



From Unconsciousness to Consciousness: Chinese Children's Rights Awareness in the Evolution of Nezha's Image

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How to cite this paper: Sijia Yu. (2023) From Unconsciousness to Consciousness: Chinese Children's Rights Awareness in the Evolution of Nezha's Image. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 7(9), 1704-1713.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2023.09.001

Received: July 31, 2023
Accepted: August 30, 2023
Published: September 28, 2023

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Abstract

Nezha originated in Buddhism and evolved into a character within the pantheon of Chinese folklore with the Sinicization of Buddhism in China. It transformed religious texts into classical literary texts in the novel *The Investiture of the Gods*, written in the Ming dynasty. After 1978, modern artistic works emerged featuring Nezha as the central character. These works innovated upon and reinterpreted the Nezha's image established in *The Investiture of the Gods*. The ancient depiction of Nezha's image suggests the emergence of a collective unconsciousness characterized by an unconscious awareness of children's rights, constrained within traditional filial and ethical norms. In contrast, the contemporary portrayal of Nezha's image in creative works reflects a conscious awareness of children's rights within society. The evolution of Nezha's image in these four literary works signifies progress in the awareness of children's rights in modern Chinese society, demonstrating the transition from an unconscious to a conscious stage.

Keywords

Nezha's image, Children's rights, *The Investiture of the Gods*, Children's literature

1. Introduction

Children's rights encompass a unique set of entitlements intrinsically tied to children's distinct physical and psychological needs, setting them apart from the rights accorded to adults. According to the law, children have the entitlement to survival, development, freedom, equality, and protection from any infringements upon these rights. In ancient China, the prevailing traditional culture, deeply rooted in Confucianism, positioned children as subservient entities within complex ethical relationships, thereby diminishing their moral and legal standing (Wang, 2018, p. 40). The concept of "foolish filial piety (愚孝)" and the "twenty-four acts of filial piety (二十四孝)" advocated by Confucianism run counter to the principles of children's rights. Furthermore, there exist celebrated classic Confucian narratives like "Wang Xiang Lying on the Ice (王祥卧冰)", "Guo Ju Burying His Son (郭巨埋儿)" and "Kong Rong Giving up His Pear (孔融让梨)", all of which exemplify a disregard for the rights of the child. Zhang Yang argues that traditional Chinese culture has not fostered the concept of children's rights nor contemplated the moral and legal standing of children (Zhang, 2017).

Similarly, Yin Tao asserts that the patriarchal system inherent in traditional Chinese society lacks a foundation of equality and does not accommodate the discourse of rights (Yin, 2014). Wang Xuemei, a prominent Chinese expert in children's rights research, suggests that despite China's longstanding tradition of cherishing children, their self-awareness and independent identities have been systematically ignored, rendering them incapable of possessing corresponding rights as autonomous individuals (Wang, 2018, p. 40). Consequently, scholars widely acknowl-

edge that the conceptual basis for children's rights in China appears notably fragile when examining explicit cultural manifestations. Before China's integration into the global discourse on human rights, there seemed to be a shortage of awareness concerning children's rights.

Nezha (哪吒) is a widely recognized mythological figure in Chinese folklore and a classic children's image in Chinese literature. Initially depicted as a fierce and evil guardian deity in Buddhism, Nezha transformed from a religious icon to a literary character by introducing Buddhism to China. Its iconic image was firmly established in the novel *The Investiture of the Gods* (封神演义)¹, written in the late 16th to early 17th centuries by Xu Zhonglin (许仲琳). After 1978, China witnessed the emergence of numerous artistic works featuring Nezha as the central character. These works include notable examples such as the animated film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (哪吒闹海, 1979), the animated series *The Legend of Nezha* (哪吒传奇, 2003), the animated films *I Am Nezha* (我是哪吒, 2018), and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (哪吒之魔童降世, 2019). The image of Nezha in these works reveals innovative reinterpretations rooted in the foundational image of Nezha found in *The Investiture of the Gods*.

In the works mentioned above, Nezha's image consistently embodies a pioneering spirit, providing a powerful critique of China's traditional culture, notably the Confucian emphasis on filial piety and its historical neglect and oppression of children, the ethical reflection provided by Nezha's text has attracted the attention of some scholars. According to Zhang Yaotian, the Nezha mythology reflects ancient Chinese social ethics and the concept of children's rights. The patricide and rebellion motifs in the Nezha mythology, which in its historical context mirrored underlying ethical problems and ambitions for autonomy within the framework of filial piety, struck a chord with society (Zhang, 2020). Xu Lu argues that the archetype of patricide in the Nezha mythology, as presented in *The Investiture of the Gods*, has been softened in modern children's animated works, fostering harmonious and warm father-son relationships that align more closely with Confucian ethics (Xu, 2020). While these studies have analyzed Nezha's themes through the lens of the patricide complex, they have yet to fully explore the perspective of societal awareness regarding children's rights.

On the other hand, in sociological research on children's rights, although the research value of Nezha's image has been indirectly recognized, it has not received in-depth attention. For example, taking into account the artistic forms used in the modern image of Nezha, as articulated by Han Jiazheng and Xie Wei, the portrayal of children in films fundamentally constitutes a rhetorical choice and a discourse strategy employed by the filmmaker to convey their cinematic expression (Han & Xie, 2019). In addition, although the works relating to Nezha have not become a research topic on children's rights awareness, other literary works have entered the field of research on children's rights awareness, and these studies consider the rewriting of literature as evidence of changes in rights awareness. For example, Liu Mingxuan used a translation edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in 1940 as an example to examine the rewriting of children's literature from the perspective of children during the Republic of China and the changes in children's rights awareness behind it (Liu, 2023), and Wang Shuainai examined the social and cultural psychology and child-centered concepts of the 21st century through the retelling of "Chinese style" original picture books (Wang, 2023). Through the sociology of literature, these studies provide a new perspective on children's rights.

Indeed, the creation and evolution of Nezha's image represent conscious or subconscious choices made by their creators, influenced by covert societal and historical factors. In Nezha's image's evolution, one can discern the interplay and transformation of societal ethical concepts, reflecting the evolving awareness of children's rights. These texts shed light on societal phenomena that deviate from the traditionally accepted Chinese perception of children's rights consciousness. Hence, this study approaches the portrayal of Nezha's image from the perspective of children's rights, employing an analysis that draws upon literature, sociology, and psychology. In doing so, it aims to reexamine children's rights awareness within ancient and modern Chinese societies. By examining the evolution of Nezha's image across literary and artistic works from antiquity to the present day, this research sheds light on the latent and unconscious origins of children's rights within ancient society and their subsequent mature and reasoned portrayal in 20th-century cinematic productions.

2. Ancient Nezha's Image: The Unconscious Sprouting of Children's Rights Awareness in China

Psychoanalytic theory posits that literature and art inadvertently reveal the unconscious aspects of both individuals and societal groups. It suggests that literature unveils latent desires suppressed, rejected, or opposed by conscious awareness. Once these desires find an outlet, they manifest themselves in forms deemed acceptable and

praiseworthy by society (Lu, 1988, pp. 16-19). In the context of the traditional Confucian ethical order's suppression, literature became a means to release and express the unconscious desires of the populace. Nezha's image within *The Investiture of the Gods* emerged as a product of the collective unconscious of civil society during the Ming Dynasty, which was influenced by the prevailing Buddhist and Taoist ideologies, indirectly giving rise to a developing awareness of children's rights. The sociocultural implications embedded within Nezha's image in *The Investiture of the Gods* constitute a pivotal national cultural foundation for modern China to embrace the global awareness of children's rights. The creative efforts also represent a constructive practice through which traditional Chinese society ventured into acknowledging and understanding the concept of children's rights.

Nezha (known as Nalakūbala or Nalakuvera in Sanskrit) originates in Indian Buddhism. In its initial incarnation, Nezha lacked childlike qualities despite being the prince of Vaiśravaṇa. Instead, Nezha was portrayed as a guardian deity with three heads, six arms, a fierce countenance, and unwavering loyalty. Indian Buddhism made its way to China during the Western Han Dynasty (around 2 BC to 1 AD). It was during this period that the indigenous Daoist reverence for Li Jing (李靖), a prominent military figure of the early Tang Dynasty, and the Buddhist veneration of Vaiśravaṇa merged. This natural convergence led to the reimagining of Nezha as the son of Li Jing (Liu, 2009). With a father figure based on an actual historical male figure, Nezha's image started to take on the context of a child, and his narratives began to align more closely with traditional Chinese family ethics.

During the Song and Ming Dynasties (from the mid-late 10th century to the mid-17th century), Nezha underwent a significant transformation. Representative literary works from this era that depicted Nezha's image include *The Complete Collection of Three Religions' Origins and Gods Investigations* (三教源流搜神大全) (Anonymous, 2012), *Journey to the West* (西游记) (Wu, 1987), and *The Investiture of the Gods* (Xu, 1980). Among these works, *The Investiture of the Gods* is the most recent composition, offering a more detailed portrayal of Nezha's image, particularly his childlike attributes. Within the narrative of *The Investiture of the Gods*, there is a notable emphasis on Nezha's concern for the rights related to the survival and protection of children, even if this awareness is not explicitly articulated.

Firstly, in *The Investiture of the Gods*, the image of Nezha is mischievous, driven by adventurous pursuits of happiness, and lacking a clear sense of right and wrong. It is evident in an incident where Nezha accidentally caused the deaths of Li Gen (李艮), a sea patrol officer, and Ao Bing (敖丙), the third son of the East Sea Dragon King, while playing in the water (Xu, 1980, pp. 113-118). Notably, Nezha did not perceive any fault on his part for these unintended consequences. This mischievous aspect of Nezha's character underscores the work's departure from traditional expectations that children should prematurely conform to adult norms. Instead, it presents children as a distinct group separate from adults. This differentiation is essential for recognizing and protecting children's rights, as only when children are acknowledged as a unique and separate entity can their rights be genuinely respected.

Secondly, concerning the portrayal of Nezha's family, *The Investiture of the Gods* provides insight into the traditional Chinese family dynamics characterized by a stern father and a loving mother. It unveils the reality beneath this outwardly harmonious structure, exposing the nuanced complexities within Confucian ethical relationships, where husbands are expected to guide their wives and fathers teach their sons. In this framework, fathers often appear less empathetic as they strive to maintain their privileged status. In contrast, mothers, as embodiments of consanguineous affection, assume a distinct role from fathers and contribute to the facade of familial harmony (Li, 2007). Within the narratives centered on Nezha's family relationships, Lady Yin (殷夫人) demonstrates care for Nezha, dictated primarily by Li Jing's will, which does not genuinely protect or nurture Nezha (Xu, 1980, pp. 118-120). When Nezha makes a mistake and faces denunciation from an adversary with whom he has a severe conflict, Li Jing exhibits no hesitation in delivering Nezha to his enemy, allowing him to be subjected to any form of punishment, even if it means risking Nezha's life (Xu, 1980, p. 128). *The Investiture of the Gods* thus serves as a revealing lens through which we witness how the Confucian father-son ethic can trample on children's right to life. The narrative highlights concerns surrounding children's rights to life and protection by depicting traditional Confucian family ethics.

Finally, the climactic moment in the texts relating to Nezha in *The Investiture of the Gods* centers around returning the bones and the flesh to the parents (Xu, 1980, p. 132). Nezha's mischievous nature, blurred sense of right and wrong, and somewhat cruel disposition led to the accidental killing of Li Gen and others, resulting in retribution from the East Sea Dragon King and other adversaries. In an act to protect his parents and others and, most importantly, to fulfill his filial duty, Nezha takes his own life. He goes as far as to "cut open his belly, pluck out his intes-

tines, remove the flesh from his bones, and return it to his parents, not to burden them"² (Xu, 1980, p. 131). This act symbolizes the deconstruction of traditional blood relations. This plot underscores a crucial aspect of conventional Confucian culture: children were not considered independent individuals. According to Confucian filial piety, "the body and skin were received from one's parents"³ (Qu, 2011), and children were obligated to repay their parents for granting them life through absolute obedience and sacrifice "when the child brings disaster, burdening the parents, how can their hearts find peace?"⁴ (Xu, 1980, p. 131). According to Confucian values, filial piety often precedes other considerations, resulting in the subordination of children's rights to ethical concerns. Nezha's self-immolation serves as a protest against this unyielding demand for blind obedience. It represents a liberation from the constraints of Confucian ethics disguised as filial piety and challenges the theoretical foundation that suppresses children's rights.

In ancient societies, resources that countered the Confucian inhibition of children's rights were drawn from both Taoism and Buddhism, as well as a distinct collective subconscious characterized by a Chinese-style inclination towards patricide. This collective unconscious resonated with the core principles of Daoism and Buddhism, concurrently serving as a form of resistance to the prevailing dominance of the Confucian ethical order. Within Buddhist doctrine, the precept of equality among all sentient beings starkly contrasted the hierarchical constructs inherent in Confucianism. Furthermore, Taoism's foundational principles often exhibited disregard for and sometimes even disdain for the rigidly tiered ethical hierarchy espoused by Confucianism. Inspired by the teachings of Buddhism and Taoism, this theological resistance found its literary expression in works imbued with religious undertones.

Simultaneously, in line with Malinowski's belief that strict discipline within the family could breed resentment (Shi, 2000, p.196), the stringent ethical order of Confucianism fostered a prevailing sentiment of "paternal reverence" in Chinese folklore (Liu, 2006). This reverence also gave rise to the potential for "paternal resentment". Song Xianghong, a scholar of modern Chinese literature, suggests that when examining the mythological roots of the patricide complex in modern literature, this "paternal resentment" can trace its origins back to ancient Chinese mythology, with "Yi Shooting Down Nine Suns (羿射九日)" serving as a vivid example of this collective subconscious (Song, 2003). This sentiment "reflects an innate impulse that, much like reason and volition, seeks to forge its path" (Ye, 1987, p. 111), providing a psychological outlet to alleviate subconscious feelings of frustration and oppression stemming from the rigid hierarchical social structure and ethical order. Against the backdrop of the ethical and moral standards of the Ming Dynasty rooted in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, this collective unconsciousness evolved into a challenge to the unquestioning obedience to paternal authority, reflecting on the status of children within Confucian ethics. The introduction of Taoism and Buddhism provided an expressive platform for this collective unconscious, culminating in its thematic embodiment in the character of Nezha. In the subsequent plot of Nezha's suicide in *The Investiture of the Gods*, the reborn Nezha disavowed his filial bond with Li Jing and exacted vengeance against his father without moral restraint, committing patricide. However, this patricide remained predicated on the foundational principles of Confucian filial piety, meaning it could not be allowed or committed if Nezha were still considered Li Jing's son in the ethical sense. This plot sets it apart from archetypal patricides such as those seen in the narratives of Oedipus and Hamlet. As Zhang Dan initially offers a comparison of Nezha and Oedipus in her research on the balance of the patricide structure between China and the West (Zhang, 2020), the analysis of Nezha's image provides more precise insights into the organic evolution of patricide literature in China. It serves as compelling evidence for the originality of this theme within the Chinese literary tradition. Nezha's particular form of patricide is intertwined with the logic of paternal reverence, emphasizing themes of human relations, justice, and rights rather than predestined outcomes or prophetic determinism. Nezha's patricide alleviated the prevailing tensions within society that had arisen under the stifling grip of filial piety, all while refraining from dismantling the underlying construct of filial devotion itself, allowing such rebellion to be accepted by the general public consciousness.

In summary, Nezha's image in *The Investiture of the Gods*, infused with elements of Buddhism and Taoism, through its depiction of the mischievous urchin, contemplation of familial constructs, and exposition of the pervasive lack of children's rights in ancient Chinese society, orchestrates a multi-layered critique of traditional Chinese cultural paradigms, particularly the Confucian principles of filial piety. This critical perspective recognizes the intrinsic worth of children as individual entities. Nezha, within this context, emerges as a quintessential prototype of a patricidal figure shaped by the collective subconscious that arises from the suppression of paternal sentiments, embodying a distinctly Chinese interpretation of patricidal themes. Furthermore, Nezha serves as a form of spiritual

catharsis within the broader ambiance of a rigid filial piety culture.

However, it's crucial to clarify that despite these considerations, Nezha's image, marked by solid streaks of defiance, is not the central thematic focus of *The Investiture of the Gods*. Instead, the perspective it offers on children's rights remains fragmented. Objectively speaking, *The Investiture of the Gods* effectively introduces a new viewpoint on children's rights within traditional literature, encapsulating a nascent semblance of children's rights awareness latent within the collective psyche of Chinese society, albeit manifesting unconsciously and incompletely. This work suggests that the foundational concept of children's rights in ancient China may not have been as weak as previously believed. Before integration into the global human rights movement, Chinese society was already undergoing a self-developing awareness of children's rights. While integrating into the global human rights movement, Chinese culture did not merely passively adopt the concept of children's rights but actively engaged in its development.

3. Modern Nezha's Image: The Conscious Development of Children's Rights Awareness in China

Since the publication of *The Investiture of the Gods*, Chinese children's literature has witnessed a surge in Nezha-centric adaptations over the past forty years. These adaptations include the animated film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979, produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio (上海美术电影制片厂)), the animated series *The Legend of Nezha* (2003, produced by China International Television Corporation (中国国际电视总公司)), and the animated films *I Am Nezha* (2018, directed by Shu Zhan (舒展)) and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019, directed by Jiaozi (饺子)). Influenced by the broader sociocultural landscape and catering to the psychological expectations of the consumer base, these works have unfolded a contemporary transformation of Nezha's image. The modern adaptations of the Nezha character serve as a testament to the evolving perceptions of children's rights within modern Chinese society. These adaptations reflect the changing attitudes of individuals toward children's rights awareness.

First and foremost, among these four works, Nezha's appearance underwent a pronounced process of chylification. For example, his bodily proportions increasingly gravitated towards the characteristics typical of younger children, and these works often utilized visual elements such as buns, bellybands, and a red dot on his forehead to accentuate his childlike attributes. Nicholas Mirzoeff explores the intricate relationship between visual culture and human rights by emphasizing the visual as a crucial element in the understanding of human rights issues, contends that visual culture can contribute to the realization of human rights by shedding light on social injustices, exposing systemic inequalities, and providing a platform for marginalized voices and experiences (Mirzoeff, 2016). Since modern Nezha adaptations primarily take the form of films and animated series, Nezha's visual representation assumes a pivotal role within the Nezha narrative, providing important clues for the human rights metaphor of Nezha's image. His appearance becomes a tool for discourse, reflecting societal perceptions and expectations of children. Moreover, lyrics from the closing song of *The Legend of Nezha*, such as "He's as tall as me"⁵ and "He's as old as me"⁶, illustrate how modern Nezha adaptations also serve as mirrors for children's self-awareness. The most striking transformation of Nezha's appearance occurred in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, where he transitioned from a cherubic, Chinese doll-like figure to an ungainly child with messy hair, a toothy grin, and dark circles under his eyes. This departure from conventional expectations of a child's appearance aligns with the theme of challenging stereotypes and signifies a broader societal shift in dismantling inherent expectations of children's physical traits. These adaptations of Nezha's image suggest a growing acceptance of diverse and naturally childlike features, thereby emphasizing the increasingly distinct status of children as primary agents of their individual life experiences.

The family constitutes the primary social environment for children's growth and a crucial sphere for realizing their rights. The transformation of family dynamics and parent-child relationships in modern Nezha works is notably subversive compared to *The Investiture of the Gods*. In these works, the father-son conflict between Nezha and Li Jing is consistently mitigated, giving way to novel conflicts that take center stage in the narrative. For example, in *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, the dichotomy between Nezha and the Dragon King symbolizes the struggle between good and evil. In *The Legend of Nezha*, political upheavals during changing dynasties become the focal point, while *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* emphasizes clashes with destiny. Simultaneously, the parental figures in Nezha's life acquire more intricate dimensions, and parent-child interactions become richer, fostering more har-

monious relationships characterized by enhanced equality in dialogue. These transformations within the parent-child dynamic reflect a heightened awareness of children's rights, including survival, participation, development, and protection. For example, in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, the narrative doesn't adhere to the traditional motif of "returning the bones and the flesh to the parents", which symbolizes severance from the primal family. Instead, it resonates with the dialogue, "My destiny is decided by myself instead of god"⁷. As a result, the film's creators have balanced a child's right to autonomy and the need for familial support in constructing the space for childhood growth and transforming Nezha's spirit of resistance and sacrifice into a general potentially shared spirit of fighting against one's destiny (Diao, 2021), providing an idea and the space for the discussion of general children's rights. Additionally, Nezha's parents exhibit heightened senses of responsibility and unwavering protective behavior when Nezha faces harm. Gradually, it becomes clear that sacrificing a child's life for the sake of adult life is unreasonable. From the perspective of children's rights, this portrayal starkly violates the right to survival and contradicts the fundamental principle of acting in children's best interests.

Lastly, within the text of the novel *The Investiture of the Gods*, Nezha's act of suicide, returning the bones and the flesh to the parents, led to a complete severance from his previous self and his primal family. Subsequently, with the guidance of Taiyi Zhenren (太乙真人), he underwent a rebirth and transitioned into the realm of adulthood. This plot embodies a primitive style reminiscent of "mock death-rebirth" rites of passage. This motif disrupts the coherent path from childhood to adulthood and disregards the nuanced process of child growth. In contrast, contemporary works have consistently reduced the prominence of rebirth motifs in favor of themes focused on growing up. Gradual mental and cognitive maturation of children takes precedence over drastic transformations in physical and spiritual aspects, all while emphasizing the context of education. In *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and *The Legend of Nezha*, Nezha's education primarily stems from family upbringing. However, by the time of *I Am Nezha* and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, Taiyi Zhenren transitions from the role of a divine master within the celestial hierarchy to that of a real-world educator, emphasizing social education.

4. The Evolution of Nezha's Image and the Changing Social Environment of Children's Rights in China

In the works mentioned above, the portrayal of Nezha's image, whether in ancient or modern settings, reflects different levels of awareness regarding children's rights within Chinese society, especially in the context of folk culture. This phenomenon is driven by the ongoing evolution of China's sociocultural landscape concerning children.

The Investiture of the Gods emerged as a product of religious fusion, incorporating elements of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism since the Song and Ming dynasties. Within *The Investiture of the Gods*, Nezha's character reflects an implicit awareness of children's rights, representing one aspect of the competition between Taoism-Buddhism and Confucianism. The collective consciousness within folk circles regarding children's rights found rational literary expression with the support of Taoism-Buddhism thought, transforming into a rational and socially acceptable literary form. The evidence for this can be found in Nezha's childhood characteristics, her relationships with her family, and the motifs within the work.

Firstly, Nezha's characteristics as a child diverged from the Confucian ideal of prematurely mature children, which traditional Chinese culture often upheld. The Nezha depicted in *The Investiture of the Gods* embodies the natural innocence of childhood, representing a pristine state untouched by prevailing moral norms and societal ethical orders. This spirit aligns with the "natural (自然)" doctrine of Taoism and the "let it be (随缘)" perspective of Buddhism. Furthermore, in contrast to Confucian familial ethics, Taoism strongly emphasizes the mutual affection between parents and children. It maintains that "mother's tender care shines brightly, father's love is refined, and the child's disposition is gentle"⁸ (Hu et al., 2009, p. 254). Similarly, Buddhism believes that "First, to increase wealth; second, to prepare for various events; third, to serve according to desires; fourth, to indulge without restraint; fifth, to share all personal effects. Children respectfully provide for and support their parents by these five principles. Parents also cherish their children by these five principles (Hengqiang, 2012, p. 639)"⁹. "Husbands should love, respect, and provide for their wives by five principles (Hengqiang, 2012, p. 640)"¹⁰, "Wives should practice thirteen acts of kindness, respect, and obedience to their husbands (Hengqiang, 2012, p. 640)"¹¹. In summary, both Taoism and Buddhism promote equitable familial relationships and underscore an ethos of reciprocity and equal love within the family, distinguishing them from the hierarchical structure found in Confucian ethics.

Secondly, within the text of Nezha in *The Investiture of the Gods*, the motif of "returning the bones and the flesh to the parents" prominently carries Buddhist undertones. This motif symbolizes Nezha's transition from human authority to the realm of Buddhist justification, signifying Buddhism's rejection of human attachments and the abandonment of false material existence. Nezha's self-sacrifice, wherein he abandons his illusory physical body through suicide, symbolizes his liberation from the cycle of the Five Elements, a central Buddhist concept. This motif aligns harmoniously with the core principles of Buddhism. In conclusion, Nezha's image in *The Investiture of the Gods* draws significant influence from both Taoism and Buddhism, illustrating an emerging awareness of children's rights amid the interplay of these three religions.

In contrast, modern depictions of Nezha reveal a heightened awareness of children's rights, a development influenced by various factors throughout different periods in China's history. Although China's recognition of children's rights occurred later than in the Western world, the early 20th century's May Fourth Movement marked a significant turning point, leading to the emergence of children's rights as a crucial aspect of the broader "discovery of the human" trend (Zhou, 2012). A modern perspective on children began to take shape during this period, emphasizing child-centeredness. Following 1978, China underwent a substantial economic transformation, gradually establishing a market economy system that led to sustained and rapid domestic economic growth through measures such as foreign capital introduction and market liberalization. Simultaneously, the creative endeavors of writers and artists flourished, breaking away from the constraints of traditional Confucian hierarchical thinking. This cultural shift contributed to a growing awareness of children's rights among the general public. Subsequently, China ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992, leading to ongoing governmental initiatives aimed at protecting children's rights, accompanied by efforts from institutions such as women's federations to promote awareness of children's rights. Over the past two decades, the proliferation of new media channels, including news outlets, films, and social platforms facilitated by widespread Internet usage in China, has provided convenient access to information about children's rights. This accessibility has heightened public awareness and empowered individuals to voice their concerns through self-media and new media platforms. Consequently, the continued development and enhancement of awareness regarding children's rights, as exemplified in the image of Nezha in modern works, primarily stems from broader societal consciousness and a well-established legal framework governing these rights.

Moreover, the evolving landscape of Chinese children's upbringing has witnessed continuous transformations, with each generation of children facing distinct challenges that can be traced through the evolution of Nezha's image. In *The Investiture of the Gods*, the central conflict revolves around the father-son dynamic, reflecting the anguish stemming from Confucian patriarchal society and its ethical framework. Meanwhile, the battle between Nezha and the Dragon King in *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979) mirrors the pervasive politicization of Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution, where children were even instrumentalized in the class struggle, political discourse uses children's images as a carrier to construct a sublime sense of national memory. In *The Legend of Nezha* (2003), the primary conflict emerges between the emerging just state power and the old, entrenched authority, echoing the heightened emphasis on national identity within Chinese society. Nezha embodies the mission of shaping the nation's future character, with the pursuit of goodness, beauty, and truth serving as the central narrative theme of childhood during this era. *I Am Nezha* (2018) portrays the growing pains of children born after the Chinese government implemented the One-Child Policy at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. It explores the pressures and expectations placed on children by parents striving for their success. The societal narrative often depicted these single children as selfish and lacking social and familial responsibility. The work encapsulates the challenges children face in such an environment. In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), the principal conflict revolves around the individual versus destiny, addressing issues within Nezha's original family and the biases and confusion children encounter during their growth journey. It delves into the reconciliation of unique personal identity and societal belonging from a subcultural perspective, which was mainstream in the past ten years. Hence, the evolution of awareness regarding children's rights in Nezha's image is intricately linked with the social milieu and the rights-related challenges children face in different eras. Informed by their comprehension of children's needs, the creators crafted Nezha's image to align with the prevailing imperatives of children's rights during each respective era.

Finally, in stark contrast to the vague and unconscious awareness of children's rights in the ancient depiction of Nezha in *The Investiture of the Gods*, the modern portrayal of Nezha's image not only reflects creators' deliberate acknowledgment of children's rights but also invites interpretations from audiences through the lens of children's

rights. These contemporary works have been extensively discussed regarding children's rights. For instance, in China's most significant online readers and audience community, Douban (豆瓣)¹², audiences' comments regarding the appearance and character portrayal in *The Legend of Nezha* express strong approval, deeming it a genuinely "child-oriented animation" that provides "an escape from the adult world" and "an opportunity to revisit childhood". Many audiences resonate with Nezha's challenges as representative of their own childhood experiences, stating that "Nezha's struggles and grievances mirror those of many of our children (comment on *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*)" and that Nezha's story "challenges the ancient Chinese traditional ideologies of filial piety and fraternal duty, as well as the traditional ideology of 'ruler, subject, father, and son,' articulating the pain felt by numerous generations of Chinese children, both in their childhood and adulthood (comment on *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*)". These cited comments illustrate that Nezha's image as a reflection of the lack of children's rights in Chinese society deeply resonates with readers.

Simultaneously, the reinterpretation of Nezha's image through the lens of children's rights has also been acknowledged by readers, particularly in the case of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*. This work was created when the childhood environment in China was markedly different from that of ancient societies. Rather than critiquing the traditional patriarchal system, it began to emphasize the cultivation of children's self-awareness and independence. Audiences comment, "The entire film adopts a very modern form, yet it captures the essence of the mythological character of Nezha", and "The director has adapted the story of Nezha in a subversive manner, with the theme of 'defying destiny against the will of heaven' taking center stage in Nezha's image". The reimagined family and friendships in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* closely mirror the emotional relationships of children in modern society and highlight the identity dilemmas that the popularity of subcultures in contemporary social environments imposes on children. It also underscores the lack of rights faced by children who deviate from the dominant culture, such as being overlooked and harmed. The film's box office performance in mainland China reached an astonishing 5 billion yuan, ranking second in the history of Chinese cinema's box office charts, demonstrating that the image of Nezha in the movie has aroused strong resonance among the audience. Therefore, from the audiences' perspective, many audiences have entered the conscious stage of awareness regarding children's rights. They have assessed and reflected on the reshaping of Nezha's image through the lens of children's rights, fostering deeper interactions within the context of children's rights.

5. Conclusion

Nezha's image within various artworks provides a distinct lens through which to comprehend children's rights awareness in Chinese society. Rooted in ancient Confucian culture, the image of Nezha in *The Investiture of the Gods*, with his mischievous characteristics, independent spirit, unyielding authority, and defiance of unquestioning loyalty and filial piety, represents a form of resistance to Confucian ideals. This image reflects the ongoing struggle between Buddhist-Taoist influences and Confucian philosophy within folk society. It embodies the collective subconscious of a populace that simultaneously revered and rebelled against paternal authority in a society dominated by the awe of paternal figures. Additionally, it illustrates the Chinese mythological archetype of patricide, shedding light on the absence of children's rights within the framework of Confucian ethics. The Nezha texts in *The Investiture of the Gods* have already hinted at a yearning for fundamental children's rights, such as the right to life. This suggests that even before the adoption of modern children's human rights ideals, China had laid the groundwork for children's rights awareness, which was in its nascent and subconscious stage. An examination of the ancient portrayal of Nezha's image reveals that while the concept of children's rights is a modern Western construct, China has nurtured a cultural foundation for children's rights awareness and demonstrated its early growth. Despite the absence of explicit and direct consciousness of children's rights in ancient Chinese society, an underlying and indirect understanding of children's rights existed. It serves as a profound cultural underpinning for contemporary China's embrace of the global consciousness surrounding children's rights.

Concurrently, by examining the adaptations of Nezha's image in modern works, the reinterpretation of Nezha's image provides a lens through which we can grasp the societal shifts in China's perception of children's rights and the changing social landscape. As human rights consciousness has developed in modern China, accompanied by the progressive refinement of the market economy, societal awareness of children's rights has reached a level of self-consciousness. Nezha's image, primarily in commercial films and animation texts, has evolved to align more closely with prevailing societal ideologies and aesthetic preferences. Within this context, Nezha's image found in four major works created over the past four decades in China represents different facets of children's rights aware-

ness in various eras. The evolution of Nezha's image serves as a mirror reflecting the evolving awareness of children's rights across different periods in modern China.

Notes

1. *The Investiture of the Gods*, authored by Xu Zhonglin in the Ming dynasty and written around the late 16th to early 17th centuries, is a classic Chinese novel. Set in ancient times, it weaved gods, heroes, and power struggles, drawing from mythology and history, creating a captivating narrative of battles between gods and mortals.

2. The original Chinese text of the citation is 剖腹、剜肠、剔骨肉，还于父母，不累双亲。

3. The original Chinese text of the citation is 身体发肤，受之父母。

4. The original Chinese text of the citation is 子作灾殃，遗累父母，其心何安。

5. The original Chinese text of the citation is 他的个头跟我一般高。

6. The original Chinese text of the citation is 他的年纪跟我一般大。

7. The original Chinese text of the citation is 我命由我不由天

8. The original Chinese text of the citation is 母慈昱昱，父爱甄甄，子色循循。

9. The original Chinese text of the citation is 一者增益财物，二者备办众事，三者所欲则奉，四者自恣不违，五者所有私物尽以奉上。子以此五事奉敬供养父母，父母亦以五事善念其子。

10. The original Chinese text of the citation is 夫当以五事爱敬供给妻子。

11. The original Chinese text of the citation is 妻子当以十三事善敬顺夫。

12. All comments of readers and audiences quoted came from Douban, China's largest internet reader and audience community. The webpage address of *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* on Douban is <https://movie.douban.com/subject/1307315/>; the webpage address of *The Legend of Nezha* on Douban is <https://movie.douban.com/subject/2156771/>; the webpage address of *I Am Nezha* is <https://movie.douban.com/subject/26820458/>; the webpage address of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* is <https://movie.douban.com/subject/26794435/>.

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