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# THE MYTH OF NEGOTIATION: HERO CONSTRUCTION AND YOUTH IDENTITY IN CHINESE ANIMATED FILMS

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## ABSTRACT

*Identity is a never-ending conversation." (Hall, 1996) Chinese mythological animated films, represented by Ne Zha and Ne Zha 2, have become a key arena where contemporary youth negotiate cultural identity. Moving beyond existing textual analysis paradigms, this study adopts "identity negotiation" as its core theoretical perspective to examine how young audiences agentically engage with these media texts to construct and express cultural identity. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this research builds on textual analysis of five animated films and a questionnaire survey of 612 young people. Using quantitative analysis, it identifies and quantifies six core elements driving the formation of youth's cultural identity: ethical resonance, non-authoritarian destiny, symbolic translation, techno-national pride, intergenerational dialogue, and psychological projection. The study finds that "ethical resonance" carries the highest weight, indicating that the value foundation of youth identity has shifted from traditional authoritarian obedience to the negotiation of modern individual ethics. This value shift is facilitated by the synergy of two mechanisms: cultural translation which activates traditional memory into perceptible, contestable meaningful resources; techno-nationalism provides youth with an emotional anchor in the context of globalization. Together, these six elements constitute a "third space of negotiation" (Bhabha, 1994). Through empirical modelling, this paper reveals how mythological hero images are reconstructed as a practical field for the generation of negotiated identity, offering a critical analytical pathway for understanding the entanglement of tradition, technology, and subjectivity in non-Western contexts.*

**KEYWORDS:** Youth Cultural Identity, Chinese Animated Films, Identity Negotiation, Cultural Translation, Techno-nationalism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: RECONSTRUCTED MYTH AND NEGOTIATED IDENTITY

"Identity is a never-ending conversation." Stuart Hall's (1996) dictum finds renewed resonance in the reception of contemporary Chinese mythological animated films. Represented by *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), and *Ne Zha 2* (2025), these "youth-oriented" Chinese mythological animated films have not only achieved commercial box office success but have also become significant media events igniting social discussion and condensing youth emotions. However, this phenomenon signifies more than mere market success; it marks a critical cultural transition: The Chinese animation industry is transitioning from a phase of technological imitation to a period of deep cultural exploration and endogenous value reconstruction. As some commentators have noted, the success of *Ne Zha 2* precisely reflects the innovative cultural consciousness displayed in the modernization of traditional Chinese intellectual properties (Liu, 2025, February 23). This shift is not an isolated case but epitomizes the golden age of Chinese animation, where the industry as a whole is being empowered by traditional culture (Zhang & Zhang, 2025). Beyond the evident prosperity characterized by visual spectacle and the modernization of traditional IPs, a fundamental academic inquiry necessitates rigorous investigation: Through what mechanisms do these reconstructed mythological hero images trigger the complex and profound cultural identity of contemporary youth? How does this process of identity formation reflect the identity negotiation and power dynamics among youth, situated between tradition and modernity, the local and the global, authority and the individual?

Existing research offers diverse perspectives for understanding this phenomenon. Some scholars focus on narrative translation and the activation of cultural memory, pointing out that by visually translating and emotionally connecting classical mythological codes, these films successfully construct a "cultural memory community" shareable by contemporary youth, achieving intergenerational transmission and paradigmatic breakthroughs in tradition (Yan et al., 2025). Another line of inquiry delves into the micro-mechanisms of identity negotiation and intergenerational dialogue, arguing that by deconstructing traditional mythological lineages and authoritarian narratives, these films provide young people with a model of identity negotiation based on "harmony without uniformity," consciously activating intergenerational dialogue within families to build an emotional community

across ages (Ma, 2025; Jiang & Lu, 2020). While these studies keenly capture textual strategies and social effects, their analytical approaches often remain at the level of case interpretation and qualitative description, failing to systematically reveal the multi-dimensional structure of identity-driving factors and their relative weights. More importantly, existing analyses have not yet situated this cultural practice within a broader critical theoretical framework, thus failing to deeply uncover the inherent power dynamics: how do young people, through consuming, interpreting, and re-creating these media texts, practice a complex stance that both negotiates and constructs, distances from and embraces mainstream culture, thereby contesting for discursive authority over meaning and cultural identity?

To address this question, this study introduces "identity negotiation" as its core theoretical lens. This perspective originates from the de-essentialist interpretations of cultural identity by Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha. Hall (1996) profoundly argued that cultural identity is not rooted in a distant, essentialized past, but is constantly in the process of historical, cultural, and power-infused "play"; it is a process of "becoming" rather than "being." Bhabha's (1994) concepts of "hybridity" and the "third space" further reveal that the products of cultural contact are not simple binaries but new forms, neither this nor that, emerging through translation and negotiation. Applying this theoretical lens to the contemporary Chinese context reveals that youth identification with mythological animation is not passive acceptance or outright resistance, but rather a dynamic meaning-making game and identity practice. This manifests in three dimensions: at the value level, it is a conscious preference for and choice of "non-authoritarian" personal destinies (e.g., retreat to the mundane, worldly practice) over traditional authoritarian narratives (e.g., being canonized as a deity); at the emotional level, it involves projecting and resonating with one's own circumstances through highly metaphorical modern ethical dilemmas (e.g., conflict between individual dignity and collective interest); at the cultural-political level, it manifests as an inherent paradox of "techno-nationalism"—local pride stimulated by top-tier visual effects stands in tension with the barriers to understanding and market discounts faced by these works in cross-cultural communication (Wang et al., 2025). This series of negotiating practices echoes central concerns in media studies within the convergence culture era: audiences are no longer passive consumers of meaning but active producers

and circulators of it (Jenkins, 2006); media consumption itself is deeply embedded in the construction of power orders within the social world, becoming a social practice that demands serious consideration (Couldry, 2012).

Thus, the research objectives of this paper are clear: through systematic empirical methods, moving beyond phenomenological description and case interpretation, to address the following core questions: What are the core constitutive elements of the mythological hero images that shape youth cultural identity? What are the relative weights of these elements in driving the process of identity formation? How do the structural relationships between these elements specifically map onto the complex dynamics of identity negotiation and power games among youth in the cultural field? To this end, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, first conducting in-depth textual analysis of five representative films, including *Ne Zha* and *Legend of Deification*. Subsequently, through a large-sample questionnaire survey of 612 core youth audiences aged 18–35, and using exploratory factor analysis and entropy weight method, it seeks to scientifically identify and quantify six core constitutive elements – ethical resonance, non-authoritarian destiny, symbolic translation, techno-national pride, intergenerational dialogue, and psychological projection—and reveal their intrinsic structural correlations.

The theoretical value of this study lies in incorporating the indigenous cultural phenomenon of Chinese animated films into the global scholarly discourse of cultural studies and identity politics, constructing, based on empirical data, a model of youth cultural identity formation centred on "identity negotiation." Simultaneously, through the empirical operationalization and theoretical elevation of the concept of "techno-nationalism," it offers new analytical tools for studying the relationship between media technology, national identity, and youth culture in non-Western contexts. Its practical significance lies in clearly delineating the constitutive elements and their weights, providing actionable empirical evidence and strategic references for how the Chinese animation industry, on its path of dual innovation in content and technology, can more precisely connect with the spiritual world of youth, undertake the mission of cultural inheritance, and respond to the challenges of globalization.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: IDENTITY

### NEGOTIATION AND CULTURAL TRANSLATION IN THE POST-TRADITIONAL CONTEXT

The popularity of Chinese mythological animated films, represented by *Ne Zha* and *Legend of Deification*, is no mere instance of cultural nostalgia or technological victory. It profoundly reflects an ongoing identity negotiation practice carried out by Chinese youth in a rapidly changing society, utilizing mass media texts in the era of globalization and digitalization. To systematically explain the internal logic of this practice, this study integrates critical theoretical resources from cultural studies and media studies to construct an analytical framework centred on identity negotiation, cultural translation, techno-nationalism, and media practice, repositioning mythological animated films as a "third space" for youth to engage in cultural identity negotiation (Bhabha, 1994).

Any discussion of "youth cultural identity" must first address a fundamental question: What is identity? Traditional essentialist perspectives view cultural identity as something fixed, unchanging, and rooted in common ancestry, language, or history. However, Stuart Hall fundamentally challenged this notion. Hall (1996) argued profoundly that cultural identity is not a passively inherited legacy but an actively constructed product; it is not rooted in a distant, essentialized past but is constantly in the ongoing historical, cultural, and power-infused "play." Identity is a process of "becoming" rather than a state of "being." This conception of identity provides a crucial entry point for understanding the cultural identity of contemporary Chinese youth. Today's youth do not live in an era with clear cultural boundaries and stable value orders; instead, they must continuously piece together, select, and re-articulate their identities amidst the overlap and conflict of multiple discourses—tradition and modernity, local and global, authority and individual. Hall (1996) terms this process "identity negotiation": the subject is not passively accepting positions designated by social structure but actively constructs a narrative of "who I am" within the constraints of available discursive resources.

This insight resonates profoundly with Homi Bhabha's theory of "hybridity." Bhabha (1994) argues that the products of cultural contact are not simple binaries or unilateral assimilation, but new forms, neither this nor that, emerging in the "third space." Such hybridity is not a cultural flaw but a marker of cultural vitality and creativity. Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" is also illuminating—mimicry is never a perfect copy but produces an effect of "almost the

same, but not quite," creating a space for resistance and rewriting (Bhabha, 1994). The process by which Chinese animation learns from and surpasses Western technology constitutes a contemporary manifestation of Bhabha's mimicry strategy, where the industry produces an effect of 'almost the same, but not quite' to carve out a space for indigenous expression: it is neither submission to Western industrial standards nor a rigid adherence to indigenous traditions but opens up new expressive possibilities within the tension between mimicry and difference—a creative transformation that echoes Bhabha's notion of "almost the same, but not quite." Placing the aforementioned theoretical lens onto this study's object of analysis, we can clearly discern the intrinsic connection between Chinese mythological animated films and youth cultural identity: the reconstructed mythological heroes in these films are precisely the visual representations of hybrid identity. Ne Zha is both "Spiritual Pearl" and "Demon Pill," his identity violently oscillating between predetermined fate and individual resistance; Jiang Ziya's ethical struggle between "saving one person" and "saving all beings" is essentially a painful negotiation between two value systems. Young audiences' high identification with these heroic figures stems not merely from the impact of visual spectacle but more from seeing their own identity dilemmas metaphorically projected onto these characters.

If identity negotiation answers the question of "why youth need these texts," the next core question becomes: how do these texts make negotiation possible? This study argues that the key lies in "cultural translation." Homi Bhabha (1994) liberated translation from the purely linguistic realm, endowing it with cultural-political significance. In his view, translation is not a faithful copy of the original but a performative act, creating new meaning in the interstices between two cultures, two languages, two histories. The value of translation lies not in its similarity to the original but in its revelation that the original itself is incomplete and awaiting supplementation. This insight holds profound implications for understanding the creative logic of Chinese mythological animation: the mythological is not an inviolable canon, untouchable object but a field of meaning awaiting reactivation within a contemporary context. The bold rewriting of the classic plotline "cutting flesh to return to the father, cutting bone to return to the mother" in Ne Zha, the reevaluation of the "deification" narrative in Legend of Deification, the prequel imagination of folklore in White Snake—these creative practices are essentially

acting of cultural translation. They are not faithful reproductions of the mythological canon but "creative translations" based on the current social context and the emotional structures of youth. This translation occurs on at least three levels: translation at the symbolic level—visually modernizing traditional artefacts like the "Red Armillary Sash," "Wind Fire Wheels," and "Whip of Divine Punishment," giving them a contemporary industrial design aesthetic while retaining the essence of Eastern aesthetics. For the "next generation" youth, this modernized translation of traditional symbols precisely balances their nostalgia for traditional culture with their contemporary aesthetic needs (Sun & Zhang, 2025); translation at the narrative level—transforming transcendental concepts in classical mythology, such as "Heaven's Mandate" and "predestined calamity," into modern ethical propositions like "the conflict between individual dignity and collective interest" and "rebellion against prejudice and fate"; translation at the value level—shifting the ultimate destiny of heroes from the authoritarian narrative of "being canonized as deities" toward individual practices of "returning to the mundane" and "self-realization." Through this series of cultural translation acts, rigid cultural memories are "reactivated," becoming meaningful resources that can be perceived, articulated, and even contested by contemporary youth. The "cultural memory community" discussed by Yan et al. (2025) is premised precisely on successful cultural translation.

In existing cultural studies, the connection between nationalism and media technology is not a new topic. However, the "techno-national pride" evoked by Chinese mythological animated films exhibits a unique emotional structure and political significance, warranting dedicated theoretical treatment. The concept of "techno-nationalism" proposed in this study aims to capture the following phenomenon: young audiences' identification with domestic animation is deeply intertwined with their admiration for the top-tier visual industry standards presented in these films. This study operationalizes this phenomenon as "techno-national pride," one of the six core elements. Particle rendering, high-frame-rate action design, IMAX exclusive formats—these technical indicators are no longer merely professional jargon in industry news but have been transformed into the central signifiers of the "National Animation Renaissance" discourse on social media, becoming a significant source of collective efficacy for youth. Wang et al. (2025, February 14) astutely observed that the local pride stimulated by these technological breakthroughs

stands in clear tension with the comprehension barriers faced by these works in cross-cultural communication—Western audiences may be awestruck by the visual spectacle of *Ne Zha 2*, yet struggle to fully grasp the cultural lineage of the "Red Armillary Sash" or the philosophical implications of "Heavenly Dao." Techno-nationalism thus functions as a dual-edged sword: acting as a cohesive domestic force while simultaneously creating a 'cultural discount' for international audiences unfamiliar with the symbols. However, this paper advocates for a more dialectical understanding of techno-nationalism. It is not simply an expression of nationalist sentiment but an "affective anchor" through which youth affirm their cultural subjectivity in the global context. When youth express a sense of cultural efficacy through the advancement of domestic animation to global standards," they are expressing not only recognition of the technology but also a declaration of agency: "We can do it too." Within the unequal structure of global cultural flows, youth, who have long occupied a position of cultural receivers, gain a form of symbolic cultural empowerment through the rise of indigenous technological prowess—technological breakthroughs become more than just indicators of industrial progress; they serve as a medium for youth to reposition themselves and express cultural confidence in the global context (Appadurai, 1996).

The above discussion still carries a risk: reducing youth cultural identity solely to textual interpretation or psychological mechanisms. To overcome this limitation, this study introduces Nick Couldry's "media practice" theory as a necessary complement. Couldry (2012) advocates shifting research focus from "media texts" or "media institutions" towards "what people do with media." Media consumption is no longer viewed as an isolated act of meaning decoding but is repositioned as a social practice embedded in daily life, constrained by social norms, and possessing the potential to reproduce social order. Applying this perspective to this study reveals that youth identification with mythological animation extends far beyond the emotional resonance felt during the viewing moment. It manifests in practices such as buying tickets to show support, participating in discussions on social media, creating fan works, engaging in intergenerational discussions with parents, and even transforming the spiritual core of the films into action resources for tackling real-life challenges. Henry Jenkins's (2006) "participatory culture" theory offers a more optimistic interpretive framework for this. In the era of convergence culture, audiences are no longer

passive consumers of meaning but active producers, circulators, and community builders.

The two elements identified in this paper—"psychological projection" and "intergenerational dialogue"—are specific manifestations of participatory culture in the contemporary Chinese context. Young people do not merely "interpret" *Ne Zha*'s rebellious spirit; they project it into personal narratives for coping with workplace pressure or academic challenges; the intergenerational discussions sparked by the films, regardless of whether opinions align, are themselves a form of "cultural reproduction practice." Based on their respective life experiences, parents and children engage in differentiated interpretation and communication of the same mythological symbols; thus, traditional culture transforms from a static process of "acceptance" into a dynamic, negotiation-filled process of "living inheritance."

Notably, recent international scholarship on youth media practices has shifted from traditional media consumption towards more complex issues of identity negotiation and agency. Researchers are examining how algorithmic recommendations shape youth self-perception (Jylhä *et al.*, 2025), how social media literacy affects youth cultural participation (Cho *et al.*, 2024), and how digital technologies serve as tools for identity negotiation in cross-cultural contexts (Ye, 2025). In the Chinese context, the impact of the mediatized environment on youth identity formation also warrants attention (Wei, 2024). These studies provide important theoretical references for understanding the agency of youth in media consumption.

Synthesizing the theoretical resources above, this study proposes an integrated analytical framework, repositioning Chinese mythological animated films as a "third space" for youth to engage in cultural identity negotiation (Bhabha, 1994). This framework unfolds around four interconnected propositions: at the textual level, mythological animation is a practice of cultural translation of traditional resources, "reactivating" rigid cultural memories into meaningful resources available for negotiation through creative translation at the symbolic, narrative, and value levels; at the audience level, youth reception is a practice of identity negotiation, where they agentically select, recombine, or even resist the identity positions offered by the text based on their own life circumstances and emotional structures—the six constitutive elements to be identified in this paper are precisely the representational dimensions of this negotiation practice; at the socio-cultural level, the consumption

and reproduction of mythological animation constitutes a media practice, embedded in the fabric of youth daily life while possessing the potential to transform existing cultural power orders (Couldry, 2012); at the global context level, the rise of Chinese mythological animation and the formation of youth cultural identity must be understood within the tension between globalization and localization (Appadurai, 1996), with techno-nationalism being both a product of this tension and an emotional strategy for youth to navigate it. The following section will test, refine, and modify this analytical framework through systematic empirical research.

### 3. MYTH TRANSLATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION: EMPIRICAL IDENTIFICATION OF SIX ELEMENTS

To test the aforementioned theoretical framework, this study employed a mixed-methods design: first, conducting in-depth textual analysis of five landmark Chinese mythological animated films, followed by a questionnaire survey of 612 young audiences aged 18-35, using exploratory factor analysis and entropy weight method to identify and quantify the six core elements driving youth cultural identity formation. The selection of textual analysis objects followed purposive sampling principles, choosing five films released between 2015 and 2025 that hold landmark significance in terms of box office and youth cultural discourse: *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), *White Snake* (2019), *Ne Zha* (2019), *Legend of Deification* (2020), and *Ne Zha 2* (2025). The researchers developed a semi-structured coding manual focusing on three core dimensions: "narrative strategy," "visual symbols," and "value expression." Two coders independently completed the coding (Cohen's Kappa = 0.86), ensuring analytical reliability. The questionnaire survey strictly targeted Chinese youth aged 18-35, employing quota sampling with pre-controls for age, gender, and region based on the China Statistical Yearbook 2024, ultimately collecting 612 valid questionnaires (40% aged 18-25, 35% aged 26-30, 25% aged 31-35; 52% male, 48% female; 55% Eastern, 25% Central, 20% Western). The questionnaire primarily used a 5-point Likert scale. The survey included 31 items covering six constructs: ethical resonance, non-authoritarian destiny, symbolic translation, techno-national pride, intergenerational dialogue, and psychological projection. The overall Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient was 0.91, with subscale  $\alpha$  coefficients ranging from 0.79 to 0.88, indicating good reliability. Exploratory factor analysis (principal component analysis with varimax rotation) showed a KMO value of 0.89, and Bartlett's

test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2 = 5231.77$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), successfully extracting six factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, cumulatively explaining 68.7% of the total variance, with all item loadings exceeding 0.65. Based on this, the entropy weight method was used for objective weighting, and Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to reveal the intrinsic relationships among the elements. This study's examination of youth audiences draws on research on information-seeking behaviour and meaning construction in youth media studies, viewing youth as active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients (Besharat Mann, 2024).

#### 3.1. Ethical resonance

Among the six extracted factors, ethical resonance ranked highest with a weight of 0.254. Ethical resonance refers to the deep emotional identification and value alignment young audiences experience regarding the ethical dilemmas faced by heroic characters in the films, which are highly metaphorical of modern social situations (e.g., conflict between individual dignity and collective interest, rebellion against prejudice and fate). The statistical dominance of ethical resonance (0.254) suggests that youth legitimacy for heroes has moved from external 'Heaven's Mandate' to internal ethical negotiation that confirming that the value foundation of contemporary youth identification with mythological heroes has fundamentally shifted: from obedience to traditional authoritarian narratives towards deep engagement with and negotiation of modern individual ethical dilemmas. In traditional mythological narratives, the legitimacy of heroes often derived from transcendent sacred lineage or inescapable fate. *Ne Zha's* "Lotus Rebirth" and *Jiang Ziya's* "Mission to Deify" were essentially affirmations of and submissions to an external authoritative order. However, the reconstruction of *Ne Zha's* image in contemporary animation underwent a narrative discursive shift from "divinity" to "humanity," with heroic legitimacy gradually moving from external fate towards internal individual choice (Liu et al., 2025). The data reveal that contemporary youth show a distinct detachment from this set of authoritarian narratives. They identify with *Ne Zha* not because he is a "Spiritual Pearl reincarnate," but because his struggle between his "Demon Pill" identity and his own choices resonates deeply with their own internal conflicts when facing social norms; they resonate with *Jiang Ziya* not because of his "Deification" mission, but because his ethical dilemma between "saving one person" and "saving all beings" mirrors

their own painful trade-offs between collective demands and individual conscience. This corroborates Hall (1996)'s insight of "identity as becoming"—cultural identity is not a passively inherited legacy but an actively constructed product. Youth identification with mythological heroes is essentially an active process of self-value negotiation and affirmation. They do not passively accept values embedded in the text but agentially select, recombine, or even resist the identity positions offered by the text, based on their own life circumstances and emotional structures. This shift in value foundation also resonates profoundly with Bhabha's (1994) "third space" theory—the mechanism of ethical resonance itself constitutes a negotiating third space: where youth neither completely submit to traditional authority nor entirely break from cultural roots; within the framework of traditional myth, through emotional involvement in modern ethical dilemmas, they create a new identity narrative that connects to the past while pointing towards the future.

### **3.2. *Techno-national pride and symbolic translation***

Techno-national pride and symbolic translation ranked second and third, with weights of 0.198 and 0.172 respectively, together accounting for 0.370, jointly constituting the formal empowerment layer of identity formation. Techno-national pride refers to the cultural confidence and sense of industrial identity young audiences derive from recognizing the top-tier visual effects industry standards achieved by domestic animation. This element is the central signifier of the "National Animation Renaissance" discourse; technological spectacle itself has become an emotional anchor for youth to affirm their cultural subjectivity in the context of globalization. Symbolic translation refers to the process by which creators visually modernize and re-encode traditional mythological symbols (e.g., artefacts, costumes, decorative patterns), with successful translation not only lowering cultural comprehension barriers but also transforming traditional symbols into fashionable emblems possessing both Eastern aesthetic charm and modern beauty. The strong correlation between the two ( $r = 0.65$ ) reveals a key finding: young audiences' admiration for technology and appreciation for the innovative design of cultural symbols are highly integrated aesthetic experiences. In their eyes, "well-drawn" and "has Chinese characteristics" are not two independent dimensions but jointly constitute an overall recognition of the work's "industrial

aesthetics" quality. This finding reveals the successful psychological grounding of the dual innovation path in content and technology within the Chinese animation industry: technology no longer functions as an isolated aesthetic presentation but a sensory vehicle carrying cultural identity; tradition is no longer a rigid heritage burden but an aesthetic resource revitalized by modern technology. However, the tension this synergy reveals in international communication is equally noteworthy. Symbols with high cultural density may pose cognitive barriers for viewers lacking context, leading to a disconnect in the reception of "technological spectacle" and "cultural connotation." Wang Kunshuo et al. (2025) astutely observed that the local pride stimulated by these technological breakthroughs stands in clear tension with the comprehension barriers faced by these works in cross-cultural communication—Western audiences may be awestruck by the visual spectacle of Ne Zha, yet struggle to fully grasp the cultural lineage of the "Red Armillary Sash" or the philosophical implications of "Heavenly Dao." This is the inherent paradox of techno-nationalism: it is simultaneously an inward-looking cultural cohesive force and a potential outward-facing cultural discount. This finding imposes higher demands on the globalization strategy of domestic animation: technological breakthroughs and cultural translation must advance synergistically, without neglecting either. While pursuing visual industry standards, equal attention must be paid to the translatability and commensurability of cultural symbols, exploring an aesthetic language capable of carrying the depth of local culture while possessing cross-cultural communication potential (Gan, 2025). This paper advocates for a more dialectical understanding of techno-nationalism. It is not simply an expression of nationalist sentiment but an "affective anchor" through which youth affirm their cultural subjectivity in the global context. When young people take pride in "domestic animation reaching world-class standards," they are expressing not only recognition of the technology but also a declaration of agency: "We can do it too." Within the unequal structure of global cultural flows, youth, who have long occupied a position of cultural receivers, gain a form of symbolic cultural empowerment through the rise of indigenous technological prowess—technological breakthroughs become more than just indicators of industrial progress; they serve as a medium for youth to reposition themselves and express cultural confidence in the global context. This is the deeper meaning of techno-nationalism as an

emotional anchor: it is both an expression of cultural confidence and a practical path for reconstructing subjectivity in the global era (Appadurai, 1996).

### **3.4. Non-authoritarian destiny and psychological projection**

The elements of non-authoritarian destiny and psychological projection together constitute the value-practice orientation of identity formation. Non-authoritarian destiny (0.156) refers to narratives where the hero's ending departs from the traditional authoritarian narrative of "being canonized as a deity," turning instead towards retreating to the mundane world, embracing worldly life, or seeking individual value realization; psychological projection (0.120) refers to the tendency of audiences to map the spiritual core of the on-screen narrative onto their own real-life situations, potentially leading to real-world cognitive restructuring or behavioural changes. The strong correlations of these two elements with ethical resonance ( $r = 0.72$  and  $r = 0.58$ ) reveal a key mechanism: emotional resonance is not the endpoint but the starting point towards practical engagement. The significant weight of non-authoritarian destiny is the clearest narrative expression of youth values—the detachment from the traditional "deification" template and the preference for endings involving "returning to the mundane" or "self-realization" publicly declare a modern value system characterized by decentralization and emphasis on individual life experience. This is not merely narrative innovation but a declaration of cultural attitude. Psychological projection advances identity from screen viewing towards life practice. Youth transforming Ne Zha's rebellious spirit into personal narratives for coping with workplace pressure or academic challenges, and Jiang Ziya's ethical struggle into a rethinking of their own value priorities—this is precisely the 'implementation' link where identity negotiation moves from textual consumption to life practice. There exists a profound interactive reproductive relationship between mythological archetypes and youth culture: young people do not passively accept established mythological narratives but, through consumption and recreation, turn mythological resources into materials for constructing self-identity (Shen, 2025). This finding echoes Ma Mingyue's (2025) observation of *Ne Zha 2*—the film provides young people with a model of identity negotiation based on "harmony without uniformity" by deconstructing traditional mythological lineages and authoritarian narratives. The quantitative data from this study provide empirical support for this

assertion: the youth's preference for non-authoritarian endings stems from their deep identification with the modern ethical dilemmas set up in the films—it is precisely this prior emotional involvement that makes the non-authoritarian ending a natural value declaration. This finding corroborates the core insight of Jenkins' (2006) "participatory culture" theory: in the era of convergence culture, audiences are no longer passive consumers of meaning but active meaning-makers and practitioners (Jenkins, 2006). By transforming the spiritual core of films into resources for real-world action, youth complete the practical loop of cultural identity. Identity is not merely a psychological state but also a mode of practice.

### **3.4. Intergenerational dialogue**

Intergenerational dialogue, with a weight of 0.100, ranked sixth. Although its correlations with other elements are significantly positive, the coefficients are relatively low (ranging from 0.29 to 0.47). The lower statistical weight indicates that intergenerational dialogue serves as a secondary mechanism for diffusing identity rather than a primary driver. However, it is precisely this "processual" characteristic that reveals its unique value in cultural transmission. Intergenerational dialogue refers to the perceived efficacy and behavioural intention of film content triggering or promoting discussions and negotiations between young audiences and their parents regarding values and cultural understanding. The intergenerational discussions sparked by the films—regardless of differing opinions or whether consensus is reached—constitute a form of cultural reproduction practice. Based on their respective life experiences and knowledge reserves, parents and children engage in differentiated interpretation and communication of the same mythological symbols; thus, traditional culture transforms from a static process of "acceptance" into a dynamic, negotiation-filled process of "living inheritance." Bhabha (1994) noted that the value of cultural translation lies not in its similarity to the original but in its revelation that the original itself is incomplete and awaiting supplementation. Extending this insight to intergenerational dialogue: each intergenerational discussion is a "translation" and "supplementation" of traditional culture. Parents narrate the *Ne Zha* they understand, children narrate the *Ne Zha* they understand; the two narratives collide and blend in dialogue, ultimately producing a new version born of intergenerational negotiation. This is the key mechanism through which culture remains vibrant

and integrates into contemporary life. This finding holds significant implications for understanding cultural transmission within the family sphere: transmission is not one-way "indoctrination" but two-way "negotiation." Young people do not passively receive cultural heritage passed down by parents; rather, in dialogue with parents, they agentically select, reorganize, and even reconstruct this heritage. Mythological animated films can trigger intergenerational dialogue precisely because they provide a contestable text—a narrative space both familiar and unfamiliar, both traditional and modern, where audiences of different generations can find points of entry and spaces for expression.

### 3.5. Limitations of causal inference

This study strives for rigor in theoretical construction and empirical methods, yet several limitations remain that need to be addressed and transcended in future research. Limitations of causal inference with cross-sectional data—This study is primarily based on cross-sectional data, revealing the structural relationships and weight configurations among the six elements, but cannot establish strict causal relationships. For instance, the strong correlation between "ethical resonance" and "psychological projection" could indicate the former drives the latter, or that they mutually reinforce each other, or even the presence of unmeasured third variables influencing both. Future research could introduce longitudinal designs or experimental methods to more rigorously test causal pathways among the elements. Limitations in sample coverage—Although this study employed quota sampling with pre-controls for age, gender, and region based on the China Statistical Yearbook 2024, the sample was still primarily sourced from online survey platforms and social media recruitment, with the Eastern region accounting for over half (55%) of the sample, potentially underrepresenting non-netizen populations, younger youth groups, and youth in remote areas. Future research could explore diverse sampling strategies to expand sample coverage and test whether the findings of this study are consistent or differ across groups. Lack of analysis on subgroup differences—This study primarily focused on overall trends across the entire sample and did not systematically compare differences among various subgroups (e.g., different age groups, educational backgrounds, regions, viewing frequencies). Future research could introduce multi-group analysis to examine whether the weight configurations of the six elements differ significantly across groups and the possible socio-

cultural reasons behind these differences. Insufficient integration of quantitative models and qualitative thick description—This study employed a mixed-methods design, but qualitative textual analysis was primarily used for dimension refinement and scale development, lacking deep integration with quantitative data. Future research could combine the quantitative model with in-depth audience ethnography and focus group interviews to more delicately reveal the specific socio-cultural textures of identity formation, asking "why" questions—why do certain elements carry higher weight in certain groups? Why are certain associations more salient in certain contexts? Potential for cross-cultural comparative research—This study focuses on youth cultural identity in the Chinese context and has not yet been examined from a cross-cultural comparative perspective. Future research could introduce comparable works from other cultural contexts (e.g., mythological adaptations in Japanese animation, American animation) to compare the similarities and differences in mechanisms of youth identity formation across cultures, exploring the universality and particularity of cultural translation and technonationalism in cross-cultural communication.

In summary, based on empirical data, this study successfully identifies and quantifies the six core constitutive elements and their objective weight system in triggering youth cultural identity through Chinese mythological animated films. The results clearly depict a three-dimensional identity formation model with "ethical resonance" as the emotional-value core, "techno-national pride" and "symbolic translation" as the dual formal empowerment wings, "non-authoritarian destiny" and "psychological projection" as the value-practice orientation, and "intergenerational dialogue" as the social diffusion hub. The proposed model synthesizes these six dimensions into a cohesive negotiation framework, illustrating how youth agentically bridge on-screen heroism with off-screen identity—young people do not passively accept values embedded in the text but, through a series of agentic practices including emotional resonance, technological appreciation, symbolic interpretation, value selection, psychological projection, and intergenerational exchange, establish complex negotiated connections between the mythological heroes on screen and their own self-identity off screen.

## 4. CONCLUSION: MYTHOLOGICAL ANIMATION AS A CULTURAL LABORATORY

### 4.1. Youth cultural identity

The formation of youth cultural identity is a composite process involving the synergistic action of multiple elements. Exploratory factor analysis successfully extracted six factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, cumulatively explaining 68.7% of the total variance, empirically confirming the multi-dimensional factor structure of youth cultural identity formation. These six elements correspond to different aspects of identity negotiation practice: ethical resonance is the emotional dynamic of negotiation, non-authoritarian destiny is the value declaration of negotiation, symbolic translation is the meaningful resource for negotiation, techno-national pride is the emotional anchor of negotiation, intergenerational dialogue is the social field of negotiation, and psychological projection is the practical outlet of negotiation. This corroborates Hall's (1996) insight that identity is a matter of "becoming" rather than "being"—youth cultural identity is not a passive acceptance of given positions but an actively constructed product within the interplay of multiple discourses.

#### **4.2. Ethical resonance**

Ethical resonance ranks first among the six elements with a weight of 0.254, marking a fundamental shift in the value foundation of youth identity: from obedience to traditional authoritarian narratives towards deep engagement with and negotiation of modern individual ethical dilemmas. Young people identify with Ne Zha not because of his "divine birth" but because his rebellious spirit of "my destiny is determined by me, not Heaven" resonates deeply with their own internal struggles against social norms. This finding provides empirical support from the Chinese context for Bhabha's "third space" theory (Bhabha, 1994): mythological animation constitutes a cultural space where youth negotiate between tradition and modernity, authority and individuality. Driven by ethical resonance, youth transform traditional mythological resources into narrative resources for addressing their own identity anxieties, constructing cultural identity through negotiation between text and self.

#### **4.3. Techno-national pride and symbolic translation**

Techno-national pride and symbolic translation constitute the dual formal empowerment wings of identity formation. Together, they account for 0.370 of the weight and exhibit a strong correlation ( $r = 0.65$ ), jointly revealing the intrinsic connection between the industrial logic of the "National Animation Renaissance" and youth cultural identity.

Top-tier visual industry standards provide youth with tangible evidence of "hard power" that can be globally benchmarked; successful modernization and translation of traditional symbols achieve the "soft implantation" of cultural roots and aesthetic innovation. The synergy between the two indicates that youth identification with domestic animation is not a unidimensional structure of "content is king," but a deep fusion of technological hard power and cultural soft power. This finding not only empirically operationalizes the original concept of "techno-nationalism" but also offers a new analytical perspective for understanding how youth in non-Western countries affirm cultural subjectivity through media technology in the context of globalization (Appadurai, 1996). However, the tension this synergy reveals in international communication—the reception disconnects between technological spectacle and cultural connotation—is equally noteworthy, representing the inherent paradox of techno-nationalism.

#### **4.4. Non-authoritarian destiny and psychological projection**

Non-authoritarian destiny and psychological projection jointly point towards value practice, completing the loop of identity from screen viewing to life practice. The significant weight of non-authoritarian destiny (0.156) is the clearest narrative expression of youth values—the detachment from the traditional "deification" template and the preference for endings involving "returning to the mundane" or "self-realization" publicly declare a modern value system characterized by decentralization and emphasis on individual life experience. Psychological projection (0.120) advances identity from textual consumption towards life practice, with youth transforming the spiritual core of films into action resources for tackling real-world challenges. The strong correlations of these two elements with ethical resonance ( $r = 0.72$  and  $r = 0.58$ ) further reveal that emotional resonance is not the endpoint but the starting point towards practical engagement. Identity is not merely a psychological state but also a mode of practice—a specific confirmation of Jenkins' 'participatory culture' theory in the Chinese context (Jenkins, 2006), and also provides empirical support from the audience reception level for Bhabha's 'cultural translation' theory: youth, through negotiation between text and self, accomplish the creative transformation of traditional mythological resources (Bhabha, 1994).

#### **4.5. Intergenerational dialogue**

Intergenerational dialogue, as a processual element in the deepening and diffusion of identity, reveals the dynamic, negotiate nature of cultural transmission. Although the weight of intergenerational dialogue (0.100) is relatively low, its sociological significance should not be overlooked. The intergenerational discussions sparked by the films—regardless of differing opinions—constitute a form of cultural reproduction practice. Based on their respective life experiences, parents and children engage in differentiated interpretation and communication of the same mythological symbols; thus, traditional culture transforms from a static process of "acceptance" into a dynamic, negotiation-filled process of "living inheritance." This is a vivid manifestation at the intergenerational level of what Bhabha terms "cultural translation" (Bhabha, 1994): each intergenerational discussion is a "translation" and "supplementation" of traditional culture.

In summary, the findings of this study offer multiple insights for animation creation, cultural policy, and youth education. For animation creators, the reconstruction of mythological heroes should not stop at showcasing visual spectacle but must delve deeper into ethical issues capable of deeply resonating with the spiritual world of contemporary youth. For cultural policymakers, domestic animation is a key medium for the construction of youth cultural identity; policy should go beyond mere economic support, focusing on value guidance and the encouragement of cultural transmission. For youth educators, identity education should be a two-way "negotiation" rather than one-way "indoctrination," respecting the agency of youth in dialogue.

The rise of the "New Animation Chinese School," represented by phenomenal works such as *Ne Zha* and *Ne Zha 2*, owes its success to a profound "contemporary translation." By constructing ethical narratives that resonate with the spiritual world of contemporary youth, leveraging technological and aesthetic vehicles representing national industrial progress, and encouraging a value practice that is non-authoritarian and emphasizes individual agency, it has successfully transformed traditional cultural resources into identity resources that youth can resonate with, take pride in, and put into practice. The factor model and weight system provided in this paper not only offer an empirical basis rooted in audience psychology for understanding current cultural hotspots but also suggest a scientific and referential path for how Chinese animation can more effectively connect with

youth, transmit culture, and build confidence in the era of globalization and digital media. Ultimately, the vitality of culture lies in its capacity to engage in dialogue with each generation. Chinese mythological animation is playing an increasingly important and critical role in this dialogue—it serves as a translator between tradition and modernity, a negotiator between youth and culture, and a "cultural laboratory" where mythological heroes descend from their pedestals, enter the contemporary world, and resonate with the subjective experiences of the youth population. This symbiotic relationship between youth and culture is the underlying reason why contemporary domestic animation continues to resonate profoundly with young audiences (Si, 2025).

## 5. DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1. *Ethical resonance as the core of identity negotiation*

The empirical results of this study underscore a fundamental shift in the value foundation of contemporary Chinese youth. With "ethical resonance" carrying the highest statistical weight (0.254), it is evident that the legitimacy of mythological heroes has transitioned from traditional "divine enchantment" or submission to an external "Heaven's Mandate" toward the negotiation of modern individual ethics. This aligns with Stuart Hall's assertion that identity is a process of "becoming" rather than a fixed state of "being". Young audiences do not identify with figures like Ne Zha due to their supernatural origins, but rather because their struggle against predetermined fate mirrors the internal conflicts youth face when navigating modern social norms. Consequently, these animated texts function as a "third space" where tradition and modernity collide, allowing youth to agentically select and recombine cultural resources to solve contemporary identity anxieties.

### 5.2. *The paradox of techno-nationalism in global contexts*

The high weights of "techno-national pride" (0.198) and "symbolic translation" (0.172) reveal that technological prowess is no longer a mere industrial metric but a vital "affective anchor" for cultural subjectivity. The strong correlation between these two elements ( $r = 0.65$ ) suggests that for the "next generation," top-tier visual effects and the modernized aesthetic of traditional symbols are perceived as a unified expression of national "hard power" and "soft power". However, this "techno-

nationalism" harbours an inherent paradox: while it fosters deep internal cohesion and collective efficacy among domestic youth, it may create a "cultural discount" in international markets where viewers lack the contextual knowledge to decode high-density symbols like the "Red Armillary Sash". This finding necessitates a more dialectical globalization strategy that balances indigenous depth with cross-cultural commensurability.

### 5.3. From screen consumption to life practice

The interaction between "non-authoritarian destiny" and "psychological projection" completes the loop from media consumption to social practice. By preferring endings that emphasize "self-realization" and a "return to the mundane" over traditional canonization, youth publicly declare a decentralized value system. This practice extends beyond the cinema; as Nick Couldry's media practice theory suggests, youth transform the rebellious spirit of these heroes into action resources for tackling real-world challenges, such as workplace pressure or academic hurdles. Furthermore, "intergenerational dialogue," while carrying a lower weight (0.100),

serves as a critical processual hub where traditional culture is "supplemented" and "re-encoded" through family discussion, transforming a static heritage into a "living inheritance".

### 5.4. Recommendations for creators and policymakers

Based on these findings, it is recommended that animation creators move beyond the mere display of visual spectacle and focus on constructing ethical narratives that resonate with the complex spiritual world of contemporary youth. Successful "contemporary translation" requires heroes to descend from their pedestals and engage with modern dilemmas. For cultural policymakers, support should extend beyond economic incentives to fostering environments that encourage "two-way negotiation" in identity education rather than one-way "indoctrination". Finally, the industry must explore an aesthetic language that retains Eastern philosophical depth while lowering cognitive barriers for global audiences to mitigate the "cultural discount" effect of techno-nationalism.

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