

# Cultural Psychology and Artistic Representamen of Traditional Chinese IP Animation Characters: Utilization, Inheritance, and Innovation of History and Memory

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the analysis of the character Nezha in the IP animations “Nezha Conquers the Dragon King”, “The Legend of Nezha” and “Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child”. Utilizing Peirce's semiotic framework, the study delves into the historical significance and the collective memory evoked by the visual representamen of these characters, and examines the underlying cultural psychology that influenced their creation. The results demonstrate that in contemporary Chinese popular culture, traditional IPs are presented with new avenues for development. It is concluded that for traditional IP content to succeed, it must strike a balance between embodying traditional cultural values and meeting contemporary popular culture demands. On the representamen level, it is imperative to recreate symbols that resonate with collective historical memory. On the object level, it is essential to capture the cultural characteristics of the time. At the interpretant level, the character images must resonate with the public by aligning with the prevailing cultural psychology.

**Keywords:** Traditional IP animation, History and memory, Semiotics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early stages of development of traditional Chinese IP animation, creators have focused on its unique ethnic characteristics. By reconstructing and reassembling characters and events from traditional novels such as “Journey to the West” and “Investiture of the Gods”, and combining various digital content elements and modern popular cultural symbols, these classic images are reinterpreted in the form of modern character IPs. In addition, in recent years, animated works such as “Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child” and “Legend of Deification” based on the Ming Dynasty novel “Investiture of the Gods” have been continuously released, and the Chinese animation industry is actively using “Investiture of the Gods” IP characters to create new popular cultural heroes. These animations not only extensively draw on the narrative and visual symbols of traditional novels and related cultural and artistic works, but also

develop unique story strategies based on the different creative elements of each production unit.

In 2019, the film “Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child” has once again gained market acceptance and commercial success with the traditional character IP of “Nezha”, following “Nezha: Conquers the Dragon King” and “The Legend of Nezha”. The film showcases the conflict between modern concepts and traditional values, opening a new chapter in the differentiation of traditional Chinese cultural materials, and endowing traditional mythological heroes with true humanity, winning widespread recognition and success. Subsequently, the trend of creating animated films based on “Investiture of the Gods” continued to heat up, and discussions on “Universe IP of Investiture of the Gods” centered around “Nezha” also increased day by day. This animation no longer follows the traditional binary opposition structure, but adopts bold and subversive design, not only endowing traditional characters with modern personalities, but also integrating ancient

prototypes and modern spirit, and unfolding modern narratives through traditional mythological characters. Despite the subversive adaptation of the original work, breaking the audience's preconceived notions and making the story unfamiliar, the animation still retains familiar elements and reveals the existence of a collective memory or historical artistic representamen.

Chinese modern animation has significantly departed from the traditional form of family films and repositioned itself as "full aging" and "youthization". This change reflects a cultural reorganization of contemporary Chinese living conditions and spiritual dilemmas. Among the animations based on the "Nezha IP" and achieving great success in the market, among the animations produced based on the "Nezha IP" that have once again achieved great success in terms of market acceptance and profitability, "Nezha: Conquers the Dragon King" is the first animation in the initial stage of reform and opening up, and also the most influential and magnificent movement of that period;<sup>1</sup> "The Legend of Nezha" is the first anime in the new century to feature Nezha as the main character; "Nezha: The Birth of the Demon Child" is the latest and highest grossing animation in China recently. Therefore, this study will take these three animations as objects and use semiotic theory to analyze the artistic representamen of Nezha's characters, while also attempting to explain the psychological characteristics of modern Chinese popular culture contained in their representamen.

## 2. SYMBOL THEORY AND ANIMATION

### 2.1 Peirce's Symbol Theory

At the beginning of the 20th century, Charles Sanders Peirce proposed Peirce semiotics, in which he defined representamen, also known as symbols, as anything that is determined on one hand by the object and on the other hand by an idea in people's minds; And the object indirectly determines the way the latter is determined, which he named the interpretant of symbols.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, as a symbolic medium, the representamen can exist independently; The referent object refers to the object referred to by the symbol; The explanatory item is the concept triggered by the representamen in the interpreter's

psychology. Peirce focused on the representamen of symbols, the object, and the semantic relationships they generate, providing the fundamental concepts of visual semiotics. Thus, a ternary relationship is formed between the representamen (symbol), the object, and the interpretant.

The relationship between these three is not equal, and Peirce divides them into three levels: symbol (representamen) is the first property, object is the second property, and interpretant is the third property. The first property is the perceivable self-attribute, the second property is the characteristic of being able to associate with external things and produce effects or reflections, and the third property links the first two properties as a medium, forming a dynamic interactive ternary structure under the linkage of the three. And it fully embodies the process of symbolic meaning: the object is represented by symbols, the information carried is interpreted, and transformed into an individual's unique perspective on the object. The unique perspective becomes a new symbol to replace the original object... and so on.<sup>3</sup> As shown in "Figure 1", the interpretant is essentially a symbol that points to the same object as the previous symbol, or in other words, it replaces the previous symbol and becomes a new symbol pointing to the same object. At the same time, the interpretant also needs to explain the subsequent symbols (i.e. another explanatory item).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the objects referred to by symbols are limited, but the interpretation of symbols is dynamic and limited, and the interpretant will continue to evolve with the changing times.

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1. Sun Lijun, History of Chinese Animation [M]. The Commercial Press, 2018, 161.

2. Peirce, C.S. Peirce: On Signs [M]. Zhao Xingzhi, trans., Sichuan University Press, 2014: 31.

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3. Guo Shuyin, The Creative Research of Han-Tang Dance Theater Series "Figurines" from the Perspective of Peirce's Semiotics [D]. Master's Thesis of Fujian Normal University, 2023, p9.

4. Zhang Caixia, The Study on C.S. Peirce's Semiotic Theory [D]. Doctor's Thesis of Shandong University, 2015, 98.

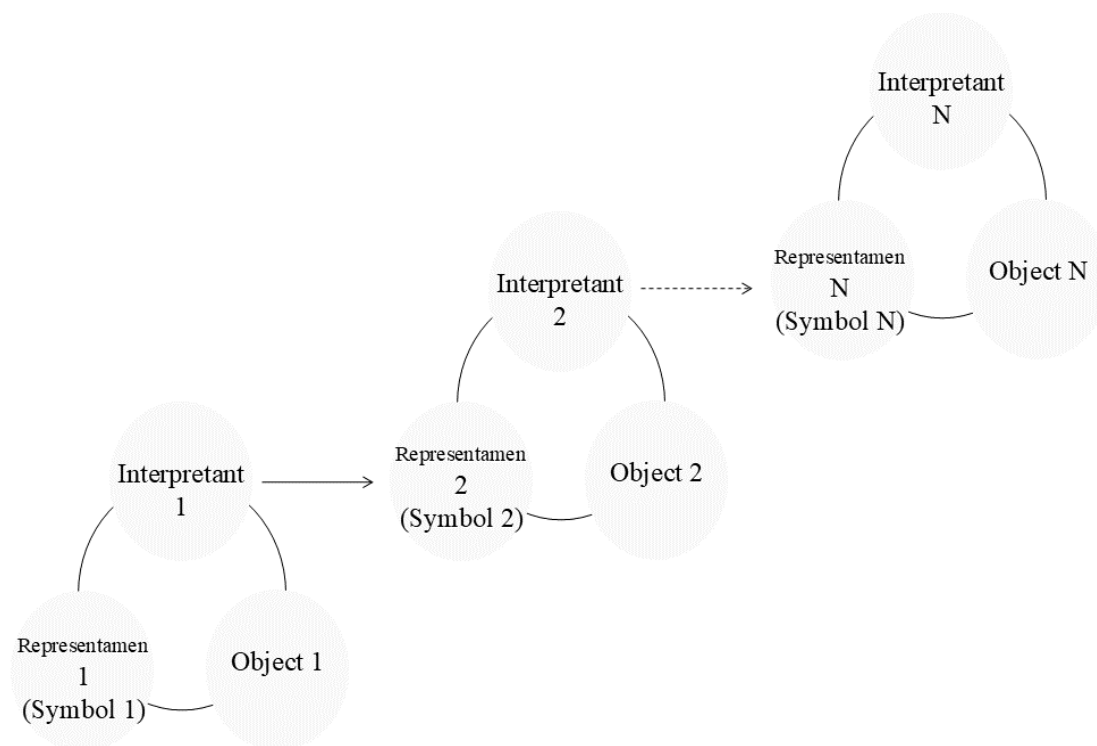


Figure 1 Meaning interpretation process in Peirce semiotics.

## 2.2 Visual Symbols of Animated Characters

The core value of traditional IP is not inherent from the beginning, but stems from the concept of traditional culture acquired and chosen in history.<sup>5</sup> "The way of thinking, values and codes of conduct implied in traditional culture and passed down from generation to generation, on the one hand, have strong historicity and heredity, on the other hand, have fresh reality and variability, which affect and restrict today's Chinese people at any time, and provide us with historical basis and realistic basis for opening up a new culture."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, traditional IP not only reflects the morphological characteristics of modern popular culture, but also carries the unique national spirit and cultural significance of traditional culture.

Traditional culture requires modern expression, and the Chinese spirit can only be responded to by contemporary audiences by reflecting the characteristics of modern aesthetics. The changes in

social context inevitably affect the enthusiastic response of art.<sup>7</sup> Outstanding traditional IPs such as Investiture of the Gods IP and Journey to the West IP have become important resources for Chinese animation creation, providing rich materials and verifying their creative potential.

Animation, as a visual language art, has given new meaning to traditional IP through the forms of sound and image. As the most cutting-edge form of simulation art in the era of imaging, animation not only reproduces entities in reality, but also showcases new creative features of concepts generated in reality. In this process, the visualized concept serves as the object of sensory perception, demonstrating its vitality as a living character. This visualized character naturally conforms to the definition of symbols. Therefore, analyzing traditional IP animation characters such as Nezha as symbols is of great significance.

In order to analyze the mechanism and cultural environment of Nezha IP character representamen, this study constructed a character symbol structure based on Peirce's symbol theory. As shown in "Figure 2", the explanation of animated characters,

5. A.L.Kroeber, Clyde Kluckhohn, Culture A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions [M]. Harvard University Printing Office, 2009: 181.

6. Zhang Dainian, Fang Keli, Introduction to Chinese Culture [M]. Beijing Normal University Press, 1994: 10.

7. Rao Shuguang, Dialectics of Sustainable Development of Chinese Film (Part 2) [J]. New Films, 2014(02): 4-8.

Nezha IP, and the cultural psychology of modern Chinese masses are respectively incorporated into

the three-dimensional relationship framework of Peirce symbols.

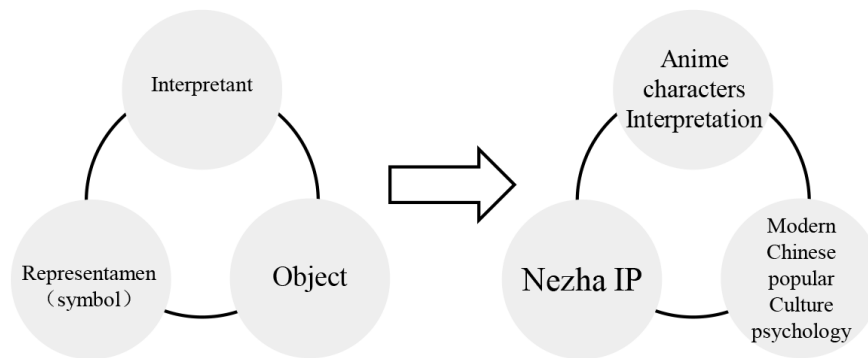


Figure 2 Schematic diagram of the composition of Nezha IP character symbols.

Character performance, as an external symbol of collective unconsciousness, has infinite suggestive power. In Peirce's triadic structure, it is regarded as representamen of symbols, where the representamen that contains or awakens (i.e. popular culture itself) corresponds to the Nezha IP in the symbolic structure. Through visual representamen, Nezha IP has triggered surface effects and thoughts in public psychology under the influence of popular culture. The common function of this system is to symbolically process the character images in the object, imbue them with connotation, and generate expression through collective imagination, thereby stimulating the audience's emotional reactions and ideological activities. The cultural psychological prototype of Nezha's IP characters originates from the collective unconscious and clearly relies on visual representamen. Visual representamen, as an external medium and prompt, makes deep cultural psychological prototypes a part of objective symbols. Meanwhile, due to the existence of cultural psychological prototypes, interpretant can generate new symbolic objects.

### 3. CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY AND ARTISTIC REPRESENTAMEN OF CHARACTERS

#### 3.1 *Representamen That Integrates Traditional Culture and Modern Aesthetics*

As mentioned earlier, the interpretant must reinterpret and extend another symbol to express itself with a new symbol. The interpretant of the previous symbol serves as representamen of the next symbol, and this process is essentially endless.

Animated characters have the characteristic of "expressiveness" as conditional symbols, so although the character symbols originate from the same object, the reproduction form may vary depending on the creator's intention. Although these roles are designed according to the needs of various social environments, they can create a variety of different images. The psychological elements behind shaping character images are the same, which forms the analytical basis of this study. The transformation of character symbols is the result of long-term mutual influence between the audience and the creator, combining the audience's familiarity with the character and the creator's extraction of character features. Regardless of whether they are characters from ancient to modern times, both in China and abroad, as long as they are shaped into characters, they should reflect contemporary culture and value orientation. Although this requirement may seem demanding, it is one of the key elements that made animation a classic. With the evolution of the times and the emergence of regional differences, people not only continue cultural traditions, but also further define them, demonstrating the understanding and participation of those who understand.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, the visualization of Nezha IP character symbols in today's era not only requires the continuation of the familiar styling features in traditional culture, but also the integration of modern features extracted by creators from character characteristics.

In the typological modeling approach, the design of inherent body shape and posture is an important means of expressing the types of

8. Lin Qing, On Chinese Animation Films [D]. Doctor's Thesis of Shanghai Normal University, 2012, 93.

characters and strengthening the contradictions and dramatic tension between characters.<sup>9</sup> Characters can fully utilize the elegant, distinct, and simple characteristics of traditional culture to maintain the visual consistency of traditional IP works. Meanwhile, abstract symbols with established attributes in traditional culture, such as metaphors and symbols, can quickly convey the specific characteristics of characters. For example, in the animation, Nezha's "three heads and six arms" image during battle is presented unchanged, and this externalized typical feature aims to highlight the distinctiveness of the character. The changes in the era image of Nezha's character IP are shown in "Table 1".

The image of Nezha in animation is basically shaped under the premise of following tradition, showing obvious similarities in story themes, character images, narrative structures, and other aspects. At the same time, the animation fully utilizes relevant symbols and props that can reflect Nezha. In people's aesthetic perception, Nezha is the young man with two small buns, a flame between his eyebrows, wearing a red bellyband, holding a pointed gun, stepping on a wind and fire wheel, dancing mixed sky silk, and able to transform into three heads and six arms.<sup>10</sup>

"Nezha: Conquers the Dragon King" is directly adapted from the original work and is the version that best fits the traditional impression. Influenced by the social ideology of the time, the animation emphasizes sacrifice, revolution, and resistance in its themes, portraying Nezha as a messenger of justice. Therefore, the image of Nezha displayed is a true, good, and beautiful image, an embodiment of justice, and a hero in the hearts of children. In terms of imagery, while reproducing symbols such as Nezha's small bun, red bellyband, fire pointed spear, wind fire wheels, red-long silk, and three-heads six-arms, the style reflects traditional art and has distinct characteristics of the times, and lays the foundation for Nezha's image in future films and TV shows. In terms of narrative structure, replace the phrase "scraping bones to return father" in the novel with the form of "holding a sword and committing suicide". The subsequent "Legend of Nezha" animated series can be seen as a continuation of "Nezha: Conquers the Dragon

King" in the TV series, with the character setting of the "young hero" and the opposition between good and evil unchanged, and the narrative structure also remaining unchanged. In addition, shaping a friendly image of "our friends", opening the prelude to the new era of Nezha, and laying the foundation for a large number of new narratives in Nezha's film and television industry.<sup>11</sup>

To make audience like the new Nezha character, it is necessary to give it distinct modern features. This requires the visualization of Nezha's character not only to gain the support of the times, but also to draw material from the collective unconscious of today's masses, so that the character's image is in line with the modern living environment. Modern youth pursue spiritual fulfillment, especially personal emotional support and satisfaction. Therefore, today's animation should reflect and depict the love of family, friendship, and the psychological need for collective recognition.

After 2015, traditional Chinese IP animation began to boldly innovate in content and form. Creators are not only satisfied with the visualization of traditional elements, but also innovate through the adaptation of traditional materials. "Monkey King: Hero Is Back" marked the beginning of this transformation. While inheriting the basic image of Nezha, "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" has also made a lot of innovations. Although the character design retains traditional features familiar to the audience, such as a small bun, a red bellyband, a pointed gun, a wind and fire wheel, a mixed sky silk, and three heads and six arms, the new Nezha image also incorporates freckles, dark circles, and shark teeth; When angry, his face is fierce and the shoulders are hunched. Animation does not exclude ugly elements, and creates a strange and magical aesthetic effect. In addition, Nezha has showed a keen interest in folk children's games and had a mischievous personality of secretly leaving home to play pranks on villagers at any time.

Nezha's character vividly portrays the image of modern left-behind children. Dark circles under his eyes may reflect a lack of sufficient sleep, while shark teeth may symbolize parents' failure to take care of their children's cavities. Children's desires and expectations for paternal and maternal love often manifest in the form of emotional instability when they are not satisfied. At the end of the animation, Nezha transforms from a child to a

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9. Wan Yan, On the Design of Animated Character Characters [J]. *Movie Literature*, 2012(09): 53.

10. Zhou Xuehua, The Traditional Cultural Memory of "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" [J]. *Movie Literature*, 2020 (04): 123.




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11. Peng Huiyuan, Li Keying, The Evolution of Nezha's On-screen Image in Ethnic Animation from 1961 to 2019 [J]. *New Movie*, 2019(06): 91.

teenager, reflecting the rebellious mentality of youth. The representamen in the animation showcase the social issues faced by Chinese families in various eras. Therefore, the character symbols of Nezha in "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" blend the seemingly contradictory features of "mischievousness" and "malevolent spirit". Nezha was born as a "evil baby" and his fate was destined

to be accompanied by struggle and rebellion. At the same time, he displayed a rebellious teenage image in both appearance and behavior. This method of reshaping character images not only preserves the public's memory of traditional Nezha, but also integrates modern cultural backgrounds and social concerns.

Table 1. The shape of Nezha in different Nezha IP animes

Nezha: Conquers the Dragon King	The Legend of Nezha	Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child
		

The protagonist must have empathy, while sympathy is optional. Transference refers to being like me. Something about a character can touch the audience's heartstrings. At that moment of identification, the audience instinctively hoped that the protagonist would get everything he wanted.<sup>12</sup> In the depths of the protagonist's heart, the audience discovers a common humanity that reflects the desires of the masses at that time. Therefore, the personification of Nezha IP characters has a clear logic. Firstly, the repositioning of aesthetics preserves and integrates forms and styles derived from traditional culture, while accepting the national style of the Chinese animation school. Secondly, based on the characteristics of modern Chinese family structure and ethical relationships, the character of Nezha is reshaped to define a new character image.

### 3.2 Object That Reflects Cultural Prototypes and Contemporaneity

Cognitive consensus comes from social consciousness, which is a primitive consciousness naturally formed by people in social life practice.

The reason why symbols become symbols and can replace or represent other things, phenomena, and processes that are different from the symbols themselves through a certain formal system is simply due to the interpretation or cognition made by the interpreter of symbols based on certain community or social norms.<sup>13</sup> Cognitive consensus is the consciousness formed in daily life without theoretical sublimation, with universality among the masses, becoming a popular custom in a specific period, and subtly influencing people's thoughts and behaviors. Each country has its own unique history and culture, and social and cultural genes accumulate the collective subconscious of humanity through repeated expression, gradually forming prototypes that symbolize human thinking patterns. Social group members integrate these prototype concepts into the cultural context, and through long-term repeated communication and learning, form cultural prototypes.

Cultural prototypes represent the inner world of human consciousness. Animation, as a popular form of spiritual consumption in modern popular culture, has profound social and cultural attributes. The goal of animated works is cultural inheritance and spiritual beliefs, aiming to continue the most

12. Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* [M], 165. Zhou Tiedong, trans., China Film Press, 2001: 165.

13. Lu Deping, *Semiotics Interpretation of Youth Culture* [M]. Social Sciences Academic Press(China), 2007: 19.

essential spiritual elements of collective consciousness. Animation from different periods organizes audiences in innovative ways, reflecting a microcosm of human groups in real society and showcasing the desires, strengths, and weaknesses of characters.

The contemporary youth group values their own needs. Before the reform and opening up, Chinese youth were influenced by the planned economy and generally valued the overall situation over individuals, advocating collectivism and believing that collective interests were higher than individual desires. At this point, personal needs were often overlooked. At the beginning of the reform and opening up period, the audience of "Nezha: Conquers the Dragon King" was still stuck in the traditional aesthetic trend, hoping to become a great hero. Therefore, the image of a righteous messenger in "Nezha: Conquers the Dragon King" perfectly matches their longing and admiration for heroes, as well as their recognition of their own social identity at that time. The character Nezha in "The Legend of Nezha", who has personality flaws similar to ordinary people and grew up with them, touched the hearts of the audience. People live in society and are all ordinary people, no one is perfect. It is this "ordinary" hero image that links to the audience, and the audience develops self-identity and social identity in this animated film.<sup>14</sup>

With the advent of the Internet era, animation communication has become a highly interactive cultural activity, and the traditional communication mode has been completely subverted. The development of online platforms and community culture has influenced the aesthetic and reception styles of audiences. The post-80s and post-90s generations who have been immersed in new media for a long time have gained more cultural voice. As the core support for growing up in the Internet development environment, the youth group is the pioneer to prove social change. Through the huge Internet, they found topics of interest and like-minded friends, and formed various cultural communities and fan groups with different characteristics. And a new culture has emerged: youth subcultures. It reflects the eternal contradiction and tension between the adult world and the youth world, between the older generation

and the younger generation.<sup>15</sup> The culture of online communities has a subtle influence on the thinking, expression, aesthetic orientation, and other aspects of young people.<sup>16</sup> This also determines that in the process of animation creation and dissemination, it is important to pay attention to understanding cultural groups, accurately grasping the content of creation, and doing homework for the good dissemination effect of animation.

But today's youth have long been influenced by youth subcultures, emphasizing emotional roles, individuality, popular trends, and democratic consciousness in their values, and firmly believing in the natural rationality of pleasure. This differs from the mainstream value system in different dimensions and even conflicts.<sup>17</sup> They not only need to meet basic entertainment needs, but also hope to achieve personal and ethnic identity through contact with deep cultural psychology.

The inspiration for modern animated characters comes from traditional literature, but combines contemporary factors and modern narratives to reinterpret and overcome stale content. Through the survival methods of animated characters, it showcases the inherent unity between humans, society, and nature in the real world. In "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child", the character relationship between Nezha and his parents reflects the dynamic of rebellious youth and kind parents, combined with real-life family situations. This reflects the integration of imagination and popular culture in modern animation creation, revealing family and youth issues in modern society. The theme "My destiny is determined by me, not by heaven" resonates with the youth group that emphasizes individual autonomy. The image of Nezha in different perspectives and contexts is closely connected to public life, and this strong reflection of reality is one of the key factors for the success of this animation.

The indication system of consciousness symbols needs to undergo character transformation and reconstruction in animation. Animation provides the most instinctive and direct way of expression by presenting real-life objects in the form of imagined

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14. Zhang Li, Viewing the Audience's "Use and Satisfaction" from the Changes of Domestic Animation Protagonist Images - Taking Nezha as an Example [J]. Home Drama, 2021(34): 149.

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15. Ma Zhonghong, New Media and the Shift Towards Youth Subcultures [J]. Literature & Art Studies, 2010(12): 104.

16. Yao Yujie, Analysis of the Cultural Forms of Network Narrative Communities in the Perspective of Communication [J]. Social Science Front, 2010(08): 278.

17. Liu Qi, Omnimedia Audiovisual Variety Shows Production and Youth Cultural Identity [D]. Doctor's Thesis of Jilin University, 2022: 5.

characters. Nezha IP character symbols utilize animation media as a medium to develop text content with enormous potential, combining the self-expression characteristics and stylized forms of young people to showcase a worldview that conforms to public aesthetics. By explaining and reflecting real social life, Nezha IP has significant advantages in creating and accepting popular cultural symbols in the online language environment.

### **3.3 Interpretant That Expresses Audience Psychology**

The interpreter's interpretation of the representamen will generate new representamens, and these new representamens continuously form new interpretants. Although a symbol can have infinite explanatory terms, all interpretants are interconnected through certain principles. These principles ensure the continuity and consistency of interpretants, allowing the meaning of symbols to maintain a certain internal logic in constant change. Like this, an endless series of reproductions of "one before the other" may have an "absolute object" at its limit. The meaning of reproduction is only a reproduction. Therefore, there exists an infinite regression here.<sup>18</sup> That is to say, in the long historical process, interpretant not only enriches the content of the explanatory subject, but also continues to develop. At the same time, in order to maintain the continuity and normal operation of symbolic activities, interpretant needs to follow certain principles and frameworks. No matter how the interpretant develops, it is essentially a symbol, and in the symbolic activity, it must be possible to review and trace the previous interpretant. From this, it can be seen that although symbol interpretant can continue and develop infinitely, their degrees of freedom are limited. This limitation is attributed to the social and group characteristics of the object and interpreter. The formal condition for symbolic activities is "collectivity (commonality)".<sup>19</sup> Understanding sociality or collectivity is a practical prerequisite for mastering symbolic activities.

The rich fantasy and astonishing nature of animation is not only a medium for disseminating information, but also a narrow path that connects

with the unconscious of the public, touching on the moral issues deep within human hearts. Due to the universal manifestation of collective unconsciousness, it constitutes a transpersonal psychological foundation that exists universally in each of us and influences people's psychology and behavior at both conscious and unconscious levels. Therefore, the prototype that constitutes the collective unconscious can be said to be the prior form with universal consistency of all psychological reactions.<sup>20</sup> During the screening of the movie, the audience is seeking identification, and they must continue to rely on the game of permanent identification without which there can be no social life. Otherwise, the film will become incomprehensible, much more incomprehensible than the most incomprehensible films. This continuous identification constitutes "social".<sup>21</sup> Many excellent literary and film works in China have the following characteristics. First, they tell the story of the Chinese themselves. Secondly, they reflect the unique emotional temperament and life culture of the Chinese people from the text.

Peirce stated that in the interpreter's mind, the psychological effects or thoughts generated by symbolic media are expressed through interpretants, which is a mental concept. Chinese traditional culture embodies widely recognized ethics and values, even including the collective unconscious deep within the hearts of the masses. People with a common collective unconscious psychology are more likely to communicate, understand, and resonate during the communication process. Literary works not only reflect the historical themes of the creative period, but also showcase the atmosphere of the times. Therefore, the combination of the theme of the era background and literary works is particularly important. This combination enables the work to more accurately reflect the spirit of the times and social emotions, evoke public memories, and enhance its emotional appeal and cultural identity to the audience.

According to Wan Laiming's recollection, "As soon as animation appeared in China, the subject matter diverged from the West. In the suffering China, we don't have time to joke around. To awaken our compatriots, we filmed animations that reflected the lives of the oppressed working people and inspired the Chinese people to resist Japanese

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18. Peirce, C.S. Peirce: On Signs [M]. Zhao Xingzhi, trans., Sichuan University Press, 2014: 49.

19. Zhang Caixia, The Study on C.S. Peirce's Semeiotic Theory [D]. Doctor's Thesis of Shandong University, 2015, 136-137.

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20. Jin Jingji, Art - Unconscious Symbolic Products [D], 61. Doctor's Thesis of China Academy of Art, 2008: 61.

21. Christian Metz, Imaginary Signifier [M]. Wang Zhimin, trans., China Radio Film & TV Press, 2006: 43.



aggression."<sup>22</sup> The narrative mode of "combining education with entertainment" began to take the stage of history at this time, and this idea also influenced Chinese animation for many years. In the context of cultural policies such as "serving the people with literature and art" and "serving socialism with literature and art" at that time, the animated series "Nezha: Conquers the Dragon King" aired in 1979 was one of the representative works of this time. The hero characters in the animation serve as a symbol that reflects the political state of the real society at that time. In the animation, Nezha is portrayed as a hero who sweeps away evil forces and maintains peace, which corresponds to the role of a righteous proletarian revolutionary in real life who upholds justice and eliminates evil for the people.

After the 1980s, Japanese and American animations entered the Chinese animation market at extremely low prices or even as free gifts.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the reform and opening up promoted the emergence of modern popular culture in China, which broke the monopoly of elite culture and ruling culture on art and culture. Especially in the 1990s, China's cultural traditions began to shift towards popularization, transitioning from political and enlightenment culture to enlightenment culture, education, and entertainment. Culture presented increasingly new characteristics. Influenced by these conceptual changes, the 2003 broadcast of "The Legend of Nezha" tells the story of Nezha, an ignorant child with many flaws, who, through a struggle between justice and evil, ultimately grows into a true little hero who eliminates harm for the people. The philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder believed that collecting the remaining folk poetry and using it to continue interrupted national traditions could restore the national spirit.<sup>24</sup> "The Legend of Nezha" tells the historical story of traditional Chinese mythology or reconstruction through Nezha's growth experience. Its role, content, and core idea are to restore the national spirit. In the interpretation of the plot, it tells the audience about the fine traditions of the Chinese nation, promotes the national spirit, and helps them

establish the belief and confidence that justice will surely overcome evil in their hearts.

Afterwards, under the influence of cultural collective psychology, Chinese animation began to challenge and resist the traditional elite culture and unique creative style of Chinese school animation in contemporary animation. The traditional exquisite creative approach that emphasizes time and cost has been significantly impacted. In terms of narrative, animation has shifted from traditional binary values to a "diversified" feature in popular culture, and the social function of character images has also shifted from a focus on collectivist identity to a focus on individual identity. The 2019 film "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" completely broke the traditional character setting, emphasizing Ne Zha's identity as a "demon child" excluded by social order, as well as his struggle in finding himself and a sense of identity.

Animation works not only undertake the function of mass cultural consumption, but also carry the functions of constructing mass cultural images, shaping value orientations, cross-cultural dissemination of local culture, and seeking cultural identity in a broader social field through popular culture and visual art.<sup>25</sup> The Nezha IP animation utilizes traditional IPs that are familiar to the public, presenting difficulties and real-life problems through exaggeration, thus resonating with modern audiences. By incorporating cultural content or themes expected by contemporary audiences, the experiences of animated characters enable viewers to reflect and grow in real life, and reflect their own inner reality through internal unity with the text. Animation not only showcases the inner world of the audience, achieving the externalization of feelings and consciousness, but also reflects the collective consciousness of the masses at a deeper level. This makes Nezha IP animation not only reproduce a certain phenomenon of the external world, but also become a reflection of the audience's emotions and thoughts, further enhancing its cultural and social significance.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The past is a foreign land, only through memory can people obtain a boat to reach it. Chinese traditional IP animation has relied heavily on traditional literature since its early stages of

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22. Sun Lijun, History of Chinese Animation [M]. The Commercial Press, 2018, 28.

23. Su Feng, Research on International Trade Mode of Animation [D]. Doctor's Thesis of Harbin Institute of Technology, 2006, 104.

24. Liu Xiaochun, From Vico, Rousseau to Herder - The Roots of Romanticism in Folklore Studies [J], 61. Folklore Studies, 2007(03): 61.

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25. Niu Min, Research on the Transformation of Modern Comics from the Perspective of New Media [D]. Doctor's Thesis of Hubei University, 2021, 1.

development. For example, the leading traditional IP content "Journey to the West" and "Investiture of the Gods" have been used as the source of animation creation. The new animations that emerged from this have been analyzed and compared with the old animations since their release, and the old animations have been forgotten, transmitted, or reawakened through this process, becoming a shared past for the public and a memory archive that they carry with them. So, how to artistically reproduce the history and memory of old animations in new animations is a question that should be explored.

Through this study, it can be seen that at the level of representamen, Chinese animated characters carry the experience, customs, and cultural memories of mainstream social culture. The aesthetic of Nezha IP characters is constantly repositioned, incorporating historical elements while preserving and blending traditional cultural forms and styles, while also absorbing the national characteristics of the Chinese animation school, preserving the audience's memories of the characters and their symbols. On the other hand, by integrating the characteristics of modern popular family structures and ethical relationships, the character of Nezha was reshaped and defined new character images.

At the object level, "Nezha: Conquers the Dragon King", "The Legend of Nezha", and "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" all significantly reflect the pursuit of cultural identity among young people of the same era, and trigger their collective memory and recollection. These animated works, through the storyline of Nezha, allow the audience to construct a sense of self-identity that is closer to human nature. At the interpretant level, Nezha animation utilizes traditional IPs that are familiar to the public and exaggerates real-life difficulties in script creation. By introducing cultural content or themes that are expected by contemporary audiences, the self-actualization process of animated characters not only reflects the cultural psychology of the audience, but also awakens this cultural psychological memory. Animation not only showcases the inner world of the audience, achieving the externalization of feelings and consciousness, but also reflects the collective consciousness of the masses at a deeper level. This makes Nezha IP animation not only reproduce a certain phenomenon of the external world, but also become a reflection of the audience's emotions and thoughts, further enhancing its cultural and social significance.

In summary, Nezha IP animation successfully combines the memory of traditional culture and the characteristics of modern society at the three levels of representamen, object, and interpretant, demonstrating the unique charm of Chinese animation in cultural and historical inheritance and innovation. By analyzing the cultural psychology and artistic representamen of traditional Chinese IP animation characters, this study provides important guidance for the future development direction of traditional Chinese IP animation. Based on these conclusions, it can be speculated that traditional IP animation will continue to play an important potential value and role in the future Chinese animation market.

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