

Film Review

Ne Zha Unbound: A Cultural Phenomenon in Motion

Review of *Ne Zha 2* (Jiaozi, 2025)

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When a film's characters leap from the screen onto children's backpacks, viral TikTok filters, and fast-food collectibles, it's no longer just a movie. It is a cultural takeover. *Ne Zha 2* (2025), the sequel to director Jiaozi's 2019 animated hit, didn't just dominate the box office with 10 billion yuan during Lunar New Year—it spawned a 周边 (“merchandise”) empire.¹ From CapCut's Ne Zha-themed video effects to clothing lines featuring the fiery demigod and his dragon ally, the film's success underscores a modern truth: In China, this hit movie is a cultural phenomenon (figure 1).

Beneath the commercial frenzy lies a story as old as the Ming dynasty. Adapted from sixteenth-century novel *Investiture of the Gods*, *Ne Zha 2* picks up where its predecessor left off: the fiery-tempered demigod Ne Zha and his once-rival, the dragon prince Ao Bing, are reduced to wandering spirits after their climactic sacrifice. In order to save their souls from dying, Master Taiyi Zhenren exhausts his seven-colored sacred lotus to regenerate their physical bodies, though they are still fragile. After Ao Guang, the dragon king, falsely believes that his son Ao Bing is dead, he unleashes demons on Ne Zha's hometown, Chentang Pass. Ao Bing defends the city but collapses as his borrowed body fails. Forced into a ceasefire, Ao Guang strikes a deal: Ne Zha and Ao Bing must share one body for seven days, complete three celestial trials to earn an immortality elixir, and restore Ao Bing's body.

1. “Ruiping, 100Yi Pojilu! Baiyi Nezha, Bushi Zhongdian Shi Qidian. 锐评 | 100亿破纪录! 百亿哪吒, 不是终点是起点” (Review | 10 billion record-breaking! 10 billion is not the end for Ne Zha but the beginning), news.sina.com, accessed July 20, 2025, <https://news.sina.com.cn/zx/gj/2025-02-14/doc-inekmpzf0920647.shtml>.



Figure 7.1. Cultural phenomenon of Ne Zha in shopping malls.

Source: Official set stills from Douban

What follows is a high-stakes odyssey across the sky, land, and sea, where Ne Zha and Ao Bing must confront not only gods and monsters but the weight of their respective identities.

Why has this story exploded into a 10-billion-yuan phenomenon? Whether viewed as a blockbuster, a political allegory, or a queer narrative in disguise, behind the stunning animation lies the film's reimagination of China's deep-rooted mythological traditions. *Ne Zha 2* places these traditional narratives in a modern cinematic framework, thus reinterpreting them to reflect contemporary values and social issues.

Ne Zha 2 and Free Will

Ne Zha 2 takes the rebellious spirit of its protagonist and elevates it into a manifesto of self-determination. Although Ne Zha's struggle with his destiny

is central to both the original myth and the film, the former framed Ne Zha's battle against destiny as a cosmic inevitability. The film places greater emphasis on individual agency and personal transformation. Ne Zha's initial inability to control his temper and his tendency to act recklessly could be viewed as character flaws, yet the narrative frames these qualities as part of his path to self-realization. His accidental rebirth via samadhi fire symbolizes how even chaos and failure can lead to growth and transformation when guided by individual willpower.

Ne Zha 2's thematic assertion of self-determination is underscored by its dynamic visual language. Director Jiaozi employs a kinetic, rollercoaster-ride film aesthetic, characterized by extreme Dutch tilts, rapid depth shifts, and first-person perspectives to immerse viewers in Ne Zha's journey. The cinematography reinforces his defiance through deliberate framing choices. In framing Ne Zha in the scene of his fury, the composition also works with the camera movement to achieve the same effect. By utilizing a series of low-angle hero shots, Ne Zha appears in control and larger than life. When Ne Zha absorbs the cauldron's flames in the climax, the film's haptic close-up invites the audience to make a leap of faith in equating Ne Zha's body as fire itself, utterly indestructible.

Apart from the aesthetics, the paradigm of *Ne Zha 2* is a capitulation to the Western deification of the self as the ultimate authority. Scholars have consistently identified individualism as a central theme in contemporary Chinese animation. As Liu observes, "A subtle shift in social ethos is evident from the animated images which focus on self-cultivation and individualism."² This focus on personal agency is particularly pronounced in depictions of Ne Zha, with Whyke noting that the 2019 film presents resistance as "the struggle of a special individual against a restricted fate."³ By framing Ne Zha in the center of the frame, the movie echoes the message

2. Yuling Liu. "Translating Folktales into Chinese Animated Films." *Syn-Theses*, no. 13 (2022): 56–65, <https://doi.org/10.26262/st.v0i13.9738>.

3. Thomas William Whyke and Joaquin Lopez Mugica, "Calling for a Hero: The Displacement of the Nezha Archetypal Image from Chinese Animated Film *Nezha Naohai* (1979)

that Ne Zha is the master of his own destiny. Moreover, Ao Bing's father Ao Guang acknowledges the flaws in placing high hopes on his son to change the fate of the dragon clan: "I just wanted to use my own experience to bring you happiness, but now I realize that the experience of the older generation belongs to the past and may not always be right. Your path is yours to carve out." Ao Guang's support for his son to choose his own path at the end reinforces the theme of individuality.

Social Inequality and Youth Disillusionment

Parallel to the tale of defiance, *Ne Zha 2* transcends its mythological roots and delivers a sharp commentary of contemporary Chinese social hierarchy and the economic struggles plaguing its youth. Through its narrative and visual storytelling, the film exposes the social injustice of those in power with resources, critiquing the economic inequality in Chinese society, which resonates deeply with a generation grappling with post-COVID economic instability.

For many young Chinese, the promise of upward mobility is strained under the weight of post-COVID economic stagnation and structural job scarcity. State news agency Xinhua reported a record high of 12.22 million college graduates in 2025.⁴ This surge in graduates coincided with a tightening labor market, as the *Guardian* reports a youth unemployment rate exceeding 18 percent for Chinese individuals aged eighteen to twenty-four.⁵ The high youth unemployment and the pressures of an oversaturated job

to New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021)," *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 15, no. 3 (2022): 389–409, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-021-00335-5>.

4. "Record Number of Students to Graduate College in China in 2025," Reuters, November 14, 2024, www.reuters.com/world/china/record-number-students-graduate-college-china-2025-2024-11-14/.

5. "The rise of 'Bai Lan': Why China's Frustrated Youth Are Ready to 'Let It Rot,'" *Guardian*, May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/26/the-rise-of-bai-lan-why-chinas-frustrated-youth-are-ready-to-let-it-rot>.

market have fueled widespread disillusionment among young workers. Online movements such as 摆烂 (“let it rot”) and 躺平 (“lying flat”) reject the “996” work culture (9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week), symbolizing a broader resistance to a system that offers little upward mobility. *Ne Zha 2* taps into this frustration, presenting a world where social roles are rigidly enforced, mirroring the real-life struggles of millions. The film’s antagonist, Wuliang and his cauldron, embodies oppressive societal forces, reinforcing the idea that individuals are born into predetermined roles and cannot escape them. Characters like Shen Gongbao, who performs Wuliang’s dirty work, are never truly accepted or rewarded. The cinematography and costume design underscore this reality, reflecting the experiences of many young workers who commit to exhausting jobs with little hope for advancement.

The film often frames Shen Gongbao in tight, enclosed spaces, symbolizing his lack of agency (figure 2) while Wuliang is frequently shown in high-angle shots, making him appear dominant and untouchable. Additionally, Shen Gongbao’s hunched posture and exaggerated, beast-like features visually mark him as “other,” reinforcing the film’s critique of hierarchical discrimination. His physical form, along with his constant subjugation, strengthens his frustration for being denied upward mobility despite his loyalty and hard work. By weaving together visual and narrative elements,



Figure 7.2. Shen Gongbao decides to fight.

Source: Official set stills from Douban

the film acknowledges young people's frustration in trying to earn a living in societies that prioritize power and connections over meritocracy. In so doing, *Ne Zha 2* blends fantasy with real-world frustration, resonating both as entertainment and social critique.

Narrative Subtext and State Endorsement

One of *Ne Zha 2*'s most compelling reinterpretations of *The Investiture of the Gods* lies in its portrayal of the relationship between Ao Bing and Ne Zha. While the original mythology positions them as adversaries, the film transforms their dynamic into an intimate and emotionally charged bond that borders on romantic subtext. Their strong bond built on mutual sacrifice, deep understanding, and even literal bodily fusion echoes the “queer bromance” trope seen in Chinese hits like *The Untamed* (2019).

Though explicit LGBTQ+ representation remains taboo in Chinese media, *Ne Zha 2* employs visual storytelling to suggest a connection that goes beyond friendship. Close-up shots of Ne Zha and Ao Bing during moments of vulnerability highlight the tenderness in their connection while the use of contrasting colors—Ne Zha's fiery reds against Ao Bing's icy blues—symbolizes their opposing yet complementary natures. Yet, in the final scene when Ao Bing leaves his father to join Ne Zha on his journey, the scene softens these differences. The lighting becomes more diffused and warmer under the sunset, symbolizing their harmony. This shift is commonly seen in romance films, where warmer tones create a sense of emotional warmth, vulnerability, and resolution. Prior to their climatic battle to open up the caldron, Ne Zha's touch melts the curse on Ao Bing, saving Ao Bing's life. Even their narrative arc—from misunderstanding, conflict, to ultimate reconciliation—echoes the classic enemies-to-lovers trope often found in romantic storytelling.

By embedding queer coding in cinematic language, *Ne Zha 2* evokes a queer emotional landscape that resonates with marginalized audiences

while aligning with state priorities. Indeed, *Ne Zha 2* is successful in winning the state's recognition, and this duality is epitomized in the state's own praise. Official outlets like *People's Daily* have lauded the struggles of Taiyi Zhenren and *Ne Zha* as metaphors for perseverance. Meanwhile, the message endorses a narrative that LGBTQ+ viewers may read as an allegory of self-acceptance. Similarly, the emphasis on director Jiaozi's labor-intensive production team and process reinforces state-endorsed narratives of individual grit.⁶ This duality extends to the film's broader themes: Its celebration of individualism and critique of rigid hierarchies are framed through mythic allegory, enabling it to both align with state-sanctioned narratives of perseverance and subtly undermine them.

This delicate balance exemplifies how contemporary Chinese animation can negotiate creative agency within ideological constraints. The *Economic Daily* quoted Tsinghua University professor Yin, who highlighted the film's exploration of mythic conflict as both a social critique and a psychological study of growth, comparing it to an Oedipal struggle between the individual and society.⁷ Far from passive co-option, *Ne Zha 2* demonstrates how commercial films can reframe state priorities to smuggle in subversive ideas, proving that ideological negotiation isn't a zero-sum game.

Beyond social commentary, *Ne Zha 2* contributes to the broader discussion of what constitutes authentic Chinese storytelling in a rapidly globalizing film industry. Rooting its imagery in Daoism and Buddhism, the lotus throne, *Ne Zha*'s meditative poses (figure 3), and jade-adorned celestial palaces all draw from Chinese spiritual traditions.

6. "Xijie Manfen! Zhemeduo Jiaose You Jiaozi de Yingzi 细节满分! 这么多角色有饺子导演的影子. 人民日报-有品质的新闻" (Perfect score on detail! Jiaozi is in so many characters), *People*, accessed July 20, 2025, <https://www.peopleapp.com/column/30048250472-500006090790>.

7. "Ne Zha 2 Yingshi Zuijia, Qiji Haishi Biran? 《哪吒2》影史最佳, 奇迹还是必然?- 21经济网" (Is *Ne Zha*'s record breaking a coincidence or inevitable?), *21jingji.com*, accessed July 20, 2025, <https://www.21jingji.com/article/20250208/herald/e00870517effdb0664dd739e9abafd6a.html>.



Figure 7.3. Ne Zha completes his transformation.

Source: Official set stills from Douban

Whyke notes how modern Chinese animation often uses “generic historicity”—visual shorthand like Han clothing and palatial architecture—to evoke tradition without strict accuracy.⁸ *Ne Zha 2* follows this trend, as the director chooses to use jade in celestial palaces (figure 4), a material that is iconic in China. Jade’s association with the celestial realm and the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝) being the highest deity of Daoism. Just as marble or gold is used in Western fantasy films—such as the grandeur of Mount Olympus in *Clash of the Titans* (1981)—jade’s association with the celestial realm in *Ne Zha 2* positions it as a material that signifies the boundary between the mortal and spiritual worlds. This gives the setting a mythic and otherworldly quality that resonates with global fantasy and adventure narratives. The use of jade thus functions not only as a culturally specific symbol but also as part of a broader cinematic language that conveys power and transcendence across cultural boundaries.

In modern Chinese animation, the visual style and sociocultural themes emerge from a dynamic interaction between the overarching

8. Thomas William Whyke et al., “Contemporizing the National Style in Chinese Animation: The Case of *Nezha* (2019),” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 16, no. 3 (2021): 157–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17468477211049354>.

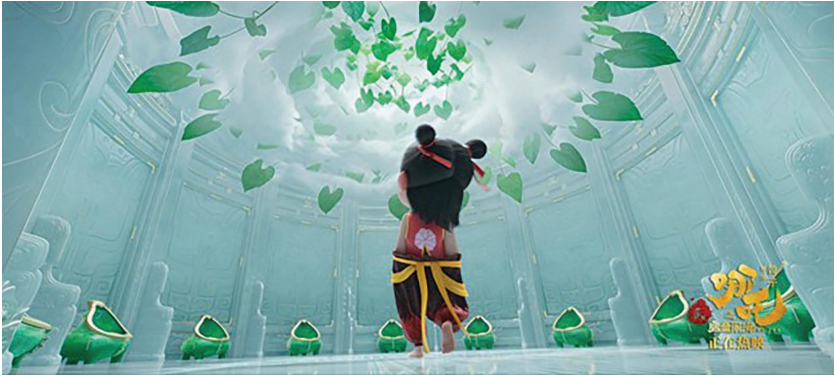


Figure 7.4: Architecture of celestial palaces.

Source: Official set stills from Douban

narrative of modernization and an evolving concept of visual modernity. The relationship is complex and challenging to define, as it is still in the process of developing. The intersection between China's effort to modernize its animation industry and the influence of global animation aesthetics creates a space for adaption and reinterpretation within a shifting cultural landscape.

Under such an evolving animation landscape, *Ne Zha 2* succeeds by balancing spectacle with substance. It's a film that critiques inequality, flirts with queer representation, and reinterprets Daoist philosophy for a global audience while navigating China's restrictive media landscape, mirroring the growing cultural emphasis on self-determination and personal agency. Its box office success and popularity among audiences prove that audiences crave stories reflecting their struggles, even when coded in myth.

