



The Demon Child Churns the Sea: *Ne Zha 2*'s Modern Diversion From Traditional Folktales

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Abstract

The 2025 Chinese animated film *Ne Zha 2* is a contemporary reinterpretation of the traditional folktale that challenges the historical binaries of good and evil by reconstructing classic mythological figures as multifaceted antiheroes. The film criticizes social injustices and a larger system that has perpetuated discrimination against “demons,” who are equated with evil, exposing how prejudice and rigid classifications further alienation and violence. Thus, the film twists traditional cultural values to fit into a modern context of uncertainty and youth dissatisfaction with society’s rigidity and censorship, exemplified by the demon child protagonist Ne Zha and his rebellious journey of reconciling with his otherworldly nature to convince the Heavens of his benevolence. This endeavor subverts the original folktale, as the Heavens are constructed as antagonistic, described as an oppressive authority. Through breaking the traditional folktale, this paper argues that *Ne Zha 2* presents a social commentary on rebellion against injustice and forging one’s own destiny.

Introduction

Having passed \$2 billion at the global box office, *Ne Zha 2* (2025) is the world’s highest-grossing animated film of all time, achieving worldwide acclaim (Weaver). The director, who goes by Jiaozi (or “dumpling”), was originally a graduate with a bachelor’s degree in pharmacy who chose to pursue animation instead, being unemployed for six grueling years until the success of *Ne Zha 1* (Wu). Given his personal struggles along with the wider Chinese social context, Jiaozi wanted *Ne Zha 2* to be a movie about self-actualization, breaking prejudices, and forging one’s own destiny, a message that reflects both his own life and Chinese society.

Through the reinterpretation of traditional folktale characters, *Ne Zha 2* embodies the uprising of Chinese youth who are dissatisfied with the extreme social expectations and censorship that deny them the freedom of expression. The Guardian reporter Amy Hawkins states that the “storyline about battling injustice and powerful authorities may feel particularly apt” given the difficult economic times and high youth unemployment rates, causing an increase in “dissatisfaction with Chinese society” (Hawkins). Thus, this movie confronts the struggles of modern society while deploying familiar folk characters, establishing a sense of reassurance for the viewers as it conveys tragic yet timeless struggles in an imperfect society.

In August 2025, the movie was released in US theaters as an English dub, which also received positive reviews from Western critics. New York Times critic Maya Phillips reviewed the movie as “ambitious” and “Tolkien-esque” in its grand fantastical mythmaking (Phillips). Additionally, writer Qina Liu of the Seattle Times said that the Ne Zha universe “rivals the Marvel franchise in scale and spectacle” and will “heal your inner child” as it is an “empowering film that

makes you believe that you, too, can change your fate,” supporting the film’s success on conveying the main morals of rebelling against oppression and parental love (Liu). Furthermore, Washington Post critic Chris Klimek remarks that the film is “visually stunning,” yet “narratively opaque” for viewers unfamiliar with Chinese mythology (Klimek). Thus, the film is visually engaging in quality and elaborate in storytelling, yet its plot may be unclear to those unfamiliar with its cultural context, rendering it a mostly effective social commentary, but one that requires knowledge of Chinese culture for audiences to understand the social message, while not being overwhelmed by the detailed plot. Thus, this paper argues that this reinterpretation of the folktale is especially powerful in its social-cultural context and its extremely positive global reception.

Historical Background of Ne Zha

By considering the differences between the plots and social context, this paper seeks to explore how the film’s reinterpretation is effective as a modern social commentary.

The original Tang dynasty (618–907) folktale was introduced to China via Buddhist scriptures (Whyke and Mugica). After a thousand years of evolving the folktale, the most popular and well-known adaptation is the 1979 Shanghai film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, which tells of the reckless child Ne Zha who slays the Dragon Prince Ao Bing and is forced to commit suicide to atone, only to later be resurrected and ascend to godhood. Ne Zha’s rebellious attitude of seeking purpose and righteousness despite tribulations is a trademark of his heroic archetype.

The major change from the 1979 version to the 2025 *Ne Zha 2* is Jiaozi’s decision to have Ne Zha and Ao Bing become allies after reconciling their differences, demonstrating that the fault lies in the larger system that perpetuates the condemnation of the supposedly inferior demons. These demons range from the powerful imprisoned sea dragons of purgatory to more harmless animal shapeshifters, yet they are treated indiscriminately with Heaven’s operational massacres.

In *Oedipal God: The Chinese Nezha and His Indian Origins*, Meir Shahar writes that filial piety—the Confucian virtue that establishes obligations of a parent-child familial relationship, whereby children are to obey and respect their parents throughout life—is an ideology that is dramatically violated in the original folktale (ix). However, this unconformity is what Shahar argues made the folktale tremendously popular. After murdering Ao Bing, Ne Zha is ordered by his father to commit suicide to atone for his sin, which he does. Ne Zha is later resurrected and attempts patricide in anger, though he is unsuccessful due to the intervention of the Heavens. Connecting Sigmund Freud’s concepts from the Greek Oedipal play with the “hegemony of the Confucian ethics,” Shahar argues that the Chinese folktale overshadows the unconscious Oedipal drive to “masquerade as filial piety,” pointing to how deeply Confucianism is ingrained into culture and ethics (xiii). By looking through these lenses, this paper has argued how intrinsically Confucianist practices are ingrained in the folktales, presenting filial piety as one of its morals despite the unconforming characterization of Ne Zha’s murderous intent.



However, in *Ne Zha 2*, the ethics of filial piety are greatly altered in its father-son dynamic. Although both the folktale and the film present a struggle between Ne Zha and his father, who criticizes him for his misdemeanors and attempts to discipline him, it is soon made apparent in the film that his parents harbor modern society's parenting perspectives on acceptance. Instead of encouraging Ne Zha's suicide to preserve his father's dignity, his human parents are unafraid to brazenly challenge Heavenly Rule, outright accusing the gods of their misuse of authority and violent prejudice against the demons.

In contrast with the original folktale's undisputed submission to authority, *Ne Zha 2* reshapes traditional family dynamics through their acceptance and support of Ne Zha's demonic nature and his deeds, embodying the modern subversion of rigid and often overbearing power dynamics. This change from enforcing Confucian ethics to challenging injustice is symbolic of the film's themes of rebellion. This parenting dynamic diverges from the enforced filial piety of the original folktale, signalling a changing mindset in the methods of parenting. Thus, individuality is emphasized over conformity, fitting into the social commentary of the new generation's changing perspectives.

Ne Zha's Character Growth

Director Jiaozi's movies tell of the demon Ne Zha and his journey towards constructing his identity to be free from prejudice against supernaturals, who are deemed dangerous and malevolent. Along with his counterpart, the dragon Ao Bing, the two seek to prove their benevolence and heroism to win Heaven's favor, which will bring peace in the conflict between gods, mortals, and supernaturals, a war that destroys the characters' physical bodies in the battle depicted in *Ne Zha 1*. In the second film, the former enemies share Ne Zha's newly sculpted body and partake in the Xian trials, with the goal of ascending to godhood and being accepted by society despite being supernatural. Yet, they are confronted by the truth of Heaven's exploitation of their powers. In the end, Ne Zha and Ao Bing, with newly crafted physical bodies, fight against this injustice, leading the purgatory demons against the Heavenly Army, ultimately succeeding in driving them to retreat. With its tremendous popularity, the movie has become a significant landmark for the rise of Chinese animation, which has in turn sparked a cultural tide of national pride. The paradigm shift from the binary good-and-evil trope to multifaceted anti-heroes embodies the struggle for traditional moral ideals when each character is unique yet unable to express themselves beyond the titles which they are assigned, be it demons or mortals.

To that end, the protagonists' character growth is evident in their mottos. Notably, Ne Zha's anger in the first movie was towards the mistreatment he suffered, which was based solely on his demonic nature. His iconic line: "I determine my fate, not the heavens; demon or saint, I myself get to decide!" (我命由我不由天，是魔是仙，我自己说了算!) conveys his rage towards this binary prejudice. This enforces his determination to be the master of his own destiny, and that he should be judged not by his nature but by what he becomes. Essentially, he fights to prove that villains are a consequence of the hatred exhibited by humanity, not simply

from birth. However, in the second movie, Ne Zha reconciles with his demonic nature, no longer hiding from the fact of his identity. He instead declares, “I am a demon, so what!” (小爷是魔，那又如何!). This change in attitude signifies his maturity from acceptance and self-actualization, exhibiting his defiance against the misjudgment of society, and instead criticizing the pressure to be ashamed of his identity.

Modern Chinese Context

In modern society, mainland Chinese students and citizens have heavy expectations placed upon them, both academically and in terms of their behavior at home and in society. This has resulted in a phenomenon called “lying down” (躺平). The phrase describes being tired of the rigorous lifestyle that advancement in economic and technological development has imposed upon people, which has worsened psychological problems.

According to New York Times writer Elsie Chen, in recent years, Chinese society has undermined social welfare and human development in its fast-growing economy as citizens pursue the traditional standards of success, such as prestigious jobs in office buildings. Now, more people have begun to embrace a minimalist and slow-paced mindset to find their own rhythm amidst the relentless onslaught of rigorous striving. Interviewee Luo Huazhong says that this society is a hierarchy of respect and submission, in which many young people have seen through its hypocrisy and superficiality (Chen).

The traditional mindset of hoping to reap the full benefits of what you sow has begun to be deconstructed, and much of the population wants to focus on their happiness versus how they are seen in society, often as a mere number in the workforce. This relates to Ne Zha’s endeavor to be more than his inferior demonic nature and to forge his own destiny with his strengths, criticizing the rigidity of traditions that are no longer suitable for the present context.

Ne Zha’s Character Design Symbolism

Ne Zha is the embodiment of the flame element, his affinity apparent in his appearance and hot-headed attitude. Symbolically, fire is destructive and chaotic, mirroring his character and his impulsive conflicts, which link back to his childhood chastisement due to prejudice against his demonic nature. By juxtaposing his element with the usual disposition of innocent youth, the ever-changing nature of flames accentuates Ne Zha’s unpredictability and lays the foundation for his maturation and physical transformation to that of an adolescent. From a gremlin child often described as “ugly-cute,” Ne Zha’s childish appearance is highly expressive, and his actions are exaggerated, playing into his uncontrollability and carefree attitude. But once his body is resculpted after being destroyed in the previous battle, he is essentially reborn (see Fig 1). He becomes more conventionally attractive, with a defiant scowl upon a more mature anime-style visage and an athletic body—not only to appeal to audiences but also as a symbol of strength and purpose for headstrong youth.

This transformation embodies the Chinese beauty standards of having a small face, fair skin, and a skinny body, in contrast to the child version, which is less stereotypically beautiful.

This cultural shift in the perception of beauty is also present in the trending Labubu figurines, where the “ugly-cute” appearance aligns with Gen Z’s “unconventional and offbeat” individualistic style (D. Lau). In the traditional folktale, Ne Zha is seen as a hero through his selfless act of filial piety, killing himself to atone for his murder of Ao Bing, but the rewritten Ne Zha is characterized as not conforming to the oppression of the system in spirit and in physical appearance. This contrast thus renders him rebellious in both mind and body, challenging the mental perspective along with our interpretation of outward beauty.



Fig 1: Movie posters depicting Ne Zha in child (left) and adolescent form (right)

Such a dual image also links to flames as a light in the darkness, embodying his rebellion against the Heavens’ black-and-white condemnation of the demons. Thus, Ne Zha’s willingness to confront injustice is like that of a flame: untamed and calamitous if misguided, yet it can be a beacon of hope amidst flawed systems. This characterization contrasts with the folktale’s theme of obedience, where the original Ne Zha is coerced to atone for his killing of Ao Bing via suicide, and ultimately abides by the Heavenly Ruling after his ascension. *Ne Zha 2* portrays the titular character as rejecting the offer of a place among the Heavens, which is revealed to be corrupt and unethical, emphasizing morality over power, a social injustice that Ne Zha challenges. Subversively, Chinese pop culture works in a system of censorship, so people have to use creative methods to challenge authority.

Ao Bing’s Symbolism

Ne Zha and Ao Bing are crafted as foil characters, their design and characterization evident of this opposition. By contrast, Ao Bing is a water dragon symbolic of ice, his element

portrayed in his demeanor and appearance. Unlike Ne Zha, Ao Bing's human appearance is already that of an adolescent, placing them at an evident physical contrast in height and disposition. Ao Bing's attire is also much more formally traditional than the loose-fitting clothing of Ne Zha (see Fig 2). Ao Bing's white robes, symbolizing purity and innocence, are embroidered with blue dragon patterns, pointing at his supernatural heritage and the responsibility he bears, which is to move the Heavens and free the Dragon Clan from their underwater Hell.

In contrast, Ne Zha was raised as a human child, being imprisoned in his home by his parents, who had to shelter him from society due to his demonic nature and reckless, destructive behavior. Thus, having to uphold the extreme responsibility for the future of his clan, Ao Bing is the more traditionally heroic figure, in terms of elegance, duty, and conformity. Symbolically, in disposition, Ao Bing is sculpted to be the anti-villain; not in opposition for selfish reasons or in malice, but as the savior figure that strives to break free from oppression, while adhering to the laws of the Heavens.



Fig 2: Ao Bing Movie Advertisement Posters from China (left) and the US (right)

However, through befriending Ne Zha, in a major deviation from the original folktale, Ao Bing comes to no longer see morality as black-and-white or good-and-evil. Thus, Ao Bing is torn in internal conflict between his inherited duty and his own sense of justice, which manifests in

his protest and questioning of his purpose as he fights for self-liberation. The shift in perspective is brought on through the confrontation, and the foil characters are determined to riot against the injustice of the system itself. Symbolically, fire meets ice, not in lethal conflict as in the original folktale; rather they reconcile, metaphorically thawing the rigid distinction between rebellion and conformity to fight for a united cause.

Both in the folktale and the film, the juxtaposition of the physical appearances and dispositions of Ne Zha and Ao Bing emphasizes their opposition, but it is in the film that such conflict in their dynamic nature symbolizes reform against injustice, be it from perspectives of rebellion or attempted adherence, in which the former proves the most destructive yet effective. In *Ne Zha 2*, the two grow closer, having to temporarily share a new body until they ascend to godhood as their original forms were destroyed in the first film. This choice further emphasizes the difficulty of their cooperation, as Ne Zha has to be unconscious and let Ao Bing take over; otherwise, neither can control the corporeal vessel, and Ne Zha's demonic energy will cause them to be disqualified and persecuted. During their Xian trials, they are tasked with subduing three targets: a village of harmless marmot demons, inspired by the screaming marmot internet meme; a leopard shapeshifter training demons for the next trials; and the stone monster Shi Ji, who is worshipped as a minor deity in Chinese culture. During these tasks, the targets are attacked solely because of their demonic nature and are thus a threat to the Heavenly rule. This absolute persecution denotes the destructiveness of prejudice based on superficial labels, which gestures towards the reality of systemic oppression, where rebellion is often futile and destructive to the offender, as shown by how each demon was ultimately captured by the Heavenly Army.

Upon realizing that the Heavens' plan to exterminate all supernaturals, the Dragon Clan included, the demons in the cauldron overcome their previous opposition and, together, lead a revolution against the Heavenly Army. Thus, the power of unity can bring about radical change, though with severe consequences for both parties, as waging war against the Heavens warrants endless challenge, strife, and bloodshed.

As for Ao Bing's mottos, he is sophisticated in speech and rarely talks, but his poetic lines are just as meaningful as his fiery counterpart's. In the first film, he actively opposes Ne Zha's rebellion, telling him that his efforts are futile as he was "born a demon, a fate that has been sealed!" (你生来就是魔丸，这是命中注定!) This conveys how Ao Bing himself can't escape the persecution of his supernatural nature despite his moral refinement. However, in *Ne Zha 2*, Ao Bing is affected by Ne Zha's unyielding spirit and dares to defy the system that enforces their inferior labels. During the battle with the Heavenly Army, Ao Bing declares that the Heavens "claim to be a beacon of light for this world," but that they only "exploit the weaker and bring about chaos," and thus they are the "true demonic evils" (自诩照世明灯，干的却是恃强凌弱，祸乱人间的勾当，你们才是邪魔歪道). By associating "evil" with the traditionally "good" Heavens, Ao Bing redefines the word "demon" to no longer be an inherent label of the supernatural race and instead focuses on the corrupt actions to be an indicator of the demonic. Additionally, on par

with Ne Zha's iconic motto, Ao Bing also proclaims that "if there is no path ahead, I will forge my own!" (若前方无路，我就踏出一条路!). The ideology of individualism, of forging one's own path and straying from a predestined future, is a clear deviation from China's traditional socialism. By humanizing the traditional folktale villain, an elegant symbol of resistance is created, challenging the stereotypes of violent radical change by presenting the same argument through Ne Zha's fiery declarations.

Discreetly, there is a subversive implication of historical rebellion. Revolution, written as gémìng 革命, is defined as a "forceful overthrow of a despotic ruling house through a virtuous successor," which came to mean the "concept of envisioning fundamental political and social change" in the late Qing dynasty (Leese). This organized overthrowing of the original societal structure to replace it with constitution reflects Ne Zha's uprising against the Heavens, which conjures parallels between China's history of revolution to depose emperors and to former Chairman Mao Zedong's cultural revolution. To that end, the Maoist slogan was Rebellion Is Justified (造反有理) (清华大学东方红南下革命战斗队). The quote is based on the Marxist philosophy, which formed the basis for the practice of communism, which is the goal to create a classless socioeconomic order of common ownership of the means of production in a country. Thus, the subversive social critique of Ne Zha's rebellion is not only against oppressive ruling of the Heavens, interpreted as sovereignty, but also points to reforms from within, as the structural prejudice is at fault for prolonging mistreatment.

The Significance of the Film's Climax

The pivotal point of the movie is just before the final battle, where Ne Zha realizes that the Heavens still seek to massacre the demon races despite claiming to guide them onto the divine path of recultivation, his moment of catharsis manifested in physical destruction and reconstruction. The scene starts with a long shot of Ne Zha standing alone in the fiery cauldron, rendered immobile by the curse of a god who unorthodoxly cultivates demons into elixirs to boost the spiritual power of his sect. The music ceases, bestowing a dreary and apprehensive atmosphere that intensifies the hopelessness of the situation, in which Ne Zha, Ao Bing, and the captured Dragon Clan can only await their death.

Then, the silence is disrupted by Ne Zha's escalating, shaking breathing and cries of torment as he strains against the cursed thorns puncturing his body, slicing cuts that glow gold against the crimson flames of the cauldron. Extreme close-ups of his arms and his face, which have contorted, reveal Ne Zha's demonic nature. This stylistic choice uses the versatility of 3D animation to create exaggerated expressions, allowing Ne Zha's all-consuming rage to be visualized, contrasting against his usual childish grin and carefree, sassy nature. The stylistic change makes Ne Zha seem less human, thus indicating to the viewers his loss of control and caution, intensifying the sense of danger.

The camera then turns to Ao Bing (also paralyzed by the thorn curse), who shouts at the rage-blinded Ne Zha to stop his self-destruction, but to no avail. The music starts again, in a low, echoing crescendo as Ne Zha tears away from the thorns, dissipating into the air, then the

music cuts to silence. In this way, the music mirrors Ne Zha's impulse of self-destruction, leading the audience to think he is dead. The camera pans to the shocked faces of Ao Bing and the Dragon Clan, before slicing back to Ne Zha, the pieces of his body swirling together to create his new adolescent form. With a deafening shout, the music starts once more, a Western orchestra of string ensemble and brass, menacingly low and rumbling in its build-up. This combination of Eastern and Western music creates a balance between softer, more harmonious traditional Chinese instruments and sonorous orchestral grandeur to heighten the dramatic and solemn atmosphere.

Yet, despite the dramatic and rage-fueled disposition of Ne Zha in his original child form, he is now solemn and calm, signifying that the transformation matured him both physically and mentally. This new identity, formed from self-destruction and purpose, symbolizes Ne Zha's rebellion against accepting the unjust will of the Gods, forging his own path that allowed him the freedom of movement—interpreted as autonomy—and the power to break free from the confines of the cauldron. The cauldron itself symbolizes the overbearing control of absolute authority, trapping individuals in the system, making them complacent during the misuse of power and status, often disguised as adherence to the regulations of “justice.” After all, the rules are made by those in power, emphasized by the overbearing influence of the Gods.

Evidently, the traditional Confucian philosophy of the Doctrine of the Mean (zhōng yōng zhī dào 中庸之道), written in around 450-500 BCE, is blatantly opposed. In essence, the doctrine is a method of accepting and conforming to social norms to create constant harmony by being in the middle (zhōng 中) (Academy of Chinese Studies). For example, “the superior man is harmonious yet different, the villain is the same but not harmonious” (君子和而異，小人同而不和). This places those who adhere to social rules at a respectable position while condemning protestors, emphasizing compliance and passivity. Ne Zha's tale rebels against this passive acceptance, and signals a rise in China's soft power by combining modern perspectives with traditional folktales, preserving traditional culture by situating it in modern relevance. More indirectly, this ties into implications on the matter of China's governance as well.

In China's modern social context, this subversive rebellion against authority can also be viewed as pushing against limits on individual liberty. Dubbed the “Great Firewall of China,” online content is monitored by government authorities, complying with laws that require deletion of “sensitive” content, including information that opposes the “Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) official narrative” (Hawkins). The heavy employment of censorship is to “maintain its monopoly on political legitimacy” and shape behavior through “public opinion guidance” to reduce “foreign ‘ideological contagion’ of liberal democracy” and limits discussions of “local government corruption and mismanagement” (Green et al.). For this film, with overseas collaboration with Western studios, to meet the requirements of the public screening permit while displaying such outwardly rebellious demonstrations is a powerful and interesting phenomenon.

Regarding the film, with this newfound freedom and rebellious purpose, Ne Zha clasps Ao Bing's hand, disintegrating the thorns of the latter's curse. The medium-wide shot from a low angle emphasizes the flourish of Ao Bing's clothing and illuminates their silhouette against the surrounding flames. This choice alters the symbolic meaning of the fire: originally of destruction and ruin, yet capable of completing Ne Zha's new physical form and able to free Ao Bing. Thus, the flames symbolize rebirth and unity, where strength comes from their rebellion.

The camera then cuts from a high-angle to a low-angle shot, reinforcing the significance of this pivotal moment. The high-angle shot creates a feeling of inferiority as the viewer looks down upon the subjects, evoking a sense of powerlessness as they must now strain against the confines of both the cauldron and the rule of the Gods—a notion that has never been explicitly challenged or prevailed before.

The cut to the low-angle shot reveals the golden flames at the top of the cauldron, which indicates that they've got a long way to go in a fight that they may not be able to succeed in, aligned with the visual perspective of the main characters. This shot signals strength and superiority, paired in contrast with the high-angle shot. However, this shot angle appears interestingly ironic, as it empowers the characters to seek purpose and strength rather than the usual adoption of this technique to elicit dread and a foreboding sensation.

Additionally, the contrast of light emphasizes the dual symbolic meanings of the flames. Light is often associated with hope, good, and order—a divine paradoxical element that prompts the viewer to consider the perspectives of the Gods and of the main characters. To the Gods, the demons are uncontrollable and have the potential to wreak havoc and thus must be restrained or eliminated; to Ne Zha, the black-and-white binary categorization of good and evil is unjust and abhorrent in a flawed system he will no longer abide by. Thus, the golden glow of the flames indicates the conflicting values of their opposition, which are similar in core yet executed in drastically different ways. The Gods are to confront the darkness in their ways, and the demons are to search for light in the oppressive darkness.

Ultimately, *Ne Zha 2* presents a traditional folktale through modern lens, bringing back culture in a novel and inspiring film.

Between Subversive Critique and National Pride

With an extraordinary audience reception for the film, many critics have noted the rising cultural pride of China's soft power. Writing on the film, Afra Wang for the ChinaTalk newsletter has claimed that “national destiny”—a country's progression—“contextualizes current struggles within a larger, ultimately triumphant story,” resulting in a “therapeutic” response (Wang). The familiar characters and the changes between the traditional folktale and the modern film are essential to investigating the social context and the reasons behind such a reinterpretation. The focus has shifted from character versus character conflicts to character versus society struggles, pointing to the real-world humanitarian crisis of the Chinese diaspora.

According to reporter Sheng Ding, the new generation of the Chinese diaspora, especially when influenced by a Western upbringing, is “unbound by the censorship and



surveillance” of China’s social networks, becoming “vocal critics of the Chinese communist government,” particularly on its “lack of transparent governance, respect for democracy and commitment to human rights” (Ding). The new generation is more politically educated and engaged, in comparison to earlier generations, thus placing more emphasis on identities and humanitarian values, along with the bravery to speak out against social injustice that would otherwise be censored. Recently, during the White Paper protests against China’s zero-Covid policy, which were the “largest protests since the 1989 pro-democracy Tiananmen Square demonstrations,” where participants expressed dissatisfaction against the pandemic restrictions and also with the Chinese regime’s censorship, holding up blank sheets of paper in mockery (J. Lau). *Ne Zha 2*’s emphasis on challenging oppressive authority may also be viewed as implying this dissatisfaction, communicated through the iconic demon child’s opposition against the Heavens, or authority. Thus, the movie has drawn inspiration from traditional Chinese culture, while challenging the stereotypical good-and-evil binary to retell an engaging story that Gen Z (called “00后” or “after 00s” in mainland China) audiences can empathize with.

Essentially, the film evokes a social surge of national pride that has imbued the retelling of the traditional folktale with new meanings of social rebellion against censorship and strict regimes, while simultaneously being a forefront of China’s soft power.



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