

# The Development of Animation Movies in China: Analyses of the *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* and *Nezha: I Am the Destiny*

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## Abstract

The movie of *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* and *Nezha: I Am the Destiny* were two dark horses in the year of 2015 and 2019. The success of the two films is not just the success of the box offices, to some extent, it connotes that China's animation industry has been able to stand a world stage. Such a standing reflects not only the progress of performing animation technology in China, but also a Chinese style animation being cognized by the world. This paper tries to present and analyze how the two animation movies succeed, by comparing with the early Chinese *Meishupian*, the Japanese anime and the American cartoons. Additionally, the paper argues that the development of Chinese animation can be seen as a key sector for the birth of a new national identity in the new century. The analyses of the use of traditional ink painting style, character-based Peking Opera, as well as the re-structured stories of the *Journey to the West*, and *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* would be the case in point; they are the Chinese-rooted national culture and are challenging the Western-based film cultures.

## Keywords

*Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, *Nazha: I Am the Destiny*, Chinese Animation, Development, National Culture

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## 1. Introduction

With the productive development of Chinese movies, the animation industry has gradually become one of the main economic sources in China. The creation of Chinese animation started in the 1920s. It can roughly be divided into three competing steps: ink animation, (fine) art animation and animated films. In 1926, *The Big Room* was produced by Wan Brothers. It was China's first original

comic video, showing a painter who painted in the studio while a small naughty man who jumped off the drawing board, giving the painter a lot of troubles.

Nowadays, the concept of animation is different from the previous sense of comic videos or pictures; it is a comprehensive art, combining with cartoons, visual arts, music, and digital technology. In addition to this, the development of Chinese animation industry has always been influenced by Japanese anime and American cartoons. Though, this might result in an academic controversy that the focus on imitation and copying of the two foreign styles has greatly depreciated a qualified level of Chinese animation works. The Chinese animators have been working hard for this creative work and making a lot of contributions to the animation industry. In recent years, the Chinese government has initiated new policies to encourage artists to create better animation works. Within this context the term “development” is discussed in this paper.

The structure of the paper is arranged in five parts. Besides the above content set as an introduction, the second part briefly explores the phenomenon of copycat and an integration cultural style in China. The third section simply illustrates how Japanese anime and American cartoons impacted China’s animation industry. The fourth part explores the two movies *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* and *Nezha: I Am the Destiny* by comparing them with the previous character of heroes in China, the Japanese style of anime and the American cartoon characters to show how they shift from a moment of the copycat towards forming a Chinese-based cultural identity. The last section summarizes that, the trend of Chinese animation is gradually becoming a sign, of which animation can be seen as a new-born of China’s national spirit.

## **2. The Phenomenon of Copycat and Cultural Integration**

The previous section mentions that ethnic and artistic styles are used to make animation products. And this, on the other side of the coin, implies that China has been always trying to establish its own animation culture. However, since China has opened its door to the world, the creation was potentially decreased its power, lots of *Shanzhai* and copying products emerged.

### **2.1. Copycat Phenomenon in China**

Copycat, as a kind of socio-cultural phenomenon, certainly has the typical characteristics in process, that is, the word “imitation” is the key to approach it. One of the theories to explain the imitation behavior among social or group members is its memetics character, as He Ziran (He, 2005) notes. For instance, when a person hears something interesting, he passes the idea to his friend, and then his friend passes the idea to other friends. The process of delivering the idea becomes one of the forms of copying, meaning, by copying an idea people learn to use it in their socio-cultural lives. However, copycat is used broadly than memes, it happens in aspects of high-tech, education, or artworks.

Chen Weiqiu and Chen Kaiju (Chen & Chen, 2014) argue that the emergence

of the *Shanzhai* is in relation to the economic profits it would bring about. Taking *Shanzhai* products as an example, they can be cosmetic products specifying in chasing well-known brands, so as to quickly expand the market.

*Shanzhai* products and works saved a lot of time on market research, manpower, capital and other aspects of business. They are low-cost but high-profit products, becoming market competitors of the imitated objects. (Chen & Chen, 2014: p. 289)

Some argue that in contemporary culture forms, entertainment is a unique feature. TV programs, TV dramas, advertisement and movies are copycat-based. Though, such a copying is different from the above two forms, as it relates to the original given culture, but uses the term “spooof” to cater for audiences for developing an entertainment industry, as Wang Tao and Huang Jieru address:

A parody is a kind of derivation and imitation of the genus that consciously copies earlier movie works in styles and forms. (Wang & Huang, 2015: p. 248)

It just has to be said that the appearance of the copycat phenomenon is inevitable. They can be as similar as the memes, the *Shanzhai* and the spooof forms in every aspect of the creation process, taking an act without any sense in relation to freshness, interesting, imagination and innovation.

## 2.2. Integration Cultural Styles

The copied cultural products, to some extent, may target at improving the cultural level, but the action of “imitating” is undoubtedly a wrong way for the sense of creation. Then the term “integration” is established to highlight a sense of style and a sense of influence impacted by national and other cultures. Cultural integration is indeed addressed by lots of scholars and philosophers. The American cultural critic Saeed talks about nationality or cultural identity, he stresses that culture cannot be completely purified as a metaphysical independence, but understood by different types and characteristics, as a result of conflict and integration with other communities (Liu, 2018: p. 93).

For instance, in recent years, Asian countries come together to advance the common demands of well-being. They give each country opportunities to show their cultural strength. The integration of Asian cultures thus presents a positive trend that a fusion power has become a rich mine for mutual understanding, learning and developing among the region (Wang, 2019: p. 27).

China, in building its national power, has been gone through the process from integration to autonomy. In earlier years, Liang Qichao, who believed that the most fundamental foundation for China was to establish a modern country. Though, what Liang stressed was that, a Chinese sense of traditional civilization must become the premise of modernity (Li, 2019). Looking back at the decades of China’s development, the modern partially lied in China’s recognition of foreign cultural values, and awareness of learning from others, as Wang Shubo

(Wang, 2013: p. 163) notes that, the collision and assimilation between cultures has also become an unavoidable challenge for China, due to the competition among nations has become increasingly fierce in many fields and levels of communication.

In this sense, what seems more important is that, however, to maintain unique cultural characteristics of the nation under the trend of increasing convergence of other cultural elements. Such a maintaining particularly lies in China's accumulating a sense of nationality, and reaffirming a sense of cultural identity. The development of China's animation industry is a case in point.

### 3. The Impact of Japanese and American

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The above argues that cultural identity is not a simple learning of foreign cultures, but the preservation of its own stuff. As one of the largest movie markets, animation can bring huge communicative profits in the world. For decades, animation works have played a very extensive and profound role in the exchange and cooperation of cultures around the world. Watching animation movies has gradually become one of the wonderful and impressive moments in people's daily life. There are certain evidences to show that China had learned a lot from the animation works of Japan and the United States in the previous years, which greatly stimulated Chinese animation creators to think about how to satisfy the audience, and how to improve and develop their own works.

#### 3.1. The Impact of Japanese Anime on China

Japanese animation has a beautiful style and a lot of themes, many of them have a significant power in movie market. Japanese animation, along with its television cartoons, enjoys tremendous popularity in China due to its cultural and geographical proximity.

Many Chinese animation creators can be said to have grown up with Japanese anime, works like *Slam Dunk* (*Guanlan Gaoshou*), *Digital Monster* (*Shuma Baobei*) and *Detective Conan* (*Ming Zhentan Kenan*) were popularly screened daily on different local television stations in China. Early in the new century, one of the Chinese animations *Mad for Music* (*Wo Wei Ge Kuang*) resembled styles of Japanese music and campus art, guaranteed a higher audience rating. The previous Japanese television drama serials, Japanese pops and Japanese fashion styles not only blew a gust of wind for Japanese maniacs, but also, they became potential motivations for the promotion of Japanese anime. Additionally, lots of Chinese video game designers inspired their work from Japanese anime, which had greatly attracted Chinese small children to play the game all the time. Nowadays, with frequent cooperation between China and Japan in animation industry, more post-edited animation works have been processed and produced in China, and more practices have been applied to animation creation, targeting at improving China's animation technology.

### 3.2. The Impact of American Cartoons on China

In addition to Japanese anime, the development of Hollywood animation is a valuable resource for China. Unlike Japanese anime, the created cartoon images make audience recall the pure emotion of romantic love; the main purpose for watching American animation is to enjoy its entertaining moments. The cultural characteristics of American animation are very obvious, setting characters by Western humor, and exaggerated expressions. Therefore, American animation in some respects can be considered as cartoons (Chen, 2014).

The style of American cartoon also plays a certain role in promoting the development of Chinese animation industry. Firstly, the exaggerated way of American cartoons uses an image language to indicate the culture, like *Mickey Mouse* and *Snow White*, taking Disney as a symbol. In this sense, cartoons, either make people laugh or entertain audiences, wisely inform the audience of both American spirit and sentiments. Secondly, lively and lovely cartoon stories show the way of how American understand lifestyles and cultures of different nations, embodying an open attitude of acceptance and cognition with others (Finch, 2011) such as *Mulan* and *Kung Fu Panda*.

The animation industry in both Japan and the US has had a great significance and influence on China. Lots of animation movies were produced in the past 40 years such as *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (*Nazhe Nao Hai*, 1979, directed by Yan Dingxian) which won the 1979 Ministry of Culture Excellent Film Award, and the 1981 Manila International Film Festival Animation Award, attracting old and new generations.

*Lotus Lantern* (*Baolian Deng*, 1999, directed by Chang Xiguang) won the 19th China Film Golden Rooster Award for the best art film. It learned from Hollywood techniques and achieved commercial success, marking the beginning of Chinese animation into commercialization and internationalization (Ding, 2019: p. 59).

However, China has also been practicing in its own way to develop the industry. The *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (2015) and the *Nezha: I Am the Destiny* (2019) are representative works, starting to show the new forms and the new themes. The rest of the paper will explain the viewpoint, such an explanation is based on answering the following questions: What are the characteristics of the two Chinese animation movies? How the movies absorb the fine part of foreign animations to qualify their own styles? Why the movies can be said as one of the representatives of national culture?

### 4. Analyses of the Success of the Two Animation Movies

The movies of the *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (2015) and *Nezha: I Am the Destiny* (2019) did not follow the images of the previous *Monkey King* and *Ne Zha*. In other words, the characters of both Sun Wukong and Ne Zha created as any types but the one in the *Journey to the West*, who was full of divinity, and was a hero of a great master, or the one in *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, an image of children's hero (Wu, 2016). They were rebellious at some point, brave but de-

pressed, and kind but indifferent. The presentation of the two works made audiences very impressive.

#### **4.1. Characters of the Two Animation Movies**

In the *Monkey King: Hero is Back* and *Nezha: I am the Destiny*, the creation of the two characters was based on the background of the two mythological works, but was not taken into account by the orthodox needs in the first place. In the *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, the character seemed to reach over the previous level in an unprecedented realm. For instance, the character changed from omnipotent to a seemed-selfish, evasive and tragic one, and more accessing to daily life. In *Nezha: I am the Destiny*, the boy bore the prejudices of the people of Chen Tangguan, and chose to be an “evil”, indicating kinds of prejudices in real life and their negation of human values (Ning, 2018).

Second, a series of new characters created in the two movies. *Jiang Liuer*, who infinitely worshiped *Sun Wukong*, and happened to be an accompanied monk. And, a cat and a pig appeared to work together, helping *Sun Wukong* stop the monsters. The emergence of these new characters can be taken as a prelude, closely connecting *Sun Wukong* with his mater and brothers in the novel of *Journey to the West*. In the movie of *Nazha: I Am the Destiny*, audience saw Ao Bing, the son of the dragon king, depicting largely different from *Nezha* in character and upbringing. Though, the contrary of the two characters led to a classic “love and hate” mode of interaction.

Thus, the richness of the characters in the two animation movies made the new narrations more layered and attractive, and the storylines were fuller and more engaging than their previous works.

#### **4.2. A Sudden Increase of the Box Office**

*Monkey King* and *Nezha* were the yearly animation hit box office in both 2015 and 2019. Taking the *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, when the first time it was arranged in cinema, the schedule was not impressive, as other domestic movies were expected to play to get benefits. But within only one week, the *Monkey King: Hero is Back* devoted to the largest number of the box office, occupying nearly 90% of the total 100 million. Among the films released in the same period as *Monkey King* were *Tiny Times (Xiao Shidai)* and *Forever Yong (Zhizi Hua Kai)*, the two were proved to over audiences’ expectations for their poor quality, hollow story and the procrastination of the plots. As audiences actively went to the cinema, the *Monkey King* finally broke the record with 956 million, making the total box office continue to rise up in the summer of 2015. The sudden surge of the box-office in both 2015 and 2019 also reflects a commercial value of Chinese animation movies.

#### **4.3. Monkey King: Hero Is Back vs. Previous Chinese Meishupian**

The image of Sun Wukong has been popular for decades. In 1964, *Uproar in*

*Heaven (Da Nao Tiankong)* marked a glorious page in the history of Chinese animation, taking Sun Wukong in Crystal Palace to fight with other kings. Sun Wukong was designed in a peach-heart face, with goose-yellow jacket, tiger skirt around waist, big red trousers, and a pair of black boots (see **Figure 1**). The so-called brave and vigorous description of Chinese characteristics of the hero (He, 2016: p. 80).

While in the *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, the character of a hero is somewhat unusual. It was designed as exaggerated, along with horse-like long face, sloppy clothes and irritable temper (see **Figure 2**). By protecting Jiang Liuer and the little girl, though, *The Monkey King: Hero is Back* shaped Sun Wukong into an image of a knight, and a mature elder brother with affectionateness and righteousness.

The different part also embodied in the background or environment combining with the character, and the term “hero” in this sense was constructed by the impression of the space and the narrative forms. The setting of the space of the *Uproar in Heaven* was based on the *Huaguo* Mountain (see **Figure 3**), the dragon palace (see **Figure 4**) and a few haven-based palaces (see **Figure 5**) in that *Meishupian*. The story unfolded in the constant appearance of such places where the decorative background of the traditional Chinese expressions was in a way of repetition and limitation. In other words, the heavens and the human world mainly served as the place where the story took place.



**Figure 1.** Image of Sun Wukong in *Uproar in Heaven*.



**Figure 2.** Image of Sun Wukong in the *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (Source: <https://image.baidu.com/>).



**Figure 3.** *Huaguo* mountain.



**Figure 4.** Dragon palace.



**Figure 5.** Haven-based palace in *Uproar in Heaven* (Source: <https://image.baidu.com>).

While the space of the scene of the *Monkey King: Hero is Back* covered not only mainland landscapes such as caves (see **Figure 6**), jungles (see **Figure 7**) and buildings, but also contained different sub-visions. For instance, the buildings in the film included not only various urban styles like inns, but also mountain temples (see **Figure 8**), and they could be seen as the sub-scenes. In fact, there were more than 90 scenes in the film, followed by constantly accumulated events, thus, the entire space was three-dimensional, and was constantly changing as well (Xie, 2017: p. 105).



**Figure 6.** Caves.



**Figure 7.** Jungles.



**Figure 8.** Mountain temples in the *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (Source: <https://image.baidu.com>).

The third is about the artistic performance. Roles of the Uproar in Heaven were designed by the staged form of Peking Opera. The narrative expressions were mainly embodied by the performance of the characters. Though, due to a lack of the multi-model spaces, there was very little communication or interaction between the characters and scenes. However, in the *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, due to the benefits of the digital technology and its dynamic spaces, for instance, the scene of the eaves, balconies, even the stone lions, etc. had become an

indispensable part being interacted with the characters. In other words, detailed landscapes participated in the narrative communication. The combination of the two became a unique characteristic for expanding both the language of the space and the narration of the story.

From the comparison it can be seen that, multiple-scene is also the direction for Chinese animations to work for. To some extent, the use of three-dimensional dynamic in the two animation films added a lot of sensuous stimulations to audiences.

#### 4.4. *Nezha: I Am the Destiny* vs. Japanese Styles of Anime

It is known that the character in an animation is the soul of its work. It may represent a direct expression of the storyline, by bringing a comparative sense of entry into the audience, or making spiritual connotations of the animation work.

Japan's ability to innovate in role-building has always been an influence. From *Doraemon* (Jiqi Mao, see **Figure 9**), *Crayon Shin-Chan* (Labi Xiaoxin, see **Figure 10**) to *The King of Pirates* (Haizei Wang) and *Naruto* (Huo Ying Renzhe, see **Figure 11**), roles were created simply but cutely, storing to audience with an imaginative and innovative sense of the animated world.

Another major feature of Japanese anime is the delicate and aesthetic qualities of character creation. From the above pictures it can be seen that, the use of different performance techniques such as bright colors and refined lines make the roles have higher degree of cognition, satisfying audience with visual aspects of both aesthetic application and aesthetic appreciation (Chen, 2017: p. 374).

While China's animation works appear to be different. In *Nezha: I Am the Destiny*, the design of Nezha was rather ugly (see **Figure 12**), corresponding to his grievous, rebellious and non-yielded characteristics. The use of Chinese style of watercolor painting art form, grey wall and green grasses (see **Figure 13**) in the process of character-shaping also had a strong cultural function. Meanwhile the use of the Chinese brush (see **Figure 14**) waved between the heavens and the earth, embodying oriental aesthetic philosophy, though, in a short lens.



**Figure 9.** *Doraemon*.



Figure 10. Crayon Shin-Chan.



Figure 11. Naruto of Japanese anime (Source: <https://image.baidu.com>).



Figure 12. Image of Nezha.



Figure 13. The use of grey wall and green grasses in Nezha.



**Figure 14.** The use of Chinese brush in *Nezha: I am the Destiny* (Source: <https://image.baidu.com>).

In this sense, the design of two Chinese animations paid more attention to the expression of the characters, the matching degree between characters and stories, along with their respective sceneries-corresponding.

#### 4.5. The Two Animation Movies vs. The American Kung Fu Cartoon

China and the United States have a long history of producing Kung Fu movies. By comparing the image of the classic animated characters of the two Kung Fu styles, it is helpful to understand similarities and differences as well as to examine the cultural implications and transmission sown behind the form.

In both *Monkey King and Nezha*, the two images and behaviors adopted traditional Chinese drama elements and logos. For instance, color aspects highlighted the red, the yellow and the black, representing traditional symbols of Chinese culture. In other words, the dramatic treatment of colors, along with the actions painted a strong pessimism for both Sun Wukong (see **Figure 15**) and Nezha in the birth of a hero, though, the rebirth of the two characters, to some extent, strongly re-designated a mysterious force within Chinese tragic philosophy.

American's *Kung Fu Panda*, for instance, the main character A Bao, with his fat body and grassroots behavior, represented very Hollywood-style (see **Figure 16**). His exaggerated expressions and rich body language made the American national characteristics more vivid. Despite a bit of luck of A Bao, the process of a hero's birth embodied the social rule of fair play in American society (Yan & He, 2014: p. 21).

In addition, expectation of a hero and his value in Chinese culture lies in a noble moral character, ready to sacrifice the ego to ensure the interests of the public. The concept in both *Monkey King* and *Nezha* was particularly evident, in which sacrifice, reform, resistance and other distinctive symbolic characteristics were in compliance with the collective principles, so as to achieve Chinese-based image of heroes.

While again, in *Kung Fu Panda*, A Bao as a hero strongly revealed the individualism of an American character, implied a contradiction between the individual and the social order. In the movie, A Bao didn't have to abide by the long



**Figure 15.** Images of Sun Wukong in *the Monkey King*.



**Figure 16.** Image of *A Bao in Kung Fu Panda*.

and orderly moral norms, and his pursuit of personal liberation and his realization of personal dreams could exist along with his defects and fears (Yu, 2017: p. 134).

Furthermore, unlike American cartoon movies, either through images or dialogues, it can be seen that American humors would be everywhere. The two Chinese animation movies also reflected an oriental charm of humor. Take *Nezha* for instance, in the portrayal of Tai Yi, a fat, round face, wine bad nose and big belly poo were arguably oriental, but the use of Sichuan dialect born most of the laughing points (see **Figure 17**).

From the above analyses it can be seen that, the success of the two animation movies was twofold. First, in narration of a hero, the two creative works added new values. Both the *Monkey King and Nezha* lost their magic powers and confidence; they were weak and depressed at some point but gradually recovered themselves after being inspired by people around them. The whole process was like a modern Chinese educational program that strives to become stronger would always be the theme of Chinese national spirit.

In addition, in disseminating cultural values, the *Monkey King and Nezha* played an important role. They re-narrated Chinese old stories, making the two characters as national images of the country. Meanwhile, an increasing result of



Figure 17. Image of *Tai Yi in Nezha* (Source: <https://image.baidu.com>).

the box office showed that, the two works were capably competing with American cartoons and Japanese anime. They definitely opened a bridge between the Chinese animation industry and the rest of the world.

Furthermore, or purely from a cultural-based perspective, the so-called reproduction was gradually replaced by Chinese artistic and sentimental forms in the two animation movies. They are, in the way of seeking a breakthrough, and of finding their own styles to compete with both Japanese and American animation works.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper mainly analyzed how the two Chinese animations succeeded in 2015 and 2019, and found that the movies no longer copied the contents, copied the artistic styles and copied the technology of foreign countries, rather, they absorbed the essential part and advantages of foreign animations, acquired of the digital culture in their movie making, and established their own styles.

Then the term “development” in the title of this paper may include a series of elements, but all of which are in relation to the cognition of Chinese national culture. In the first place, the audiences of Chinese animation began to expand its scope from children to various age ranges, and from domestic to international. In their acceptance of the style of artistic forms, the language, the narration of the story and the digital technology, etc. these symbols showed a sign that the Chinese animation work began to shift its form and structure towards cultural transmission, disseminating Chinese culture in every possible aspect.

Added to this is that, animation is a form of cultural expression. In both producing an animation work and watching an animation film, the artists and the audience preferred to see something in the creation, remaining, or modifying. Whatever it should be, the spirit of Chinese nationality, the responsibility the character of a hero would choose to take, and the multiple versions of the artistic practice within Chinese animation forms became strong drives for Chinese animation makers to bear in mind, and to find the way for the development of their further works.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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