

# The Evolution of the Visual Symbols of the Chinese Mythological Character Nezha from the 12th to the 21st Century

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**Submitted:** 16 May 2025 • **Accepted:** 23 May 2026 • **Published online:** 30 September 2026

**To cite this article:** Xiuhua Zhao, Olga Yezhova and Kalina Pashkevych. 2026. "The Evolution of the Visual Symbols of the Chinese Mythological Character Nezha from the 12th to the 21st Century." *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 25(2): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2026.25.2.1>

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2026.25.2.1>

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolutionary logic of the visual symbols of the Chinese mythological figure Nezha within the framework of cross-cultural communication. Adopting a diachronic comparative research design, it integrates three core analytical approaches: image typology, semiotic deconstruction, and cross-media comparative analysis. Based on typical visual cases from the 12th to the 21st century—including religious stone carvings, traditional New Year paintings, comic books, animated films, and digital game imagery—this study systematically summarises the morphological characteristics of Nezha's core symbols, such as the Lotus Incarnation, magical weapons, and distinctive costumes. Through typological sorting, the research clarifies a three-stage evolutionary trajectory of visual symbols: the codification of religious divine symbols, the popularisation of folk heroic symbols, and the reconstruction of technological digital symbols. Employing a three-layer semiotic interpretation encompassing denotation, connotation, and myth, the study further reveals that the semantic meaning of core symbols has shifted from religious ritual connotations and folk moral metaphors towards modern individual expression and interactive symbolic functions. Cross-media comparison further verifies that media attributes act as the core driving force of symbolic transformation, reshaping narrative logic from one-way cultural dissemination to immersive interactive experience. The key contribution of this paper is the construction of a theoretical framework of semantic stratification and functional adaptation for the digital reconstruction of traditional mythological symbols. It confirms that the stability of mythological archetypes guarantees the inheritance of cultural genes, while formal innovation and media empowerment realise the modern transformation of visual symbols. The findings provide practical paradigms for the cross-media dissemination of Chinese cultural heritage and theoretical support for the in-depth development of visual semiotics and mythological character design research.

**Keywords:** visual symbol, character design, cross-media narrative, semiotic analysis, Chinese culture

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of global cross-cultural communication, the modern reconstruction and cross-media dissemination of traditional mythological characters have become important research topics in visual design and cultural communication. As a classic cross-era and cross-media mythological intellectual property (IP) in China, Nezha's visual images have been continuously reinterpreted across religious art, folk paintings, animated films, and digital games, forming a rich evolutionary trajectory that bridges tradition and modernity.

Although existing studies have examined the connotations and stylistic characteristics of Nezha's image from the perspectives of folklore (Li 2023) and film studies (Whyke and Mugica 2021), most focus on a single work or a specific historical period, lacking a systematic analysis of the entire evolutionary process of his visual symbols. Furthermore, in-depth analysis of the internal logic underlying changes in symbolic meaning remains insufficient.

To address these research gaps, this study pursues three core research objectives: (1) to identify the morphological patterns and typological trajectories that characterise the evolution of Nezha's core visual symbols across religious, folk, and digital media contexts from the 12th to the 21st century; (2) to analyse how the semantic layers of classic symbols—such as his magical weapons and the Lotus Incarnation—transform in response to shifting cultural values and technological affordances; and (3) to examine how the transition from one-way to interactive media reshapes the functional and narrative logic of traditional mythological symbols.

Taking the evolution of Nezha's visual symbols from the 12th to the 21st century as its research object, this study employs image typology, semiotic deconstruction, and cross-media comparative analysis to examine a range of typical visual cases. It aims to summarise the evolutionary rules governing these visual symbols, reveal the driving role of media technology and changing social values in symbolic reconstruction, and refine design principles for the digital transformation of traditional cultural symbols. The findings are expected to provide both a theoretical reference and practical support for cross-media narrative innovation and the international dissemination of traditional Chinese cultural IP.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Iconography

Panofsky's three-level method of iconographic analysis provides a foundational framework for the systematic study of visual symbols (Panofsky 2018) and has been widely applied in art design and cultural heritage research. Pre-iconographic description has been used to analyse the formal characteristics of ethnic costume patterns (Yance et al. 2025), while iconographic analysis has clarified the symbolic meanings of visual elements in traditional art (Xu 2017). At the level of cultural interpretation, studies have revealed the relationship between auspicious patterns and folk symbols (Liu and Wang 2025), as well as the symbolic evolution of Lion Dance culture (Qiu et al. 2024). Iconographic interpretation has also been employed to examine socio-cultural phenomena, such as the transformation of historical symbols in poster design and New Year painting art.

Within this framework, image analysis enables the systematic tracing of Nezha's image across historical periods and media. Shen et al. (2020) divided the evolution of Nezha's image into four historical stages, revealing its visual characteristics and symbolic meanings across different contexts. However, existing iconographic studies of Nezha tend to focus on formal description

rather than systematically linking visual changes to shifts in cultural logic. A more integrated application of Panofsky's three-level method—moving from pre-iconographic description to iconographic analysis and finally to cultural interpretation—remains underexplored in the study of mythological character evolution. This research fully adopts Panofsky's three-tier iconographic framework throughout its case analysis: the pre-iconographic layer records basic visual features, the iconographic layer decodes fixed symbolic meanings, and the cultural interpretation layer connects visual changes to the broader social and cultural context.

## Semiotics

Semiotics, by analysing the relationship between signifier and signified, reveals the connection between surface form and deep meaning in cultural phenomena and has become a key methodology in art design, film and media studies, and cultural analysis. In animation IP research, Barthes's myth analysis system has been employed to deconstruct the ideological connotations of character symbols (Saisselin 1957), while the encoding-decoding model provides a theoretical tool for analysing audience reception of film and television symbols (Muzayin 2011).

From a semiotic perspective, Chen and Khynevysh (2024) analysed character design in the animated film *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child*, integrating screenwriter Robert McKee's character design theory to examine character shaping, character truth, and character relationships. Their study revealed the semiotic characteristics of the Nezha image (Dydynski and Mäekivi 2021) and its reinterpretation across cultural contexts. While this research demonstrates the applicability of semiotic analysis to mythological character design, it remains confined to a single media product. A longitudinal semiotic analysis tracing the transformation of Nezha's core symbols across centuries and multiple media forms is still lacking. This study applies Barthes's myth analysis system to differentiate the signifier and signified of visual symbols, and further explores how social culture continuously reconstructs the mythological connotations embedded in Nezha's image.

## Cross-media Narrative

Cross-media narrative constructs unified yet expansive story worlds across multiple media platforms, offering audiences immersive experiences (Bolat 2021). It has become a research focus in cultural industries, art design, animation, and gaming. Studies have shown that collaborative narratives across animation, games, and television series significantly enhance the communicative power of works (Caldwell 2014), while cross-media strategies in cultural tourism product design have amplified cultural communication effects (Ezzatian 2025). In brand design, cross-media narratives of virtual idols strengthen brand influence through fan interaction (Francistyová 2024). Gryshchenko et al. (2024) highlighted the integration of scientific, artistic, and engineering approaches in design activity—an intersection particularly relevant to contemporary studies on visual symbolism in mythological character design.

Using cultural analysis, Li (2024) explored the evolution of Nezha's image in two representative animated films, *Prince Nezha's Triumph* against the Dragon King (1979) and *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), situating visual changes within their historical and socio-cultural context. While this study aligns with the cross-media narrative framework by comparing Nezha's image across different periods and media platforms, its focus on two films limits its ability to capture the full trajectory of Nezha's visual evolution—particularly across non-film media such as religious art, New Year paintings, and digital games. This research applies cross-media narrative theories to compare symbolic presentation and narrative logic across diverse platforms, revealing how traditional symbols adapt to different media environments.

## Development of Nezha's Visual Image: A Brief Overview

Nezha's visual image has evolved profoundly throughout Chinese history, reflecting broader changes in society, culture, politics, and aesthetic concepts. The image originated from the Buddhist deity Nalakūbara and was later shaped by classic texts such as *The Complete Collection of the Three Teachings* (1909) and *Creation of the Gods* (c. 1567–1619) (Xie 2024). The earliest extant visual representation is the Liao Dynasty Prince Nezha Stone Casket (Bo 2025).

In early film adaptations, Gu Wuwei's *Prince Nezha's Triumph against the Dragon King* (1927) established the initial positioning of the "child hero" (Shen et al. 2020). The 1979 animated film of the same name created a paradigmatic image—featuring a full-moon face, starry eyes, a topknot hairstyle, and a red bib—that combined traditional aesthetics with contemporary discourse, making Nezha a visual symbol of collectivist heroism (Wang et al. 2025; Jin and Wang 2021). Subsequent adaptations, including the 2003 CCTV series *The Legend of Nezha*, further modernised the image to appeal to children while retaining its core symbols (Xuefeng and Sa-Ngiamviboon 2024).

In the 21st century, digital media have driven radical reimaginings of Nezha. The webcomic *Non-Human* (2016) transforms classic symbols into everyday items; the 2019 film *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* creates an anti-hero image characterised by smoky eye makeup and jagged teeth, turning Nezha into a symbol of individual rebellion (Chen and Khynevysh 2024; Yangyi 2024); and the 2021 film *Xin Shen Bang: Ne Zha Chongsheng* merges traditional mythology with cyberpunk aesthetics (You 2022).

## Summary and Research Gap

Existing research has examined the visual symbolism of Nezha from multiple theoretical perspectives. Iconographic studies provide detailed formal descriptions across historical periods; semiotic analyses reveal the cultural meanings embedded in character design; and cross-media narrative approaches trace how the image adapts across different platforms. However, three limitations persist. First, most studies focus on specific historical periods or single media forms, lacking a comprehensive view of Nezha's visual evolution across centuries. Second, there is limited integration of iconographic, semiotic, and cross-media frameworks, which in isolation cannot fully explain how core visual symbols transform in both form and meaning across time and media. Third, the mechanisms underlying the digital reconstruction of traditional symbols—particularly how semantic layering and functional adaptation operate—remain undertheorised.

This study addresses these gaps by combining image typology, semiotic deconstruction, and cross-media comparative analysis within a unified framework. By tracing the evolution of Nezha's visual symbols from the 12th to the 21st century across religious art, folk motifs, animation, and digital media, this research aims to reveal the mechanisms of symbolic translation and functional adaptation, thereby providing theoretical support for the cross-media reconstruction of cultural symbols.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs three methods—image typology analysis, semiotic deconstruction, and cross-media comparative research—to systematically trace the evolution of visual symbols in the design of the Nezha character.

First, in the image typology analysis, representative visual samples from the Liao Dynasty stone casket were selected, covering various media forms such as religious statues, New Year paintings, animation manuscripts, and game models. Sample selection was based on historical context, media attributes, and cultural representativeness, including the *Prince Nezha Stone Casket*, the Qing Dynasty's *Fengshen Zhenxing Tu*, Dong Tianye's 1955 comic book *Ne Zha Nao Hai*, the 1979 animated film *Prince Nezha's Triumph against the Dragon King*, the 2003 animated television series *The Legend of Nezha*, the 2016 webcomic *Non-Human*, the 2019 animated film *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child*, the 2021 animated film *Xin Shen Bang: Ne Zha Chongsheng*, and the 2024 game *Black Myth: Wukong*. These works are typical in terms of historical span, media type, and audience influence, and can systematically reflect the evolution of Nezha's visual symbols. By extracting and classifying core symbols—such as the lotus rebirth motif, the shape of the Red Armillary Sash, and hairstyle structure—and comparing their typological characteristics in clothing patterns, magical implements, colour coding, and aesthetic style, the visual patterns of the symbols across different historical periods and media environments are revealed.

Second, in the semiotic deconstruction, semantic stratification and functional translation are performed on patterns and objects, analysing their evolutionary path from religious symbols to folk patterns and then to technological metaphors, as well as their functional reconstruction from ritual objects to political symbols and then to interactive props. Based on the three-layer analytical framework of denotation, connotation, and myth, semantic stratification and functional translation analysis are applied to patterns and objects. At the denotative level, the visual form of the symbols is described, such as the geometric shape of the flaming crown and the material expression of the Red Armillary Sash. At the connotative level, the cultural metaphors of the symbols are interpreted—e.g., the transformation of the lotus from a Buddhist symbol of purity into a technological mecha aesthetic. At the mythological level, the ideology behind the symbols is analysed, such as the transformation of the Universe Ring from a religious ritual object into a modern symbol of resistance against patriarchy. Through this process, the evolutionary path of symbols from religious emblems to folk decorations and then to technological metaphors is traced, alongside the functional reconstruction process from ritual objects to political symbols and then to interactive props.

Third, the cross-media comparative study focuses on three dimensions: symbol usage, narrative logic transformation, and audience reception context. A comparative analysis is conducted on the symbolic translation paths and narrative logic reconstruction of the Nezha character across different media, including animation, games, and picture books. For example, the traditional heroic narrative in *Prince Nezha's Triumph against the Dragon King* (1979) is compared with the anti-hero setting in *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), and the interactive nature of symbols and their functional transformation in battle scenes in *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024) is examined.

The comprehensive application of the above methods not only systematically reveals the evolutionary mechanism of Nezha's visual symbols but also provides theoretical support and practical paradigms for understanding the translation process of cultural genes in cross-media narratives; that is, how traditional cultural symbols, while retaining their core semantics, achieve modern transformation through formal innovation and functional adaptation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Image Typological Analysis: Three-Stage Evolution of Visual Symbols

This study divides the evolution of Nezha's visual symbols into three standardised stages based on media form, social function, and aesthetic orientation, avoiding simple chronological stacking and linking each stage with its corresponding historical and cultural background. All typological analysis in this section is conducted in line with Panofsky's three-tier iconographic framework: the pre-iconographic layer describes the shape, colour, and styling of Nezha's costumes and weapons; the iconographic layer interprets the fixed symbolic connotations of the Lotus Incarnation and magical implements; and the cultural interpretation layer further links visual changes to the religious systems, social ideologies, and public aesthetics of different eras.

#### *Stage 1: Traditional Religious Period (12th to 19th Centuries)—Codification of Divine Symbols*

##### General Characteristics and Historical Context

During this period, Nezha's visual representation was primarily embedded within religious contexts, specifically Buddhist sculpture and Taoist-influenced folk literature. The image served ritual and didactic functions, aiming to convey supernatural authority rather than psychological depth or narrative engagement. Visual symbols were codified according to religious iconographic conventions, with limited variation across individual representations. This codification reflects the syncretic nature of Chinese folk religion, in which Buddhist and Taoist elements coexisted and mutually influenced one another.



**Figure 1** Prince Nezha Stone Casket  
(Liao Dynasty) Green sandstone,  
51 × 33.5 × 41.5 cm.

Source: Beita Museum, Chaoyang collection.

##### Visual Analysis

The Liao Dynasty stone carving of Nezha, known as the Prince Nezha Stone Casket (Figure 1), presents the figure as a solemn Dharma protector. Nezha wears a flaming crown and full armour, with the flame motif signifying the sanctity of a Buddhist guardian deity. He holds a pagoda in his left hand—a symbol of Buddhist authority and the containment of rebellious forces—referencing the narrative of Nezha's subordination to his father, Li Jing. His facial features—protruding eyes, a high nose, a square face, and a wide mouth—adhere to the iconographic conventions of Buddhist yaksha figures, emphasising otherworldly power over humanistic expression. The colour scheme, dominated by red and gold, highlights the ritual solemnity of religious art: red aligns with fire and divinity, while gold heightens sacred majesty.

The Qing Dynasty ink painting *Fengshen Zhenxing Tu* (Figure 2) shows a significant transformation while retaining core symbols. The religious armour is simplified into a folk bib, yet the bib retains the lotus rebirth motif, echoing the Taoist theme of the Lotus Incarnation. Nezha is now depicted as a youth, standing on Wind-Fire Wheels and wielding the Universe Ring. The magical implements—the Red Armillary Sash,

Universe Ring, Wind-Fire Wheels, and Fire-Tipped Spear—appear as iconic items for the first time in a fully realised form. The Red Armillary Sash, a red silk ribbon, embodies the Taoist principle of softness overcoming hardness, while the Universe Ring, a plain metal ring, connotes Buddhist authority. This fusion of Buddhist and Taoist elements within a single visual representation reflects the syncretic religious landscape of late imperial China.

### Chromatics and Symbolic Meaning

Chromatically, both samples employ red and gold as dominant hues. In the Liao Dynasty carving, red signifies sacred power and fire, while gold heightens ritual solemnity—consistent with the function of mythic figures serving religious propagation. In the Qing Dynasty illustration, the same colour pairing shifts towards folk festivity and hero veneration, indicating a gradual secularisation of the symbols while retaining their traditional chromatic core. Restricted by religious ideology and canonical artistic norms, stone carvings and ancient paintings served ritual purposes exclusively. Audiences received these images passively for worship, leaving no space for diversified interpretation of visual symbols.



**Figure 2** Fengshen Zhenxing Tu (Qing dynasty, ca. 18th century) Ink painting book, 28.5 × 18 cm.

Source: Taipei Palace Museum collection.

### Summary

The Traditional Religious Period established a stable visual vocabulary for Nezha: the Lotus Incarnation motif, the four magical implements, and the red-gold chromatic scheme. Nezha was represented as a superhuman figure—either a Buddhist protector or a Taoist immortal—rather than a psychologically complex character. All visual designs served religious preaching and folk myth inheritance, with no personalised expression. This period codified the grammar of Nezha's visual symbols, providing a foundation upon which later periods would elaborate.

## Stage 2: Media Transformation Period (20th Century)—Popularisation of Folk Hero Symbols

### General Characteristics and Historical Context

The 20th century witnessed a fundamental shift in Nezha's visual representation, driven by two interrelated developments: the emergence of mass media—including comics, animated films, and television—as primary carriers of cultural narratives; and the ideological transformation of Chinese society following the 1949 revolution. Nezha transitioned from religious icon to secular folk hero, with his visual symbols adapted to serve new ideological and aesthetic functions. This period also saw the establishment of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, which pioneered a distinctive Chinese school of animation that synthesised traditional art forms with modern cinematic techniques.

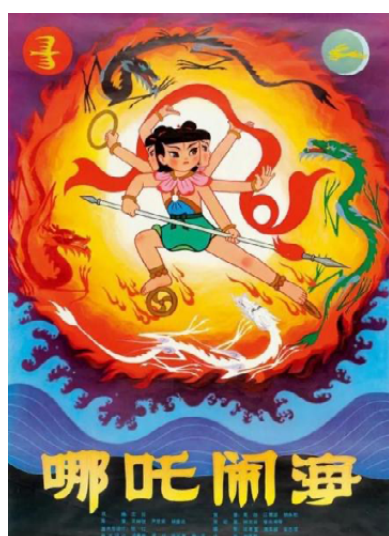
### Visual Analysis

The 1955 comic book *Ne Zha Nao Hai* (Figure 3) represents the first systematic visual adaptation of Nezha for a mass print audience. The design abandons complex religious details and adopts high-saturation folk colour schemes, with reds, greens, and blues dominating the palette. This chromatic choice downplays religious ornamentation in favour of child appeal. Nezha's



**Figure 3** *Ne Zha Nao Hai* by Dong Tianye (1955)  
Comic book, Zhaohua Fine Arts Publishing House, Unified Book Number: 7160-6658.

Source: <http://www.meishuziliao.com/huihua/a496b677b075200e79c50c85fae5dc4e.html>



**Figure 4** *Prince Nezha's Triumph Against Dragon King* by Wang Shuchen (1979)  
Animated film, produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio, online image.

Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0354770/>

plump, sturdy silhouette, rendered with mature line-work inherited from late Qing illustration, conveys vitality and approachability. Importantly, the magical implements are retained but secularised: the Wind-Fire Wheels and Fire-Tipped Spear function as tools of youthful heroism rather than divine instruments. This representation reflects the early post-revolution cultural context, in which folk heroes were mobilised to convey socialist values of courage and justice.

The 1979 animated film *Prince Nezha's Triumph against the Dragon King* (Figure 4) marks a watershed moment in Nezha's visual evolution. Chief art designer Zhang Ding drew extensively from Dunhuang murals, Yongle Palace murals, and folk New Year pictures, creating a visual language that synthesised traditional aesthetics with contemporary ideological demands. Nezha's design—round face, starry eyes, topknot hairstyle, and red bib—established an image paradigm that would endure for three decades. Critically, the 1979 film politicised Nezha's symbols. The Red Armillary Sash, previously a Taoist ritual implement, was reimagined as a weapon wielded against the Dragon King, a figure allegorically representing feudal authority and patriarchal oppression. This transformation aligned with the post-Cultural Revolution discourse of individual awakening and resistance to authoritarian structures. The colour scheme refined red and gold into a unified heroic palette, with red symbolising revolutionary spirit and gold representing the continuity of tradition.

The 2003 animated television series *The Legend of Nezha* (Figure 5) reflects the commercialisation of Chinese animation and the shift towards child-centred entertainment. While retaining the red bib and magical implements, the design introduced significant modifications: facial proportions borrowed from Hollywood animation, with larger eyes and smaller remaining features, rendering the figure livelier and cuter. The colour scheme employed traditional Chinese scarlet and brilliant yellow, maintaining cultural recognisability while appealing to modern children's tastes. The Wind-Fire Wheels received vibrant gradient colours, and the Universe Ring gained a metallic sheen, enhancing visual impact through technological upgrades while preserving the recognisability of traditional symbols. This design approach, termed the modernisation of traditional symbols, provided an important paradigm for subsequent character innovation.

### Chromatics and Symbolic Evolution

Chromatically, this period moved away from the religious red-gold binary towards more varied palettes. The 1955 comic employed high-saturation primaries emphasising folk playfulness. The 1979 film refined red-gold into a unified heroic scheme, with red as the dominant colour

of revolutionary heroism. The 2003 series introduced yellow as a dominant accent, signalling warmth and child-friendliness. This chromatic diversification reflects the secularisation of Nezha's image and its reorientation towards mass entertainment. The rise of print and film media broke the dominance of religious art. Updated social ideology redefined Nezha as a secular folk hero, while mass audiences favoured approachable and lively imagery, jointly driving the secularisation and popularisation of traditional visual symbols.

### Summary

The Media Transformation Period effected a fundamental redefinition of Nezha's visual symbols. Religious connotations were systematically replaced by secular meanings: the magical implements transitioned from divine instruments to heroic tools; the colour palette shifted from sacred red-gold to varied folk and child-oriented schemes; and Nezha himself evolved from a superhuman protector into a relatable child hero. Visual symbols completely broke free from religious bondage and became carriers of collective heroism and folk values. Critically, this period established the mechanism of symbolic recontextualisation—the practice of preserving core visual elements while reassigning their meanings according to contemporary ideological or commercial demands.



**Figure 5** *The Legend of Ne Zha* (2003)

Animated TV series, produced by CCTV Animation Group, online image.

Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6866732/>

## *Stage 3: Digital Innovation Period (21st Century)—Reconstruction of Technological Symbols*

### General Characteristics and Historical Context

The 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented diversification of Nezha's visual representation, driven by the proliferation of digital media—including webcomics, three-dimensional (3D) animation, and video games—the rise of internet culture and ACG (Anime, Comics, Games) creation, and the emergence of Generation Z as a key cultural consumer demographic. This period is characterised by the coexistence of multiple, often contradictory, Nezha images: from the subversive parody of webcomics to the existential anti-hero of blockbuster animation and the cyberpunk reimagining of traditional mythology. Visual symbols have undergone technological and personalised reconstruction, achieving an innovative integration of traditional cultural genes with modern technological aesthetics.

### Visual Analysis

The webcomic *Non-Human* (Figure 6), created by Xu Manxin in 2016, exemplifies the subversive potential of digital media. Set in a contemporary urban environment, Nezha is depicted as a primary school student who navigates everyday troubles alongside his supernatural heritage. His magical implements are radically recontextualised: the Wind-Fire Wheels become a skateboard, and the Red Armillary Sash becomes a red scarf worn as a school accessory. This transformation reflects the webcomic's genre conventions—slice-of-life comedy aimed at young adult readers—and the internet culture's playful deconstruction of authoritative symbols. Critically, while the form of the symbols changes, their core meanings of speed, flexibility, and protection are



**Figure 6** Non-Human by Xu Manxin (2016)  
Comic strip, online image.

Source: <https://baike.baidu.com/en/item/Nezha/1457389>



**Figure 7** Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child by Yu Yang (2019)  
Animated film, produced by Chengdu Coco Cartoon, online image.

Source: <https://wellgousa.com/films/ne-zha>

preserved, demonstrating a mechanism of functional adaptation rather than wholesale replacement. The colour palette employs varied contemporary hues, reflecting individual expression and ACG culture.

The 2019 animated film *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* (Figure 7) represents the most commercially successful and culturally influential Nezha adaptation to date. The film's visual design breaks decisively with the 1979 paradigm. Nezha is portrayed as an anti-hero with smoky eye makeup, jagged teeth, a slouching posture, and hands in pockets—a deliberate inversion of the traditional heroic aesthetic. His clothing retains the red bib with a lotus rebirth motif but pairs it with brown cropped trousers featuring flame patterns and a yellow belt, creating a visual tension between tradition and rebellion. The smoky makeup signals his status as the demon child and his alienation from society; the asymmetrical hair bun suggests non-conformity; the slouching posture communicates adolescent defiance. The Red Armillary Sash and Universe Ring are retained, but their function shifts: they become tools for Nezha to assert his own will against fate, rather than instruments of divine authority or resistance to external oppression. The film's climactic declaration, "My fate is in my own hands, not in the heavens," encapsulates this transformation, marking a shift from collectivist heroism to individual self-determination. Chromatically, the film introduces a red-black contrast, where black signifies the demon child's alienation and red retains the traditional heroic connotation.

The 2021 animated film *Xin Shen Bang: Ne Zha Chongsheng* (Figure 8) merges traditional mythology with cyberpunk aesthetics. Nezha is no longer presented solely as a child but is combined with Li Yunxiang, a young man in modern society, resulting in a multicultural representation. His design incorporates traditional mythological elements—such as lotus petal-like hairstyles, red clothes, and shoes in the form of mythical beasts—alongside modern popular culture elements including trendy clothing and motorcycle culture. The motorcycle replaces the Wind-Fire Wheels, symbolising speed and freedom, while the cyberpunk outfit and silver-red colour scheme blend a technological feel with traditional genes. This design allows audiences to examine traditional mythological stories from different perspectives while imbuing these stories with new vitality.

The 2024 3D game *Black Myth: Wukong* (Figure 9) represents the most recent iteration of Nezha's visual evolution within interactive media. Nezha is given blush eyeshadow derived from theatrical makeup, making his face more recognisable, while his eyes and posture convey sharpness and arrogance. In the design of weapons and abilities, Nezha embodies two essential elements—fire and lotus—as he is the incarnation of the lotus. The design team combined the lotus leaf shape with Nezha's fire attribute, so that when Nezha activates

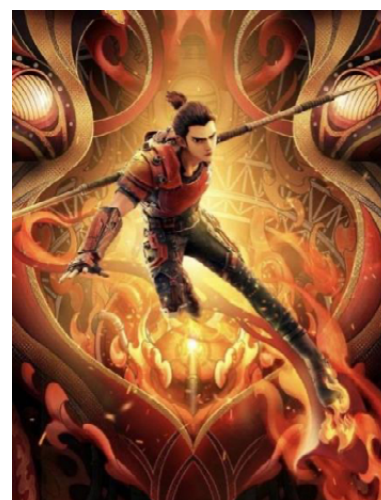
his divine power, lotus-shaped flames burst through the Universe Ring around his neck. This lotus-flame effect visualises the fusion of Nezha's mythological origins with his martial attributes. Critically, as an interactive medium, the game demands that visual symbols serve gameplay functions. The Universe Ring shifts from a static symbol to a dynamic interactive prop: it triggers the lotus-flame skill, transforming the symbol from a representational sign into an operational tool. The colour palette emphasises black and gold with flame accents, conveying divine majesty and destructive power simultaneously. This design exemplifies the mechanism of semantic layering: traditional symbols are preserved but overlaid with new meanings derived from gameplay interactivity.

### Chromatics and Symbolic Evolution

Chromatically, this period introduces significant diversification beyond the traditional red-gold scheme. *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* employs red-black contrasts, where black signifies the demon child's alienation and red retains the traditional heroic connotation. *Black Myth: Wukong* adds black and gold with flame hues, emphasising divine power within a combat context. *Non-Human* uses varied contemporary colour palettes reflecting everyday life. *Xin Shen Bang: Ne Zha Chongsheng* introduces silver-red combinations, blending a technological feel with traditional genes. This chromatic pluralism reflects the period's broader cultural logic: the fragmentation of a single authoritative Nezha into multiple coexisting versions tailored to different media, genres, and audience demographics. Digital interactive media have fundamentally transformed symbol presentation. Pluralistic social values and youth subcultures have discarded single authoritative interpretations, steering Nezha's visual identity towards individual expression, rebellion, and entertainment.

### Summary

The Digital Innovation Period is characterised by three interrelated developments. First, the fragmentation of Nezha's image into multiple coexisting versions tailored to different media platforms and audience segments. Second, the emergence of functional adaptation as a key mechanism, whereby traditional symbols are preserved in core meaning but transformed in form and function to suit new media affordances—as seen in the skateboard replacing the Wind-Fire Wheels and the Universe Ring becoming a combat skill trigger. Third, the shift from Nezha as collective hero to Nezha as individual anti-hero, reflecting broader cultural shifts towards individual self-determination and identity exploration among younger generations. The core archetype of the symbol remains stable, while forms and functions achieve an innovative integration of traditional cultural genes and modern technological aesthetics.



**Figure 8** *Xin Shen Bang: Ne Zha Chongsheng* by Zhao Ji (2022)  
Animated film, produced by Light Chaser Animation, online image.

Source: [http://www.impawards.com/intl/china/2021/xin\\_shen\\_bang\\_ne\\_zha\\_chongsheng.html](http://www.impawards.com/intl/china/2021/xin_shen_bang_ne_zha_chongsheng.html)



**Figure 9** *Black Myth: Wukong* by Feng Ji (2024)  
3D game, produced by Game Science, online image.

Source: <https://gamesci.cn/wukong/>

## Semiotic Deconstruction: Semantic Stratification and Meaning Evolution

Taking the Red Armillary Sash and the Universe Ring as core analytical carriers, semiotic analysis reveals that while the external forms of these core symbols have maintained high stability for centuries, their internal semantics have undergone three layers of evolution. Drawing on Barthes' theory of myth analysis, this study distinguishes between the literal signifier and the deep mythological signified of Nezha's visual symbols. The external forms of the red ribbons and golden rings act as the signifier, while the shifting connotations—from religious ritual to collective heroism and then to individual rebellion—constitute the constructed mythology behind the symbols.

At the denotative level, the basic forms of the red silk and the golden ring have remained unchanged, ensuring the continuous inheritance of cultural visual genes. At the connotative level, their meaning has evolved from Buddhist teachings and Taoist ritual implements in the religious era, to symbols of resistance against authority in folk hero narratives, and finally to personalised tokens of pursuing self-destiny in modern digital works. At the mythological level, the underlying ideology has shifted from maintaining traditional ritual order to advocating collective spirit, and finally to highlighting individual independence and self-value realisation. These evolutionary patterns and transformations are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1** Evolution analysis of Nezha's visual symbols from the 12th to the 21st century.

| Visual symbol<br>Period/year                                                     | Cultural context                                                    | Core symbols                                     | Symbolic meaning                                             | Colour meaning                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Prince Nezha Stone Casket (stone casket)<br>Liao Dynasty (12th century)          | Early Buddhist-Taoist fusion, religious sculpture as main medium    | Flaming crown, armour, pagoda                    | Pagoda: Buddhist authority<br>Flaming crown: protector deity | Red: sacred power<br>Gold: ritual majesty                 |
| Nezha in Fengshen Zhenxing Tu (ink painting book)<br>Qing Dynasty (19th century) | Taoist culture dominant<br>Investiture of the Gods popularises myth | Bib, Red Armillary Sash, Wind-Fire Wheels        | Sash: ritual implement<br>Wheels: transport magic            | Red: folk festivity<br>Gold: hero veneration              |
| Ne Zha Nao Hai (comic book)<br>1955                                              | Post-war cultural revival, comics as mass medium                    | Traditional bib, simplified Wind-Fire Wheels     | Sash: decorative motif, no religious sense                   | Red, green: folk playfulness, child appeal                |
| Prince Nezha's Triumph against the Dragon King (animation film)<br>1979          | Feudal remnants dismantled, collectivist values emphasised          | Round face/almond eyes, red bib (with streamers) | Sash: tool against patriarchy and feudal authority           | Red: heroic spirit<br>Gold: tradition continued           |
| The Legend of Nezha (animated TV series)<br>2003                                 | Early animation industry, focus on character affinity               | Modern cartoon styling, simplified props         | Universe Ring: guardianship and friendship                   | Red, yellow: lively warmth, child aesthetic               |
| Non-Human (comic strip)<br>2016                                                  | Internet culture rises; sub-cultures influence design               | Skateboard (sash variant), casual wear           | Skateboard: modern transport, trend symbol                   | Multi-colour: individual expression, ACG culture          |
| Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child (animation film)<br>2019                        | Individual awareness awakens, anti-hero narratives trendy           | Lotus-motif vest, smoky makeup                   | Sash: weapon to defy fate<br>Lotus: rebirth, rebellion       | Red, black: rebel loneliness<br>Eyeshadow: demon identity |

(continued on next page)

**Table 1** (continued)

| Visual symbol<br>Period/year                                        | Cultural context                                                                    | Core symbols                                    | Symbolic meaning                                    | Colour meaning                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Xin Shen Bang: Ne Zha Chongsheng</i><br>(animation film)<br>2021 | Traditional culture modernised, national symbols reconstructed under globalisation  | Cyberpunk outfit, motorcycle (wheels variant)   | Motorcycle: speed and freedom, modern youth spirit  | Silver, red: tech feel, traditional gene                  |
| <i>Black Myth: Wukong</i><br>(3D game)<br>2024                      | Digital tech empowerment, game-interaction demands drive symbol-function innovation | Lotus-flame armour, Universe Ring (energy loop) | Ring: triggers combat skills, both guard and attack | Black, gold: divine majesty<br>Flame hues: sense of power |

## Cross-Media Comparison: Media-Driven Narrative Logic Transformation

Media attributes are the key external factor affecting symbolic evolution. Traditional paintings, comic books, and classic animated films belong to the category of one-way communication media, focusing on the unified output of symbolic connotations and fixed narrative themes. Drawing on cross-media narrative theories, this study compares how different media reshape storytelling modes. Linear narrative in animation and comics presents symbols in a one-way manner, whereas interactive games rebuild symbols into participatory narrative carriers—a typical application of cross-media narrative transformation principles.

Webcomics adapt symbols to everyday scenes, realising localised and fragmented narratives. Digital games, with interactivity at their core, transform visual symbols into operable functional props, achieving the shift from “audience watching stories” to “players experiencing stories.” This cross-media differentiated adaptation ensures that traditional symbols consistently align with the communication characteristics of their current medium, thereby maintaining the vitality of cultural inheritance. A summary of the analytical dimensions and their implications is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2** Dimensions and implications of Nezha symbol analysis.

| Analytical dimension    | Core findings                                                           | Contribution to understanding Nezha's symbols                             | Implications for digital media narration                                              |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Image typology analysis | Evolution of symbols from religion to technology (12th to 21st century) | Clarify the core of cultural genes and establish an inheritance framework | Anchor core semantics and preserve cultural genes                                     |
| Semiotic deconstruction | Symbolic semantic layering and functional adaptation to context         | Reveal the logic of cross-era/cross-cultural adaptation of symbols        | Semantic layering design to promote the shift from one-way to interactive narration   |
| Cross-media comparison  | Media attributes drive the innovation of symbolic forms and functions   | Demonstrate the dynamic adaptability of symbols across media              | Balance formal innovation and cultural adaptability to enhance interactive experience |

Media, ideology, and audience culture are three interlocking forces that continuously reshape Nezha's visual identity throughout history. Media types determine the form and narrative mode of visual symbols: static traditional art solidifies fixed symbolic meanings, mass media promotes the wide dissemination of heroic images, and digital interactive media transforms symbols into participatory experiential elements. Social ideology acts as the value core, endowing the character with religious connotations, a collective heroic spirit, and modern ideas of individual independence across different eras. Meanwhile, audience aesthetics, cultural cognition, and entertainment demands drive continuous stylistic adjustments from the demand side. The interplay of these three factors not only propels the evolution of Nezha's visual form and symbolic semantics but also reveals that traditional cultural symbols must keep pace with media development and public needs to sustain long-term vitality.

## CONCLUSION

This study systematically traces the entire evolutionary process of Nezha's visual symbols from the 12th to the 21st century through image typology, semiotic deconstruction, and cross-media comparative analysis, and clearly summarises three core evolutionary stages: the codification of religious divine symbols, the popularisation of folk heroic symbols, and the reconstruction of technological digital symbols.

The research identifies two core rules. First, classic mythological archetypes such as the Lotus Incarnation and magical weapons maintain long-term stability, which is the fundamental guarantee for the inheritance of Nezha's cultural genes. Second, media technological progress and changes in social values drive the semantic stratification and functional adaptation of symbols, enabling the continuous modern reconstruction of traditional visual symbols. The internal narrative logic has completed an evolution from religious preaching and moral indoctrination to immersive interactive experience.

The theoretical contribution of this paper is the construction of a universal analytical framework for the digital reconstruction of traditional mythological symbols, which can provide a reference for the visual design and cross-media communication of other Chinese cultural IPs. In practical terms, it summarises a feasible path for balancing cultural gene inheritance with modern innovative expression, supporting the creative transformation of cultural heritage in the digital era.

This research has limitations: it cannot cover all derivative images of Nezha, and cross-cultural comparative analysis of overseas communication remains insufficient. Future research can further explore the symbolic reconstruction of Nezha's image in AI-generated content and immersive media; and deepen the study of global dissemination strategies for traditional mythological visual symbols. In summary, this study provides a new systematic perspective for research on Nezha's image and visual semiotics; and has practical significance for promoting the innovative development of traditional Chinese culture.

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