

# ***Oriental Punk Aesthetics and Youth Discourse Construction in Chinese Animated Films: Taking the New Gods Series of Animated Films as an Example***

**Zu Gong<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, Wuhan, 430073, China*

*a. 1329332789@qq.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Although punk culture was introduced into China from the West, with the rapid development of Chinese science and technology and the enhancement of the consciousness of national discourse construction, Chinese punk culture has shown a breakthrough trend. Meanwhile, as a significant representation of youth subculture, punk culture always pays attention to youth culture's reality to convey young people's spiritual needs. With the development of the Internet, the attitude of youth has gradually changed from complete rebellion to looking out from the edge to the center, showing the tension of resistance and compromise. In this paper, the author studies Oriental punk aesthetics and youth discourse construction in Chinese animated films, and the *New Gods* series of animated films is taken as a case study. According to analysis, it is concluded that the *New Gods* series connects the punk style with national identity, finds the commonality between punk culture and the spiritual core of the films, and fits with the discourse of youth in the context of national culture, so as to construct a localized mythological space based on national historical experience and explore the mode of youth culture with Oriental punk aesthetics.

**Keywords:** Animated film, New Gods, Oriental punk aesthetics, Youth discourse construction

## **1. Introduction**

Although the all-age audience positioning is a favorable channel for the development of the animation industry, youth in China who have a strong recognition of two-dimensional culture remain the primary consumer force. They possess more positive consumption habits towards two-dimensional animation, and animated films have a beneficial interaction with them by tapping into their lived experiences. Among these, an increasing number of Chinese animated film creators are focusing on using punk aesthetics to showcase youth culture. Certain Chinese animated films that integrate punk elements exhibit innovative breakthroughs in aesthetic style, such as Nezha sporting smoky eyes in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* which aligns with punk stage culture; Oriental aesthetics depicted in *Green Snake* and its portrayal of the postmodern world's ruined punk imagination; and punk mechanical aesthetics showcased in *New Gods: Nezha Reborn*, among others. *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* marks the inception of the *New Gods* series of animated films, where unified punk aesthetics play a crucial role in constructing a mythological universe within this series. The subversion of rigid systems, resistance against power oppression, and spirit to break free from emptiness and darkness represented

by punk culture deeply resonate with the spiritual core of the *New Gods* series of animated films while also aligning with the overall cultural context wherein contemporary Chinese youth strive to liberate themselves from traditional constraints, defend individual expression, foster cultural self-confidence, and pursue new forms of Oriental aesthetics [1]. This paper focuses on the punk aesthetics and youth cultural consciousness displayed in the development process of Chinese animated films, studies the representation of Chinese punk culture, and explores the construction of youth discourse in the Oriental punk aesthetics of Chinese animated films with the focus of the *New Gods* series of animated films.

## 2. The Realistic Turn of Punk Culture and Youth Rebellion

Punk music emerged in the late 1960s and was initially a branch of rock music, representing the counter-mainstream, avant-garde, extreme, and rebellious. Punk culture developed through punk music and became the most significant symbol of youth culture in the 1970s and 1980s. Punk culture reflected the cultural crisis in Britain and America in the 1970s. Young people indulged in radical and anarchist ideas at that time due to the Great Economic Depression in Britain and America, the war trauma brought by the Vietnam War in America, and the political Watergate scandal. They were unwilling to become prisoners of order and rationality, so they chose to break the rules and promote the anti-rule spirit of punk. This also made punk culture a "radical, absurd, and dangerous phenomenon" [2]. Youth used music to ignore authority, neglect capitalism, and against commercialism. They put forward the slogan "be yourself" and claimed that mainstream culture was hypocritical, shallow, and wrong. These concepts of punk culture have inspired thousands of people to create personalized and subversive music, art, film, fashion, and writing, even producing free thought and action, to rebel against mainstream culture and strive to change the world. "Since the 1980s, the innovation and development of science and technology has greatly attracted the attention of youth. Youth groups rely on scientific and technological innovation tools to realize their ideals of surpassing their parents and realizing themselves. Their cultural creation has become an important symbol of current popular culture and youth culture [3]."

If the youth subculture had a strong rebellious character before the emergence of the net-born generation after World War II, then with the rapid development of the Internet and new media, the net-born generation has entered the historical stage, making the youth subculture show an obvious realistic turn. When youth were still at the edge of mainstream culture, they were free in form, rarely bound by traditional values, and had certain destructive and critical effects on mainstream culture, such as surrealism, pop art, conceptual art, performance art, and other avant-garde art. Avant-garde artists abandoned the classical aesthetic norms of harmony, proportion, and symmetry that had been observed for centuries. In the Internet era, communication between the youth group and the mainstream culture is gradually frequent, from the rejection of the mainstream society and the adult world to the mild resistance to the mainstream society and the mainstream culture. As the main force of the Internet, the net-born generation has gained the right to speak on the Internet, constantly refreshing the mainstream society's cognition of the youth group. The new culture represented by today's youth penetrates the mainstream culture with the help of network media, and the new era also has a higher tolerance for youth subculture. As a result, more exchanges and collisions occur between youth subculture and mainstream culture [4]. Remix, hip-hop culture in the music industry, etc., are mostly descriptions of traditional culture, mainstream values, and mainstream culture mix, collage, adaptation, or allusion, and this resistance must be under the restriction of mainstream culture. Youth can only use mainstream culture to complete the creative activities of resistance, and their rebellion is based on the identification of mainstream culture [5]. The rebellious or marginalized characteristics of youth still exist, but at the same time, they show a positive tendency to test and approach the social center, and many subcultural elements gradually enter the mainstream vision. It has even become an

important element of mainstream fashion. The discourse of youth in films and television also changes with the reality of youth culture. Especially in animated films, where youth occupy a large proportion of the audience, the rebellion and confrontation of rebellious youth in films and television on social issues are no longer a complete negation and rebellion but are rooted in the desire to change issues. The focus on issues arising from the changes of the times or issues left over from history is based on communication.

### 3. The Disenchantment Subversion of the Traditional Character Image by Punk Modeling

Although punk is an imported word, the spirit contained in punk is not unique to the West. The spirits of resistance, rebellion, and freedom in punk culture exist in both traditional and modern Chinese culture and are clearer in the youth group, such as Nezha, who is a representative of rebellious youth. Tracing back, Nezha was originally a foreign god, but its image has been localized thoroughly, from a foreign god to one that fully possesses the characteristics of Chinese civilization, with a recognized folk image. The novel *The Investiture of the Gods* gave Nezha a legendary birth. Nezha stayed in his mother's belly for three and a half years before being born, obviously not a human being, but a celestial being coming down to the earth. Nezha was born a flesh bump, and in ancient Chinese mythology, after Fu His (the first ancestor of mankind in Chinese mythology) and Nüwa (a goddess in Chinese mythology) married, Nüwa gave birth to a flesh bump, which may not be a coincidence. The evolution of Nezha's image itself fully contains the color of Chinese mythology, reflecting the complexity of the Chinese nation. Nezha showed obvious rebellion and violence in the early literature and artworks. Not only was he cruel to his opponents, but also his attitude toward his parents was completely rebellious in traditional ethics and the orthodox values that always emphasized filial piety. Confucian ethics were partially rigid in the change of dynasties, and under long-term bondage, excessive repression inevitably aroused people's inner agitation in ancient times. The emergence of Nezha not only ignited people's hearts in the past but also realized the sanctity of the flesh in history even if it was not openly advocated, and Nezha was even worshipped as a righteous god in many areas. Such a feature is easier to discuss today. The outdated moral ethics have been gradually replaced by the values of the new era, and the rebellion of Nezha has been constantly re-interpreted under modern values.

Nezha has a subversive setting again in the *New Gods: Nezha Reborn*, the protagonist of which is a modern teenager named Li Yunxiang who is the reincarnation of Nezha. As one of the gods in Chinese traditional culture, Nezha could fly and used to have magic and a lot of fighting power, but now Li Yunxiang cannot fly but rides a steampunk-style motorcycle and wears armor made of steel when fighting with rebels. What is important is that the clothing shape of the characters at this time has a meaning beyond its basic function. An opinion of Hendrickson is:

The body surface is an especially compelling indexical sign. Bodily signifiers present an ever-present semiotic possibility for expressing identity and intention, for asserting the legitimacy of the status quo or subverting it [6].

According to Hebdige:

One way to subvert the status quo is to challenge the conventional uses of clothing, to recontextualize them [6].

The design of the armor Li Yunxiang is wearing is a reference to the Bright-Light Armor, an ancient armor popular in China from the Northern and Southern Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty [7]. He wears armor for "war", but not in the traditional sense of war. It is a war against the traditional patriarchal culture and the oppression of the hegemonic class, as well as to find his self-worth.

All of the above reflect the most important change of the character image in the film, that is, the deity of the character is greatly weakened. This is very close to a concept called disenchantment, which is derived from Max Weber's disenchantment of the world. "The relationship between man and

the world has undergone fundamental subversion and fission. Man is no longer a part of the world or a product of the world but becomes an independent subject who measures and conquers the world by himself [8].”

As people became more aware of the world rather than begging for gods and magic, people became more rational. By weakening the divinity of the characters, the film makes them closer to the ordinary young audience and can arouse resonance. Li Yunxiang needs to awaken from an ordinary person in the struggle, which also makes him a step closer to the cry of the real youth. The reason why Li Yunxiang as the reincarnation of Nezha finally achieved success is fundamentally his kindness, bravery, unyielding, and other qualities that resonate with Nezha. It is hard to say whether it is Nezha who awakened Li Yunxiang or it is Li Yunxiang's faith that unleashed Nezha's sealed powers since they were already one.

#### 4. Cyber Primordial Spirit and Youth's "Body" in Cyberspace

Another noteworthy aesthetic design of the *New Gods* series of films is that each character has a primordial spirit, which can be simply understood as a person's consciousness and spirit that can continue to exist after the death of the body and reincarnate into a new life form, a reincarnated soul. However, the concept and evolution of the primordial spirit are far more complicated than this explanation. In traditional Chinese culture, body and mind are not the meaning of body and mind in the English context. In China, mind and body are not absolute dualities. It is rooted in the Chinese concept of Yin and Yang, so the primordial spirit cannot be simply understood as the soul attached to the heart and independent of the body. According to Edward Slingerland, the duality of body and mind in early China is not the strong duality in Cartesian philosophy, but the weak duality in which matter and consciousness can interact with each other although they are independent of each other [9].

In films, the design of the primordial spirit looks similar to the neon lights in cyberpunk style. Every time the primordial spirit appears in the film, it is the ultimate cool visual presentation. Cyberpunk was introduced into China from the West at the end of the 20th century and began to flourish under the enthusiasm of youth after entering the new century. The science fiction sense of cyberpunk corresponds with the existence of youth in the online virtual world, and the primordial spirit also coincides with the extension of youth's bodies on the Internet. Youth use the advantages of network new media technology to open up a virtual space and time that are parallel to the real world. They construct communities and communicate with each other through the network "substitute" in the virtual community. Cyberspace has become an important place for them to connect with and extend reality. On the Internet, they "abandon the relatively single, stable, and mainstream social aesthetic norms of the physical space, break the conventional boundaries, and pursue the freedom of unconventional shaping to get rid of the extremely severe power control of the body [10]." This is a new discourse form of youth, who realize satisfaction through virtual reconstruction and self-shaping, so as to release and respond to the pressure of the modernization process. In the *New Gods* series, the concept of the primordial spirit is both the same body and an extension. It seems that the primordial spirit of Nezha has given Li Yunxiang, the reincarnation of Nezha, great power. But in the traditional Chinese spiritual culture, the primordial spirit is different from the pure substitute. The substitute is more like an object outside the body, while the essence of the emergence of Nezha's primordial spirit is Li Yunxiang's self-release. The primordial spirit is the existence of life outside human beings, and it is also the self-identity of human beings. It is the desire hidden in Li Yunxiang's heart, the desire to break through himself, and the true expression of his inner words. The imagination and extension of the power outside of himself displayed by Nezha's primordial spirit is what youth yearn to see in the network media, and they also hope that their spirit and discourse power can successfully stimulate the primordial spirit to awaken. The process of Li Yunxiang's successful awakening of the primordial spirit is also the process of the youth's pursuit of identity and self-worth.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the creator of the *New Gods* series of animated films has the idea of constructing a mythological universe, and the creation of the cinematic universe requires a unified worldview and solid world rules. In terms of story creation, although the *New Gods* series of animated films is based on *The Investiture of the Gods*, the original novel has limitations due to the confinement of the environment and thoughts of the times. The *New Gods* series modernizes the original story world structure based on modern values. In terms of aesthetic construction, Oriental punk aesthetics has become an important element of the *New Gods* series, which contains the collision of Eastern and Western culture, tradition and modernity, myth and technology, hybridity, and deconstructive reorganization. The reshaping of traditional mythological imagination in the *New Gods* series of animated films is also a rethinking of the traditional spiritual civilization in the past, which carries the fantasies and psychology of people in the past and also has emotional resonance with the current public. The construction of nationality is not only a re-tracing of the national spirit but also a re-interpretation of the national character in the new era. Additionally, the Oriental punk aesthetics with subcultural characteristics, such as resistance and marginality, shown in the *New Gods* series not only implies the struggle of youth in loss and self-identity but also solves problems imaginatively under mythological discourse, showing the spiritual demands of youth trying to make up for the loss of identity and establish collective ownership.

## References

- [1] Zong, J. W. and Lv, H. (2022). *The Punk-style Aesthetic Construction of the Narrative of "New Gods" Series of Animated Films*. *Journal of Zhengzhou University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 55(06), 70-75.
- [2] Rombes, N. (2010). *A Cultural Dictionary of Punk: 1974-1982*. Bloomsbury, London.
- [3] Jiang, Y. Q. (2021). *Chinese Cyberpunk Cultural Representation and Discourse Construction*. *Journal of Shenzhen University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, 38(05), 143-151.
- [4] Ma, Z. H. and Chen, L. (2015). *Another Force that Cannot Be Ignored Is the Study of New Media and Youth Subculture*. Tsinghua University Press, Beijing.
- [5] Ma, Z. H. (2010) *New Media and Youth Subculture Turn*. *Literature and Art Study*, 12:104-112.
- [6] Simmert, T. (2022). *Youth and Popular Culture in Africa: Media, Music, and Politics*. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 56(3), 686-688, DOI:10.1080/00083968.2022.2073733.
- [7] Table Film. (2021). *New Gods: Nezha Reborn Exposed Its Behind-the-Scenes Concept Map*. [https://www.sohu.com/a/450965378\\_100042193](https://www.sohu.com/a/450965378_100042193).
- [8] Wang, Z. Y. (2009). *The Significance and Crisis of Disenchantment: An Exploration of Max Weber's Disenchantment View and Its Influence*. *Hunan Social Sciences*, 4, 1-8.
- [9] Behuniak, J. (2019). *Slingerland, Edward, Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism*. *Dao* 18, 305-312. DOI:10.1007/s11712-019-09666-3.
- [10] Du, D. (2015). *Body Remodeling and "Grotesque" Carnival in Internet Graffiti*. *Youth Studies*, 5, 41.