification for the audience. Nezha, for example, was ostracised for a long time because of his status as a 'demon child'. His upbringing has become a key point of identity resonance for audiences around the world.

The marginalised image of Ne Zha actually reflects some of the structural problems that exist in contemporary society, such as the phenomenon of social exclusion, the common anxiety about identity, and the problem of class solidification. Individuals who are marginalised in society, such as ethnic minorities and young people at the bottom of the social ladder, find in Ne Zha's journey of defiance a way to project their own emotions, and thus create emotional resonance. This mechanism of individual identification and then identity resonance makes the audience no longer just passive recipients of the story, but rather active participants in the carnival culture. In addition, the film's subversion of character identity further highlights the decentralised nature of rave culture. In terms of character construction, it breaks the either/or dichotomy of traditional mythological narratives, giving dominance to individuals who were originally on the periphery and challenging the original identity hierarchy. Moreover, the characters in the film have strong cross-cultural adaptability, and viewers from different cultural backgrounds can project their own experiences onto the characters, thus creating the effect of identity resonance on a global scale.

3.3 Dissemination mechanisms of group orgies

Carnival culture doesn't just affect the emotions of individuals, it also spreads socially and creates an atmosphere of communal revelry. In the case of Ne Zha 2's global spread, what started out as a personal feeling of the audience watching the film has been magnified and turned into a force that can mobilise the emotions of a large group of people.

Social media nowadays offers so many new ways for the audience to participate in this carnival. People are making short videos of second takes, parodying characters from the film, and constantly refurbishing classic quotes from the film. For example, the phrase 'I am what I want to be' is not just a line from a film anymore, but has been adapted all over the globe with all kinds of new sayings. In this way, what was originally a resonance in the heart of an individual is all of a sudden amplified into a group of people in a feverish emotional frenzy.

At the same time, the current media environment has also allowed rave culture to spread faster and wider. On platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Weibo, the audience's secondary creation has long broken through the small space of the cinema, allowing the film to enter the large space of different cultural exchanges. This kind of user-driven carnival-style communication makes the audience no longer just watch and consume the content, but also become the protagonist of cultural re-creation. This coincides with Bakhtin's theory of carnival, in which the discourse of carnival is dismantled and reshaped over and over again with the participation of the audience, and finally becomes a big cultural carnival scene in which the whole world can participate together.

It seems that the global success of Ne Zha - The Descent of Nezha is not just about the film making a lot of money, but also about how powerful rave culture is in film and television communication nowadays. From Bakhtin's theory of rave, we can see that the film has managed to thrill audiences around the world by portraying rave-loving characters, telling unconventional stories, and creating empathy among the audience, creating a cross-cultural rave craze. Carnival culture is more than just a storytelling device; it reflects a psycho-social phenomenon. When viewers watch a film, they express their emotions through the defiance of the characters, get comforted by the identity of the characters, and then rely on social platforms to let everyone revel in the film. At this point, the film is not just for entertainment, but also an important vehicle for carrying cultural emotions. The success

of *Ne Zha 2* shows that the use of carnival culture in film and television creativity can not only make the audience's personal emotional experience stronger, but also break down the barriers between cultures and create an emotional space that resonates with everyone on a global scale. In the future, if we want to study how carnival theory can be used in film and television, we can look at how changes in the media environment affect the effects of carnival, and how carnival narratives can be reconstructed in different cultural environments to create meaningful content.

4. Summary

Ne Zha - The Descent of the Demon Child has created a global carnival with its unique charm. Based on Bakhtin's theory of carnival, its success can be traced. In terms of characterisation, Nezha is transformed from a 'son of God' to a 'devil child', and from a 'master of heaven' to a 'master of self'. 'The double subversion of identity and discourse is in line with the core of carnival culture, and triggers the audience's in-depth thinking and strong identification with individual subjectivity. At the narrative level, the film breaks the linear logic and traditional cause and effect, inverts time, causes and effects, subverts the order, reverses the discourse, builds a carnival narrative, weakens the authority of moral judgement, and gives the audience an absurd and novel experience and spiritual release.

In terms of the psychological motivation of the global craze, its rebellious discourse provides audiences with an outlet for emotional catharsis, maps out real-life dilemmas, and stimulates individual resistance and collective empathy. The image of the marginalised Nezha reflects the difficulties of contemporary society, prompting individuals from different cultural backgrounds and marginalised societies to find a point of emotional projection and form an identity resonance. Social media facilitates the dissemination of group revelry, and secondary creation and discourse derivation allow the film to break through the cinema's limitations and enter the cross-cultural space, transforming the audience from consumers of content into the main body of cultural reproduction, and ultimately forming a globally shared cultural revelry phenomenon. *Ne Zha 2* is not only a masterpiece of film and television, but also a valuable example of carnivalisation strategy for Chinese cultural products going overseas.

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