From Patricide and Child God to Revolutionary Martyr and Filial Son: Changing Ideological Representations of Nezha in Two Chinese Animated Films

by

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Abstract

Through a comparative close reading of four Chinese animated films adapted from the story of Nezha, a Chinese patricide and child god best known from the Ming dynasty novel *Creations of the Gods*, this study examines how animated films about Nezha reflect changing ideologies about rebelliousness under the rule of Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping, two patriarchal leaders considered to be the most authoritarian in China after 1949. Employing two major approaches, this thesis firstly analyzes the films, *Havoc in Heaven* (1986), *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979), *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019) and *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021), in relation to their cultural-political background and the dominant ideologies of Mao's and Xi's periods of rule respectively, and secondly it observes the films through the lens of Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary society. I argue that Nezha's rebelliousness serves as a form of disguised discipline of youth by the governments of both eras.

The mainstream value of Mao's era (1949-1976) called for youth to leave their biological families and join the proletarian revolution. This is reflected in such films as *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* as Nezha's break with his biological father, his union with his master, and his anarchist violence against class enemies. *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* offers Nezha a certain degree of subjectivity and autonomy to withdraw from society through violent suicide scenes. The film's symbolic simplistic binary serves as a political metaphor that challenges the propaganda of the official ideology and offers a potential avenue for resistance reading beyond the film text.

The official ideology of Xi's era (2012-present), which promotes a revival of

Confucian filiality and calls on singletons to be good children who love their parents and to be socialized into society, is reflected in films of the era as the fundamental conflicts between father and son being weakened into a lovely misunderstanding, as well as Nezha's quarantine in continuous disciplinary enclosures such as family and school. In contrast with the films of the Maoist era, *Nezha: Birth of The Demon Child* weakens its dictatorial, patriarchal figures and all the fundamental conflicts, disguising Nezha's correction and socialization as a rebellion against his evil nature and transforming Nezha's struggles from a social issue about discrimination to a personal problem of a male only child in a modern middle-class Chinese urban family. The Xi-era film therefore eliminating the possibility of resistant reading.

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I. Introduction

In 2006, the Chinese metal-rock band Miserable Faith 痛仰 (*tongyang*) released an EP titled *Bu* (不, no) .[1] On the cover of the EP, a cartoonish child is swinging a sword and killing himself. He has two hair buns on his head, which was a common hairstyle for children in ancient China. His childish face is androgynous, with sharp, hanging eyes and a tight frown displaying a painful and determined expression. In fact, this image has not only appeared on several album covers by Miserable Faith but is also the band's logo. The image comes from a 1979 animated film made by The Shanghai Animation Film Studio (SAFS): *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (哪吒闹海, Nezha naohai, hereafter *Nezha Conquers*).[2] The child who wields a sword and commits suicide is the famous child god of classical Chinese mythology, Nezha (哪吒, nezha).

Figure 1.1: The album cover of *No* (*Bu*, 不).

Coincidentally, from 2006 to 2007, an underground indie rock band named Naza

[1] Miserable Faith 痛仰, "Bu 不 [no]," qingnian wenhua 青年文化, 2006, compact disc.

[2] *Nezha Naohai* 哪吒闹海 [Nezha Conquers the Dragon King], directed by Shuchen Wang 王树忱, and Jingda Xu 徐景达, Dingxian Yan 严定宪 (Shanghai: Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1979).

(哪吒, nezha) appeared in Beijing. In "*Naohai* (闹海, to stir up the sea)," one of the most famous songs of the band, which was as young and short-lived as Nezha, a line from the 1979 film is used. The seven-year-old Nezha presses the Third Prince of Dragon King to the ground, scolding in a naive and childish voice: "I am going to pull your tendons. Let's see if you still can hurt people (我抽你的筋，看你还害人不)!"[3] The image of the child god repeatedly appearing in Chinese rock music, together with the 1979 animated film of SAFS, profoundly affected the cognition of Nezha for the Chinese young generation born in the 1980s and 1990s. In Chinese pop culture, Nezha has become a symbol of rebelliousness and the spiritual totem of many young people who want to fight against repression by patriarchal authorities. When Nezha is mentioned, people always think of the young and angry face, the cold sword stained with blood, and the child who committed suicide to defend his faith. It seems like no one in the world can discipline him.

[3] Naza 哪吒, "Naohai 闹海," track 7 on *Outside the Door* 他在时间门外, 2012, compact disc.

Figure 1.2: The French version poster of *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*.

Why is Nezha so closely associated with the spirit of rebellion? Why would a seven-year-old commit suicide? The answer can be found in two crucial features of his most famous mythology: suicide and patricide. In the most widely circulated literary version of Nezha's story, a Ming dynasty (1368-1644) novel *Fengshen Yanyi* (封神演义, Creation of the Gods), Nezha kills the third son of the Dragon King, who therefore demands that Nezha's parents, General Li Jing (李靖) and his wife, pay with their lives. Nezha cuts his own bones and flesh to return them to his parents, severing his blood ties with them and saving their lives by sacrificing his own. After his master Taiyi Zhenren (太乙真人) revives him with a lotus, he hunts down his father, who had attempted to prevent his resurrection.[4] Due to this astonishing patricide, some scholars consider Nezha to be the Chinese Oedipus.[5] However, unlike in the Oedipus

[4] Zhonglin Xu, *Creation of the Gods* Fengshen yanyi 封神演义, first ed, trans. Zhizhong Gu (Beijing: New World Press, 2000).

[5] Meir Shahar, *Oedipal God: the Chinese Nezha and His Indian origins* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), 38-58.

story from ancient Greece, which heavily emphasizes sexuality, in the Chinese story, the influence of the mother is significantly weaker, and all conflicts are built on the mutual hatred between the son and the father. Patricide, which is an absolute taboo in Confucian patriarchal filial piety and is one of the most violent forms of direct rebellion against patriarchal authority, is embodied in the seven-year-old Nezha. It is not surprising that Nezha became a symbol of rebellion against patriarchy.

A. Research Questions and Statement

As a child god, Nezha has been considered one of the most rebellious characters in Chinese mythology, literature and pop culture for centuries. With its elements of suicide and patricidal drama, his story clearly tells people who have suffered oppression as a result of Confucian filial piety that life is their very own and that fathers can be killed. Much of the importance of Nezha's image comes from his status as a child. His story takes place between a son and his father. In China the father-son relationship is seen as a metaphor for the relationship between king and subject, the ruler and the ruled. Thus, whoever sees the story from Nezha's perspective and empathizes with Nezha must firstly identify with the position of an oppressed son in a Confucian patriarchal relationship. Such a reading itself expresses bottom-up rebellion and threatens anyone who sits in the father’s position.

Due to his child identity and his being one of the most famous child figures in classical Chinese literature, Nezha is often used as the protagonist of animated films targeting a child audience. However, here is where conflicts arise. From the very

beginning, Chinese animation has been tasked with educational and propaganda functions.[6] As Wan Laiming (万籁鸣, 1900-1997), the first Chinese animation director, said: “Our animation went beyond entertainment the moment it was born. From the very beginning, it served the needs of national salvation in real life.”[7] This view is in line with Mao Zedong's (毛泽东, 1893-1976) position in his Yan’an talks on literature and art, and the view became an important feature of socialist Chinese cinema between 1949 and late 1970s.[8] The propaganda function of Chinese animation is reflected in the fact that it always follows and represents the dominant ideology of the times promoted by the government. In the Maoist era, when SAFS was the only animation studio in the country, the production of Chinese animation was directly controlled by the government. Thus, the views in SAFS films can be considered as propagandistic representations of social norms and values. In the period of the 1950s through the1970s, and especially during the Cultural Revolution, any art or artist questioning the ruling ideology would face the danger of being severely criticized and persecuted. Since the period of economic reform that started at the end of 1978, although Chinese artworks began to shift and join the capitalist market economy, they have remained under strict censorship by the government. Works that stand against the official ideology cannot be publicly distributed in China on a large

[6] These features also show in Chris Berry’s observation of Chinese film from 1949 to 1976. Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Routledge,2004), 24.

[7] Daisy Yan Du, *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s-1970s* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019), 43.

[8] Since its publication in 1942, Mao's Yan’an talks has been promoted as the CCP's official policy on Chinese literature and art, especially gaining prominence during the Cultural Revolution. Its emphasis on art in the service of the revolution and artists in the service of the people strongly influenced the production of Mao-era artworks. Bonnie S. McDougall, ed., *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: A Translation of the1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1980), 3-42.

scale, let alone ones that endorse the theme of child suicide and patricide, which is considered disharmonious and directly threatening to the ruling regime. The second function of Chinese animation, education, is reflected in the fact that it mainly targets a child audience. Thus, the themes and stories in animated films are required to convey the society's standards and expectations of a good child, even if they differ from time to time. In terms of these two functions, we can consider mainstream animated films as a carrier of official discipline. Such a feature is clearly in strong conflict with the theme of bottom-up rebellion against patriarchal authority represented by Nezha's story.

However, two of the most influential Nezha adaptations in Chinese animated cinema emerged during precisely two historical periods of the People's Republic of China (PRC) which have had the highest political repression and the most patriarchal ruling figures since 1949. The two films are *Nezha Conquers*, from Mao Zedong's China which started from his proclamation of the founding of the PRC in 1949 to his death in 1976; and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (哪吒之魔童降世, Nezha zhi motong jiangshi, hereinafter *Demon Child*) (2019), from Xi Jinping's (习近平, 1953-present) China which started from his becoming the General Secretary of the CCP in 2019 to the present.[9] Both films achieved great success among Chinese audiences. *Nezha Conquers* is considered one of the artistic pinnacles of Chinese animated films,

[9] *Nezha zhi Motong Jiangshi* 哪吒之魔童降世 [Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child], directed by Jiaozi 饺子 (Horgos Coloroom Pictures Co., Ltd, 2019). It should be noted that although *Nezha Conquers* was released three years after Mao's death in 1976, the filmmaking started in Mao's time and was completed under the influence of Maoist ideology, as introduced in Chapter One. The economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) had just begun, and it took until the early 1980s to transform China from Maoism. Therefore, the film should be considered as a product of Maoist China.

becoming the collective memory of Nezha for a generation of Chinese. *Demon Child* went even further to become the newest box office champion of Chinese animated films.[10] More importantly, both films have been endorsed and supported by the government as positive examples of promoting Chinese animation and culture. The China Film Administration even organized a meeting to learn from the success of *Demon Child*.[11]

Why did a story about child suicide and patricide, with its theme of resistance to patriarchal oppression, emerge in the two most patriarchal and authoritarian eras since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), not only becoming popular with audiences but also being honored by the government? How was Nezha's violent and tragic story of rebellion in *Fengshen Yanyi* remade in animated films targeting children in different eras? How were these changes related to the social context and ideology of the two times? What elements in the films made the government endorse them? Most fundamentally, in the two animated films rooted deeply in the mainstream ideologies of two patriarchal and authoritarian eras, what exactly is Nezha rebelling against?

Through a comparative close reading of the two most successful Nezha animated films of Mao's and Xi's eras respectively that is inspired by Michel Foucault's theory

[10] Yijun Yin, "Animated Film About Cheeky Kid with Powers Breaks Records," *Sixthtone*, July 30, 2019, https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1004366.

[11] Shijue Wangluo 视觉网络, "Guojia dianying ju zhaokai Nezha yantaohui, zhuanjia reyi chenggong jingyan 国家电影局召开《哪吒》研讨会，专家热议成功经验 [China Film Administration held a seminar on *Nezha* and experts discussed the success]," last modified August 24, 2019, https://www.sohu.com/a/336111630_120279447.

of disciplinary society in his study of the French penal system and the changing forms of power in society, I argue that in the Nezha films in both eras, Nezha's rebelliousness is a disguised form of disciplining youth. The Maoist government called for youth to leave their biological families and join the proletarian revolution. This is reflected in films as Nezha's break with his biological father and the union with his master, as well as in anarchist violence against class enemies. The values of Xi's era call on singletons to be good children who love their parents and to be socialized into the community. This is reflected in the films by the weakening of the fundamental conflict between father and son into a lovely misunderstanding and by Nezha's quarantine in continuous disciplinary enclosures. However, the 1979 Nezha film gives Nezha the subjectivity and autonomy to withdraw from society through violent suicide scenes. Its symbolic simplistic binary serves as a political metaphor providing a potential of resistance outside of the film text and thus threatens social discipline. By weakening the dictatorial patriarchal figures and all the fundamental conflicts, the 2019 Nezha film individualizes Nezha's struggles and therefore eliminates the possibility of a resistant reading.

B. State of the Field

1. Chinese Animation

Compared to the rich scholarship on Chinese cinema, the study of Chinese animated films is a relatively young and developing field. From the beginning of the 21st century, scholars began to focus on Chinese animation, mostly with a historical

approach. As Chinese animation developed in the second decade, it attracted more specific studies from different disciplines. Some studies focus on the general history of Chinese animation. In 2001, David Ehrlich presented a history of Chinese animation from the 1920s to the 1990s, with interviews of important Chinese animated filmmakers such as Te Wei (特伟, 1915-2010) and Xu Jingda (徐景达, 1934-1987). It is one of the most influential earlier academic studies introducing Chinese animated film history.[12] Rolf Giesen took a decade-by-decade look at the most important Chinese animated works from 1922 to 2012, providing synopses, documentation of commissions, as well as summary filmmaking information.[13] Sun Lijun, Shi Yi, and Li Junting divided Chinese animation from the 1920s to the 21st century into six historical stages, introducing representative works, industry models, aesthetic features, and sociohistorical backgrounds of each period.[14]

The study of Chinese animation films in the past two decades can be divided into two major perspectives, with the 1978 Chinese economic reform as the boundary. One perspective focuses on Chinese animation during the state-run film period from the 1920s to the late 1970s. SAFS, the only animation film studio in China before the 1980s, with its fine-art artistic expression known for its national style, represents the golden age of Chinese animation because of its high artistic value. Its historical background, which is closely linked to the Cultural Revolution, therefore became the

[12] David Ehrlich, "Animation in China," in *Animation in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. John A. Lent (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 7-32.

[13] Rolf Giesen, *Chinese Animation: A History and Filmography, 1922-2012* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015).

[14] Sun Lijun, ed., *The History of Chinese Animation I,* trans. Shi Yi, and Li Junting (New York: Routledge, 2020); Sun Lijun, ed., *The History of Chinese Animation II,* trans. Shi Yi, and Li Junting (New York: Routledge, 2020).

focus of Chinese animation studies. Daisy Yan Du is one of the most significant scholars studying Chinese animation of this period. Her 2019 book discusses the development of Chinese animation from the 1940s-1970s in terms of the historical context of World War II and the Cultural Revolution, policies towards animation films, social ideology and aesthetics.[15] Her 2022 book is a volume of interviews with former important filmmakers of SAFS, providing interpretations and experiences of Chinese animation in the 20th century socialist period from the perspective of filmmakers rather than scholars.[16] Sean Macdonald also focuses on animations in socialist China. His major works include the analysis of films from SAFS within the context of the Cultural Revolution, and he proposes the concept of scar animation.[17] Focusing on *meishu* (美术, fine art) films, Wu Weihua illustrates how the nationalist style of *meishu* films produced national identity by examining the aesthetics of Chinese animated films during the socialist period.[18]

Another perspective focuses on the development of more contemporary Chinese animation after the 1978 Chinese economic reform. Wu has introduced the industrial production model of Chinese animation in the free market and internet era. He has also discussed the topics of flash animation and cyber practices of audiences in the digital era, transformation of art styles in the commercial era, independent animation

[15] Du, *Animated Encounters*.

[16] Daisy Yan. Du, ed., *Chinese Animation and Socialism: From Animators 'Perspectives* (Boston: Brill, 2022).

[17] Sean Macdonald, *Animation in China: History, Aesthetics, Media* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Sean Macdonald, "Animation as Intertextual Cinema: Nezha Naohai (Nezha Conquers the Dragon King)," *Animation* 10, no. 3, (2015): 205–221, https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847715605608.

[18] Weihua Wu, "In memory of meishu film: catachresis and metaphor in theorizing Chinese animation." *Animation* 4, no. 1 (2009): 31-54, https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847708099741.

and so on.[19] Shaopeng Chen examines Chinese animated films after the shift from state-run production to the free market, analyzing the new characteristics of Chinese animated films in the commercial era and how they balance Chinese characteristics with challenges to Hollywood and Japanese animation in the era of globalization.[20]

By the second decade of the 21st century, the study of Chinese animated films had attracted scholars from more disciplines and with different perspectives. In 2017, *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* published two issues on Chinese animated films, containing studies on different periods and themes of Chinese animated films from historical, aesthetic, and technical perspectives. These studies represent, to some extent, the diversity of Chinese animation studies today.[21]

2. Studies of Nezha Films

Nezha animated films are some of the most studied Chinese animated films. Until 2021, research on Nezha animated films mainly focused on SAFS's *Nezha Conquers*. Macdonald and Wu both related the violent scenes in the film to the cultural context of the Maoist era.[22] In July 2019, a new Nezha animated film, *Demon Child*, was released and eventually became the new box office champion of Chinese animated films, sparking academic interest. A series of studies on Nezha animated films were published starting in 2021. Some studies focused solely on the

[19] Weihua Wu, *Chinese Animation, Creative Industries Digital Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
[20] Shaopeng Chen, *The New Generation in Chinese Animation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).
[21] *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 11, no. 1 (2017), https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rjcc20/11/2?nav=tocList.; *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 11, no. 2 (2017), https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rjcc20/11/2?nav=tocList.
[22] Sean Macdonald, "Nezha naohai (Nezha Conquers the Dragon King): Scar animation and an ending" in *Animation in China: History, Aesthetics, Media* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 136-173; Weihua Wu, "Catachresis and metaphor in theorizing Chinese animation" in *Chinese Animation, Creative Industries Digital Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2018) 11-44.

2019 film. Shih-Wen Chen and Sin Wen Lau argue that the new Nezha remaking represents a new image for the contemporary Chinese child who seeks a balance between individual desires and social expectations while pursuing control of their future instead of obeying adult authority.[23] Thomas William Whyke, Joaquin Lopez Mugica, and Melissa Shani Brown examine the narrative and aesthetics of *Demon Child*, demonstrate how the film developed the concept of "national style" and question the neutrality of the "Chineseness".[24]

Several studies have conducted a comparative analysis of the two Nezha films within a broader context. Ni Fan examines the development of Nezha's image in three animated films from 1961 to 2019, arguing that the aesthetics and techniques of Chinese animated films shifted from a national aesthetic to an imitation of Hollywood methods.[25] Jing Jin and Cathy Yue Wang focus on Nezha's subjectivities in three Chinese animations from 1979 to 2019, arguing the development of Nezha's images represents the subjectivity of Chinese youth in different socialist and post-socialist eras.[26] Whyke and Mugica examine the famous Nezha figures in three Chinese animated films in 1979, 2019 and 2021, arguing that Nezha's remaking in Chinese animated films represent the call for a "traditional heroic image" in different eras.[27]

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[23] Shih-Wen Chen and Sin Wen Lau,"The New Chinese Individual: Confronting the Divided Self in Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child," *Asian Studies Review* (2021): 1-16.

[24] Thomas William Whyke, Joaquin Lopez Mugica, and Melissa Shani Brown, "Contemporizing the National Style in Chinese Animation: The Case of Nezha (2019)," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 16, no. 3 (November 1, 2021): 157–74.

[25] Ni Fan, "Ne Zha's Image Transformation in Chinese Animation Cinema (1961–2019)," *Film, Fashion & Consumption* 10, no. 1 (2021): 277–98.

[26] Jing Jin and Cathy Yue Wang, "Taming the Rebellious Child: The Adaptation of Nezha in Three Chinese Animations of the Socialist and Post-Socialist Eras," *Children's Literature in Education: An International Quarterly* (2023): 39–54.

[27] Thomas William Whyke and Joaquin Lopez Mugica. "Calling for a Hero: The Displacement of the Nezha

These studies all place Nezha's animated adaptations in their corresponding historical contexts, focusing no longer only on the art style, but more on the ideologies, examining the different cultural issues of the times represented by the Nezha remakes.

3. Studies of Nezha Literature

In addition to the studies of Chinese animated films and Nezha adaptations, research on Nezha literature also offers insight for this study. Among classical Chinese literature, *Fengshen Yanyi* and *Journey to the West* (西游记, *Xiyouji*) provide the most influential depictions of Nezha's images and stories. *Journey to the West* provided the original text of the SAFS film *Havoc in Heaven* (大闹天宫, *Danao tiangong*, 1961), in which Nezha had his debut in Chinese animation. *Fengshen Yanyi* is considered the most significant source of the literary image of Nezha, for it provided the most detailed portrayal of Nezha's life and death as well as his relationship with the father Li Jing. It is the literary source of all four Nezha adaptations this study analyzes, which are *Nezha Conquers*, *Demon Child* and *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (新神榜：哪吒重生, *Xinshenbang: Nezha chongsheng*, hereafter *New Gods*) (2021).[28]

For a long time, Nezha literature has attracted the attention of scholars in several fields, including literature and sociology. In English-language scholarship on the

Archetypal Image from Chinese Animated Film Nezha Naohai (1979) to New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021)," *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 15（2002): 389-409.

[28] *Danao Tiangong* 大闹天宫 [Havoc in Heaven], directed by Laiming Wan 万籁鸣 and Tang Cheng 唐澄, dirs. (Shanghai: Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1961); *Xin Shenbang: Nezha Chongsheng* 新神榜：哪吒重生 [New Gods: Nezha Reborn], directed by Ji Zhao 赵霁 (Light Chaser Animation Studios, 2021).

literary portrayal of Nezha, one of the most prominent scholars is Paul Steven Sangren, who examined the story of Nezha in *Fengshen Yanyi* with anthropological and psychoanalytic approaches, analyzing the traditional Chinese family relationships, particularly the father-son relationships and filial piety discipline. He argues that there is an Oedipal tension between father and son in the Chinese family represented by Nezha's story.[29] Another important scholar in this field is Meir Shahar, who traces the Hindu origins of Nezha. Using a Freudian psychoanalytic method, he examined the patriarchal filial piety in Nezha's story in the context of Confucian morality.[30] Both scholars employ psychoanalytic methods to examine the image of Nezha in classical Chinese literature with reference to Confucian filial ethics. These studies provide a solid literary and cultural study foundation for the research of Nezha animated films.

In addition to the English scholarship, Nezha, as a classic figure in Chinese literature, has also attracted a great deal of attention from Chinese scholars. Related studies in Chinese scholarship can be divided according to their having one of two perspectives. One type focuses on the overall development of *Fengshen Yanyi*. Aihong Li, Jing Li, and Yihui Li all focus on the process of writing *Fengshen Yanyi* and the literary origins of its central story, King Wu of Zhou's conquest of the Shang dynasty. They discuss how the rebellious revolutionary, highlighted by the plots of

[29] Paul Steven Sangren, "Fathers and sons in a patrilineal mode of production of desire: preliminary analysis of the story of Nezha from Fengshen Yanyi," in *Chinese Sociologics: An Anthropological Account of the Role of Alienation and Social Reproduction* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 72; Paul Steven Sangren, "Myths, gods, and family relations," in *Unruly gods: Divinity and Society in China*, ed. Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 150-183; Paul Steven Sangren, *Filial Obsessions: Chinese Patriliny and Its Discontents* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[30] Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller, eds., *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996); Shahar, *Oedipal God*.

patricide and regicide in the Ming dynasty novel, forms a fundamental contradiction with Confucianism, which is the ruling ideology of the Ming dynasty, emphasizing obedience to patriarchal authority.[31] Other scholars focus directly on Nezha's portrayal in *Fengshen Yanyi*. Zhaohong Li and Jen-chieh Ting both examine Nezha's sonship in a patriarchal society, exploring the socio-cultural reasons for the conflict in the father-son relationship in Nezha's story.[32] Since my study focuses on animated images of Nezha, the Chinese scholarship on Nezha that focuses more on the Ming dynasty novel and is profound in literature studies, is relatively distantly related to mine. Therefore, this thesis will primarily use English secondary sources, which employ more contemporary methodologies, such as ones from anthropology, sociology and psychoanalysis, for reference to Nezha's literary images.

4. Limitations of Previous Studies

Previous research offers a rich and solid foundation for this study. The research on Chinese animation provides a detailed introduction to the Chinese animation industry's institutional history, filmmaking methods and cultural-political environment, especially reports on animated works in socialist China such as Du's

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[31] Aihong Li 李爱红, *Fengshen Yanyi De Yishu Xiangxiang Yu Jingdian Hua Yanjiu*《封神演义》的艺术想象与经典化研究 [A Study of the Artistic Imagination and Classicization of *The Investiture of Gods*] (Jinan: Qilu Shushe 齐鲁书社, 2011); Jing Li 李静, *Tianming Zhiwai De Kunhuo: Fengshen Yanyi De Lunli Kunjing Ji Jiejue* 天命之外的困惑:《封神演义》的伦理困境及解决 [Confusion Beyond the Fate: Ethical Dilemmas and Solutions in *The Investiture of Gods*] (Beijing: Renmin Ribao Chubanshe 人民日报出版社, 2018); Yihui Li 李亦辉, *Fengshen Yanyi Kaolun*《封神演义》考论 [The Studies of *The Investiture of Gods*]. Beijing: Renmin (Wenxue Chubanshe 人民文学出版社, 2018).

[32] Zhaohong Li 李昭鴻, "Fengshen Yanyi Zhong Lijing, Nezha Fuzi Hudong Qingjie Zhi Neizai Yiyi《封神演義》中李靖、哪吒父子互動情節之內在意義 [The Intrinsic Meaning of Interaction Plot between Li Jing and Nazha in Feng Shen Yan Yi"]," *Zhenli Daxue Renwen Xuebao* 真理大學人文學報 No.24(2020): 1-23; Jen-chieh Ting 丁仁傑, "Mulian Jiu Mu, Miaoshan Jiu Fu, Nezha Dazhan Lijing: Fuxi Shehui Zhong Erzi Yu Never De Zhutixing Jiangou 目連救母, 妙善救父, 哪吒大戰李靖: 父系社會中兒子與女兒的主體性建構 [Mulian Saves His Mother, Miaoshan Saves Her Father, Nezha Battles with Li Jing: The Processes of Subjectification of Sons and Daughters in Chinese Society]," *Journal of Chinese Ritual, Theatre and Folklore* 民俗曲藝 198, (2017):1-62.

books. These studies' observations function as one of the foundations of this study's analysis of the Nezha adaptations in the Maoist era. The research on Nezha animations shares similar research objects and cultural context with my study, demonstrating recent and diverse perspectives in the field. Some arguments, such as the one seeing the 2019 Nezha as the tamed and good child and the middle-class only child,[33] strengthened or inspired this study. The research on Nezha literature presents a more sociological and anthropological explanation of the Nezha story in its literary and religious forms, helping this study to understand how filiality works and what patricide means in a Confucius context.

While prior research has made significant contributions to the understanding of Nezha, none of it deeply associates the animated adaptations with their cultural-political context or examines the changing ideologies of the films' two times. Those studies, therefore, do not directly address the questions this study seeks to answer. Seeing both Nezha adaptations in two authoritarian, or arguably totalitarian, periods in China since 1949 as representations of social norms, my aim is to explore and reveal how the respective periods' governments utilized Nezha as propaganda to promote ideologies. Despite the adaptations both depicting Nezha as a rebel figure, the targets of Nezha's rebellion in the two periods differ greatly, even to the point of being opposite. To reveal the underlying logic of such portrayals of Nezha, which

[33] Jing Jin and Cathy Yue Wang, "Taming the Rebellious Child: The Adaptation of Nezha in Three Chinese Animations of the Socialist and Post-Socialist Eras," *Children's Literature in Education: An International Quarterly* 54 (2023): 39–54; Shih-Wen Chen and Sin Wen Lau, "The New Chinese Individual: Confronting the Divided Self in Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child," *Asian Studies Review* 45, no. 4 (2021): 1-16; Thomas William Whyke, Joaquin Lopez Mugica, and Melissa Shani Brown, "Contemporizing the National Style in Chinese Animation: The Case of Nezha (2019)," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 16, no. 3 (November 1, 2021): 157–74.

disguise discipline as rebelliousness, this study employs Foucault's theory of disciplinary society and examines the cultural-political context of the films' two eras. Such an argument and approach has not been fully employed in previous research. Thus, this study demonstrates the changing social norms and official ideologies of the two periods and fills a gap in the fields of Chinese film and cultural studies.

C. Methodology

1. Four Films, Two Areas

As a rebellious and tragic teenage figure with a gripping story, Nezha has long been a popular protagonist in Chinese cinema. Filmmakers from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong made numerous influential pieces remaking Nezha's image in *Fengshen Yanyi*. These works include live-action films such as *Na Cha the Great* (哪吒, *Nezha*) (1974), a martial arts film adhering to the original novel by Hong Kong director Chang Cheh (张彻, 1923-2002);[34] *Rebels of the Neon God* (青少年哪吒, *Qingshaonian nezha*) (1992), a modern urban remaking by Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang (蔡明亮, 1957-present);[35] and *Nezha* (少女哪吒, *Shaonü nezha*) (2014), a female-perspective adaptation by independent director Xiaofeng Li (李霄峰, 1978-prensent) from mainland China.[36] There are also countless works about Nezha in Chinese animation and TV dramas.

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[34] Nezha 哪吒 [Na Cha the Great], directed by Cheh Chang 张彻 (Hongkong: Shaw Brothers, 1974), DVD.

[35] *Qingshaonian Nezha* 青少年哪吒 [Rebels of the Neon God], directed by Ming-liang Tsai 蔡明亮 (Central Motion Picture Corporation, 1992).

[36] *Shaonü Nezha* 少女哪吒 [Nezha], directed by Xiaofeng Li 李霄峰 (Shanghai Wei Ge Wenhua Chuanbo Youxian Gongsi 上海维格文化传播有限公司 [Shanghai Wei Ge Culture Communication Co.], 2014).

Among all the Nezha films, this study majorly focuses on two animated films mentioned above, *Nezha Conquers* and *Demon Child*. In addition, there are another two animated films that will be analyzed in this study as support because of the strong connections of Nezha's images between the primary two and the secondary two, which are *Havoc in Heaven* (大闹天宫, danao tiangong) (1961) and *New Gods*.

There are three reasons why *Nezha Conquers* and *Demon Child* are chosen as the main research subjects in this study. First, they are the twin stars of the most influential pieces on Nezha in Chinese cinema. *Nezha Conquers* is considered both the artistic pinnacle of Chinese animated films and one of the most significant works in Chinese animation. It is the primary visual source of Nezha's image in Chinese popular culture, leading to many subsequent animated adaptations of Nezha that either refer to or challenge the 1979 version, including the 2019 remaking. *Demon Child*, on the other hand, is the current box office champion of Chinese animated films, achieving unprecedented commercial success despite mixed reviews, which is the common situation for commercial films. It can be said that these two films represent the artistic and commercial peaks of Chinese animation. Therefore, a study of them will make the analysis of Nezha's image highly representative.

Second, they represent Nezha images from two separate eras: *Nezha Conquers* was filmed and released during Mao's era, and *Demon Child* during Xi's era. As mentioned earlier, these two eras are considered the most politically authoritarian and patriarchal eras in China after 1949. The fact that a patricide story was able to achieve mainstream success in both eras with very different cultural contexts but similar

patriarchal oppression raises the research questions of this study. Also, the two films represent different filmmaking methods of Chinese animated films in the two eras. *Nezha Conquers* is a fine art film made by the collective filmmaking studio directly controlled by the government, a product of a planned economy, whereas *Demon Child* is a commercial blockbuster made by an individual director and animation studio funded by a giant capitalist company, mostly a product of a market economy that is censored by the government. These two filmmaking modes not only reflect the characteristics of the animated film industry in the two eras but also strongly influence the film content.

Third, their portrayals of Nezha are diametrically opposed in many ways. With a 40-year gap between them, both films are based on the original *Fengshen Yanyi* text, but they approach some important plots and settings in contrasting ways. *Nezha Conquers* prefers serious violence and confronts the father-son conflict, while *Demon Child* entertains and weakens the violence and avoids the father-son conflict. Such differences are undoubtedly based on the changing social background of the eras, from which we can see how Nezha's rebelliousness is related to the context of times.

The two secondary films focused on in this study are closely related to the 1979 and the 2019 adaptations respectively. Both *Havoc in Heaven* and *Nezha Conquers* films were produced by SAFS, sharing a similar filmmaking team and artistic style. More importantly, they were produced and released before and after the Cultural Revolution respectively, which makes them the most representative animated films of the Maoist era that were influenced by the radical political movements such as the

Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the Cultural Revolution. Also, *Havoc in Heaven*, as the debut of Nezha in Chinese animated cinema, is of great significance. Similarly, *New Gods* is also a Xi-era work, like *Demon Child*. They both avoid the father-son conflict, from which a Xi-era trend can be glimpsed. As noted before, there is limited but solid scholarship on these four films, reaffirming that scholars have agreed on their importance, while providing a firm basis for future research.

In addition to the four films, this study draws on other primary sources, including the filmmakers' interpretations of the films and audience comments on the adaptations. The former provide valuable insights into motivations for adapting the Nezha story, while the latter reflect audience's reactions to these adaptations. The inconsistencies in those two reveal the varying attitudes and values toward the same Nezha text.

2. Approach and Structure

This study utilizes a historical-cultural approach to examine four films within their social background. By combining narrative and visual analysis with a contextual exploration of the historical and cultural milieu in which the films were produced, the study aims to shed light on how the films' stories and images reflect the dominant social norms and values during the Mao and Xi eras, respectively. The socio-historical background is used to place the adaptations in their own social context and examine the social values of the times expressed by the films, such as the attitudes towards filiality, violent rebellion and the one-child policy. Narrative analysis is used to

demonstrate the plot and narrative by seeing films as literary texts and Nezha as a literary figure. The audio-visual analysis is used to investigate specific scenes in the films. By scrutinizing the use of art design, sound effects, montages and so on, this research shows how the films express certain values through cinematic language.

The paper is organized into two chapters framed by an introduction and a conclusion. Both chapters use the same structure to show the comparison and highlight the similarities and differences between the films analyzed. The first chapter focuses on the two Nezha animated films from Mao's era and is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the specific cultural context of Mao's era, including rebellion as a mainstream value, the revolutionary family model, and the collectivist filmmaking method of SAFS. The second section focuses on patriarchal figures in *Nezha Conquers* including Nezha's relationships with his biological father and master, as well as the patriarchal villains. It aims to demonstrate the patriarchal power dynamics in the Nezha adaptations in Mao's era. The third section analyzes the important violent scenes in *Nezha Conquers*. I argue that violence is one of the key features in Mao-era Nezha films which provides a visual representation of power struggle. Finally, in the fourth section, I will discuss how *Nezha Conquers* offers a defiant reading outside of the film text while following Mao's ideology in the text. With observations on how the 1979 Nezha image was used in Chinese rock music, I will draw a conclusion for this chapter that there is a possibility of rebelliousness about the film.

The second chapter focuses on two Nezha animated films from Xi's era. This

chapter is also divided into four sections. The first section introduces the unique cultural context of Xi's era, including the revival of Confucianism, the effects of the one child policy, and the filmmaking method of the individual director working in the market economy. The second section focuses on the patriarchal figures in *Demon Child* and analyzes how the film avoids the fundamental conflicts in the father-son relationship by diluting the patriarchal heroes and villains. The third section uses Foucault's theory of disciplinary society to examine how the film socializes and disciplines Nezha by isolating him in several disciplinary enclosures. In the fourth section, I will discuss how the audience's consumption of the homosexual romantic possibilities between Nezha and the Third Prince of Dragon King dissolves the defiant interpretation of this film.

3. Foucauldian Theory

a. Foucault's theory of disciplinary society

In posing the central argument of this study—that Nezha's rebelliousness is a disguised form of disciplining youth—this study will use Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary society to identify manifestations of such social and political phenomena in the films of Mao's and Xi's eras.

Foucault presented his theory in the 1975 publication *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. He uses the case of France from the mid-18th to early 19th century as an example to illustrate a shift in penal practices. Foucault argues that in older systems of judicial punishment, "the public execution is to be understood not

only as a judicial, but also as a political ritual," which was used to deter anyone who wanted to disobey the king's authority while manifesting it.[37] However, since this violent ritual also demonstrated the criminals' defiance against torture, it provides possibility that the mass audience can read "authority mocked and criminals transformed into heroes,"[38] Thus it failed to serve the purpose of discipline while in turn threatening sovereignty. The public execution was abolished and replaced by the modern prison system, "the apparatus of corrective penality [sic]," which seems to be more moderate and civilized but in fact imposes harsher discipline on the prisoners.[39] It not only deprived the prisoner of physical freedom, but also emphasized the reformation of the mind and behaviour to shape the prisoner into an obedient subject conforming to social standards. Moreover, since the individual executioner was abolished and replaced by automatized institutions, the discipline was less visible and therefore harder to be rebelled against. On the basis of such observations, Foucault proposed the concept of modern disciplinary society. He argues that modern society operates in a way similar to a panoptic prison. By placing subjects in enclosure institutions that are surveilled and corrected, discipline is eventually achieved with little resistance. He emphasizes that besides prisons, schools, factories, hospitals, and other institutions, there are also disciplinary places where obedient individuals are formed through correction and normalization.

Foucault's influential theory has inspired a tremendous volume of scholarship

[37] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 47.
[38] Ibid., 61.
[39] Ibid., 128.

and attracted continuous attention of scholars from various disciplines. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow give a very detailed explanation of *Discipline and Punish*, dividing the history of penal development in the book into three period: sovereign torture, humanist reform and normalizing detention, addressing the transition from physical torture to the correction of the soul.[40] The volume edited by Dianna Taylor presents the key concepts of Foucault's theory in terms of power, freedom and subjectivity, which are highly relevant to the focus of this study.[41] Subsequent scholars have critically developed the theory of discipline based on Foucault's work. Gilles Deleuze also gives his own account of Foucault's concept of disciplinary society.[42] Building on that, he further proposes the idea of control societies.[43] These interpretations of Foucault's theory provide a theoretical basis for my study.

With the development of Foucauldian scholarship, many scholars have questioned and built up the theory of discipline from a constructive-critical perspective. Some argue that Foucault's argument overemphasizes the role of discipline while ignoring the subjectivity of the oppressed. Feminist studies have also pointed out that the theory of discipline ignores individual differences in genders.[44] These scholars examine Foucault's arguments in the context of richer perspectives and

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[40] Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2014), 143-167. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315835259.

[41] Dianna Taylor, ed., *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts* (Durham: Acumen, 2011).

[42] Gilles Deleuze, "A New Cartographer (Discipline and Punish)," in *Foucault*, translated by Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 23-46.

[43] Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October* 59 (1992): 3–7. http://www.jstor.org/stable/778828.

[44] For more criticisms on the discipline theory, see David Garland, *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); Jonathan Simon, "Beyond the Panopticon: Mass Imprisonment and the Humanities," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 6, no.3 (2010): 327–40; Loïc Wacquant, "Crafting the Neoliberal State: Workfare, Prison Fare, and Social Insecurity," *Sociological Forum* vol.25, no. 2 (2010): 197–220; Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

fields, and they help my study to cautiously investigate the applicability of disciplinary theory to Nezha's adaptations.

Film as a visual medium often focuses on the body, while Foucault's genealogical approach also addresses the history of social disciplines on the individual body with a critical perspective. Therefore, a Foucauldian framework has occasionally been used in film studies, especially to critique representations of the oppressed in mainstream society, such as criminals, the mentally ill, the poor, and the sexually disadvantaged. Pat J. Gehrke examines the punishment and treatment of the protagonist Alex in Stanley Kubrick's (1928-1999) film *A Clockwork Orange* (1972) with Foucault's disciplinary society theory, critiquing how the social science and criminology of Foucault's contemporaries tries to define and reform the subject.[45] Using Foucault's biopolitics theory, Casey Ryan Kelly analyzes the thanatopolitics in the 2014 horror film *It Follows*, showing how the film uses disturbing scenes to convey the judgement of individual survival and death in capitalist society.[46] Cynthia Erb employs Foucault's critique of psychiatry in *Madness and Civilization*, investigates a series of postwar films on the subject of psychosis including Alfred Hitchcock's (1899-1980) *Psycho* (1960) and demonstrates representations of madness in that period.[47] Mark William O'Hara also draws attention on the representation of mental illness in six Hollywood films from the end of World War II to the first decade

[45] Pat Gehrke, "Deviant Subjects in Foucault and A Clockwork Orange: Congruent Critiques of Criminological Constructions of Subjectivity," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 3 (2001): 270-284, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180128088.

[46] Casey Ryan Kelly, "*It Follows*: Precarity, Thanatopolitics, and the Ambient Horror Film," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 3 (2017): 234-249. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2016.1268699.

[47] Cynthia Erb, "'Have You Ever Seen the inside of One of Those Places?': Psycho, Foucault, and the Postwar Context of Madness," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 4 (2006): 45–63, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137167.

of the twenty-first century, showing how film as an influential mainstream media has helped to stigmatize and otherize people with psychological issues.[48]

Foucault's theory is still in a young and developing stage in the field of Chinese studies. How to test and localize a theory from Europe in the Chinese cultural context is one of the issues in this field. Ao Zhang, through an investigation of female prisons in China, argues that female prisoners' obedience to discipline is not motivated by an acceptance of rehabilitation but by the pragmatic strategies of Confucian culture, which leads to the role of discipline being exaggerated.[49] Longtao He provides a detailed comparison of Foucault's description of modern disciplinary society with classical Chinese philosophy, arguing that Confucian filial piety could be considered a disciplinary power in a Foucauldian framework.[50] These studies illuminate my research with observations on the applicability of the disciplinary theory to Confucian culture. In Chinese film studies, the application of Foucault's theory to Chinese animated cinema has yet to be developed. Therefore, this study has significance in exploring the applicability of Foucault's theory to Chinese animated films.

As many critics have pointed out, Foucault's theory is rooted in French culture and needs to be examined for its applicability when being employed in the Chinese context. I believe there are two commonalities that make the theory applicable. First, the theory focuses on power dynamics, especially patriarchal relationships. This study

[48] Mark William O'Hara, "Foucault and Film: Critical Theories and Representations of Mental Illness," PhD diss., Miami University, 2014, http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=miami1415896906.

[49] Ao Zhang, "Chinese Practice of Foucault's 'Disciplinary Power' and its Effects on the Rehabilitation of Female Prisoners in China," *The British Journal of Criminology* 60, no. 3 (2020): 662–680, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azz068.

[50] Longtao He, *Care Work, Migrant Peasant Families and Discourse of Filial Piety in China* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

adopts the same perspective, addressing the changing dynamics of patriarchal authority in Nezha's story. Second, Foucault observes France in a specific historical transition, from the revolutionary phase of violent oppression to the modern phase of surveillant controlling. This pattern is very similar to the change from Mao's era to Xi's era that is examined in this study. Mao's era was the revolutionary era in modern China. A common narrative used in revolutionary romantic films at that time was to put revolutionary heroes under the physical torture of old authorities to highlight heroes' indomitability. By the time of Xi, China is already a modern society where the stability of society, rather than revolution, becomes the primary purpose of governance. Therefore, discipline was softer but stricter, less visible but more difficult to resist, as reflected in Nezha's story by the weakening of patriarchal figures and the presence of imprisoning institutions. Although Foucault built his theory of disciplinary society based on the observation of penalty transformation in France, there are common features which appear in cultures other than that of France. For this study, it is noted that the feudal power in pre-1949 China, as portrayed in the CCP's propaganda, shares similar penalty rituals and power dynamics with the sovereign power, as in Foucault's observations. The dictators in both societies used public executions to demonstrate their power and punished those who violated royal authority. Foucault's disciplinary society refers to a particular power form of how modern society operates, instead of a cultural phenomenon unique to France. Prisons, schools, and factories are seen as disciplinary apparatuses. Since 1978, China transformed from a planned-economic socialist battleground to a capitalist modern

country. As it has participated in globalization, transplanting apparatuses like prison schools and factories from North America and Europe, the disciplinary power has worked in Chinese modernization. Thus, Foucault's disciplinary theory can effectively fit the Chinese context.

Most studies of Foucault’s theory focus on his account of the modern surveillance system. This study aims to bring his observations of sovereign torture back into view and examine both disciplinary methods, public execution and imprisonment, in Nezha's cinematic representations. This study does not view the Foucauldian framework as a universal truth but as a critical lens to expose some presentations in Chinese pop culture that are considered ordinary and entertaining and thus have been obscured and ignored.

II. Chapter One. Mao's Child: Nezha as Resistant Revolutionary

In a sense, the Mao era was the most "revolutionary" era in China since 1949. In a new country that had just been born, the political and economic system was changing dramatically, and artists and artworks were subjected to the intense impact and influence of authoritarian politics that turned them into a prism, each ray of light reflecting the dramatic changes in the thinking of that particular era. Against this harsh and frenzied political and cultural context, Chinese animation witnessed its golden age, during which an animated film containing the image of Nezha became not only the most influential visual image of Nezha since the 1949 but also one of the artistic pinnacles of Chinese animation. How was Nezha portrayed in the politically oppressive and ideologically authoritarian Maoist era? Was he still allowed to rebel? What was he rebelling against, and what view of Maoist values did his rebellion convey?

In this chapter, I will take two perspectives, first introducing several dominant ideologies and animation industry models that directly influenced Nezha's adaptations during the Mao era, and then analyzing the film texts of two Mao-era animated films that feature Nezha as either a hero or a villain. I argue that Nezha in the Mao era was portrayed as a Maoist revolutionary, while the biological father and the Dragon King he rebels against were portrayed as class enemies. By adapting Nezha's rebellion into a binary political struggle, the authority he rebels against becomes a counter-revolutionary villain that needs to be defeated in the real world. This served the political needs of the Maoist government, the new authority, and turns Nezha's story into educational propaganda. However, such a binary political text, with the feature that its

power relations can be easily inverted, gives Nezha's image a broader rebelliousness outside of the film text.

A. Making Nezha under Maoist Ideology

The Maoist China of 1949-76, known as socialist China, was politically turbulent and filled with a violent and revolutionary tone. This climate reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. The Cultural Revolution has been described as the decade of chaos, during which the production of art came to a halt, except for a few officially permitted propaganda works. It is worth noting that although the start date of the Cultural Revolution is defined as beginning with the "May 16 Notification (五一六通知, *Wuyiliu tongzhi*)" published in 1966, Mao had already called students to revolt before then. Violent and revolutionary struggles of the Cultural Revolution were first taking shape in the early 1960s. While the end of the Cultural Revolution is defined by the death of Mao and the arrest of Gang of Four in 1976, the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution continued to have a profound impact on Chinese society, and its influence did not dissipate until the 1980s, after Chinese economic reforms led by Deng Xiaoping in 1978.[51] Thus, it is not difficult to find the strong influence of the dominant ideology of the Cultural Revolution in art productions from the entire 1960-

[51] The scholarship on the Culture Revolution is more than tremendous. The significant studies that can serve as an overall introduction to the movement include: Richard H. Solomon, *Mao's Revolution and the Chinese Political Culture* (University of California Press,1972); Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Harvard University Asia Center. 2012), https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1x07z47; Weihua Bu 卜伟华, *Zalan jiushijie: Wenhua dageming de dongluan yu haojie, 1966–1968* 砸烂旧世界：文化大革命的动乱与浩劫 [Smashing the Old World: The Turmoil and Catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution 1966–1968] (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2008).

1980 period.[52]

The two Nezha animated films of the Mao era, *Havoc in Heaven* and Nezha *Conquers* were made just before and after the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, to examine the value representations in these films, they must be placed in such a particular historical context. I argue that two dominant ideologies of the Mao era had a decisive role in the two Nezha animated adaptations in this era: the legitimized rebellion and the revolutionary family model, both of which derive from Mao's opposition to Chinese traditional culture and morality led by Confucian filiality. In addition, the unique filmmaking model of Chinese animated cinema represented by SAFS during this period strongly influenced the adaptations of Nezha's story.

Therefore, before looking close directly on the films, I would like to introduce the filmmaking method and two dominant ideologies of this period. The three perspectives help to understand why a patricide story was allowed and endorsed under Mao's patriarchal dictatorship.

1. Shanghai Animation Film Studio

From the founding of the PRC in 1949 until the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, the primary task of art and artists in socialist China was to serve politics. The notion "literature and art are subordinate to politics" was clearly stated and emphasized in Mao's Yan'an talks on literature and art in 1942 and became the

[52] Berry argues that the impact of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese cinema went beyond 1966-1976, and that the disintegration of the communist narrative in Chinese cinema after the end of the Cultural Revolution was gradually completed between 1976-1980. Du also points out that the impact of the Cultural Revolution on cinema spread between 1964-1978. See Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema*, 67; Du, *Animated Encounters*, 153.

guide of art in the following three decades.[53] This concept was reflected in the film industry at that time, as the film studios were directly controlled by the state. By 1953, the film industry was fully nationalized, and the Film Bureau implemented a mandatory censorship process for all films before their release. This ownership and censorship system effectively placed complete control over films in the hands of the state.[54] Berry refers to Chinese cinema from 1949-1979 as classical cinema, a genre sharing a pattern designed to "construct audiences securely sutured into the socialist modernity of Mao's China." The paradigm is highly stable, dominant with no competition in either domestic or foreign films.[55]

As a subgenre aiming at an audience of children, Chinese animation of this period also possesses these characteristics. Du refers to animation from the late 1940s to the late 1970s as socialist animation, represented by the only state-owned animation studio, SAFS. It was the former animation division of the state-controlled Northeast Film Studio, and it produced 90% of the animated films in China during the socialist period.[56] SAFS was under the direct control of the socialist state from production to distribution. According to the animation designer of *Nezha Conquers*, Pu Jiaxiang (浦家祥, 1932-present), the primary goal of SAFS' films was to "serve the children using folk legends, fairytales, and fables to nurture good moral character," making it responsible for educating children about socialist morality.[57] SAFS employed a collective filmmaking mode including multi-directorship. As Du

[53] McDougall, ed., *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference",* 75.
[54] Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema*, 25-26.
[55] Ibid., 21.
[56] Du ed., *Chinese Animation and Socialism*, 3.
[57] Ibid., 75.

points, many of SAFS' works use the term *jiti* (集体, collective) instead of director.[58] Therefore, the films should not be understood as products of the aesthetic preferences of an individual director but as representing the ideology of the whole SAFS under the state. In regard to the audience of such films, film screenings in China during this period were collective events, with students often organized to watch films together. Rather than being for individual consumption simply for entertainment, SAFS films are watched in collective activities so that the audience would receive artistic and moral education. This provided SAFS films with universal influence on Chinese society, especially on children. Meanwhile, the planned economy and socialist collectivism facilitated labor-intensive animation filmmaking, resulting in the studio not having to worry about income and therefore being able to concentrate on their work. Most SAFS directors came from the field of fine arts rather than from the film industry.[59] Such an environment, to a certain extent, led to the remarkable artistic value of SAFS films as well as to Chinese animation's golden age under the totalitarian regime.[60]

Nezha Conquers is an example of the socialist animation collective filmmaking model. As a production that SAFS resumed work on after the Cultural Revolution, it was the first Chinese widescreen animation, a gift for the thirtieth anniversary of the PRC that the entire SAFS studio contributed to. The film was co-directed by three directors, Yan Dingxian (严定宪, 1936-2022), Xu Jingda and Wang Shuchen (王树

[58] Du, *Animated Encounters*, 1-5.

[59] Wei Te 特伟, "Meishu dianying chuangzuo fangtan 美术电影创作放谈 [Casual Talk on Fine Art Film Creation]," in *Meishu Dianying Chuangzuo Yanjiu* 美术电影创作研究 [Fine Arts Film Creation Research], ed. Dianying Tongxun Bianjishi 电影通讯编辑 (Beijing: China Film Press 中国电影出版社, 1984), 5.

[60] Du, *Animated Encounters*, 4.

忱, 1931-1991). Its preparations began in May 1978, and filming ended in August 1979. Wang Shuchen wrote the first version of the film script in 1959. It was originally planned as a co-production with the Soviet Union, but after the Soviets rejected it, the project was shelved until after the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the making of the adaptation spanned the entire Cultural Revolution. Although the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, as late as 1984, SAFS artists continued to emphasize the guidance of Mao's Yan'an talks on literature and art in their works, which held that fantasy themes helped to provoke a revolutionary attitude toward reality and that literature and art should serve socialism.[61] SAFS remained deeply influenced by Mao's revolutionary ideology until the early 1980s. *Nezha Conquers* was no exception and should be understood in such context.

Nezha Conquers is not a personal interpretation of an individual director but a collective artwork created by a stated-own animation studio to promote official ideology. It is both a highly artistic, non-commercial, non-audience-oriented art film and a highly political propaganda work representing dominant morality and serving educational purposes. Nezha in the film is not an individual child with a particular personality or behavior but rather an image of the model child in Mao's era, whose every action represents the social norms expected of children at the time, including rebelling against class enemies and anti-feudal authority and Confucianism.

[61] Songlin 松林, "Meishu dianying yishu guilv de tansuo 美术电影艺术规律的探索 [Exploration of the Artistic Method of Fine Arts Film]," in *Meishu Dianying Chuangzuo Yanjiu* 美术电影创作研究 [Fine Arts Film Creation Research], ed. Dianying Tongxun Bianjishi 电影通讯编辑 (Beijing: China Film Press 中国电影出版社, 1984), 12-31.

2. "It's Right to Rebel."

The first element of Maoist ideology that has a strong influence on Nezha animated films was the idea that rebellion is righteous, which included the notion that the rebellion should be against Confucian culture with filiality as its foundation. *Xiao* (孝, filiality), or *xiaojing* (孝敬, filial piety), has been the dominant morality of Chinese society from the Han Dynasty until socialist China. On the family level, filiality refers to sons/daughters' support and respect for their parents, which was considered by Confucius to be "the key to other virtues developed later in life."[62] On a social level, filiality refers to subordinates' obedience and admiration for their superiors. On a national level, filiality refers to the subjects' submission and devotion to their ruler. Filiality is both a virtue and a duty, and most importantly it is a patriarchal power structure, where the ruler and his subjects are in the same position as father and son. Such a structure guarantees that no subordinates oppose their superiors, because that acts against social norms. As one of Confucius' disciples Zhong You notes, "a young person who is filial and respectful of his elders rarely becomes the kind of person who is inclined to defy his superiors, and there has never been a case of one who is disinclined to defy his superiors stirring up rebellion." [63] Therefore, the prerequisite for conducting and legitimizing any rebellion is to pull filiality down from its position as the ruling morality.

Since the New Culture Movement (1915-1919) and the May Fourth Movement

[62] Edward Slingerland, trans., *Confucius Analects: with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), 238.
[63] Ibid., 1.

(1919-1921), China's left-wing revolutionaries and intellectuals have viewed China's ostensibly "feudal" culture, represented by Confucianism, as the obstacle to Chinese modernization and communist revolution and therefore something that must be eradicated. This trend reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution. After conducting a self-criticism for the three-year famine in the Great Leap Forward at the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference in 1962, Mao retired to the second line of the CCP and country's leadership. Wishing to reclaim his supremacy from front-line leaders such as Liu Shaoqi (刘少奇, 1898-1969) and Deng Xiaoping (邓小平, 1904-1997), he promoted a mass movement from the bottom up to "destroy and then rebuild the state apparatus."[64] In such a narrative of reseizing power, Mao and Mao's supporters were the revolutionaries who smashed the "old world," which includes not only the country's in-power leaders at the time who disagreed with Mao, but also all the feudal culture represented by Confucianism. The ancient ideology of filiality now had come into fundamental conflict with Mao's goals of rebellion, and revolution thus needed to be broken down.

One of the most violent and aggressive movements in the anti-Confucian wave was the Red Guard movement. During the student rebellion movement that began in the early 1960s, the young Red Guards raised the slogan "*zaofan youli*" (造反有理, it's right to rebel) and received Mao's support.[65] With students pitted against teachers, the youth against the elderly, sons against fathers, and the people against bureaucrats,

[64] Bu, *Zalan jiushijie,* 800.
[65] Roderick MacFarguhar, and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 87-89.

the oppressive Confucian patriarchal order was completely overthrown under Mao's leadership, and *zaofan* (造反, rebellion) replaced filiality as the dominant ideology of Chinese society in the 1960s and 1970s.

Such a political circumstance led to a strange and unique cultural situation where rebellion became the social norm promoted by the supreme leader in an authoritarian society. This was the historical context of the Nezha films of that era. Nezha's rebellion against his biological father and the attack on authority in *Nezha Conquers* echoes exactly what Chinese society expected of children. It was then a "rebellion" against patriarchal oppression, not defiance against Mao's thought but pandering to it.

3. Revolutionary Children in a Revolutionary Family

Another phenomenon that resulted from the anti-Confucian and anti-feudal wave was the revolutionary family model unique to socialist China, which is another important context for Nezha adaptations in Mao's era. After the abolition of feudal marriage, the socialist Chinese family model did not follow the model of Western bourgeois liberal marriage, since affection was considered a bourgeois feature by the CCP: "motherly love, tender feelings, and mercy were treated as corrosive to revolutionary ideology" and therefore were the object of criticism.[66] With such an official ideological orientation, the preference for the traditional kinship-dependent family structure was replaced by a revolutionary family model based on political position and class category. The Chinese family model shifted from the lineage one

[66] Joshua Zhang and James D. Wright, *Violence, Periodization and Definition of the Cultural Revolution: A Case Study of Two Deaths by the Red Guards* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 90, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004360471_009.

following filiality to the revolutionary one serving communist revolution, in which class was most valued in the selection of family members.[67] Such a model, formed out of a united love for the party and the revolution, was more like a party branch than a family, in which children were also shaped by the revolutionary narrative. Propaganda films were filled with images of children from revolutionary families during this period. *Jimao Xin* (鸡毛信, The letter with feathers) (1954), *Xiaobing Zhang Ga* (小兵张嘎, Zhang Ga the little soldier) (1963) and *Shanshan de hongxing* (闪闪的红星, Sparkling red star) (1974) all tell the stories of children orphaned into the arms of the Party after their families died for the revolution.

In this context, the Nezha story becomes the ideal text promoting revolutionary children and family. By returning his body to his parents through suicide, Nezha not only rebelled against Confucian filiality but also left his feudal bureaucratic blood family and defected to his master, who was considered both an alternative father and a revolutionary mentor symbolizing justice and truth. Confucian patriarchy became a father figure that had to be overthrown on the road to practicing communism, which naturally placed the mainstream ideology of the Mao era and the Nezha story in the same line. In this way, the story of suicide and patricide is interpreted from a taboo allegory threatening patriarchy to a revolutionary story with rebellion against the reactionaries, which is right in line with the revolutionary family narrative.

[67] Dongchao Min, "From the Revolutionary Family to the Materialistic Family," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 20, no. 3 (2013): 393-413.

B. Patriarchal Figures and Villains

With such a historical context, it is possible to examine Nezha's films in the Mao era with the question of "what was Nezha rebelling against?" In the anti-Confucian wave, the inviolable patriarchal image of Confucian filiality became the main target of the revolutionary sons' rebellion. In *Nezha Conquers*, there are three main patriarchal figures: the biological father Li Jing, the master Taiyi, and the villain Dragon King of the East Sea. Father Li Jing represents the oppressive bureaucratic class, Master Taiyi represents the revolutionary mentor who provides spirit and weapons, and the Dragon King represents the old authority and feudal ruling class.[68] The primary target of Nezha's rebellion is the Dragon King, the secondary is his father Li Jing, while Taiyi is portrayed as a "fairy godfather" and an "instrument of Nezha's desire."[69] In this section I will analyze the symbolism of the three main patriarchal figures and their interaction with Nezha respectively, arguing that the portrayal of Li Jing and Taiyi, the two fathers in the Mao-era Nezha film, is intended to illustrate Mao's moral disciplining of the ideal child: the target of the rebellion is the Confucian filial father-son relationship, where children are supposed to leave their biological, feudal family and join the revolutionary family.

1. The Double Fathers: Li Jing and Taiyi Zhenren

a. The Feudal Father Li Jing

[68] Sean Macdonald also points out that Nezha interacts primarily with three male authority figures in the 1979 film. Macdonald, "Animation as Intertextual Cinema," 141.

[69] Sangren, *Filial Obsessions*, 150.

Li Jing is one of the most important characters in the Nezha story. In *Fengshen Yanyi* and *Journey to the West*, as Nezha's biological father, he is not accustomed to Nezha's various reckless behaviors and worries that Nezha will hinder his career. He then prevents Nezha from being reincarnated after his suicide and is therefore pursued by the resurrected Nezha until Randeng Daoren (燃灯道人, the burning lamp Daoist) gives him a pagoda to suppress Nezha.[70] As the result, Li Jing is the main target of Nezha's revenge, and the relationship between the father and the son is full of hatred.

The two Nezha animated films in the Mao era largely continue the depiction of Li Jing along the lines of its literary origins. In characterization, Li Jing in both films is a villain in socialist China, a feudal bureaucrat, a class enemy and an target of revolution. In *Havoc in Heaven*, Li Jing is the chief military official in the Heavenly Place, a general of the Heavenly army violently suppressing the heroic protagonist Sun Wukong. He has an aggressive look, sharp-angled eyes, head held high, strong muscles, and an always angry expression. In one hand, he holds a pagoda that is designed to suppress Nezha physically and that represents patriarchal oppression symbolically. The pagoda is also a significant symbol in Buddhism, functioning like a stupa, which is a burial site for Buddhist relics that originated in India and was later transmitted to China.[71] As a weapon, it emphasizes Li Jing's Buddhist origin as Vaisravana, one of the Four Heavenly Guardian Kings.[72] Such an attribute expresses

[70] Nezha's story can be found in both *Fengshen Yanyi* and *Journey to the West*. Zhonglin Xu. *Creation of the Gods* Fengshen yanyi 封神演义, 1st ed, trans. Zhizhong Gu (Beijing: New World Press, 2000), 232-294; Anthony C. Yu, ed., *The Journey to the West*, vol I, revised ed (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 120-121.

[71] Yang Hong, "Ancient Buddhist Reliquaries in China and Korea," *Chinese Archaeology* 10, no. 1 (2010): 184, https://doi.org/10.1515/char.2010.10.1.

[72] Shahar, *Oedipal God*, 143.

the Buddhist identity of Li Jing as both a feudal and religious figure, particularly as viewed by the CCP, and therefore a villain in the film that must be rebelled against. In the other hand, Li Jing carries a flag on which the Chinese character 令 (*ling*, decree, order) is written.[73] The character indicates both the general's orders to soldiers and the father's domination over the son in the submissive, filial father-son relationship. As is mentioned in a Confucius classic, "the father is the son's decree" (父为子纲).[74] Overall, Li Jing in *Havoc in Heaven* is an ultimate patriarchal figure who is both a feudal general and a father, representing filial discipline and violent repression.

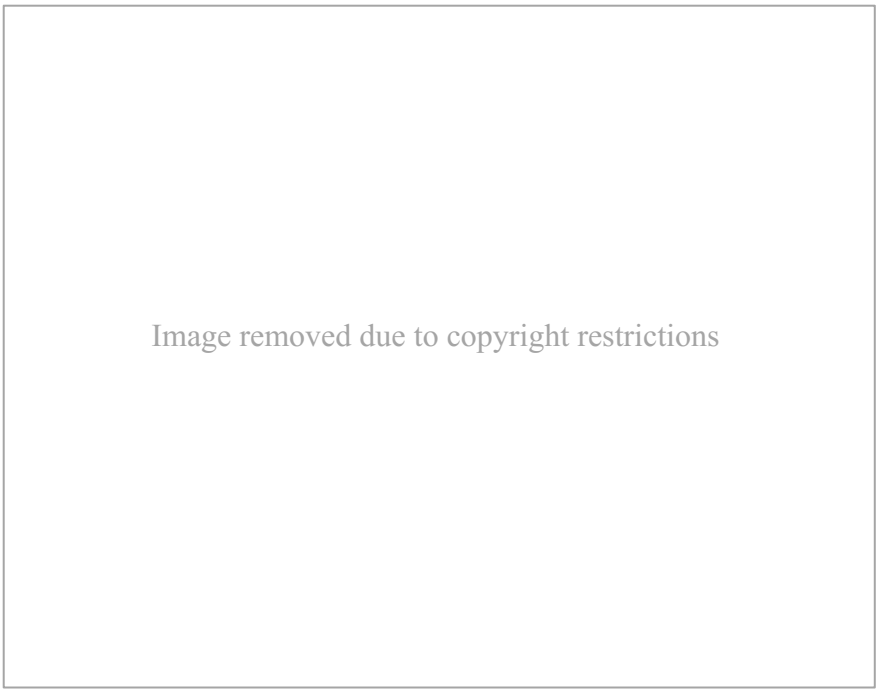

Figure 2.1: Li Jing in *Havoc in Heaven*
(Film Title: *Havoc in Heaven*, Time Code: 00:36:42)

In *Nezha Conquers*, Li Jing is no longer a heavenly general but a mortal father who is still a feudal bureaucrat, referred to by SAFS filmmakers as a "timid and

[73] MacDonald translates the word as "decree." MacDonald, *Animation in China*, 24.
[74] Donald Sturgeon, ed., "Baihutong delun: Sangang liuji 白虎通德论·三纲六纪 [Bai Hu Tong on Morality: Three Principles and Six Disciplines]," Chinese Text Project, accessed April 11, 2023, https://ctext.org/bai-hu-tong/san-gang-liu-ji/zhs.

fearful feudal bureaucrat who was afraid of the Dragon King and of losing his official position in government."[75] Compared to the binary villains in the1961 film, the 1979 Li Jing is more complex and grayer. He is the third person between the absolute villain Dragon King and the heroic protagonist Nezha who succumbs to the side of the feudal force when the hero and villain collide, therefore becoming an accomplice of the old society. In terms of his visual design, Li Jing has a majestic expression and flaring eyebrows that show his father's authority. The big red robe with the knee armor under it suggest his military, bureaucratic identity. His rounded belly emphasizes his class status as a privileged bureaucrat far from both the battleground and the people. He carries a sword with him all the time, a symbol of oppression that

[75] Shuchen Wang 王树忱, Dingxian Yan 严定宪, and Jingda Xu 徐景达, "Ruhai qinlong: shezhi Nezha naohai de yishu xiaojie 入海擒龙: 摄制哪吒闹海的艺术小结 [Entering the Sea to Haunt the Dragon: The Art Report on Making *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*]," in *Meishu Dianying Chuangzuo Yanjiu* 美术电影创作研究 [Fine Arts Film Creation Research] (Beijing: China Film Press 中国电影出版社, 1984), 101-114.

has been used against no enemy but only against his own son since the beginning.

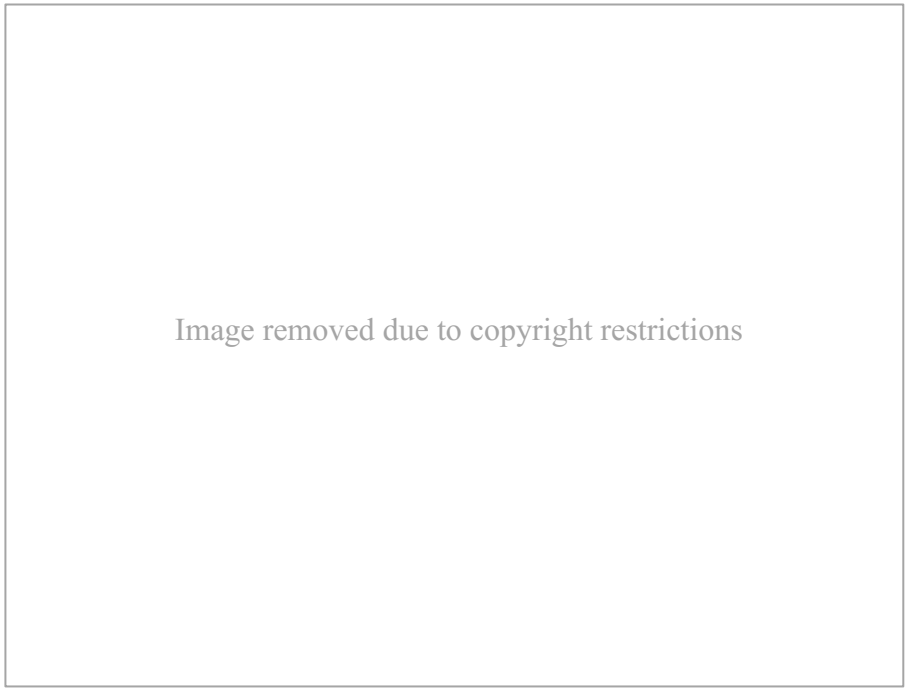

Figure 2.2: Li Jing in *Nezha Conquers*
(Film Title: *Nezha Conquers*, Time Code: 00:03:27)

The sword also represents one of the most important characteristics of Li Jing: his strong filicide desire. In the 1979 film, there are two times at which Li Jing shows the filicidal impulse against Nezha. The first time leads to the birth of Nezha. After being pregnant for three years and six months, Li Jing's wife gives birth to a meatball. Li Jing faces the meatball angrily and anxiously. He cuts the ball with the sword, and the baby Nezha jumps out. The second time, the filicidal desire leads to the death of Nezha. When the Dragon King seeks revenge on Nezha and asks Li Jing to kill his son as a form of repayment, Li Jing does not protect his son even once. He accuses Nezha of being "*gaisi de chusheng*" (该死的畜生, a beast who deserve to die) and "*nizi*" (逆子, an unfilial son) and then raises his sword to kill Nezha. After Li Jing fails to conduct the filicide and drops the sword on the ground, Nezha takes his

father's sword and commits suicide. Thus, it can be said that Li Jing's filicide led directly to Nezha's birth and indirectly to his death.

Influenced by Confucian culture on manhood, Chinese fathers assume not the responsibility of affection in family education but the indoctrination of social concepts, acting as disciplinarians and role models.[76] Thus Li Jing is not only a biological father but also a representative of social norms, an anthropomorphism of discipline. In a Maoist world where class struggle was the main principle, from the perspective of class, Li Jing was the class enemy of the young revolutionary Nezha and needed to be revolutionized. From the perspective of family structure, Li Jing is the bureaucrat father in a feudal family that Nezha needs to break with. Therefore, the rebellion against Li Jing complies with the revolutionary narrative of the Mao era.

b. The Revolutionary Mentor Taiyi Zhenren

Another important patriarchal figure in Nezha's story is Taiyi. He is Nezha's master, a Daoist. In Confucian filiality, the master is also a paternal character similar to the father, literally translated as "teacher father" (*shifu*, 师父). Sangren has noted that the master-disciple relationship in Confucianism is a filial relationship based on the father-son model, where the master plays a role second only to the parents, and the

[76] Xuan Li, "Fathers in Chinese Culture: From Stern Disciplinarians to Involved Parents," in *Fathers in Cultural Context*, eds. David W. Shwalb, Barbara J. Shwalb, Michael E. Lamb (New York; Routledge, 2012), 20-25.

disciple has a filial debt to the master.[77] As a Chinese proverb says, "*yiri weishi, zhongshen weifu*" (一日为师，终身为父, once a teacher, always a father.)[78]

According to the directors of *Nezha Conquers*, Taiyi in the film is both Nezha's guardian and the embodiment of justice.[79] Contrary to Li Jing's authoritative father figure, who is always angry and holding a weapon, Taiyi is a slender wise man with white hair and a perpetual smile. He has no weapons, only a *fuchen* (拂尘, fly-whisk), a Daoist instrument originally designed to conduct purification by sweeping away dust and desire. He rides a white crane, which is the mount of the Daoist immortals. His image is that of an amiable master.

[77] Sangren, *Filial Obsessions*, 141.
[78] Anthony C. Yu, ed., *The Journey to the West*, volume II, revised ed (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 74.
[79] Wang, Yan, and Xu, "Ruhai qinlong," 110.

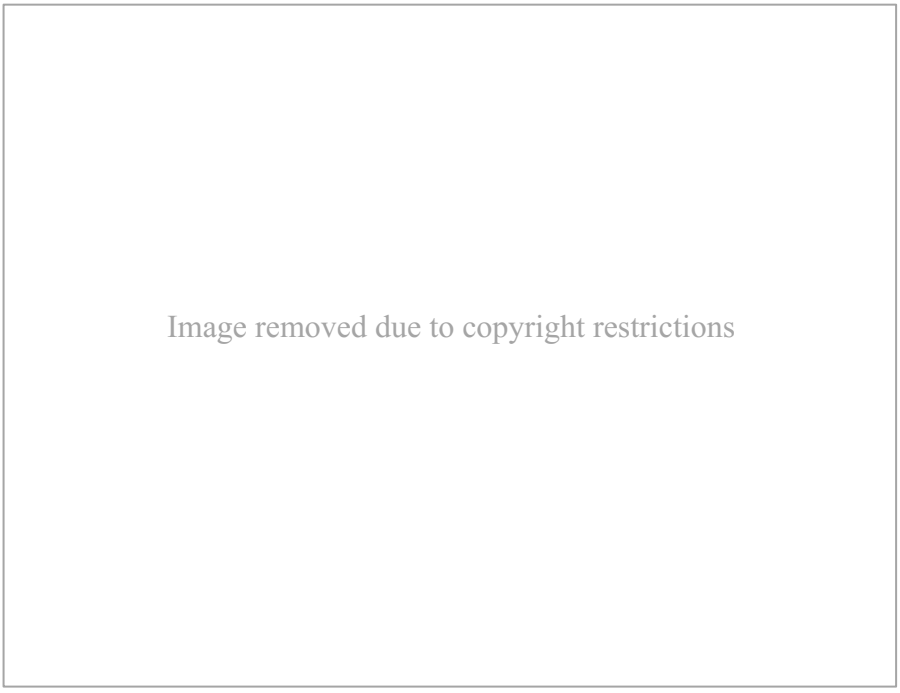

Figure 2.3: Taiyi feeding the spirit pearl to Nezha.
(Film Title: *Nezha Conquers*, Time Code: 00:07:05)

If the biological father Li Jing provided Nezha with physical existence, then Taiyi provides Nezha with spiritual subjectivity. Shortly after Nezha is born, Taiyi visits Li Jing and conducts three important things. First, he gives Nezha a name. It is worth noting that in most popular Nezha stories, including *Fengshen Yanyi* and the 1979 film, the boy is referred to as only Nezha, the first name given by Taiyi, while Li Jing's paternal surname, Li, is erased. Because the surname from one's father is considered important in emphasizing paternal family ties in filiality, the name itself highlights Nezha's subjectivity and weakens the patriarchal relationship with the father. Second, Taiyi accepts Nezha as an apprentice and provides him the spirit pearl. In *Fengshen Yanyi*, *lingzhuzi* (灵珠子, the spirit pearl) is Nezha's essence. His physical body is a vessel for it.[80] Although the materialist CCP does not recognize the existence of the soul, the spirit pearl here can be interpreted as the revolutionary

[80] Xu, *Fengshen Yanyi,* 234-235.

spirit or communist faith. The physical body given by Li Jing can be destroyed, but the spirit imparted by Taiyi lives forever. Third, he equips Nezha with weapons, which could refer to Mao arming Red Guards and to slogans such as "*yi maozedong sixiang wei wuqi zai wenhua dageming zhong chongfengxianzhen*" (以毛泽东思想为武器在文化大革命中冲锋陷阵, using Maoism as a weapon to fight in the Cultural Revolution),, which I will discuss later in the violence section.

Taiyi plays a more important role in the scenario of Nezha's death. Before Nezha commits suicide, he shouts to each of the three patriarchal characters. He firstly commands the Dragon King not to hurt anyone else and then declares to Li Jing that he is returning the physical body to the father, symbolically severing his ties with the lineage family. Finally, he shouts out to the sky "Master!" with an abundance of emotion, as if a son relying on a loving father and seeking help. After Nezha's death, Taiyi uses the spirit pearl and lotus to revive Nezha. Nezha wakes up crying "Master!" and jumps into Taiyi's arms. In the melodramatic Chinese orchestral music, the camera zooms in on the master and the padawan from a full shot with an arc shot tracking around the two for 360 degrees. This is undoubtedly one of the most sensational moments in the film. Such a heartwarming depiction of the relationship between father and son never appears with Nezha and Li Jing, but it does with Nezha and Taiyi. This clearly illustrates that the filmmakers consider Taiyi as Nezha's true father. The resurrected Nezha has no more flesh from Li Jing, only spirit from Taiyi, taking the new weapons given by Taiyi to smash the Dragon Palace and kill the

Dragon King for revenge. In this process, Taiyi plays the role of a revolutionary mentor and spiritual father.[81]

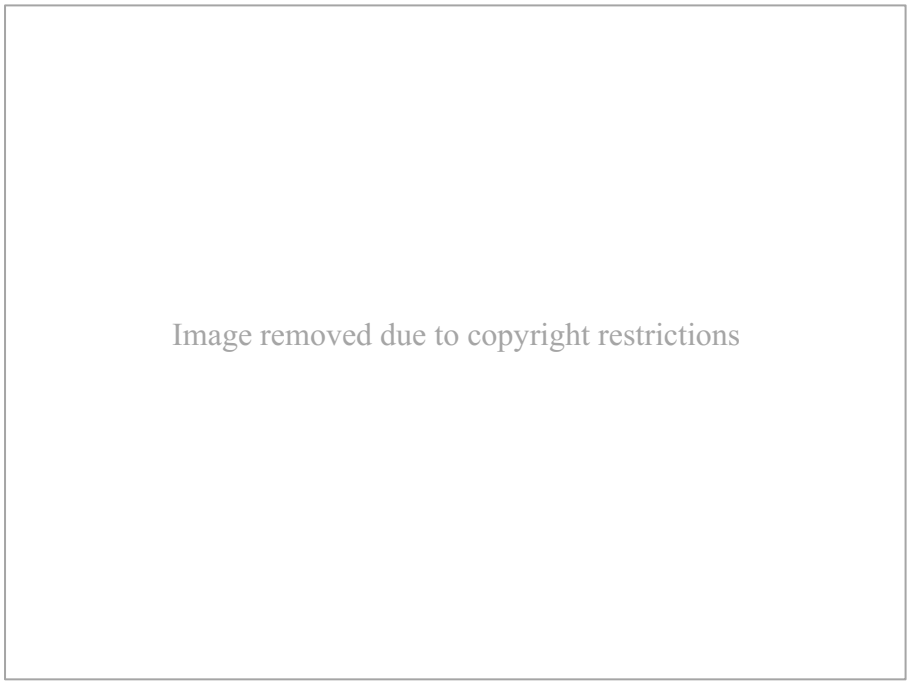

Figure 2.4: Nehza and Taiyi's reunion

(Film Title: *Nezha Conquers*, Time Code: 00:50:00)

c. Nezha in the Revolutionary Family

In *Nezha Conquers*, each step of the process from Nezha's suicide to rebirth fits the pattern of the child hero in Mao's revolutionary family narrative. Li Jing is Nezha's biological father who needs to be broken with, an obstacle to his devotion to a revolutionary family and move away from a bad-class one. As the film's animation designer Lin Wenxiao (林文肖, 1935-present) noted: "Nezha is no longer Li Jing's son and Third Crown Prince after his resurrection."[82] He is destroyed in the old

[81] Sangren and Macdonald both address that Taiyi's fatherhood as a mentor-type paternal figure to Nezha. Sangren, *Filial Obsessions*,134; Macdonald, "Animation as Intertextual Cinema," 140.

[82] Du, ed., *Chinese Animation and Socialism*, 70.

Confucian filial society while completely severing ties with the lineage family, freeing himself from Li Jing's patriarchal suppression and the feudal class identity as the Third Crown Prince. He is reborn as a rebelling revolutionary with the help of Taiyi, symbolizing the China’s future and hope together with the child villagers representing the masses.

Such a revolutionary family narrative also appears in *Havoc in Heaven*, except this time Nezha appears as a villainous prince under Confucian filiality, one of the heavenly warriors who try to repress the hero Sun Wukong. Li Jing is not only Nezha's father but also his superior and general, while Nezha serves more like a weapon of Li Jing, an instrument instead of a subject. He does not have his own story line. He is almost silent. During the few minutes in which he debuts, he obeys Li Jing's orders without hesitance, showing no subjectivity or autonomy, and flees back under father’s wings after being defeated by Sun Wukong. The father-son relationship represents the strict obedience of the son to the father in Confucian filiality. In contrast, the heroic protagonist Sun Wukong is an orphan who leads baby monkeys to set up their own territory, apparently as figures in a revolutionary family. By showing a pair of feudal filial father and son being defeated by the revolutionary orphan Sun Wukong, the film emphasizes the ideologies of anti-Confucianism and revolutionary family.

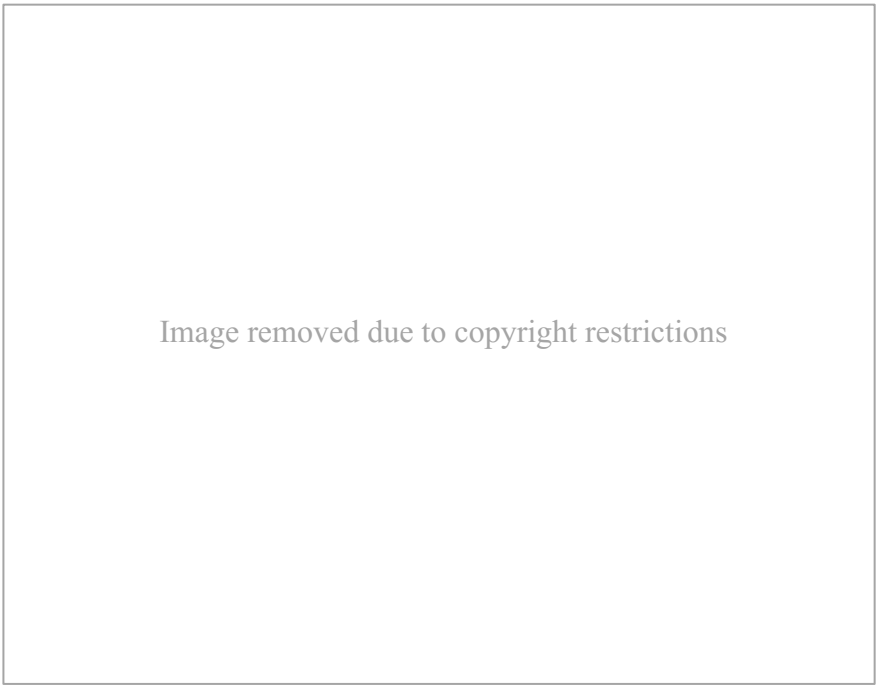

Figure 2.5: Li Jing and Nezha defeated by Sun Wukong
(Film Title: *Havoc in Heaven*, Time Code: 00:41:03)

2. The Patriarchal Villains: Dragon Kings

The Dragon King of the Eastern Sea is a binary villain among the three main patriarchal figures in *Nezha Conquer*s, and he is the biggest change the film makes to *Fengshen Yanyi.* In character design, the Dragon King has three significant identities. First, he is pure evil. The filmmaking group intentionally diminished the conflict between Nezha and Li Jing, which was originally the main conflict in the novel, and turned Nezha's main antagonist into the Dragon King. Also, to portray Nezha's morally flawless image as a revolutionary hero, they removed all of Nezha's unreasonable violent actions in the novel, making Nezha's actions into the result of the villain’s unjustified offences in the film. Thus, the Dragon King becomes “the representative of all kinds of evil forces on earth,” a symbol of dualistic evil, in

opposition to the dualistic revolutionary hero Nezha.[83]

Second, he is an animal. As the only anthropomorphic animal among the three patriarchal figures, the dragon identity gives the Dragon King an ideal condition to act as a binary villain. During the Cultural Revolution, animals were often used to refer to class enemies and counter-revolutionaries to emphasize their subhuman identity, as in such expressions as *niugui sheshen* (牛鬼蛇神, bull ghosts and snake gods) and *chanlang hubao* (豺狼虎豹, jackals wolves tigers and panthers.) Chinese animated films of the period similarly used animals to characterize villains. Du notes that anthropomorphic animals began to fade away in animated films in the mid-1960s, and the few that survived "became metonyms and metaphors for ethnic minorities and villains."[84] Among all the animals, the dragon, as a symbol of imperial power in feudal China, was the primary target of the anti-feudal and anti-Confucian movement. The dual identity of dragon and king emphasizes this point even more. Although the 1979 film reappeared as a post-Cultural Revolution movie with anthropomorphic animals (such as the plum deer), it also retained to some extent the tradition of politicized anthropomorphic animals, which is reflected in the film with villains such as the Dragon King of the Four Seas, shrimp soldiers and crab generals.

Third, he is an old man. In the 1979 film, the Dragon King is a crowned old man. The sparse white hair, long beard and stooped posture are designed to highlight his old age. In contrast, the hero Nezha is a seven-year-old child, which continues the setting from the novel, and the villagers, who represent the masses of the proletariat,

[83] Wang, Yan, and Xu, "Ruhai qinlong," 101-114.

[84] Du, *Animated Encounters*, 153.

are all portrayed as children.

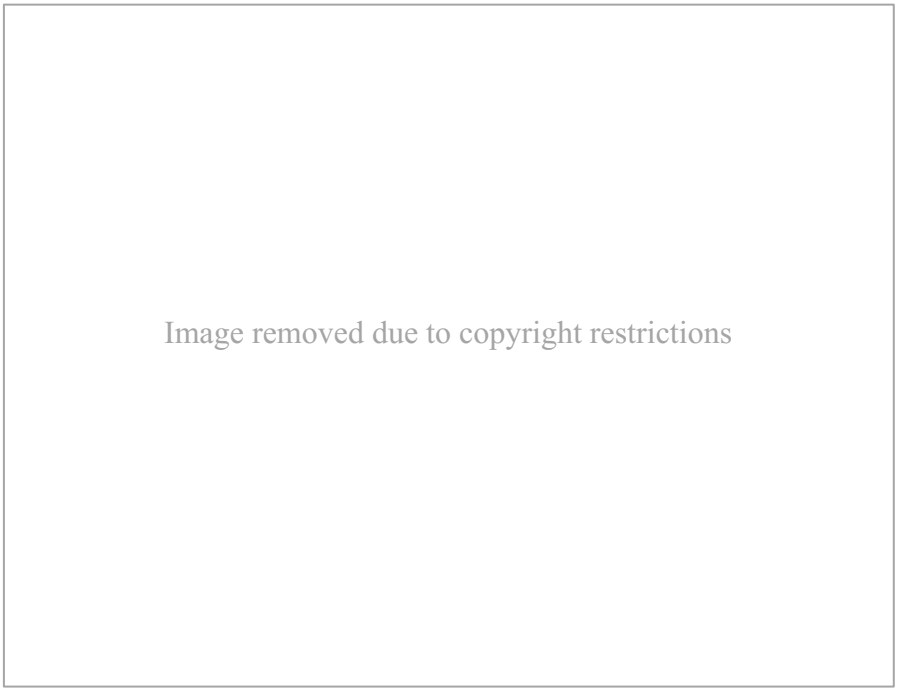

Figure 2.6: The Dragon King in *Nezha Conquers*
(Film Title: *Nezha Conquers*, Time Code: 00:11:00)

This design is rooted in the cultural background of socialist China. The concept of the old itself had political significance during the Cultural Revolution. It was one of "the four olds" (四旧, *sijiu*) (old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas) that needed to be destroyed.[85] Xu notes that "battling against 'the old' is still the primary task for the nation-building project," and that by otherizing the old, a proletarian national identity was enabled.[86] In addition, the power to defeat the old is the youth. Xu Xu suggests that children have always been seen as representing a new force capable of transforming a degenerate Chinese society into a new order. In the Mao era, children were associated with the new China.[87] Since the May Fourth Movement, children have been seen as the future and hope of China. Mao's promotion of the Red

[85] For more on "the four olds," see Zhang, and Wright, *Violence, Periodization and Definition*, 139.
[86] Xu Xu, "Chairman Mao's Child: Sparkling Red Star and the Construction of Children in the Chinese Cultural Revolution," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2011), 389.
[87] Ibid., 402.

Guard movement during the Cultural Revolution pushed the youth into a divine position as the representative of the new power, smashing all the old forces. Such a revolutionary narrative is reflected in 1979 film, where the beginning of all conflicts is portrayed as the Dragon King asking the villagers to sacrifice boys and girls for rain. The old, dragon-shaped feudal emperor eating innocent children is a metaphor of the old society's attack on the new China, which is one of the biggest crime imaginable for the dragon king to commit, reminding us of Lu Xun's famous lines in *the Diary of a Madman*: "eat people" and "save the children."[88] Through narrative and character design, the Dragon King becomes the old patriarchy that needs to be rebelled against.

So far, having analyzed the three patriarchal figures in *Nezha Conquers*, we can conclude that the targets of Nezha's rebellion are the old feudal authority represented by the Dragon King and Confucian filiality represented by Li Jing. After leaving the bureaucratic class biological family, he follows the revolutionary mentor Taiyi and joins the revolutionary family. Such a narrative continues the patterns and logics of revolutionary cinema, in line with the portrayal of communist heroes in revolutionary cinema and the Cultural Revolution ideology.

C. Violence as Spectacle

Violence is a complicated theme in Nezha's story involving not only child suicide but also child patricide. To a certain degree, violence and death are key

[88] Lu Xun, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, trans. William A. Lyell (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 41.

elements of Nezha's story, driving the plot and narrative. For a child protagonist in animated films, death itself is both sensitive and astonishing. The presence of death in a children's film is usually considered to require high caution, considering the film aims at a child audience. Thus, one of the reasons why Nezha's image in the Mao era, especially the one in *Nezha Conquers* , is considered rebellious may be its brutally violent representation beyond the level of a children's film. In particular, the scene of Nezha's suicide is read as a rejection of patriarchal power and therefore is used by resistant subculture. In this section I will use sociohistorical context and Foucauldian theory to analyze the two violent scenes in the 1979 film: Nezha's suicide and Nezha's killing. I argue that the high-intensity scenes of violence in the film stem from Mao's supportive attitude toward violent rebellion during the Cultural Revolution and that, therefore, neither suicide nor murder are resistance to dominant ideology at the time. They are pandering.

1. Suicide: Making Hero through Public Execution

Patricidal suicide is the climax of Nezha's story, and the inherently strong conflict of it with Confucian filiality has led to Nezha's popularity. However, it should be noted that in both Nezha films from the Mao era, the patricidal revenge scenes were completely removed, which makes Nezha's suicide the most violent scenario in the 1979 film and contributes to one of the most stunning montages in the history of Chinese animated films.

Before analyzing Nezha's death scene, it is necessary to emphasize the definition of the action by which Nezha kills himself. Although one may call it suicide, I argue it is self-sacrifice. In many cases, the two terms are different descriptions of the same act. As Karin M. Fierke notes, suicide "is the act of an isolated individual with an agent generally having psychological problems" and has a negative meaning, while self-sacrifice "is the act focusing interests of the group with an agent generally not having psychological problems" and thus has a positive meaning.[89] Unlike suicide leading to the withdrawal from the community, self-sacrifice is an altruistic action for the community through which one contributes the benefit of others or to life for a nobler value.

In the Mao era, the sacrifice of heroic protagonists for communist ideals was not only a major way of portraying heroes in literature and art but also part of revolutionary education. One of the most prominent methods of expressing sacrifice was the hero being brutally and violently tortured by villains. In the 1950s, a series of films were made in mainland China promoting the heroic sacrifice of communist fighters in the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War. Some films included plots of young revolutionaries self-sacrificing in extremely brutal and violent ways on the battlefield or under enemy torture, with deaths ranging from suicide bombing, self-immolation, to being guillotined by the enemy, etc.[90]

[89] Karin M. Fierke, *Political Self-Sacrifice: Agency, Body and Emotion in International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 34.

[90] Those films include *Langya Shan Five Heroic Men* 狼牙山五壮士, dir. Shi Wenzhi (August First Film Studio, 1958); *Liu Hulan* 刘胡兰, dir. Feng Bailu (Northeast Film Studio, 1950); Dong Cunrui 董存瑞, dir. Guo Wei (Changchun Film Studio, 1955).

Although child suicide is not suitable for a child audience by contemporary commercial cinema standards, in socialist China, these sacrifice-themed films were not only not considered unsuitable for children but were also organized for group viewing in schools to educate children about patriotism. Such violent scenes of heroes who would rather die than give in before torture also appear in *Havoc in Heaven*, in which Sun Wukong is tortured by the villainous Jade Emperor. He is firstly tied to a pillar in the Heavenly Palace and later thrown into a furnace and burned. Both the pillar and the fire are popular props in martyr sacrifice scenes. The scenario fits a narrative model that Berry calls socialist tragedy, which involves a martyrdom pattern. The death of good people is a necessary sacrifice for a better future of the

socialist motherland, and such a pattern was already widespread in Chinese revolutionary narratives in the 1970s.[91]

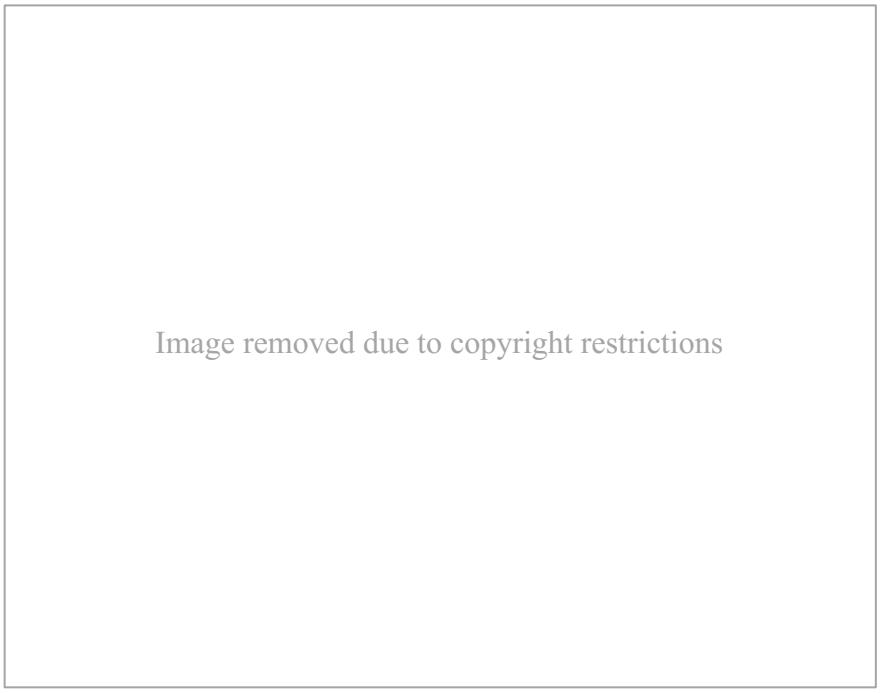

Figure 2.7: Sun Wukong being tortured by the Jade Emperor.
(Film Title: *Havoc in Heaven*, Time Code: 01:41:16)

I consider Nezha's death scene in *Nezha Conquers* to be a typical example of the martyrdom pattern of socialist tragedy. SAFS filmmakers defined the film as a Chinese tragicomedy with tragic heroism.[92] The artists spent a lot of energy using montages to emphasize the suicide scene of Nezha, making the scene "not one or two shots, but instead a section almost five minutes long."[93] In a series of pictures before Nezha decides to kill himself, the camera constantly switches between Nezha's first-person perspective and the audience's third-person perspective to show Nezha's dilemma. His brow is furrowed, and his eyes roll back and forth. After a period of intense thinking, he dries his tears and bites his long hair in determination. At the

[91] Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema*, 119-122.
[92] Du ed., *Chinese Animation and Socialism*, 156.
[93] Ibid., 127-130.

moment he picks up the sword his father has dropped, the music pauses, shifting from the earlier somber urgency to a brilliant tone. The audience realizes immediately he has decided to die in the way of sacrificial generosity. Like other revolutionary martyrs, Nezha commands the Dragon King with an impassioned voice and the gesture of a triumphant revolutionary before he kills himself: “Old demon dragon, listen up. I take responsibility for what I did alone. I dare you to hurt others!” (老妖龙，你听着，我一人做事一人当，不许你们祸害别人). Then he bites his hair, turns his back to the camera, decisively slits his throat with the cold sword in a heroic gesture, and ends his young life. Like other revolutionary martyrs, he never shows any fear or submission until death.

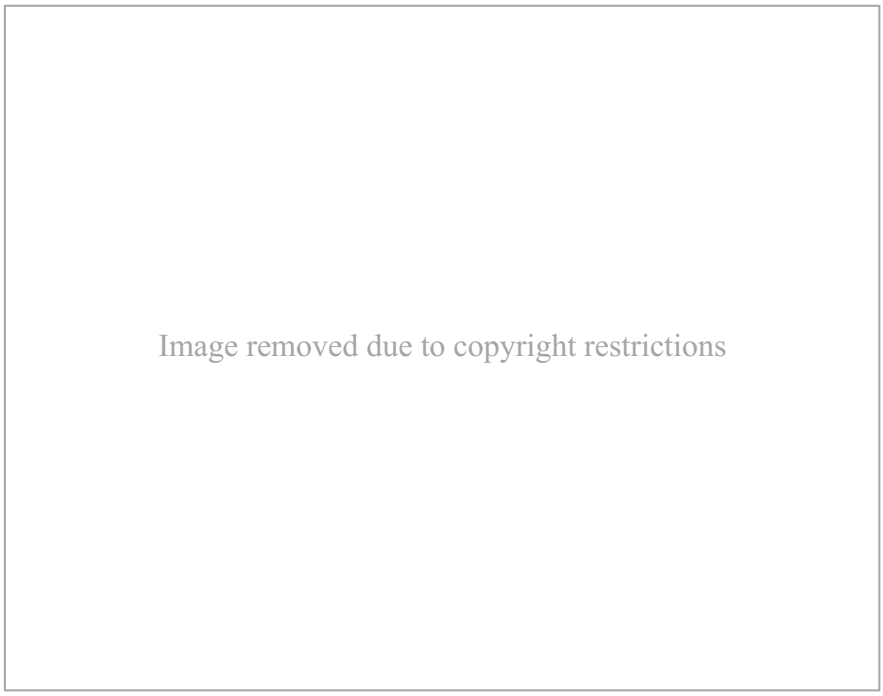

Figure 2.8: Nezha's suicide scene.
(Film Title: *Nezha Conquers*, Time Code: 00:41:59)

It is probably one of the most famous montages in the history of Chinese cinema. The logic of the camera language of Nezha's death scene is same as that of the hero's

sacrifice in revolutionary films, with close-up views of the face and the hero revealing a determined and noble expression, shaping his identity as a revolutionary hero. Nezha's death has two meanings. The first is, “I return your bones and flesh to you” (你的骨肉我还给你). In Confucianism, filiality is considered a debt, and through the act of “returning bones and flesh,” Nezha pays off his filial debt to Li Jing and becomes an independent person.[94] Secondly, such a carefully crafted montage makes Nezha's self-sacrifice a highly symbolic violent spectacle, where death becomes a theatrical performance, a public execution defined by Foucault as a disciplinary approach under sovereign power. Foucault argues that the public execution in sovereign society is a political ritual, a violent spectacle by which the power of authority is manifested.[95] However, the ritual contains a possibility of producing a reverse discourse, especially when conviction is considered unjust or the executed is approved of by the public. A criminal with nothing to lose can openly despise the king's authority before he dies, and “by not giving in under torture, he gave proof of a strength that no power had succeeded in bending.” In the process, the criminal is seen as a hero by the audience. The criminal’s indomitability functions as an attack on and mockery of kingship, which may result in social disturbances and political danger.[96]

This is the reason why Nezha's death and other narratives of martyrdom must include violence against the hero. The Nezha story is set in a premodern, sovereign society. At the request of the Dragon King, a sovereign power, Nezha is subject to a

[94] Sangren, *Filial Obsessions*, 141.
[95] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 47.
[96] Ibid., 60-67.

violent public execution in front of a villager audience that admires him. The film emphasizes his determination and bravery when facing torture, having him berate the Dragon King before death and thus attack the king's authority. Also, Nezha kills himself instead of being executed, which gives him more self-sacrifice in addition to indomitability. By taking the action to end his life into his own hands, a kind of subjectivity is revealed here. As Fierker notes, "self-sacrifice is an 'act of speech' in which the suffering body communicates the injustice experienced by a community to a larger audience."[97] With Nezha actively choosing to end his life in an extremely violent way, the audience's emotions are pushed to the highest point. The more violent the execution, the stronger the sense of tragedy, and the more it touches the audience's sympathy, raising admiration for the martyr, recognition of the values the martyr sacrificed himself for, and contempt for the sovereign. Through the violent spectacle, Nezha completes his transformation from the Third Crown Prince to a revolutionary martyr.

2. Killing: Violence against Enemies

The aggressive violence in the Mao-era Nezha adaptation is not only evident in his suicide but also in his killing. Such violence is rooted in Maoism's dominant ideology: the philosophy of struggle is based on class hierarchy. As Mao said in his famous speech "*geming bushi qingke chifan*" (革命不是请客吃饭, A revolution is not a dinner party): "A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class

[97] Fierke, *Political Self-Sacrifice*, 37.

overthrows another."[98] The revolution based on class struggle is inevitably violent, and the violence against a class enemy is not only necessary but morally good.[99]

During the Mao era, and especially during the Cultural Revolution, education on hatred of class enemies permeated China. One of the important targets of the violent education was the youth, represented by the Red Guards, who were considered the future and hope of China. Mao encouraged young people to use arms: "It is not a bad thing to let the youth have some practice in using arms - we haven't had a war for so long."[100] In 1966, the Minister of Public Security gave the words suggesting the tolerance of the Red Guards' killing: "I do not approve [the] masses killing people, but if the masses hate bad people so much that we cannot stop them, then let us not insist on [stopping them]."[101] Student attacks on the class enemy were an "accustomed fashion" approved by Mao and the Party.[102]

There are many definitions of class enemies in the class struggle. One example is the five black categories, which included landlords, rich peasants, reactionaries, bad elements and rightists.[103] These people were considered the second-class citizen by the society, treated as subhuman and unable to resist when oppressed and abused. They were the targets of social hatred under the Party's education. This class division

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[98] Mao Zedong, "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol 1, 2nd ed, ed. Committee for the Publication of the Selected Works of Mao Zedong (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021), 15.

[99] Anne F. Thurston, "Urban Violence during the Cultural Revolution: Who Is to Blame?" in *Violence in China: Essays in Culture and Counterculture*, eds. Jonathan N. Lipman and Stevan Harrell (New York: Suny Press, 1990), 152-153.

[100] Quoted in Ji Fengyuan, "Language and Violence During the Chinese Cultural Revolution," *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2004): 97.

[101] Quoted in Ji Fengyuan, "Language and Violence During the Chinese Cultural Revolution," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* vol. 11, no. 2 (2004): 97.

[102] Ibid., 95.

[103] For more on class categories, see Xiaowei Zang, *Children of the Cultural Revolution: Family Life and Political Behavior in Mao's China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 19.

made violence against those defined as class enemies a righteous act without any sense of guilt. The government's attitude of tolerance and even encouragement of extreme violence allowed violence to become widespread and ordinary during the Cultural Revolution.[104]

In *Nezha Conquers* , the executors and the victims of the violence are depicted precisely according to such a logic. Although SAFS did not deliberately portray Nezha as a Red Guard, his image inevitably bears strong traces of the appearance of Red Guards and was influenced by the late Cultural Revolution. SAFS filmmakers admit that Nezha's action sometimes are in the style of "*xiaofendui lajiashi*" (小分队拉架式, Red Guard squads' fighting gesture), a term that refers to the martial arts gestures of Red Guard squad members in fights during the Cultural Revolution.[105] One of the weapons Taiyi gives Nezha after his rebirth is *huojian qiang* (火尖枪, the fire point spear), which is visually similar to the Red Guards' *hongying qiang* (红缨枪, red tasseled spear). The scene of an aggressive child holding a spear with red tassel is easily connected with the violence of the Cultural Revolution. Macdonald also notes that the styles of Nezha's dress and gender are often associated with the

[104] Zhang and Wright, *Violence, Periodization and Definition*, 85-91.

[105] Wang, Yan, and Xu, "Ruhai qinlong," 113.

Red Guards.[106]

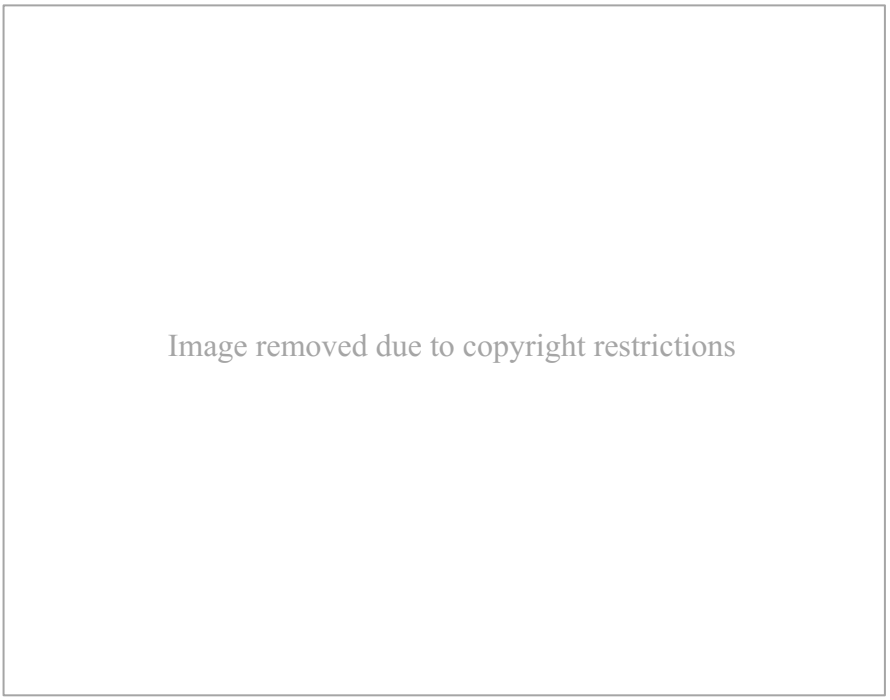

Figure 2.9: Nezha holding the fire point spear.
(Film Title: *Nezha Conquers*, Time Code: 00:51:39)

[106] Macdonald, *Animation in China*, 143.

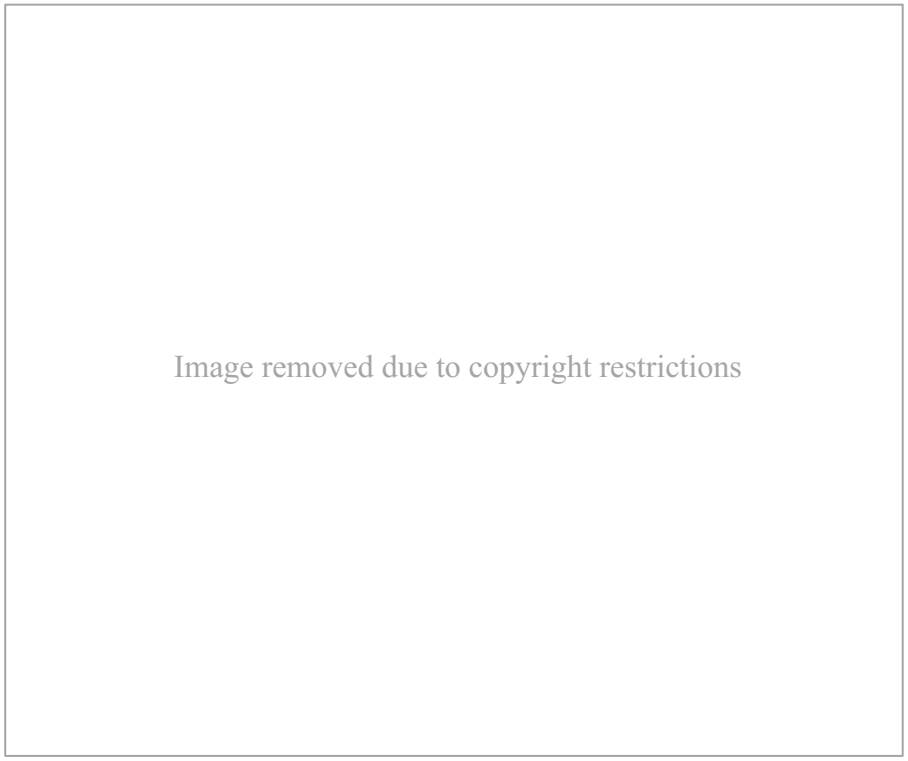

Figure 2.10: *Hongying qiang*, a comic published in 1975.

The recipients of Nezha's killings or beatings are portrayed as the legitimate targets of violence: the class enemy. Two major violent scenes in the film illustrate such violence against class enemies. One is Nezha killing Ao Bing (敖丙), a scene that is cruel beyond the general expectation of children's films. Although both are third princes, Nezha's image as a red child eliminates his aristocratic attributes and emphasizes his roots in the people. When he announces himself before the battle with Ao Bing, he only introduces himself as the son of Li Jing from Chentang Pass. The class status of a bureaucrat is deliberately erased here. Ao Bing, in contrast, addresses himself as the third prince of the Dragon King, emphasizing his feudal identity. He is designed as mostly white, showing that he is the noble son of dragons and an unbeatable little hegemon.[107] After a few rounds of Peking Opera-style fighting,

[107] Wang, Yan, and Xu, "Ruhai qinlong," 101-114.

Nezha throws the dragon-shaped Ao Bing to the ground, hits him on the head with *qiankun quan* (乾坤圈, the circle of heaven and earth) and kills him. This is when the most violent scene in this section takes place. Nezha pulls the dragon tendon out of Ao Bing's corpse and plays with it like a trophy, with a happy smile on his face. Such playful contempt towards a concrete death, delivered by a child, makes the scene shockingly violent. This violence is also reflected in the language. In declaring war on Ao Bing, Nezha shouts: "If you bully people again, I'll peel your skin and draw out your tendons" (你们再欺负人，我扒你们的皮，抽你们的筋). After killing Ao Bing, he says, "I will draw out your tendons, see if you still harm people" (我抽你的筋，看你还害人不). The two basically repetitive sentences highlight the importance of "drawing your tendons" (抽你的筋, *chou ni de jin*), which was a popular slogan during the Cultural Revolution used by the Red Guards, appearing in insults against class enemies such as Liu Shaoqi.[108] However, if "draw out your tendons" was just an exaggerated metaphor in the Cultural Revolution, then the 1979 film visualizes the scene: Nezha literally draws out Ao Bing's tendons and kicks the rest of his body into the sea.

Another scene of violence against the class enemy occurs in Nezha's beating, or one may say, torture of the Dragon King. As analyzed before, the Dragon King, as a symbol of feudal kingship and the elder authority, is a dualistic evil villain, a legitimate target of the violence of class struggle. In the film, when the Dragon King goes to the Heavenly Palace to sue Li Jing, Nezha rides the Dragon King, scolds and

[108] Ji, "Language and Violence," 106.

commands him, then presses the dying Dragon King to the beach. The old man Dragon King keeps saying “spare my life” with an old voice and faint breath, in contrast to Nezha's bright, childlike tone and the laughter of the child villagers celebrating their victory and threatening the Dragon King. Such a scene could recall the memory of the violent persecution against the elder authority by the child Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. As MacDonald has accurately pointed out: “Nezha’s dominance of the cowering elderly Dragon King cannot be separated from images of young Red Guards, some of them children, collectively denouncing and humiliating adult authority figures, even elderly men and women, in the period of the Cultural Revolution just preceding the production of *Nezha Conquers*.”[109]

Two functions of violent spectacle in *Nezha Conquers* have now been demonstrated. First, Nezha's suicide is adapted into a magnificent sacrifice through the martyrdom narrative of tragic heroism. The child hero has been shaped. Second, the film depicts the villains as class enemies and has the heroic Nezha inflict harsh violence on them, expressing the dominant ideology of class struggle. Therefore, the extreme violence of Nezha’s image in the Mao era is consistent with Cultural Revolution values and is considered to fit the revolutionary spirit and to be educational.

D. Rebelliousness beyond the Film

In this chapter, through an analysis of the patriarchal figures and violent scenes

[109] Macdonald, *Animation in China*, 152.

in the Nezha films of the Mao era, I have demonstrated that the Mao-era Nezha adaptations are fully consistent with the dominant ideology at the time, which emphasized anti-Confucianism, anti-feudalism, and violent class struggle. Everything the films oppose is opposed by Mao, and everything they support is supported by Mao. The aggressive anti-patriarchal theme and violent manifestations are rooted in the unique political context of the Mao era, which makes the films themselves obedient to dominant morality rather than rebellious against it. From this perspective, Maoist Nezha adaptations are on the same political spectrum as revolutionary operas in Cultural Revolution, both being propaganda and educational works subservient to the ideology of one of the most authoritarian regimes in China after 1949.

A question arises here. Why is the Nezha image in *Nezha Conquers* seen by subcultures such as rock as a symbol of resistance against patriarchy and tyranny, just like the Guy Fawkes mask in *V for Vendetta* (2005)? Why was Nezha's suicide scene widely used as a resistance symbol even outside the Maoist context? I argue that the dualistic narrative of good-evil and father-son leads to a high degree of political symbolism in the Nezha story, making the film a visual political metaphor in which the villain can refer to any patriarchal power, therefore providing a possibility for a reverse reading.

Such a case has happened on the other Chinese animated film featuring Nezha at the time, *Havoc in Heaven*. In the Mao era, Sun Wukong was established as an anti-feudal revolutionary hero who was metaphorically seen as Mao by Mao’s own

acquiescence.[110] In a talk in March 1966, Mao clearly expressed that in the official narrative the Maoists are Sun Wukong and the Jade Emperor is the counter-revolutionary: “Where the central authorities do bad things, I will call for local rebellion against the central government. More Sun Wukong should come out in all places and make havoc in Heavenly Palace. Some people are afraid of Sun Wukong rebellion, stand on the Jade Emperor's side ..... we must stand on the Sun Wukong side.”[111] Following such a narrative, *Havoc in Heaven* portrays Sun Wukong as the new revolutionary hero and the Jada Emperor as the old feudal authority, which echoes the fashion in which Mao saw himself as Sun Wukong. Such a narrative can also be proved by a previous work by Zhang Guangyu (张光宇, 1900-1965), the art designer of the film. His 1945 cartoon *Xiyou Manji* (西游漫记, Comic Journey to the West), which is one of the main sources of art settings for the film, satirizes the Nationalist government and sets up an emperor who shares a similar look with the Jade emperor in the film as the main villain.[112]

However, during the Cultural Revolution, any political position could face the threat of being instantly branded as a class enemy. Sun Wukong's rebellion could be simultaneously seen as resistance against the old government by the new rulers and a threat to the new rulers who just came to power. In the Cultural Revolution, *Havoc in Heaven* was criticized as an anti-socialist work, because the Red Guards saw the

[110] Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 153.
[111] Bu, *Zalan jiushijie*, 67.
[112] Chang-Tai Hung, “The Fuming Image: Cartoons and Public Opinion in Late Republican China, 1945 to 1949,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no. 1 (1994): 126–127, https://www.jstor.org/stable/179329.

villainous Jade Emperor as a satire of the Party leadership. Sun Wukong was seen as committing a great crime by making havoc in the Heavenly Palace and scaring the Jade Emperor into fleeing the throne. The film director Wan Laiming was also persecuted due to such a reading. [113]

For *Nezha Conquers* , the possibility of a binary narrative is built on not only the binary of good-versus-evil but also on the father-son structure. As mentioned before, Confucian filiality is a set of patriarchal relationships that act on both biological family and government authority. Sangren has noted that filial piety "projects a particular son/ego-centered imaginary as the productive principle not only of male subjectivity but also of Chinese state/society and, indeed, of 'all under heaven'."[114] Thus, obedience to the father can be read as an allegory of obedience to the government, and similarly, patricide can be read as an allegory of regicide, or in a modern context, rebellion against the government. Even in the Mao era, with its radical rebellion against Confucian filiality, the father-son structure was not completely abandoned. Rosemary Roberts uses the case of Lei Feng (雷锋, 1940-1962), an orphan and "Party child" propagated by the CCP as a moral model, to point out that the traditional discourse on the nature and duty of filiality is not entirely undermined and eliminated in the socialist narrative but shifted from parents to the Party and Mao. Confucian filiality's emphasis on absolute obedience and sacrifice of children to their parents is appropriated to highlight the absolute obedience and

[113] Wan Laiming 万籁鸣, and Wan Guohun 万国魂, *Wo yu Sun Wukong* 我与孙悟空 [Me and Sun Wukong] (Taiyuan: Beiyue Wenyi Chubanshe 北岳文艺出版社, 1986), 158.

[114] Sangren, *Filial Obsessions*, 219.

sacrifice of the people to the Party and Mao, which made the Party and Mao play the role of parents in such socialist filiality and people play the role of sons.[115]

In such a context, all texts attacking patriarchal authority can be viewed as dangerous political metaphors, because the replacement of patriarchal governments is itself a father-killing drama. In the Mao era, when the CCP described themselves as the revolutionary force and employed a revolutionary narrative, it was in the position of a disobedient son whose goal was to overthrow the old patriarchal authority in the Party-controlled texts. Meanwhile, the CCP is the ruler of China after 1949 who exercises authoritarian governance over the country, and it also could be seen as the patriarchal authority and the father in an anti-government narrative. Thus, the text of rebellion against the father can be used both by the CCP to attack the old feudal patriarchy and as an attack by the dissidents on the CCP. When the Cultural Revolution ended and China moved towards capitalist globalization in the 1980s, people began to reject and rethink the frenzy of the CCP revolutionary ideology. Looking back at *Nezha Conquers* , Nezha is still the same son who rebelled against patriarchal power and whose rebelliousness is built on the clear notion: the father can be killed. However, the identity of the father can be interpreted from different perspectives.

E. Conclusion

In this chapter, through an analysis of two Mao-era Nezha films and an

[115] Rosemary Roberts, "The Confucian Moral Foundations of Socialist Model Man: Lei Feng and the Twenty Four Exemplars of Filial Behaviour," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 16, 1 (2014): 23-38.

introduction to the dominant ideologies that influenced their adaptations, I have explained that Nezha's rebellion was a form of Maoist propaganda. Although the severing of ties with the biological father, the extreme violence toward enemies, and the child suicides seem shocking today, these films' plots are consistent with the ideologies Mao promoted with regard to the new revolutionary family structure, violent revolution, and heroic martyrdom for the revolution. By removing the religious elements in *Fengshen Yanyi* that did not fit Maoist thought, the film portrays Nezha as a communist revolutionary warrior, thus incorporating the aggressive child god into the army of Mao's children.

With the death of Mao and the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, the Mao era came to an end along with China's socialist phase. China embarked on rapid modernization and capitalist reforms under subsequent leaders whose primary goal was economic development. In the nearly forty years that have followed, the Mao era's harsh control of culture and thought and the treatment of ideology as a key to national security receded until the arrival of another authoritarian leader in 2012, when this trend of ideological control was revived and took precedence over economic construction. In the Xi Jinping era, Nezha has returned to Chinese animated films, but he has been transformed from a violent revolutionary into to a filial son, radically changing the patricide's identity. How does this contrasting shift reflect the ideology of Xi's era? How does the change in Nezha adaptations demonstrate cultural and political changes in China? What is Nezha rebelling against now?

III. Chapter Two. Xi's Child: Nezha as the Socialized Only Child in a Disciplinary Society

The 1979 adaptation is undoubtedly a monument in the history of Chinese animated films. Since its release, Chinese animation has undergone many economic and media technology reforms, moving from an industry of state-control studios to a capitalist, market economic industry. Through the television era and then into the commercial cinema era, Chinese animation has been impacted by globalized consumerism and Hollywood blockbusters. During this four-decade period, there have been Nezha adaptations with various media and art styles, until the summer of 2019, when a new Nezha animated film, *Demon Child*, was released and became "the highest-grossing non-U.S. animated film in history as well as the second-highest-grossing movie of any kind in China."[116] In contrast to SAFS's Maoist-era version of Nezha, which is one of the artistic pinnacles of Chinese animated films, *Demon Child* of the Xi-era became the commercial pinnacle of Chinese animated films forty years later and was called the hope of national comics by a new audience.

However, as a remake of the Nezha story, *Demon Child* has received negative reviews from supporters of *Nezha Conquers* . An audience member has commented:

> We already have no character who rebels against patriarchal power, and the only remaining Nezha became like this. 'Cutting bones to return to the father, cut flesh to return to the mother' has completely been erased off. Parents love me, the father is benevolent and the son is filial, making one cannot help but put up the middle finger. Fine, 'Parents are all scourges' discussion group has been shut off, Li Jing

[116] Owen Gleiberman, "Animation Is Film Review: '*Ne Zha*'," *Variety*, October 27, 2019. https://variety.com/2019/film/reviews/nezha-review-1203384829/.

has also been cleansed. I submit, is it enough? I have accepted the fate.[117]

Nezha Conquers and *Demon Child* are striking for their vast differences in ideologies and the great success in commercial and artistic values respectively. Under the most powerful leader in China after Mao, how does the image of Nezha in the Xi era reflect the ideology of Xiist government? What is Nezha rebelling against? Before delving into the film, it is important to understand the specific cultural and historical context of the Xi era.

A. Remaking Nezha in Xi's China

After securing a unprecedented third five-year term as the president of China in 2023, a fifteen-year record even longer than Mao, who did not hold the position of state chairman for more than ten years nominally, Xi Jinping, who seized the reins of China's top leadership in 2012, is considered one of the two most powerful leaders since 1949, if not more authoritative than the initiator of the Cultural Revolution.[118] When the name of this ambitious leader, who ended Hong Kong's political autonomy and pointed his saber at Taiwan, opened an offensive diplomatic strategy and insisted on strict lockdowns during the COVID pandemic, was hung on Beijing's Sitong bridge on the eve of the 20th Congress as part of the slogan "Remove the dictator and national traitor Xi Jinping (罢免独裁国贼习近平)," demanding he step down,

[117] Mayimeiwenti 蚂蚁没问题, July 19, 2019 (20:35 pm), comment on *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), https://www.douban.com/people/rachel-rachel/status/2562956358/.

[118] Nectar Gan, "Xi Jinping secures unprecedented third term as China's president in ceremonial vote," *CNN*, March 10, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/09/china/china-xi-jinping-president-third-term-intl-hnk/index.html.

such an impression of dictatorship became even more pronounced.[119]

Under the rule of such a leader, the story of Nezha, seen as a rebellion against patriarchal authority, was unsurprisingly radically modified, from the patricide of *Fengshen Yanyi* and severance of the father-son relationship in Maoist era to a story of a benevolent father and a filial son. I argue that two cultural features of the Xi era have had decisive influences on *Demon Child* and *New Gods*: the revival of Confucianism, represented by filial piety, and the Chinese family structure resulting from the one-child policy. Also, the Chinese animation industry now involves a combination of individual auteurs and a commercial filmmaking system, which has allowed for the director's personal experience and aesthetics, together with market preferences to influence the content of Nezha adaptations. In the following, I will introduce these three contexts.

1. Auteurs in a Commercial Film Industry

Since the late 1970s, following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the introduction of market-oriented economic reforms under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China's film industry has transitioned from a state-controlled apparatus to a privately operated system. Films are no longer seen primarily as propaganda tools funded by the government but as commercial products of capitalist companies that focus on profitability. However, this does not mean the end of censorship of literature and art. Since the Mao era, films have been subjected to strict state censorship of their

[119] Christian Shepherd, "'New tank man': Rare protest in Beijing mars Xi Jinping's moment," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/14/china-protest-sitong-bridge-haidian/.

ideology. As the famous commercial film director Feng Xiaogang (冯小刚, 1958-present) stated at the 2013 China Film Directors Guild, “Every Chinese director has faced a great torture in these twenty years, and that torture is censorship.”[120] Such censorship has reached its peak during Xi's tenure, with two key policies demonstrating the Party's tense control over ideologies presented in films. One is the Film Industry Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国电影产业促进法), passed in 2016, which not only preserves the notion that films should serve socialism, as in Mao’s Yan'an talks, but also emphasizes that films must not undertake eight ideologically prohibited acts, including "endangering social morality, disturbing social order, and undermining social stability." The interpretation of these vague standards is entirely in the hands of the China Film Administration (CFA) and is subject to change at any time in response to fluctuations in social conditions. Only films reviewed and approved by CFA are allowed to be released.[121] It means that every step of a film, from its proposal to its release, has to undergo rigorous censorship from the government. The second policy is that in 2018, the State Administration for Film Radio Press Publishing and Television (SAPPRFT), which is responsible for censoring films, was assigned to the Communist Party Propaganda Department (中共中央宣传部), and named the China Film Administration, which indicates that films have formally returned from the realm of art to the propaganda of

[120] BeijingCream, “Feng Xiaogang, ‘China's Spielberg,’ calls out China’s censors, is censored,” YouTube. April 18, 2013, video, 3:45- 3:51. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmKP1vMjBwc.

[121] “Film Industry Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China 中华人民共和国电影产业促进,” State Administration for Market Regulation, November 7, 2016. https://gkml.samr.gov.cn/nsjg/bgt/202106/t20210610_330510.html.

the Party.[122] One of the fundamental differences between censorship during the Xi era and that of the Mao era lies in the fact that, unlike the Mao era's clear division of enemy and ally classes, the standards of censorship in Xi era are vague and subject to changes in the current situation. As a result, artists have to engage in self-censorship when creating and to try to anticipate the tastes of the censorship authorities. Yet the censorship itself is somehow considered a taboo and is not appropriate for mention, just as the word “censorship” in Feng Xiaogang's speech was censored and turned into a “beep.”

When the control of ideology is reflected in Chinese animation, it is more manifested in the propagation of the Party's approved values, as Chinese animation has been tied to education and national identity since the day it was born. Especially in the wave of cultural globalization since the late 1970s and early 1980s, as Du has pointed out, when live-action films were unable to resist the influence of Hollywood films, Chinese animation, which was influenced and threatened by Japanese animation and Disney, has been regarded as "the last fortress defending Chineseness in national cinema.” Unlike some Japanese anime at that time that were designed to be “de-Japanized” and “stateless” for global distribution, the Chinese animation industry has emphasized a “national style” as the best way to be competitive and gain international recognition. Filmmakers have looked for creative and artistic inspiration from traditional Chinese culture and employed national identity as a weapon to

[122] Jingnan Shi and Xiaoxi Huang, “Guojia Xinwen Chuban Zongshu (Guojia Banquan Ju), Guojia Dianying Ju Jiepai 国家新闻出版署（国家版权局）、国家电影局揭牌 [National Press and Publication Administration (National Copyright Administration), China Film Administration unveiled],” Xinhuawang 新华网, April 16, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-04/16/c_1122688002.htm.

anxiously defend against the threat of foreign films, and an ostensibly national style has been considered as the most effective approach to rejuvenating Chinese animation since the early 1980s.[123] The animation industry in the Xiist era has inherited and developed such a notion. The adaptation of classical literary characters has become a source of inspiration not only for Chinese animators but also an investment target for government departments and capital firms. Prior to *Demon Child*, there were several culturally influential and commercially successful animated films with traditional Chinese culture or stories as theme, such as *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (西游记之大圣归来, *Xiyouji zhi dasheng guilai*) (2015), *Big Fish & Begonia* (大鱼海棠, *Dayu haitang*) (2016).

It was in this environment that *Demon Child* was produced. The filmmaking studio of the film is Chengdu Chocolate Cartoon Co., Ltd., whose predecessor was Jiaokeli Animation Studio (饺克力动画工作室, *Jiaokeli donghua gongzuoshi*). It was established in 2009 as the animation studio of *Demon Child*'s director Jiaozi (饺子; legal name Yang Yu, 杨宇, 1980-present). In 2015, the studio reached a strategic partnership with Beijing Enlight Pictures (北京光线影业, *Beijing guangxian yingye*) and became an affiliate of Horgos Coloroom Pictures (霍尔果斯彩条屋影业, *Huoerguosi caitiaowu yingye*).[124] Horgos Coloroom Pictures is the animation division of Beijing Light Pictures, a giant film and television production company, which is one of the main financiers and promoters of the film. Beijing Light Pictures

[123] Du, *Animated Encounters*, 14-15.

[124] Information can be found on the Cococarton official website: http://cococartoon.com/about; China Film Administration: https://www.chinafilm.gov.cn/chinafilm/contents/168/2485.shtml

has high hopes for Horgos Coloroom Pictures. Wishing to make it the “Pixar of China,” it has bought and financed several animation directors’ studios.[125]

Although departing from the state-controlled collective filmmaking model of SAFS of the Mao era, the current Chinese animation industry, which has joined the market economy and global competition, has not exactly moved toward the Hollywood model. Some observers argue that one of the biggest differences between the Chinese film system and Hollywood's producer-centered system is the prevalence of a director-centered system in Chinese filmmaking.[126] Such an observation may fit in the case of the individual animated studio in the Xi era. Although all films are under the strict censorship of government, the director-centred production model ensures that directors have a significant degree of creative autonomy, which leads to the content of the film being strongly influenced by the directors’ personal preferences, especially when the directors have internalized dominant ideologies and are aligned with the values the government aims to promote. This is exactly the situation of Jiaozi and his *Demon Child*.

Born in 1980, Jiaozi was one of the first singletons in China. As the family’s only hope, he started out as a medical student, undertaking a typical elite pursuit, and only after graduation did he switch careers to animation for love and passion. During his three years and eight months of unemployment, Jiaozi lived on his mother’s pension, which may explain why Jiaozi holds a grateful feeling for his parents that is opposite

[125] Jinmei 金梅, “Guangxian Chuanmei de caitiaowu, zhongjiu bushi haolaiwu 光线传媒的彩条屋，终究不是好莱坞 [Light Media's Coloroom, is not Hollywood after all],” last modified November 1, 2020, https://www.jiemian.com/article/5201218.html.

[126] Ibid.

to the hatred toward parents in *Fengshen Yanyi* and the 1979 Nezha film.[127] When explaining why *Demon Child* removed the scene of Nezha's suicide and turned Li Jing into a loving father, Jiaozi said:

> I myself went into animation by changing my career. Without my parents' support, I couldn't have gone so far and lasted so long on this path of doing animation. So this part is also some of my own reflection on Nezha, who also finally turned his fate around because of his parents' tolerance, support and love.[128]

Thus, Jiaozi's status as an only child and his gratitude to his parents strongly influenced the direction of his Nezha. The director-authorship system with large corporate investment is also seen in another Nezha animated adaption *New Gods*, in which director Zhao Ji's (赵霁) personal punk aesthetics strongly influence the film settings, despite being financed by huge capitalist corporations. Thus, the director's personal preference largely determined the direction of the film adaptation, is a characteristic of Nezha animations in the Xi era.

So far I have introduced three key features of the cultural context of the Xi era: the revival of Confucian filiality, the structure and relationships of the one-child family, and the autonomy of the animation directors who grew up in such an environment. Based on these contexts, we can now understand in greater depth what changes have been made to Nezha adaptations in the Xi era compared to the Nezha of *Fengshen Yanyi* and the Mao-era films.

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[127] Yitiao Yit 一条 Yit, "中國影史票房第一的動畫電影 The Film Topping the All Time Chinese Animated Box Office," YouTube, August 3, 2019, video, 4:17-4:26. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEAWm8aCSbQ.

[128] Fuyou 蜉蝣, "Zhuanfang Daoyan Jiaozi: Zuo *Nezha* meiyou biede, jiushi sike" 专访导演饺子：做《哪吒》没有别的，就是死磕 [Interview with Director Jiaozi: There's nothing else to do with the filmmaking of Nezha, it's just a fight to the death], last modified July 26, 2019, https://movie.douban.com/review/10338825/.

2. The Revival of Confucian Filial Piety

Two dominant values of the Xi era strongly influenced its Nezha adaptations. First is the revival of Confucian filial piety. In contrast to the anti-Confucian attitude of the Mao era, Confucianism was propagated as a state ideology by Xi's government. Such a trend began under Xi Jinping's predecessor, Hu Jintao (胡锦涛, 1942-present). In the post-socialist China period following Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, a new generation of leaders, led by Deng Xiaoping, shifted the focus from the communist revolution to economic reform. As Matthew D. Johnson points out, economic development has led to a purposeful dilution of Marxist ideology, which has severely undermined the original source of legitimacy of the CCP, and it is urgent that the CCP reinvent its sources of legitimacy. [129] Confucianism, on the other hand, is not only the most representative element of traditional Chinese culture, with its star philosophers like Confucius, but it also emphasizes obedience to patriarchal authority. The hierarchy principle and the idea of submission in Confucian authoritarianism can ideally serve the CCP's aim of "pursue 'stability and prosperity' in a context of social and political 'harmony' (和谐, *hexie*)."[130] The emphasis on class struggle in the Mao era was replaced by the revival of traditional culture that values harmonious obedience and benefits stability and economic construction. Therefore, Confucianism became the ideal spiritual instrument to replace communist faith.

[129] Matthew D. Johnson, "Institutionalizing Independence: Security, Culture, and Unofficial Documentary Filmmaking under the Xi Jinping Government," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 64, no. 3–4 (2017), 152.

[130] Edward Vickers, "Smothering Diversity: Patriotism in China's School Curriculum under Xi Jinping," *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 2 (2022): 159, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2021.1968142.

Since 2007, Confucianism has been vigorously promoted with socialist values by the Chinese government as a means of enhancing social stability.[131] In the Xi Jinping era, the emphasis on Confucianism reached a new level. As Aleksandra Kubat summarizes, the Xiist government saw the promotion of China's cultural and philosophical heritage as a political asset of the CCP, where the "nationalist sentiment" inspired by "cultural nostalgia" further strengthened the CCP's position.[132] Chandler Rosenberger also notes that unlike the Chinese intellectuals and leaders from the May Fourth Movement to Mao, who viewed traditional culture as an obstacle to China's modernization, and unlike leaders from Deng to Hu, who focused more on utilitarian economic development, Xi "is the first communist leader of China to make the celebration of the country's culture the centerpiece of his nationalist rhetoric."[133] Xi Jinping re-values the notion of the Confucian family-country parallel, conducting various projects to promote this new Confucianism in the service of socialism.[134]

In the Xi era's revival of Confucianism, two concepts have had a huge impact on the Nezha adaptations: harmony and filiality. As part of the Confucian revival, the concept of a *hexie shehui* (和谐社会, harmonious society) was first introduced under Hu Jintao and became more prominent under Xi Jinping. In contrast to the anti-Confucianism and rationalization of rebellion and violent class struggle of the Mao era,

[131] Johnson, "Institutionalizing Independence," 155.
[132] Aleksandra Kubat, "Morality as Legitimacy under Xi Jinping: The Political Functionality of Traditional Culture for the Chinese Communist Party," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47, no. 3 (2018): 48, http://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-11811.
[133] Chandler Rosenberger, "'Make the Past Serve the Present': Cultural Confidence and Chinese Nationalism in Xi Jinping Thought," in *Research Handbook on Nationalism*, eds. Liah Greenfeld and Zeying Wu (Cheltenham, UK, and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), 360-361.
[134] Kerry Brown and Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, "Ideology in the Era of Xi Jinping," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23 (2018): 336-337.

"harmony" uses the Confucian idea of benevolence to maintain social stability and avoid conflict. A feature of the CCP's concept of harmony is the avoidance of conflict, which includes the blindness to and suppression of dissent and contradictions in various fundamental social contradictions.[135] The word "harmony" is also used on the Chinese Internet to refer to censorship; "*bei hexie le*" (被和谐了, be harmonized) means something got censored and eliminated.[136] In this context, harmony is often achieved not by resolving conflicts, but by covering them up, or, to use a Chinese idiom, "*fenshi taiping*" (粉饰太平, whitewashing the peace). One example is the crime *xunxin zishi* (寻衅滋事, picking quarrels and provoking trouble), a charge from China's criminal code that has been used regularly since Xi Jinping came to power to arrest dissidents, including petitioners, protesters and rights activists, and make them disappear. [137] In literature and art, harmony is expressed in the de-emphasis or even avoidance of class conflict. Conflict often appears as misunderstandings or is resolved by sacrificing individual interests under collectivism, finally forcing a happy ending. Works depicting fundamental social conflicts are subject to strict censorship.

The second key concept is filiality. The promotion of filiality at the national level began under Hu Jintao, and the government wants the elderly to rely on their children

[135] Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, "Ideology in the Era of Xi Jinping," 333.
[136] Johnson, "Institutionalizing Independence," 155.
[137] For reports and research related to "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," see Tessa Wong and Grace Tsoi, "The protesters who've gone missing as China deepens crackdown," BBC News, February 18, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-64592333; Verna Yu, "We just want to live in a normal world': China's young protesters speak out, and disappear," *The Guardian*, February 8, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/08/we-just-want-to-live-in-a-normal-world-chinas-young-protesters-speak-out-and-disappear; Yu Zeng and Yuqing Feng, "Politicized Adjudication Vis-à-vis Petitioners in Chinese Criminal Justice," *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 137 (2022): 740-755. https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.2010874.

for support as one of the solutions to the problem of old age.[138] The government has taken a series of measures to revive filiality, including government-led propaganda filial exemplars, adding moral models of filiality to primary and secondary school textbooks, as well as establishing Respect the Elders Month and even publishing the "New Twenty-Four [Exemplars of] Filial Piety."[139] Hong Zhang calls this filiality "modernized filial piety," which no longer emphasizes the absolute obedience of children to parental authority, as in traditional Confucian filiality, but considers parent-child relationship "reciprocal rather than hierarchical," which "not only carries on the cultural tradition but also helps stabilize the family and society at large."[140]

A major reason for the revival of filiality as an official ideology is the issue of old age due to the one-child policy. The one-child policy not only revolutionized the structure of the Chinese family after the 1980s but also directly affected the setting of *Demon Child*. Nezha went from a third prince to an only son.

3. The Only Child

The one-child policy, as part of a family planning, began in 1978. It aimed to limit the number of children per couple to one nationwide in order to achieve the goal of a total population of no more than 1.2 billion by the year 2000.[141] As China

[138] Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 173.

[139] Hong Zhang, "Recalibrating Filial Piety: Realigning the State, Family, and Market Interests in China," in *Transforming Patriarchy: Chinese Families in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Gonçalo Santos and Stevan Harrell (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 238.

[140] Ibid., 249.

[141] Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy*, 1st ed (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 70.

pursued economic development in the post-socialist phase just after the Cultural Revolution, low fertility rates were seen by the government as a means to promote China's modernization.[142] Although the one-child policy officially ended in 2015, it has left a very profound impact on the structure of the Chinese family, resulting the majority of China's urban population born after 1979 being singletons.[143] It means that until 2023, a significant proportion of Chinese people aged 8-44 are the only children of their families. This almost covers the entire young-adult population, especially the audience of Chinese animation.

A significant consequence of the one-child family is the problem of old age. In multi-child families, the elderly are usually supported by multiple children, while families with one child often require a young couple to support a total of four elderly people on both sides, which is a huge burden for most families. Therefore, the promotion of filiality is seen by Chinese leaders as one of the solutions to the problem of old age. As Vanessa Fong has pointed out, filiality sees children as social security for parents in their old age and believes that raising children can guarantee being looked after in old age, which coincides with the government's goals. Therefore, Chinese leaders continued to promote filiality as a cultural model and assume that "most citizens would rely on their children for nursing care, economic support, and the payment of medical expenses in their old age."[144]

The second phenomenon resulting from the one-child policy is the change in

[142] Ibid., 2.
[143] Qiong Xu, *Fatherhood, Adolescence and Gender in Chinese Families* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 9; Fong, *Only Hope,* 2.
[144] Fong, *Only Hope,* 128.

Chinese family relationships. From the parents' perspective, in a traditional multi-child family, parental affection and resources are spread unevenly among each of the children, depending on their status and behaviour. Having many children is a form of insurance and investment in the future, with each child being replaceable. If something goes wrong with one child, there are others. This is shown thoroughly in Li Jing's tolerance of Nezha's death, since he is one of three sons. However, in one-child families, parents are forced to pour all their love into their only child, regardless of gender and behaviour. As Fong has noted, "unconditional parental love for each child developed concomitantly with fertility decline." The fewer children there are, the more irreplaceable they are, and the higher the concentration of love parents give.[145] It leads to the fact that parents love their children and are even willing to sacrifice their lives for them, because the singletons are not only loved ones but also an investment in the parents' own future, "extensions of [parents] themselves, and thus…a means to social and symbolic immortality." For some parents, children are the hope and meaning of their lives.[146] Thus, in one-child families, the power relationship between parents and children changes from absolute oppression and obedience to a more sentimental, dynamic negotiation, where the harsh patriarchal authority in traditional filiality loses its place.

From the children's point of view, a small family allows the child to receive a modern cultural model and enjoy concentrated parental investment.[147] With

[145] Ibid., 142.
[146] Ibid., 140-141.
[147] Ibid., 28.

unconditional affectionate input from parents and all the material security they can provide, there is a common stereotype of the only child as a self-centred *xiao huangdi* (小皇帝, little emperor), arrogant, selfish, and insubordinate, even if research does not prove this.[148] However, being the only child and the hope of the family means that singletons are responsible for becoming elite and making the family prosperous, which implies that they are also subject to unprecedented discipline that children in multi-child families may not need to face.[149] One of the forms of discipline is reflected in Chinese families' unreserved investment in education and strict school training, because education is the most promising and perhaps the only avenue to secular success in post-reform China. In a survey of Chinese one-child families, Fong observes that "students, parents, and teachers agreed that discipline was the single most important determinant of educational success." Some parents also agree that school is a prison, and that the only way to get ahead and enter the elite is to sacrifice freedom, obey school authority and accept surveillance like a prisoner.[150] Therefore, the self-sacrificing love of parents, the badly behaved little emperors, and the educational discipline become the key features of the one-child family.

B. Diluting Fathers

Having considered the revival of filial piety and the one-child policy, we can now examine the changes made to Nezha adaptations in the period of Xi Jinping. One

[148] Francine M. Deutsch, "Filial Piety, Patrilineality, and China's One-Child Policy," *Journal of Family Issues* 27, no. 3 (2006): 370, 381.
[149] Fong, *Only Hope*, 29, 98.
[150] Ibid., 116.

of the biggest shifts is the weakening of the patriarchal figures. The patriarchal figures in the two Nezha films of the Xi era can likewise be divided into two types: the biological father and master figures, which include Li Jing and Taiyi, and patriarchal villains, which are represented by the dragon king. However, the father-son or monarch-subject relationship is no longer the severely suppressive one of the premodern Confucian filiality, as it already critiqued by Chinese modernizers in the twentieth century. Unlike the heavenly general or the filicidal bureaucrat in SAFS films, the common feature in both Nezha films of the Xi era is that fathers are no longer repressive characters with absolute power; they are negotiable or even weak, and they die early. Meanwhile, Li Jing's attitude toward Nezha has changed from one of unresolvable conflict and hatred to one of loving misunderstanding and self-sacrificial love. Moreover, the addition of a number of new villainous characters deconstructs the role of the Dragon King as the villain in Nezha's story, making all villains understandable. All these changes work to emphasize the return of Confucian filiality by disrupting the irreconcilable father-son conflict in the original story. In this section I will show how this shift in attitude toward filiality is expressed in the film by analyzing the patriarchal figures in Nezha's adaptations from the Xi era.

1. Misunderstood Fathers

a. The Self-sacrificing Li Jing

The portrayal of Li Jing is one of *Demon Child*'s most radical adaptations of the original literary story, a change rooted in the structure of Nezha's urban middle-class family in the film. Compared to the traditional family structure, in which the father is

an official and the mother is unemployed, Li Jing's family in *Demon Child* is more like a representative of a contemporary Chinese urban family, and in Fong's words, the family structure is the standard "nuclear family" in China today.[151] It is a typical dual earner family. Li Jing and his wife Lady Yin are both civil servants in Chentang Pass and lack time to spend with their child at home, partially leading to Nezha's isolated personality. Unlike the three sons in the original literature, though he is briefly mentioned as Li Jing's third son in the beginning of the film, Nezha in *Demon Child* is depicted as a typical only child, a capricious, isolated, self-centred "little emperor" who receives all the attention and caring of his parents. It reflects the situation of most urban Chinese families caused by one child policy, as well as the family structure most familiar to the director Jiaozi and contemporary Chinese audiences.[152]

In this urban one-child family context, Li Jing is no longer an authoritative father who can kill his son for the sake of his career, as in *Fengshen Yanyi* or the 1979 film. Instead, he is a silent but loving father who loves his son unconditionally. In appearance he is a robust and discreet male figure, without the bulky body and magnificent armor and weapons that the Mao-era Li Jing has and that symbolize his bureaucratic class and his detachment from the masses. Most of the time, his clothes are discreet and decent, colored in grey and black. Characteristically he is no longer the General of Chentang Pass, who was always angry and powerful, but an official who talks in a gentle and elegant manner and is polite and modest to the villagers. One of his most common

[151] Xu, *Fatherhood*, 25.

[152] Chen and Lau also note that Nezha and Ao Bing are shaped as an only child. Chen, and Lau, "The New Chinese Individual," 1-16.

gestures is *baoquan li* (抱拳礼, the clasped fist salute), expressing both his status as a military officer and his humble character. In the conjugal relationship with Lady Yin (殷夫人, *Yin furen*), he is portrayed as a wife-respecting male, the stereotype of man who obeys his wife's demands and is considered free of traditional Confucian machismo. All of these settings transform Li Jing's image, from the Chentang Pass commander of the oppressive bureaucratic class, to a "people's servant" official of Xi's era.

In his interaction with Nezha, Li Jing's attitude is even more reversed, a change based on the one-child family context. Qiong Xu points out that in one-child families, parents are seen as friends and assume the role of playmates; "a growing number of parents were not regarded as authority figures but as friends, and so presumably children had more say in the family."[153] This is the situation of Li Jing in *Demon Child*. In the original literature, Nezha is the third son and therefore can be abandoned. Although the 1979 film does not mention Nezha's two brothers, the positioning of the feudal filial family against the revolutionary family provides Li Jing, the bureaucratic class enemy, with motive and reason to kill Nezha. In contrast, the 2019 Li Jing invested a tremendous amount of affection in Nezha, the only son who came after three years of pregnancy, to the point of sacrificing his own life. Li Jing's most important feature in *Demon Child* is that he traded his life for Nezha's. Li Jing's son should be a Spirit Pearl reincarnation, but instead, he is born from the Demon Orb because of Taiyi's mistake. The Demon Orb is assigned to be destroyed by lightning three years after his descent.

[153] Xu, *Fatherhood*, 31.

To save Nezha, Li Jing requests an enchantment from an immortal to exchange his death for Nezha's survival three years later. Such an original plot completely reverses the story of *Fengshen Yanyi* and the 1979 film, in which Nezha kills himself to save his parents. In *Demon Child*, it is Li Jing who self-sacrifices to save Nezha in the one-child family. The unconditional parental love of a father for his only son in a modern Chinese family is reflected here, which dilutes the oppressive paternal authority represented by the original Li Jing.

The change of the father-son relationship in the film comes not only from the one-child family background but also from the director Jiaozi's attitude toward Nezha. He thought that the original Nezha lacked the respect to Li Jing which a son would have for his father and was therefore not only not righteous but a villainous character. Cutting the flesh to return it to the mother and picking the bones to return them to the father was not a rebellion against patriarchal authority but rather a bloody brutality that reflected the limitations of the times and did not fit the values of today.[154] Thus, *Demon Child*'s script runs completely counter to the anti-patriarchal tone of the Ming novel and the 1979 film from the very beginning. Instead, it emphasizes love, understanding and tolerance between father and son. This change builds on the director's personal interpretation of the father-son relationship, which comes from his background as an only child in a Chinese urban family, in which his mother uses her own pension to

[154] Chen Chen 陈晨, and Xinyi Wu 吴昕怡, "Nezha zhi motong jiangshi daooyan jiaozi: dasheng geiwo de xinxin yizhi douzai"《哪吒之魔童降世》导演饺子：大圣给我的信心一直都在 [*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* Director Jiaozi: The Confidence Given to Me by *Monkey King: Hero is Back* Has Always Been There], The Paper, July 27, 2019, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_4021473; Chentangguansitaizinazha 陈塘关四太子奶吒, "Nezha zhi motong jiangshi jiaozi daoyan 26 hao shouying zhuanfang zhuanfang [哪吒之魔童降世]饺子导演 26 号首映专访专访 [Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child Director Jiaozi 26th Premiere Interview]," Bilibili, July 28, 2019, video, 2:40-3:00, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1xt411w7Wz/?p=9.

support her son while he is unemployed, as Li Jing sacrifices his own life for Nezha in the film.[155] Such dissolution of the oppressive patriarchal figures also appears in another Nezha film from the Xi era, *New Gods*, in which Nezha's father, Old Li, is portrayed as a significantly less powerful father who is unable to impose any constraints on his fully adult smuggler son and dies halfway through the film. The disempowered father is a prominent feature of Nezha animated adaptations in Xiist era.

Thus, whether in *Demon Child*, which represents a modern Chinese urban one-child family, or in *New Gods*, which expresses a cyberpunk multi-child family based on colonial Shanghai, one of the commonalities of the two Nezha films of the Xi era is the drastic diminution of Li Jing's patriarchal figure and the dissolution of the father-son conflict, changing the patricide and filicide in the original story into a benevolent father and a filial son. The radically rebellious plots in *Nezha Conquers* , such as Nezha overthrowing the patriarchal power to gain subjectivity, Li Jing's filicide, and the antagonistic father-son relationship, has no longer existed in the 2019 adaptation. They are replaced by the reconciliation of father and son, or even the sacrifice of the father for the son. The direct result of the diluting of Li Jing's patriarchal authority is Nezha's dependence on Li Jing, both spiritually and emotionally.

Two scenes in *Demon Child* express this admiration for filial piety in a straightforward way. In one, hen Nezha persuades the Dragon King's Third Prince Ao Bing to surrender, he said: “You are who you say you are, that's what Dad taught me” (你是谁只有你自己说了才算，这是爹教我的道理). This expresses Nezha’s

[155] Yitiao Yit 一条 Yit, “中國影史票房第一的動畫電影 The Film Topping the All Time Chinese Animated Box Office,” YouTube, August 3, 2019, video, 4:17-4:26. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEAWm8aCSbQ.

recognition of Li Jing's values and education. The second scene is the one depicting the death of Nezha, in which *Demon Child* takes a completely opposite approach to that of *Nezha Conquers* . In the 1979 film, Nezha delivers a death speech to Li Jing before he commits suicide: “Daddy, I'll return your flesh and blood to you, I won't drag you down” (爹爹，你的骨肉我还给你，我不连累你). The line suggests that Nezha repays his filial debt to Li Jing by returning his flesh and blood to the father and severing his father-son relationship. He undertakes his active death in exchange for subjectivity and autonomy. In contrast, the 2019 film has Nezha kneel down and kowtow to his parents, saying “thank you,” before being struck by lightning. He expresses the gratitude to the parents in a typical Confucian filial gesture, which seems abrupt in a script based on a patricide story. Considering the one-child family setting in the 2019 film, these scenes reveal that the practice of filial piety by only child has not diminished much, as well as a closer attachment of only children to their parents than in a multi-children family.[156]

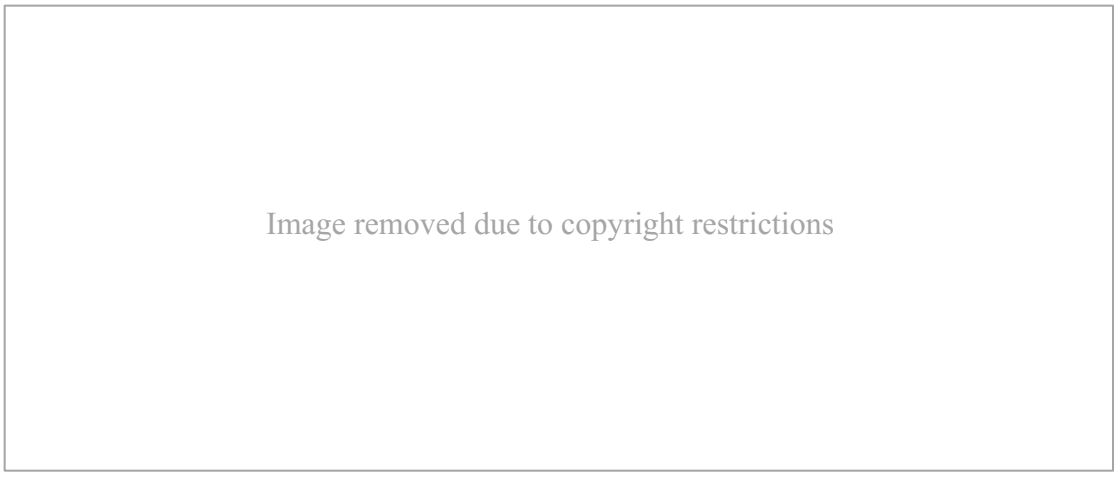

Figure 3.1: Nezha kowtowing to his parents.

(Film Title: *Demon Child*, Time Code: 01:37:46)

2. The Clown Mentor

[156] Deutsch, “Filial Piety,” 369-370, 381.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Li Jing and Taiyi are the double father figures in the Nezha story, performing different functions of fatherhood. In his analysis of *Fengshen Yanyi*, P. Steven Sangren argues that Li Jing and Taiyi represent the two paternal roles in the process of one acquiring individuality. The real father, Li Jing, represents the social discipline that suppresses individual desire, whereas the ideal father Taiyi represents the instrument of one's desire and individuality who nourishes and empowers Nezha through his initiation ritual.[157] This is also in line with the revolutionary mentor role of Taiyi in *Nezha Conquers*. However, in *Demon Child*, Taiyi's role undergoes an antagonistic change. He is essentially a comedic character who speaks a southwestern dialect and functions primarily to provide laughs by making a fool of himself. He looks like a pig, with a pig as the mount to reinforce such an image. He often makes mistakes and delays things because of his love of drinking, reminiscent of Zhu Bajie (猪八戒) in *Journey to the West*. Unlike the immortal with supreme power in *Fengshen Yanyi* and the 1979 adaptation, Taiyi in *Demon Child* is more of an executor, an instrument of superior command. As one of the disciples of *Yuanshi tianzun* (元始天尊, the Supreme Lord), he is given the task of reincarnating the Spirit Pearl into the son for Li Jing. His negligence caused by drinking leads his peer, Shen Gongbao (申公豹), another disciple of Supreme Lord who is more ambitious, to replace the Spirit Pearl with the Demon Orb (魔丸, *mowan*). Taiyi's blunder is one of the sources of the conflict in the Nezha story in the film.

[157] Sangren, *Filial Obsessions*, 133-166.

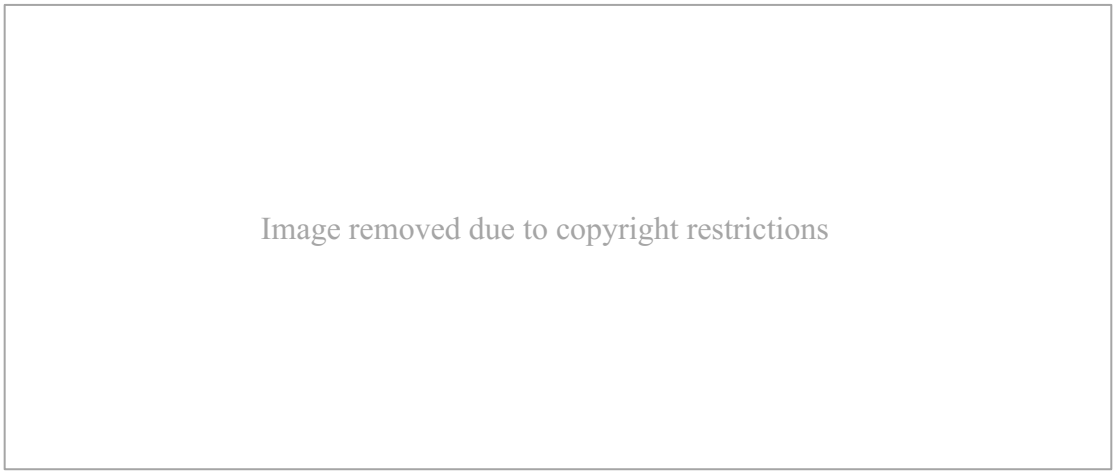

Figure 3.2: Taiyi riding a pig.

(Film Title: *Demon Child*, Time Code: 00:02:09)

This clownish image and unreliable executor status simultaneously dilute Taiyi's authority as an alternate father in *Fengshen Yanyi* and *Nezha Conquers*. He cannot be considered a repressive patriarchal power anymore. Rather than being Nezha's spiritual mentor, he is more like the tutor Li Jing hired who listens to Li Jing's commands. Not only does Nezha not treat him with the same respect and affection that he does Li Jing, but Nezha repeatedly teases him, challenging his authority as a teacher. In the four Nezha films from the Mao and Xi eras, the position of the two fathers forms a dynamic balance in the narrative. When Li Jing's role becomes more powerful and important, Taiyi's role becomes more marginal. *Havoc in Heaven* has a powerful Heavenly General Li Jing representing patriarchal repression, while there is no Taiyi at all. *Nezha Conquers* criticizes the Confucian bureaucrat Li Jing by portraying Taiyi as a mighty mentor, thus attacking filiality based on blood ties. *Demon Child* emphasizes Li Jing's fatherhood by demeaning the role of Taiyi and reinforcing the affection and attachment between father and son. In contrast, *New Gods* eliminates the presence of Taiyi with Sun Wukong as Nezha's master. From Mao to Xi, Taiyi's identity changes from that of

a revolutionary mentor who takes Nezha away from his biological family to that of a tutor in a middle-class one-child family. As an audience member commented:

> In 2019, even Nezha has become a model of success in home education. Even if you are the reincarnation of a demon child aiming to destroy the world, as long as your family has money, power and a heavenly fate, mother loves you and father gives you his life, as well as the isolated training by the top tutor, there is no worry about not raising an elite.[158]

2. Reasonable Villains

After diluting the patriarchal father figures, *Demon Child* does not put all the conflicts on the villainous characters as the 1979 adaptation did, but takes a non-binary approach, portraying all the villains as reasonable.

The evil old authority binary villain Dragon King of the East Sea, who eats children in the 1979 film, turns from a sovereign ruler in the Foucauldian sense to a discriminated and suppressed minority in the 2019 adaptation. The dragons were persecuted, deceived by the Heavenly Court because of their subhuman dragon identity and imprisoned in the Dragon Palace under the sea. Ao Bing, the third prince of the Dragon King, is transformed from the brutal bureaucratic son of the 1979 film into a well-educated son with an excellent character. Like Nezha, Ao Bing is portrayed as the only son of the Dragon King, "the chance the dragons waited for a millennian." [159]The Dragon King hopes that he will help his family escape from the underwater prison by building a career and becoming an immortal, which is a metaphor of the oppressed class's wish to achieve the family's upward mobility through the only son's excellent

[158] Wang Dagun 王大根, July 20, 2019 (19:29 pm), comment on *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), https://movie.douban.com/subject/26794435/comments.

[159] *Demon Child*, dir., Jiaozi, 01:00:19 – 01:00:28.

performance in education and exams. The tutor dragon that the family invites for Ao Bing is Taiyi's peer Shen Gongbao, a gloomy and slim figure who always works hard and wears black, who is full of ambition and strategy, and whose stuttering emphasizes his identity as someone who has suffered discrimination. Because he is cultivated into a human from a leopard, he is discriminated against by his master the Supreme Lord. He stole the Spirit Pearl, which was originally assigned to be the soul of Nezha, and made it the soul of Ao Bing. By doing so, he wishes to prove himself, win the recognition of his master, and then become an immortal. The three can hardly be called typical villains, for their behavior of obstructing the protagonist essentially stems from the fact that they are discriminated against for their subhuman identity. They want to get their rights back, which is morally understandable. Therefore, the accusations against them lack the same legitimacy as those against the binary villain Dragon King in the 1979 film. The villain’s power is distributed.

When the villain's motives and actions can be understood, to whom should the source of the conflict point, and who should be blamed? The film introduces an unavailable exit: the Supreme Lord, who appears for less than a minute at the beginning of the film. He is portrayed as a white-haired old man, a God-like figure, and is the master of Taiyi and Shen Gongbao. He subdued *hunyuan zhu* (混元珠, the sentient pearl) and divided it into the good Spirit Pearl and the evil Demon Orb, assigning the former to be reincarnated as Li Jing's son and the later to be destroyed by lightning three years later. Then he went into isolated training and disappeared. In the film, the Supreme Lord is not so much a living person as a representative of heavenly fate, an

abstract, absent, authorial, and unreasonable power. He functions to provide an initial source of all the contradictions in the film that cannot be explained or changed. He is the source of all the contradictions and is the issuer of orders. No one knows the reasoning behind his actions, and no one can find him to resolve the conflicts. In the film's tagline and Nezha's repeatedly mentioned slogan “my life is decided by me, not by the fate” (我命由我不由天), fate here refers to the nature of Nezha's evil nature, as he is mistakenly born from the Demon Orb. This mistake was caused by multiple people, including Taiyi (whose supervision failed), Shen Gongbao (who stole and replaced the pearl and orb, and the Supreme Lord (who issued orders at the beginning of the film). In theory, as the initiator of everything, the Supreme Lord is the only one capable of dealing with all these mistakes, but this option became unavailable with his absence. Taiyi's dereliction of duty can be attributed to Shen Gongbao's trickery, which in turn can be attributed to his being treated unfairly. Thus, there is no villain to take the blame for Nezha's mistaken fate. The possibility of conflict and revenge is forcibly harmonized with the disappearance of the subject of conflict, leaving only an abstract fate to serve as a theoretical object to be resisted.

By this point, *Demon Child* has diluted all the patriarchal figures in the Nezha story, regardless of whether they are fathers or villains. The conflict caused by the power struggle between patriarchy and son’s autonomy in the novel and 1979 film disappears with the destruction of patriarchal power, while the binary villains represented by the Dragon King become discriminated against and reasonable, making revenge against them illegitimate. When patriarchal power and villains are all diluted,

the film does not have any fundamental contradictions. All conflicts can be interpreted as misunderstandings. The disappearance of the contradictions leads to two consequences. One is the return of filiality, as the only son Nezha and his self-sacrificing father achieve a harmonious and filial love under paternal affection. Secondly, and more importantly, Nezha's rebelliousness is also dissolved, as no target of rebellion can be found, whether it be his father or the Dragon King. The only thing that was clearly rebelled against was an abstract and transcendent fate, for which no specific person could be found to be responsible. Thus, by eliminating the conflict between the fathers, the son and the villains, *Demon Child* panders to two characteristics of the Xi era: the return to filiality and the emphasis on harmony with the elimination of discord or rebellion.

C. Disciplinary Enclosures

As analyzed in Chapter One, violent revolution was a Maoist ideology and thus an important visual means of expressing rebelliousness in Mao-era Nezha films was violence as spectacle. In *Nezha Conquers*, whether through Nezha's suicide or the killing and torture of class enemies, the expression of violence is in line with the Maoist government's value that rebellion is righteous and violence is necessary.

Yet the serious scenes of violence, especially the classic Nezha suicide montage in the 1979 film, are eliminated from *Demon Child*. This difference is apparent when we compare the scenes of Nezha's death in the 1979 and the 2019 films. In the latter film, after Nezha kowtows to his parents in farewell, he is lifted into the sky by lightning.

The film spends four minutes describing the lightning scene, in which the death itself is never directly or clearly shown. Even Nezha himself, who has turned into a spirit after being struck by lightning, looks at himself and asks, “I'm not dead yet?” Only after Taiyi confirms that “No, you are all dead” does the audience know that Nezha is truly dead. Nezha's death is only narrated, not visually presented. More importantly, Nezha's reaction to the misconception that he is still alive is one of surprise, suggesting that his death is a passive acceptance of fate rather than an active end involving withdrawal from the system that repressed him. He feels fortunate to have escaped the strike of fate, which contrasts with the proactive suicide of the 1979 Nezha as a form of rebellion.[160] There are several moments in this scene that might be considered relevant to Nezha's death, one of which is a six-second moment of silence. Nezha and Ao Bing gradually ascend into the depths of the lightning, with the screen turning black and the music stopping, seemingly suggesting a time lapse when death comes.[161] This six-second silence also reminds us of the twelve seconds of quiet when Nezha committed suicide in the 1979 film.[162] However, the meanings of silence in the two films are radically different. In the 1979 film, the silence functions as a highlight in an intense montage and emphasizes the death by a sudden quiet. A spotlight on the stage emphasizes the dramatic moment, as if the directors are leading the audience to hold their breath and wait. It begins at the moment Nezha swings his sword at his neck and ends when the bloodied sword falling to the ground. The silence comes with a large close-up of Nezha

[160] Ibid., 01:37:52 – 01:41:35
[161] Ibid., 01:39:57 – 01:40:03
[162] *Nezha Conquers*, dirs., Wang, Xu, Yan, 42:00 - 42:12.

with tears in his eyes and blood on the sword, becoming the most iconic image in the film. While the silence in the 2019 film assumes a transitional function. It evades the scene of Nezha's direct death with a black scene and ties together the bright, loud lightning scenarios before and after the silence. The repeated use of transitions in this clip, either fading to black or white, shares the same cinematic logic of approaching a hero's death as in Marvel movies, such as Iron Man's snap scene in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), where the point of transition is to leave the specific death moments to the audience's imagination. The radical and violent suicide scene is avoided.

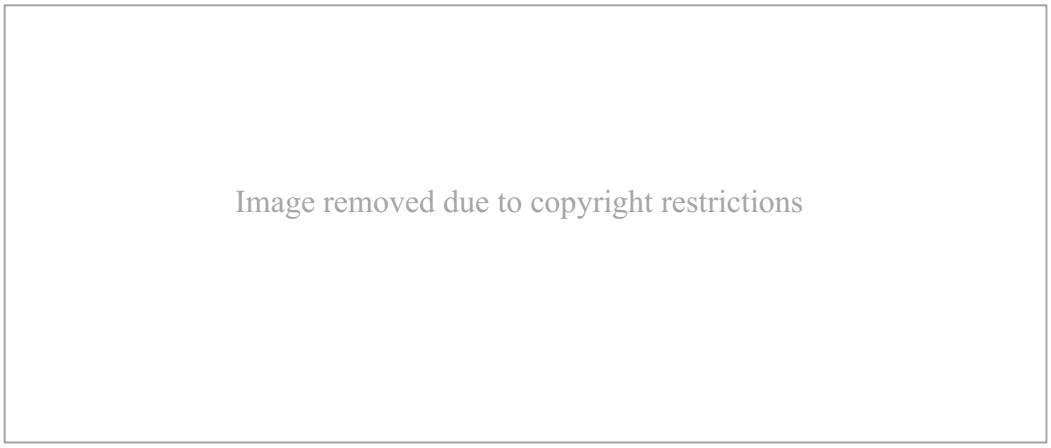

Figure 3.3: The silent suicide moment of Nezha.
(Film Title: *Nezha Conquers*, Time Code: 00:42:09)

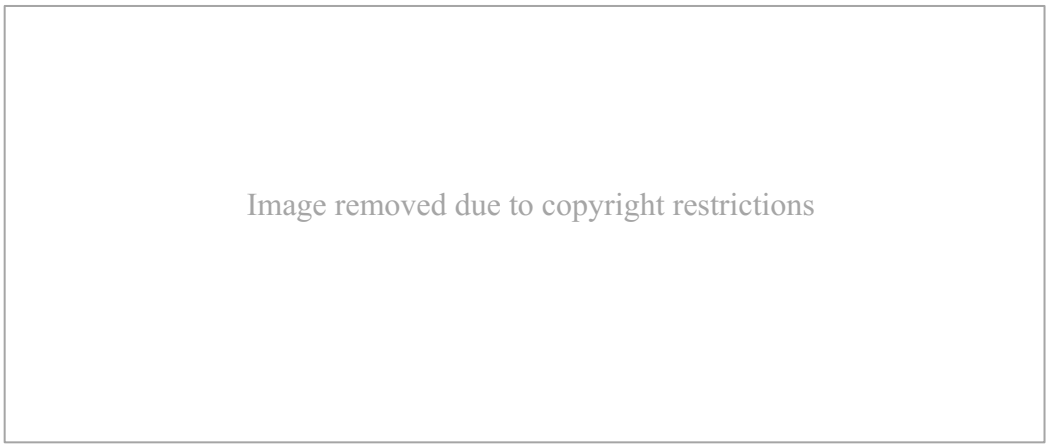

Figure 3.4: The silent death moment of Nezha and Ao Bing.
(Film Title: *Demon Child*, Time Code: 01:40:02)

This change came from the director Jiaozi's own disagreement with the violent scenes in *Nezha Conquers*, as he believed that "cutting flesh to return flesh to the mother and picking bones to return flesh to the father" was the dross that needed to be removed, that the close-up of Nezha committing suicide as a minor was anti-human, and that the 1979 adaptation allowing such scene may have been due to people being insensitive at the time.[163] Although there is violence in the 2019 film, it is similar to the one in comedic martial arts films and video games that are consumed for entertainment purposes, with no serious, permanent damage to the main characters. Such dissipation of violence is not an isolated case only in *Demon Child*. It also occurs in *New Gods*, where the suicide of Nezha is also removed. It is clear from this that Nezha's suicide, a scene considered by *Nezha Conquers* to be a highlight of portrayal of the hero, was considered by Xi-era directors to be unharmonious dross that needed to be abandoned.

4. Isolation: Tame a Rascal through Family and School

After removing the violent scenes of Nezha's suicide, *Demon Child* adopts an alternative approach to the ideology of the Xi era that I call Foucauldian disciplinary enclosures. There are two spaces in the 2019 film in which Nezha is always imprisoned. The first space is the Li Mansion. As soon as he is born, Nezha is seen as a threat by the villagers of Chentang Pass because of his demon identity. He is thus confined by Li Jing to the Li Mansion, where he is guarded and fed regularly. The first half of the film

[163] Chen and Wu, "Nezha zhi motong jiangshi daooyan jiaozi," https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_4021473; It is worth noting that the SAFS directing team also explicitly mentions the need to remove the dross from the story in *Fengshen Yanyi* when interpreting the 1979 film, but the scene of Nezha's suicide is treated in a magnified manner. It shows that Nezha's suicide was considered a heroic portrayal by the directors in the Mao era, while it was considered anti-human by the director in the Xi era.

emphasizes this isolation by depicting Nezha escaping from the Li Mansion and being recaptured several times. The second space is the world inside a painting. After Nezha escapes from Li Mansion for the second time, he is trapped and isolated in Taiyi's painting, in which a world exists. The painting is one of Taiyi's magic artifacts. Li Jing and Taiyi require Nezha not only to learn spells here but also to master and control his emotions. He is only allowed to leave the painting after being proved qualified to hunt demons for villagers with his parents. The key to leaving the painting is in the hands of his teacher, Taiyi. In addition to the period during which Nezha escaped, he is constantly imprisoned in these two locations, Li Mansion and the painting.

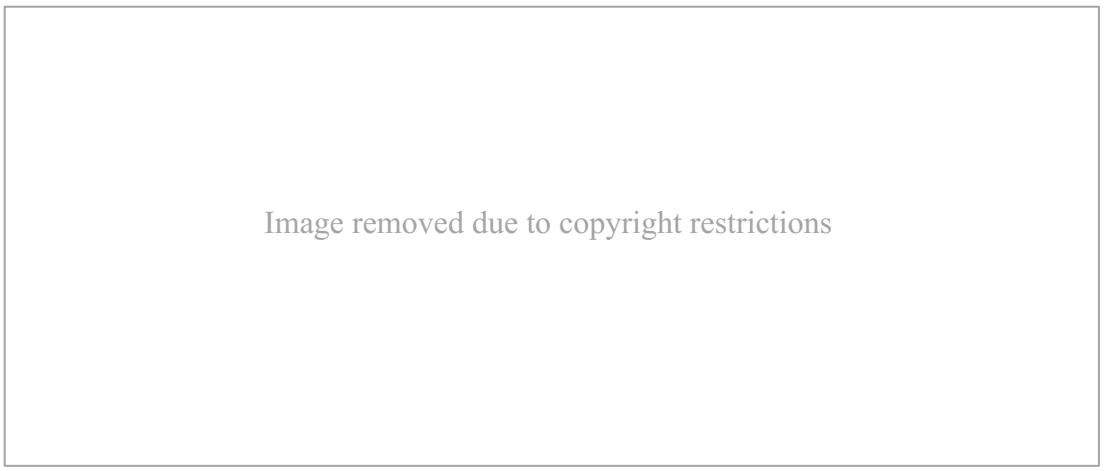

Figure 3.5: Nezha isolated in Li Maison.
(Film Title: *Demon Child*, Time Code: 00:29:22)

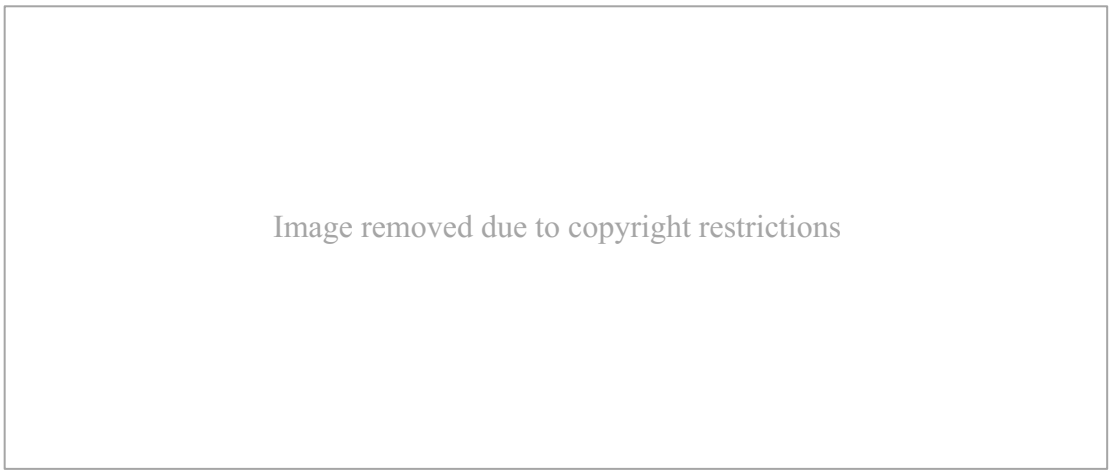

Figure 3.6: Nezha being trapped into the painting.

(Film Title: *Demon Child*, Time Code: 00:31:43)

Li Mansion and the painting serve two functions in the film. Firstly, the fancy house and landscape painting are both properties exclusive to the elite class in feudal China. They emphasize the middle-class child identity of Nezha, whose parents can afford to have servants and magic guardians to watch over him, even inviting a deity to be his private tutor. Such a focus on economic class replaces the one on political class in the 1979 adaptation.

More importantly, Li Mansion and the painting also represent the family and the school respectively, which function as the institutions that Foucault sees as implementing discipline. The family became "the privileged locus of emergence for the disciplinary question of the normal and the abnormal" signified by a disciplined parents-children relationship.[164] The school is considered an essential instrument to control and correct the operations of the body.[165] They are the major, if not the only, places that a "good kid" in contemporary Chinese families are supposed to be in. Family and school share the functions that Foucault sees in the penal imprisonment: the deprivation of liberty and the technical transformation of individuals.[166] This is the situation Nezha finds himself in. In both the Li Mansion and the painting, he has no freedom to enter or leave. He must complete Li Jing's and Taiyi's requirements and trade them for freedom. The Li Mansion is guarded by soldiers and prevents Nezha from harming the villagers, thus functioning as a juvenile detention center that deprives

[164] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* 215-216.
[165] Ibid., 136.
[166] Ibid., 233.

him of liberty. The painting, on the other hand, functions as a school, requiring Nezha to learn not only demon-killing skills but also morality, such as being able to control his emotions and behave well. The purpose of training is to make Nezha a demon hunter, a useful member of the village. This process is a transformation of the individual that makes an undisciplined child well trained in school, pass the exam then graduate as a productive social member. In that we can clearly see that the process of Nezha's isolation in Li Mansion and the painting is the process of discipline. Nezha, isolated in such disciplinary enclosures as family home and school, is changed from delinquent youth into a docile body that "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved."[167]

As a certain form of power, discipline shows a feature of how it automatizes and disindividualizes power and makes it anonymous.[168] By the discretion, low exteriorization and relative invisibility it has, there are few resistant to be triggered.[169] *Demon Child* no longer needs a powerful patriarchal character like Li Jing or the Dragon King in the novel or the 1979 film to impose repressive discipline, as it could easily cause Nezha to rebel. Instead, discipline is automatized and disindividualized through self-sacrificing fathers and disciplinary enclosures. In the film, Nezha, moved by his parents' counsel and sacrifice at home and school, internalizes this discipline and gradually transforms from a rascal who goes against everything to a filial son and community hero. By turning individuals into docile bodies through institutional discipline, resistance is eliminated.

[167] Ibid., 136.
[168] Ibid., 202.
[169] Ibid., 218.

We can thus see that the *Nezha Conquers* and *Demon Child* show what Foucault refers to as the transformation of power from sovereign to disciplinary, reflected in the change of penalization methods in the films. Nezha's suicide scene in *Nezha Conquers* is a violent spectacle, a public torture under sovereign power, which has two characteristics: first, it emphasizes revenge and punishment, not correction. The Dragon King only asks Nezha to pay for his life and does not require Nezha to become a good boy. The second is that this power has a specific and clear individual source, the Dragon King. Therefore, Nezha's resistance is straightforward. He kills the Dragon King directly after resurrection. Thus, in *Nezha Conquers*, violent execution is necessary, but Nezha is never restrained from action or locations, and neither does he attend school. He always runs free with villagers in Chentang Pass. In contrast, Nezha's imprisonment in *Demon Child* is a kind of isolation in a disciplinary society. Contrary to sovereign power, disciplinary power also has two characteristics. One is that it does not emphasize revenge, only correction. Nezha is not asked to die, but to become a good boy through detention and training, to be a useful person to the community. Second, the power was automatized. Li Jing and Taiyi are not traditional patriarchal figures. Their discipline towards Nezha comes with paternal love and is “for your own good.” In the end, the father uses self-sacrifice to make Nezha accept and identify with the discipline, thus dismantling his resistance.

5. Socialization: Be Accepted by the Community

If *Demon Child* is not a story of rebellion against patriarchal power like *Investiture of Gods* or *Nezha Conquers*, as the director Jiaozi suggests, then what is the 2019 Nezha

rebelling against? Fate? I argue that Nezha's transformation in the film is a taming process disguised as resistance. It is actually a story about Nezha's regulation from a delinquent boy to a socialized one, with the ultimate goal of becoming a beneficial person accepted by the society that is represented in the film by the villagers of Chentang Pass.

The portrayal of the villagers in *Nezha Conquers* and *Demon Child* is very different. In the Mao-era films, the proletarian masses, as the source of legitimacy for the CCP, have a natural righteousness and often represent the side of the good. In *Nezha Conquers*, the villagers are portrayed as children representing the future of China. They are the innocent and the good, the persecuted as well as Nezha's friends. Nezha does not need to fit in with the collective. He is born as one of the masses. As the representative of the collective and the mass of people, he plays with the villagers' children like an ordinary fisherman's son. The traces of his class identity as the son of a bureaucrat are deliberately erased to create his revolutionary hero image.

Demon Child, on the other hand, chose a different path. First, the film sets the villagers as the antagonists of Nezha. As Whyke accurately points out, the film adopts a narrative of "middle-class only child versus the rural migrant laborer," in which the villagers are portrayed as ignorant and prejudiced, hindering the development of China, while Nezha as the middle-class only child is portrayed as the hope of China, the righteous side.[170] Although Nezha is the son of a bureaucrat, he is placed as a victim in the conflict with the villagers. The harm that Nezha causes to the villagers' property

[170] Whyke, Mugica, and Brown, "Contemporizing the National Style in Chinese Animation," 163.

is not taken seriously but as an entertainment, while the villagers' fear and rejection of Nezha is portrayed as the greatest harm in the film. Second, the film constantly emphasizes Nezha's middle-class status as the son of the general of Chentang Pass. When Nezha is born, a bunch of villagers come to congratulate Li Jing, and the boy is constantly called "*shaoye*" (少爷, young master) by the villagers. Such an identity is reinforced by the depiction of the fancy decoration of Li Maison and the servant's subservience in front of Nezha. The most extreme depiction of this class occurs at the end of the film, when Nezha saves Chentang Pass and the villagers express their gratitude by kneeling to him. The identification with economic rather than political class is also reflected in the depiction of Ao Bing. In *Nezha Conquers*, Nezha and the villagers are friends, while Ao Bing, who is also the third prince, is simply killed by Nezha as a class enemy. *Demon Child* is the exact opposite. Nezha refers to the villagers as "these idiots," while Ao Bing becomes sympathetic to Nezha, as they are both the only sons of a middle-class family. Ao is portrayed as the only friend of Nezha, because he is one of the few people who is not prejudiced against Nezha.

It is these villagers, whom Nezha despises, that form the community where Nezha struggles to be accepted. The process of Nezha's being disciplined in the isolated enclosures is also the process of his socialization. His third birthday is also the day he is scheduled to die, and in terms of personality development, his initiation ritual. Li Jing invites the villagers of Chentang Pass to celebrate Nezha's birthday. Nezha needs to prove his eligibility to join the community in front of the entire village, a graduation exhibition after having been trained in two institutions of isolation: family and school.

Nezha accomplishes two things in this initiation ritual. One is to prove himself to the community by preventing Shen Gongbao from flooding Chentang Pass. The other thing is to repress his ego. After being told of his true identity as the Demon Orb, Nezha, who feels cheated, takes off the Circle of Heaven and Earth from his neck and enters demonization to kill irrationally. It is a very interesting scene. In *Nezha Conquers*, the Circle of Heaven and Earth is a weapon given to Nezha by Taiyi to defend his subjectivity. In *Demon Child*, the Circle becomes a disciplinary instrument used to suppress Nezha's demonic nature. When Nezha takes off the Circle, he immediately changes from a 3-year-old baby to an adolescent figure with increased force, and the first thing he does is to kill Li Jing. Here, the adolescent Nezha, freed from the Circle, clearly represents Nezha's ego, a patricide not bound by social norms, whose uncoordinated instinctual desire is to kill Li Jing. The masculine, adolescent figure represents his autonomy, which conflicts with Li Jing's existence as a father, returning to the portrayal of Nezha in *Fengshen Yanyi*. After putting on the Circle, Nezha returns to his id, a 3-year-old filial son. Thus, we can see in the narrative of *Demon Child* the ultimate goal of socialization and discipline is to keep Nezha voluntarily and forever stuck in his id, a docile 3-year-old, a child state similar to that of the filial giant baby in *Havoc in Heaven*. Both his baby and child states dictate that he must rely on his parents, and his ego, the patricidal adolescent figure, must be suppressed.

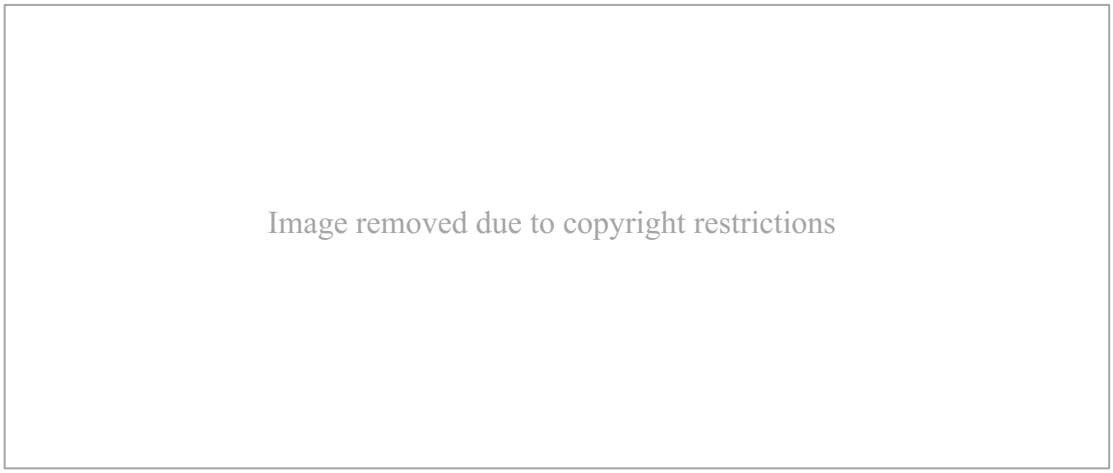

Figure 3.7: The adolescent Nezha fighting against Li Jing.

(Film Title: *Demon Child*, Time Code: 01:15:36)

Comparing the original novel and the adaptations, we can find that the artists from different eras took different approaches in addressing this patricidal impulse. In *Fengshen Yanyi*, Nezha's patricide is stopped by the pagoda given by Burning Lamp Daoist. Once Li Jing loses the pagoda, he will be hunted again by Nezha. The patricidal impulse does not disappear but is suppressed by external forces. *Nezha Conquers*, on the other hand, makes Li Jing absent after Nezha's resurrection, avoiding the patricidal drive that Nezha has to face when he becomes a new, powerful immortal. *Demon Child* makes Nezha understand and respect Li Jing by taking the Circle and suppress his ego willingly. After going through this discipline, Nezha is successfully transformed from a demon child into a filial son, while rebellion is abandoned by the corrected subject himself.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Nezha's existence is rooted in his rebellious nature in Chinese folk culture. No matter how the plot and times change, Nezha always must rebel against something. Therefore, for the 2019 adaptation in the Xi era, which emphasizes filiality and harmony, if the story of Nezha is to continue with the theme of

rebellion, then Nezha has to start out as a demon child, because the only person who can become socially acceptable through rebelling against original fate is a bad one. If Nezha does not rebel against his original fate but accepts it and remains antisocial, this reckless child is an unacceptable and disharmonious existence in the mainstream values of the Xi era. Only by regulating Nezha from a demon child to a good boy can he be integrated into mainstream society. Therefore, Nezha's rebellion against his fate is not a choice but a necessity for discipline, a socialization process in which he becomes a good child by “rebelling” against what social norms of Xi era forbid.

D. Dissolve the Rebelliousness outside the Film

So far, I have analyzed how *Demon Child*, by diluting patriarchal figures and establishing disciplinary enclosures, disciplines and socializes Nezha, transforming him from a rascal who does not conform to social norms into a docile body that is accepted by society, and I have explained how this disciplinary process is disguised as “resistance to fate.” Just as the violent-revolutionary rebellion in Nezha films from the Mao-era pander to the values of the Maoist government, the Xi-era Nezha films also pander the values of the Xi government by describing a rebellion against one’s disharmonious and unfilial nature. However, unlike the Mao-era films, the Xi-era Nezha adaptations do not offer a rebellious reading beyond the film text. Neither provide a more universal template for stories about rebellion to be applied in other contexts as the image of 79’Nezha did, being widely used in rock culture to express rebellion against any patriarchal oppression.

I argue that there are three reasons behind this situation. One is that the film individualizes social issues. As Whyke has noted precisely, although *Demon Child* emphasizes resistance to fate and prejudice as a theme, its depiction and narrative "individualizes such resistance, rather than clearly calling for collective social change in the face of specific forms of discrimination."[171] Building on Whyke's arguments, I would like to point out that while the film ostensibly insists on resistance to identity discrimination, in fact the narrative and characterizations are filled with discriminatory depictions of minorities. I use four characters to explain this point. As a victim of identity discrimination, Shen Gongbao is discriminated against by his master because of his original identity as a leopard monster. One of his famous anti-discrimination slogans is "people's preconception is a giant mountain" (人的成见是一座大山). However, his stammer is constantly used as a joke in the film, which constitutes a disability stigma. Another entertainer is Tai Yi, who is portrayed as a pig-shape clown. His obese figure is consistently humiliated in the film and associated with stereotypes such as alcoholism, gluttony, and stupidity These stigmatize obesity. The third character, a representative of the villagers, is a bearded strong man whose giant shape is emphasized in contrast to the common stature of the other villagers. He is employed with slender voice and feminine demeanor, and he is easily startled and made to scream. The film portrays such contrast in appearance and character as comical and uses it repeatedly as a punchline, expressing discrimination against people who do not conform to gender stereotypes in heterosexual male culture. The

[171] Whyke, Mugica, and Brown, "Contemporizing the National Style in Chinese Animation," 164.

fourth is the Chentang Pass villagers mentioned before, who are portrayed as ignorant discriminators against Nezha because of their proletarian and uneducated status.

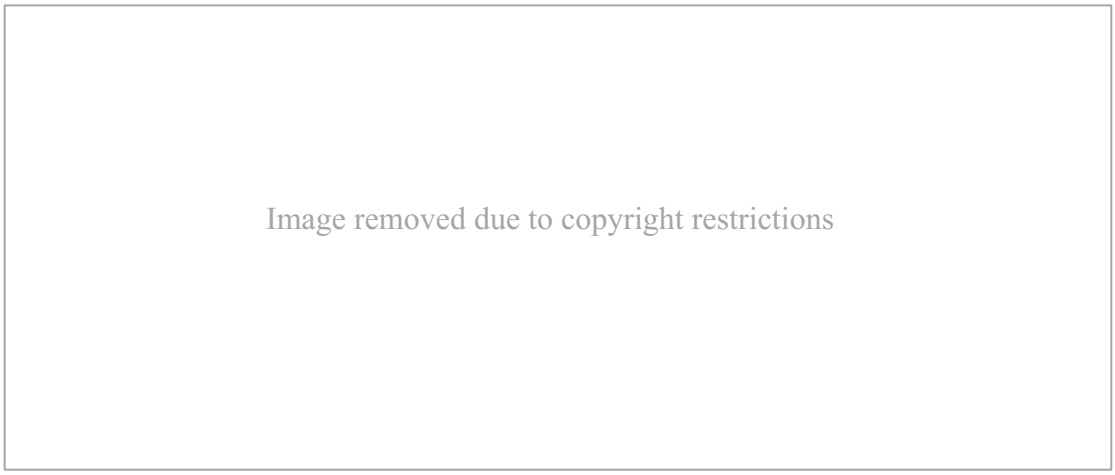

Figure 3.8: The screaming male villager.
(Film Title: *Demon Child*, Time Code: 00:03:27)

The only characters who truly rebel against fate in the film are Nezha and Ao Bing. They are both the only sons of powerful families, with fathers as a general or dragon king. Each employs a deity—Taiyi or Shen Gongbao—as a tutor and has beyond average abilities due to the Spirit Pearl or Demon Orb, representing the male, only child in urban Chinese middle-class families. Therefore, the film's theme of rebellion against fate and being uncaring about others' judgements is exclusive to the middle class, only son, while the disabled, the obese, the non-binary sexual people and the proletariat are all discriminated against in the film, which in part leads to Nezha's rebellion being individualized and his being unable to be empathized with by the broader group.

Another reason for *Demon Child*'s inability to develop a resistant reading beyond the film context relates to its legitimate interpretation of patriarchal discipline. In the first half of the film, Li Jing is a strict father most of the time. He is the one who gives

orders to imprison Nezha in Li Mansion and the world inside the painting, repressing Nezha's subjectivity on behalf of social norms. The interaction between the father and the son is merely affectionate. However, when Nezha discovers that Li Jing has traded his life for Nezha’s, he immediately reconciles with his father in gratitude. Li Jing is portrayed as the silent protector, for whom when the purpose of discipline is the greater good, through whom all means of discipline can be justified. Such a narrative can be used not only to legitimize Li Jing's discipline of Nezha but also to justify any ruling oppression, because the greater good is an abstract and macroscopic concept that can be interpreted at will, just like fate.

In summary, *Demon Child* individualizes resistance from the social level to that of personal experience, justifying discipline so that this adaptation not only cannot be taken as a resistance allegory against patriarchy but also emphasizes filiality and obedience, forming an antithetical comparison to its 1979 predecessor. Such a narrative is also rooted in the Xi era's vigilance against contradiction and rebellion, as well as its emphasis on harmony based on the removal of dissidents rather than on problem solving. Ultimately, this makes the influence of *Demon Child* beyond the cinematic context rest on the fandom of the boylove imagination between Nezha and Ao Bing, a typical entertaining consumerism.

E. Conclusion

In this chapter, I utilize Foucault's theory of disciplinary society to analyze how the Xi-era Nezha films discipline and socialize Nezha by placing him in various isolated

institutions. Unlike the direct propaganda that portrayed Nezha as a moral model in the Mao era, the Xi-era adaptations discipline Nezha more invisibly by automating power and personalizing social issues to hide conflicts, ultimately allowing the protagonist who does not conform to social rules to integrate into society voluntarily and become a docile body. By correcting the rascal into a filial son, the film emphasizes the dominant ideology of the Xi era, the re-emphasis of filial piety. Unlike the Mao-era Nezha image which later becomes an icon of revolt, the Nezha adaptations of the Xi era fail to provide a rebellious text beyond the films that can be used in a broader scenario, because the films individualize social conflicts into a personal level. This which is consistent with the Xi-era's trends: avoidance of contradictions and emphasis on harmony.

IV. Conclusion

A. The Evolution of Nezha's Images

Thus far, we have analyzed the image of Nezha in four animated films from two eras. In the 1979 and the 2019 versions, which feature the two most iconic Nezha images from the Mao and Xi eras respectively, the visual designs of Nezha form a stark dichotomy, reflecting the two different approaches of the two films in presenting Nezha as a model child figure.

In the 1979 film, Nezha is portrayed as a child hero from the very beginning. He is depicted as an adorable and lively child with a fit body, a confident expression, and a loud voice, running and jumping freely throughout the Chentang Pass in his red costume. He faces the enemy without fear with *huntian ling* (混天绫, the red armillary sash) and the Circle of Heaven and Earth in his hands like gymnastic props. These descriptions all fit the Mao-era standard of the ideal child, healthy, athletic and confident, always ready to be a "*gongchanzhuyi jiebanren*" (共产主义接班人, the heir to communism). The Nezha in the 1979 film is like Lei Feng and other moral models of the Mao era, a perfect idol for children and youth to learn from.

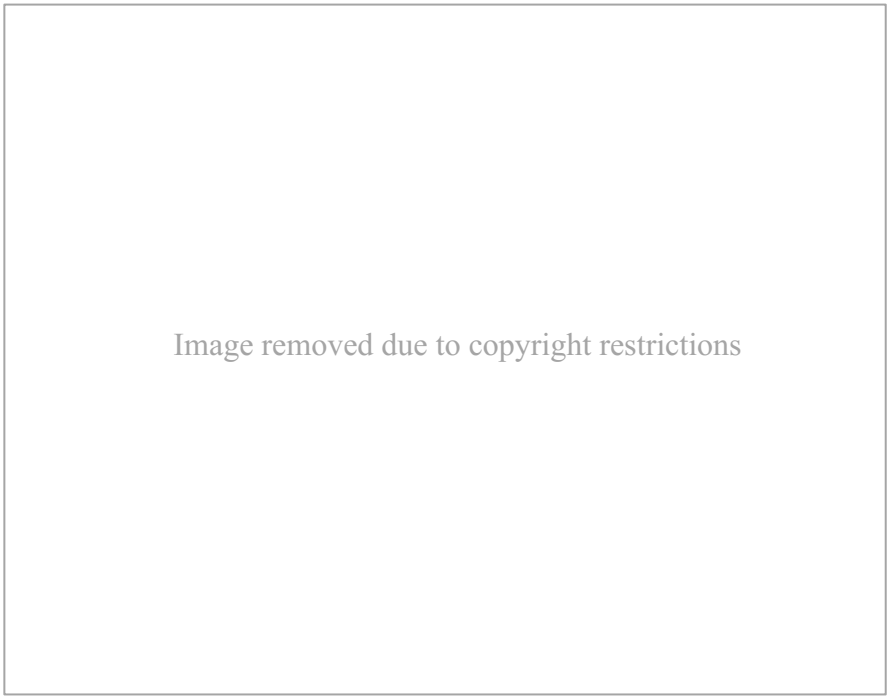

Figure 4.1: Nezha dressing red.

(Film Title: *Nezha Conquers*, Time Code: 00:15:57)

In contrast, in the 2019 film, Nezha is no longer the paragon of a good boy but a troublemaker. In terms of visual design, his most striking physical features are smoky black eyes and a mouthful of uneven teeth, suggesting both aggression and a non-mainstream lifestyle. His posture is no longer like that of the 1979 Nezha, who always confidently holds his head high, but has a cynical look, with his legs crossed or hands in the waist of his pants. Nezha's voice is sometimes lazy and sometimes frantic, and he is rude to his parents, master, and villagers. The misbehaved 2019 Nezha has been called “the ugliest Nezha ever” by the media.

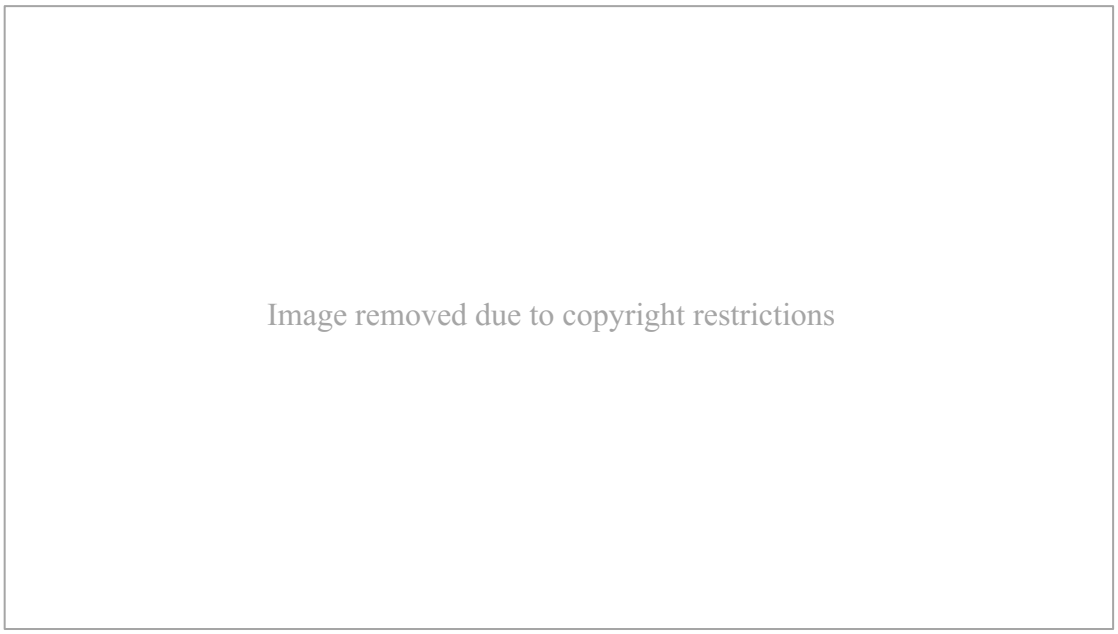

Figure 4.2: Nezha in the film stills of *Demon Child*

The film's director, Jiaozi, explains that this ugliness functions as a track for the audience to watch the film with prejudice against Nezha, and that watching the film breaks down the prejudice, deepening the theme.[172] However, from the audience's point of view, it is hard to imagine that in an era in which movie screens are filled with punk-style ,anti-hero protagonists and subculture is considered cool, audiences would be prejudiced against Nezha simply because he is portrayed as a delinquent. Two of Nezha's most common expressions in the film are a droopy and bored look, representing his nihilistic attitude, and a theatrically evil look, reminiscent of Alex in Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange*, another delinquent juvenile with significantly smoky eyeliner who is corrected into a docile body through discipline in prison. I argue that the 2019 Nezha's delinquent juvenile image design, while echoing his demon child identity, paves the way for his regulation: he is a bad boy who needs

[172] Chen and Wu, "Nezha zhi motong jiangshi daooyan jiaozi," https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_4021473.

to be corrected. A visually rebellious child clearly serves this theme better than a well-mannered good kid. The changes in Nezha's visual images also reflect the difference in the two eras' approaches to discipline, as shown in the narrative. The Mao-era work promotes Maoist ideology by portraying Nezha directly as a moral model, while the Xi-era work demonstrates the value of government by taming a rascal into a filial son.

B. The Transformation of Ideologies

By placing four Nezha animated films from the Mao and Xi eras in their social contexts, and analyzing the targets and expressions of Nezha's rebelliousness, this study demonstrates that the rebelliousness of Nezha in both the Mao and Xi eras served their mainstream ideologies, endorsing them by defying what society would not allow to exist.

The cultural context of the Maoist era is anti-Confucianism, the justification of violent rebellion, and the CCP's breakdown of the kinship family and its promotion of the revolutionary one. Therefore, Nezha's story, as a text with a theme of patricide, fits naturally into the need for anti-filiality. *Nezha Conquers* represents the Nezha adaptations of the Mao era, establishing the child god as a revolutionary youngster with traces of the Red Guards. His biological father, Li Jing, represents the feudal bureaucrats, and the villainous Dragon King represents the old authority. They are severed and killed by Nezha respectively. The master Taiyi, on the other hand, represents the revolutionary mentor who not only provides Nezha with the spirit and the weapons of rebellion but also resurrects him after death and gives him a new physical body. The rebelliousness of Nezha’s image in the Mao era is visually reflected

in the high level of violence in the films. The stunning suicide plot in *The Investiture of Gods* is in line with the legitimated violent revolution of the Mao era. By having the hero not surrender to the villain's brutal torture and finally be executed, the unyielding rebelliousness of the revolutionary martyr is emphasized and the authority of the old authority is attacked. Such a narrative of shaping heroes through violent sacrifice is in line with Foucault's description of penalty under sovereign power, which manifests the punishment of criminals through public execution with violence as a spectacle. In this process, martyrs recognized by the masses are seen as heroes, and sovereign power is mocked and attacked instead. *Nezha Conquers* is a collective-filmmaking work under the state-controlled SAFS, which led to the film endorsing the ideology of the Maoist government and seeming to be propaganda rather than a resistant text. However, its binary structure of good and evil makes it a political allegory that can be read from the opposite perspective, therefore permitting it to be used to attack any patriarchal power, including that of the Maoist government itself. The film offers the possibility of a resistant reading beyond the cinematic text and thus has been employed as a rebellious symbol in such a subculture as rock music.

The cultural context of the Xi era, on the other hand, is the revival of Confucian filiality and the censorship of conflict in a harmonious society, as well as the high level of parental affection and educational commitment to the singletons in one-child families. *Demon Child* portrays Nezha as the only child of a contemporary, urban, middle-class Chinese family, a little emperor who needs to be corrected and socialized into a docile body and a filial son through discipline in the family and school so that he

can eventually be accepted by the community. Li Jing is no longer a Confucian patriarchal symbol with filicidal impulse but rather the secret protector who sacrifices his own life for the son. Taiyi is transformed from the antagonistic alter father of Li Jing into a private tutor hired by a general. By continually imprisoning Nezha in two locations, family home and school, the film restricts his freedom while conducting corrections, a method consistent with Foucault's observation of disciplinary power in which the executor of power is automatized. Patriarchal figures such as Li Jing and the Dragon King are diluted, and the isolating institutions play the role of disciplinary apparatus. Through discipline, Nezha identifies with his father and becomes a filial son. He demonstrates the completion of correction and socialization by suppressing his patricidal impulse. Produced under the director-centric commercial animation industry, *Demon Child* reflects the only-child director's personal understanding of the father-son relationship in urban China, and the film's box office success reflects the widespread acceptance of the film's values by a Chinese, only-child audience. Due to the film's admiration for filiality and discipline, as well as its restriction of targets of rebellion to abstract concepts, such as fate, and its restriction of the rebellious subject to middle-class only boys (not girls), Nezha's rebellion is individualized and fails to resist at a social level. Therefore, the possibility of a resistant reading is dissolved both within and outside the film text.

Comparing the Nezha adaptations of the Mao and Xi eras, there are two major differences between the animated films. One is the attitude toward filiality. The radical anti-Confucian and anti-authoritarian attitude in the Mao era led to Nezha's ability to

break with Li Jing, which preserved the fierce, rebellious atmosphere of *Fengshen Yanyi* to a certain extent. The Xi era, on the other hand, promotes filiality as a tool to solve old age issues and cultural nationalism. It therefore turns Nezha and Li Jing into a benevolent father and a filial son, finally taming the child god. If it were not for the fact that Nezha as a famous classical Chinese heroic child were suitable to animated films, it would be difficult to understand why a film emphasizes the love between father and son adapted Nezha's patricidal story. The second difference is the attitude toward conflict. Mao-era China was in a period of intense revolution whose emphasis on class struggle allowed for the existence of conflict, with violence being both necessary and justified as long as the villain was portrayed as a class enemy. Such background preserves the conflict and violence in Nezha's story. Xi-era China is in a period of stability maintenance. Faced with the ideological challenges of globalization, the CCP has to maintain the legitimacy of its rule, so the concept of harmony has replaced the Mao-era's justified rebellion as the dominant ideology. Any narratives of rebellion and conflict are censored and harmonized. Therefore, the fundamental conflict in Nezha's story is avoided and turned into discipline, transforming Nazhe from a provocative rascal to a filial and obedient good boy.

C. Research Significance and Limitations

By analyzing Nezha adaptations in the context of their respective eras, this study proves that the story of Nezha, featuring the themes of rebellion and patricide, served the ideologies of the two authoritarian rulers, which sometimes conflict with each other. One of the key reasons why Nezha's story has appealed to countless artists and

audiences is that it is a story of a son's violent struggle for subjectivity and autonomy from his father in the restrictive system of Confucian filial piety. The son tries to revolt from his father's life. Such radical violence seems to carry a liberal and idealistic tone that has a natural appeal to the oppressed. The central conflict of the Nezha story rests on the power struggle between Nezha and Li Jing. Drawing on Foucault's theory of disciplinary society, which exposes how different kinds of power use various approaches to discipline the ruled, this study not only examines the power relations between Nezha and Li Jing in multiple animated films but also goes beyond the film text to point out the power relations between the government and the film audience in two eras. We find that the governments in the planned and market economy eras respectively have used different ways to censor the expression of values in cinematic works and have turned them into propaganda tools. If we view the government's top-down enforcement of the people's acceptance of the CCP's values as a form of discipline, it is ironic that the story of Nezha, an anti-authoritarian narrative that attracts an audience unwilling to become docile bodies precisely because of the story’s rebelliousness, ends up disciplining the viewer fulfilling with the government’s ideology. Sometimes this ideological discipline is hidden so deeply in the film’s narrative that the filmmakers themselves are not aware of it. Exposing the logic of how this discipline operates is one of the purposes of this study. How could the story of a patricidal child serve the ideology of Chairman Mao, who was considered by the young Red Guards to be closer to them than their own fathers? Why was the most popular animated film of the Xi era, which emphasized the revival of Confucian filial piety,

adapted from the story of a father killer? By interpreting the films with their historical and cultural context, this study provides an answer.

The study of Nezha films involves not only film studies but also the intersection of culture-historical context, politics, etc. Although this study is dedicated to answering questions related to Nezha's rebelliousness, there are limitations due to volume and time constraints. First, the subject of the study's analysis could have been richer. This study primarily focuses on two films, with another two supporting the analysis in lesser ways, taking the two primary films as being representative due to their influence in art and the box office. However, we need examination of more films to supplement these samples. For example, the other two animated films by Light Chaser Animation Studios, *Jiang Ziya* (姜子牙) (2020) and *New Gods: Yang Jian* (新神榜: 杨戬, *Xin shenbang: Yang Jian*) (2022), both belong to *Fengshen Yanyi* universe, with themes related to rebellion and patricide. An analysis of them could form a complement to Nezha's image in the Xi era and research on patricide. The second limitation of this study is that it focuses only on films, filmmakers and film contexts. However, in pop culture, how audiences receive, consume, and even recreate based on the films has a great impact on the understanding of the films and can provide an interpretation of Nezha from the audience's perspective. An audience study of Nezha's films in the Mao and Xi eras would be a good complement to a resistant reading beyond the films.

D. Future Studies

The study of Nezha animated adaptations is both directly on Nezha images in Chinese films and related to the interpretation of the patricidal and rebellious subjects

in Chinese popular culture of different eras. Based on this study, many topics can be further developed. For example, how did directors in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China deal with Nezha adaptations in live-action films? How do these adaptations relate to the different cultural backgrounds and filmmaking models of the three places? The 1974 Hong Kong film *Na Cha the Great*, directed by Shaw Brothers' martial arts film director Chang Cheh at the end of the Cultural Revolution, is one of the most consistent adaptations of the suicide and patricide scenes in *Investiture of the Gods*. The 1992 film *Rebels of the Neon* God, directed by Taiwanese director Ming-liang Tsai, tells the story of contemporary urban Taiwanese rascal adolescents in search of their own subjectivity, which could be seen as a contemporary adaptation of the Nezha theme. There is also *Shaonü Nezha*, a 2014 film by mainland China director Li Xiaofeng, which is an example of a Nezha story with a female protagonist.

Moreover, while Chinese animation has had a propaganda and educational mission since birth, resistance has never been absent. In addition to *Jiang Ziya* and *New Gods: Yang Jian* mentioned above, SAFS's *Lotus Lantern* (宝莲灯, *Baolian deng*) (1999) also features patricide. How do these animated films, originally based on classical Chinese mythology, deal with the patricide theme? What kind of views of resistance from mainstream Chinese in different eras do these characters reflect? If history only records the will of the rulers, the creation and consumption of pop culture reflects the changing perceptions of the people. I hope that in the future other scholars and I will have the opportunity to do further research on these topics.

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