

Efficacy Reconstruction of Cultural Intermediaries in the Digital Era: Examining Industrial Upgrading and Overseas Dissemination Paths of the Animation Film Industry through "NeZha2"

Wang Mei^{1,2,*}

¹Cultural Industry Research, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, City University of Macau, Macau, China

²Cultural Industry Research, Communication University of China Nanjing, Nanjing, China

*Corresponding author

Abstract: This paper examines the role of cultural intermediaries in technological empowerment and cultural feedback within the digital era, using the Chinese animated film "NeZha2" as a case study. The film achieves global adaptation of cultural values through a three-tiered cultural translation model, while leveraging self-developed technical tools such as the "Fuxi" AI animation system to enhance production efficiency and visual quality, thereby unifying visual artistry with humanistic values. Its marketing strategy combines cultural geography-informed practices---including data mining, emotional modeling, contextual embedding, social dissemination, and hybrid theatrical-streaming distribution---with the construction of a cross-sphere ecological matrix, resulting in record-breaking box office conversion and facilitating cultural value export. The success of "NeZha2" demonstrates the industrial upgrading trajectory of China's animation film industry through technological innovation, supply chain collaboration, and policy support. It further reveals structural fissures in the digital era between technological instrumentality and humanistic agency in animated film production, as well as the tension between technological output and cultural interpretative authority. The study provides a practical paradigm for the overseas dissemination of Chinese animated cinema.

Keywords: Digital Era; Cultural Intermediaries; Animation Film Industry

1. Introduction

According to data presented by Maoyan Professional Edition, as of May 6, 2025, the global cumulative box office revenue of the Chinese animated film "NeZha2" exceeded 15.8 billion RMB (Maoyan Professional Edition, 2025)^[1]. This achievement has repeatedly broken numerous records: it ranks fifth on the global film box office chart, is number one on the worldwide animation film box office chart, is the first domestic film in Chinese film history to surpass the 10 billion RMB global box office threshold, set a record for domestic films with over 1900 special effects shots, and over 56% of its domestic box office came from third- and fourth-tier cities, etc. Its success is not merely a phenomenon of fleeting popularity; it represents a groundbreaking practice of technological empowerment, cultural feedback, and intermediary coupling mechanisms within the animation film industry during the development process of the digital era. However, the upgrading of China's animation film industry still faces deep-seated contradictions: a contrast exists between the industrial gap formed by the dividends of the sinking market (where cities below the third tier contribute 60% of the box office)^[2] and the lag in derivative product development (Southern Metropolis Daily, 2025). While companies like BaseFX leveraged the technological accumulation from "NeZha2" to undertake Marvel projects, achieving a leap from OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) to standard-setting, data showing less than 3% overseas box office indicates that technological advantages have not yet translated into cultural interpretative authority. This asymmetric "technology-culture" development highlights the strategic value of cultural intermediaries in content translation, resource integration, and ecosystem operation. Using "NeZha2" as an example, this paper focuses on analyzing the coupling mechanism of cultural intermediaries in technological empowerment and cultural feedback, explores the transformation, upgrading, and overseas dissemination paths of Chinese animation films from market expansion to value export, and provides a theoretical reference for the industrial breakthrough

of Chinese animation films.

2. Content Meaning Production and Value Gatekeeping

2.1 Modernity of Mythological Narrative: "Three-Tiered Translation"

Against the backdrop of global digitalization, cultural translation faces challenges from two aspects: safeguarding cultural roots while ensuring cross-cultural readability. "NeZha2" achieved the international adaptation of cultural values through a three-tiered translation model involving symbols, narrative, and emotion.

Within the film, traditional symbols are ingeniously deconstructed and redesigned. Cultural symbols such as Sanxingdui bronze patterns, Dunhuang mural lines, and Yongding Tulou architecture are transformed into unique visual languages. Presented through special effects technology, they leave an extremely profound first impression on the audience, allowing the film's dissemination to transcend language barriers. For example, the design of the "Boundary Beast" originated from the team's topological deconstruction of the Sanxingdui bronze vertical-eyed mask. They extracted its radial pattern characteristics and reconstructed it into the "Boundary Beast" character design by combining mechanical transmission principles. This utilized the Artec Eva device with 3D scanning precision up to 0.01mm, generating over 2 million polygon models, enabling the cultural relic elements to retain the characteristics of Eastern mysticism while fitting into the cognitive framework of global audiences for cyber aesthetics. The Yin-Yang dialectic of "Spirit Pearl and Demon Pill" is integrated into the narrative, forming a stark contrast with Marvel's "binary opposition of good and evil." Ao Bing bears the heavy mission of dragon clan revival, while Ne Zha fights against the vicious curse of being the "reincarnation of the Demon Pill." This "destined twins" setting reconstructs the Eastern philosophical metaphor of the "Spirit Pearl and Demon Pill," enhancing the cultural depth of the "good-evil dialectic." The floating trajectory of the Hun Tian Ling simulates the brushwork of calligraphy, creating a dynamic "leaving blank" effect. The architectural form of the Jade Void Palace in the film is analogous to the White House, and the eagle-shaped texture patterns on the Celestial Origin Ding and the Passage Scepter are metaphorical symbols that align with the audience's pursuit of artistic quality and association with social hotspots.

"NeZha2" uses the Chinese classical mythological work "Investiture of the Gods" as its creative blueprint, retaining core settings from traditional myths like "Spirit Pearl Reincarnation" and "Flooding of Chentang Pass." Using the story of "Ne Zha rebelling against the patriarchal and celestial system," it reconstructs the tragedy of "patricide" into a narrative of order reconstruction, transforming the traditional ethics of "loyalty and filial piety" into the dilemmas commonly faced by modern youth regarding individual freedom, fairness, justice, and growth. The intertwined destiny between Ne Zha and Ao Bing transforms the Eastern fatalism of "My fate is mine to decide, not Heaven's" into the Z generation's "anti-labeling" declaration. "De-mythologized narrative" expands Ne Zha's growth dilemma into issues encountered by youth globally, such as identity anxiety and intergenerational conflict, diluting regional labels to resonate with global youth. This narrative strategy elicited strong reactions at the Cinéma Saint-Denis in Paris—when French critics noticed similarities between Ne Zha's redemption arc and that of Jean Valjean in "Les Misérables", the Eastern myth had already completed cross-cultural transcoding. The subplot involving Shen Gongbao's family in the film points to the disciplining and alienation of individuals by power structures, echoing contemporary society's criticism of bureaucracy and class solidification. This narrative strategy, combining traditional cultural symbols with universal values, avoids cultural discount and achieves soft power export of ideology.

The "de-stereotyping" transformation in character portrayal and the integration of street-smart jokes into comedic elements are key to breaking cultural barriers. The postmodern-style "small gags" between protagonists, such as "fighting evil," "arguing," and "sophistry," align with the younger generation's preference for flexible and skillful segments. Taiyi Zhenren's humorous use of the Sichuan dialect elicited knowing laughter at the London screening. The comedic adaptation of Shen Gongbao's stutter setting became viral natural material on TikTok. The overseas version translated "jǐ jí rú lǚ líng" as "Quickly quickly biu biu biu," using humor to eliminate language barriers. This creative wisdom of transforming regional characteristics into universal comedic points reduced the cultural discount coefficient to a minimum. When Ao Bing surpassed Marvel heroes on the IMDb character popularity chart, humanized character portrayal proved more penetrating than cultural background.

2.2 Technological Empowerment and Humanistic Control Practices

When audiences are moved to tears seeing Ne Zha achieve nirvana and rebirth, behind it lies the computational surge of 2000 servers roaring at full capacity, 3027 Git commit records, 480,000 lines of special effects code, and the arduous journey of enduring 11 cluster overload failures. The film fully utilizes the self-developed "Fuxi" AI animation system. Relying on its advanced algorithms and intelligent processing capabilities, this system permeates the entire animation film production process. The core proprietary technology is the "Dynamic Ink Wash Rendering Engine," which helps the team automate repetitive tasks like scene layout and color adjustment, significantly improving work efficiency. Moreover, it solved the challenge of digitally expressing the traditional ink wash concept of "qì yùn shēng dòng", enabling real-time simulation of the ink bleeding and permeating effect of a brush on rice paper in 3D animation for the first time. It integrates the freehand brushwork gene of Eastern aesthetics into the modern animation industrial system, hailed by "The Hollywood Reporter" as "literati painting in the digital age." Traditional ink wash animation requires 24 hand-drawn keyframes per second, while the team's "Particle Ink Wash Engine" increased water effect rendering efficiency by 300%. Combining 800 million digital particles with the brushstrokes of "A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains", every frame of the East Sea waves flows with the permeating effect of traditional ink wash. Thus, Shen Gongbao's 72 hair tremors per second during transformation and the 4096 types of physical simulation during Hun Tian Ling's entanglement both reached world-class levels, dubbed a "technical miracle" by foreign media due to the application of intelligent algorithms.

In the pre-production phase, high-precision scanning technology was used to transform cultural heritage items like traditional architectural patterns, clothing designs, and classical artifacts into digital materials, building a massive digital asset library. During mid-production, an AWS cloud collaboration system was established, standardizing processes across 37 special effects companies, improving production efficiency, and using dynamic quality monitoring to avoid deviations in cultural expression. The film's battle scenes and special effects production were based on synchronized dynamics simulation and motion capture. The team delved into physics principles like mechanics and kinematics to simulate the motion trajectories and collision effects of characters and objects, making the scenes more realistic and vivid. Furthermore, the production team emphasized capturing characters' micro-expressions to enhance emotional resonance. This pursuit of physical realism made character movements more natural and fluid, allowing the audience to experience stronger visual impact, immersion, and emotional resonance during viewing. In post-production, the AI dynamic storyboarding system shortened the production cycle by 30%, and Stable Diffusion technology reduced pre-production costs by 60% (Guangming Online, 2025)^[3].

In the AI-assisted creative environment, the film does not rely entirely on algorithm-generated content but uses it as a tool to expand creative possibilities. AI plays a key role in generating plot branches, providing more creative inspiration for screenwriters. However, the final plot choices are controlled by the screenwriting team. Based on the film's overall values and narrative needs, they screen and integrate the AI-generated plot branches, thus avoiding narrative vulgarization or thematic deviation potentially caused by algorithmic bias. "NeZha2" also demonstrates the significance of humanistic agency in emotional expression. The production team used audience physiological data monitoring to optimize the design of emotional climaxes, ensuring the film could precisely touch the audience's emotional resonance. However, they did not blindly pursue data-driven effects but used data as a reference, combining the creators' artistic intuition and aesthetic judgment to make decisions. This "data + humanistic" combined approach ensures the film's emotional expression resonates with the audience while avoiding the creative rigidity and technical excess that the "data supremacy" industrial assembly line model might induce.

3. Domestic and International Market Penetration Strategies

3.1 Algorithmic Identification of Social Sentiment and Contextualized Expression

"NeZha2" achieved the effective transformation of social sentiment into cultural consumption through a market penetration strategy consisting of five stages: "data mining, emotional modeling, contextual embedding, social dissemination, and box office conversion."

Using big data from public opinion to capture key issues in different regional markets, such as intergenerational conflict and anti-appearance anxiety, it implemented issue-setting penetration. In North America, it used Ao Bing's ethnic dilemma design to precisely reflect the identity struggles of

North American minorities. For the North American Z generation, it emphasized anti-authority narratives. In Southeast Asia, it deeply explored the "emotional connection within the Mazu cultural sphere." In Europe, it highlighted humanistic spiritual resonance. This "cultural topology"-like communication strategy allows the same IP to find emotional anchor points in different contexts. When the film set box office records for animated films in Islamic cultural regions, it demonstrated the maturing art of balancing universal values with localized expression. Collaborations with professional film critics facilitated IMDb reputation management and guided in-depth interpretations in publications like "Variety".

Advanced technology was employed during the filmmaking process. For instance, throat singing (Khoomei) was used in the score to create a majestic and vast atmosphere, and particle ink washes special effects created dreamlike scenes, enhancing the epic feel and emotional tension of the scenes. Taking the "Underwater Purgatory" scene as an example, crowd animation technology achieved the visually stunning effect of 200 million characters on screen simultaneously, making the audience feel immersed, deeply sensing the pressure and tension of the character's predicament, thereby enhancing emotional immersion.

Transmedia storytelling created a multi-dimensional cultural cognition scene. The prequel comic accumulated 1 billion views on the Webtoon platform. The virtual idol Ne Zha appeared on stage alongside Hatsune Miku at Bilibili's New Year's Eve Gala. The Metaverse Chentang Pass project attracted 3 million users for virtual pilgrimage. This omnichannel coverage strategy facilitated the penetration of the cultural IP into every experiential dimension of the target group. When "The New Yorker" discussed "cultural pilgrimage in the digital age," a Chinese IP appeared in the case library for the first time^[4]. Overseas premieres combined with activities like dragon dances and intangible cultural heritage markets transformed film promotion into a Chinese cultural experience scenario, reducing cultural discounts.

Interactive marketing involved creating a virtual Ne Zha image for real-time interaction on platforms like Douyin. By releasing fun videos and launching interactive topics, it attracted user participation and attention, creating a good interactive atmosphere. For example, launching BGM activities on Douyin for popular catchphrases like "Thunder rumbling so scary, struck till crumbling to bits" encouraged audiences to imitate character performances and produce secondary creative videos. This transformed the audience from passive information recipients into active participants in dissemination, enhancing the film's visibility and influence, increasing audience emotional identification, and raising anticipation for the film.

3.2 Construction of a Cross-Sphere Ecological Matrix

The "cultural geography" practice applied to the distribution strategies of theatrical and streaming platforms, through the precise grasp of geo-cultural variables, demonstrated precise global market insight, maximizing communication effectiveness^[5]. In the North American theatrical market, it emphasized individual heroism elements and released a Dolby Vision version to attract tech-savvy audiences. The Southeast Asian version used local language dubbing and featured top stars, while also releasing dialect-dubbed versions to lower cultural barriers, achieving a balance between "technology premium" and "emotional affinity." The European art-house version emphasized auteur film characteristics. This "one-core, multi-dimensional" distribution strategy was amplified exponentially when coordinated with streaming platforms. In the interactive version customized for Netflix, viewers could choose between Ne Zha's "resistance" or "reconciliation" branch plots. This participatory narrative transformed cultural dissemination from one-way output to two-way dialogue. Video clips from "NeZha2" circulating online and Google Ads used algorithmic recommendations to push customized content based on cultural differences like "family bonds" in Southeast Asia and "individual awakening" in Europe/America, enabling the film to achieve a win-win box office and critical acclaim in 170 countries. This technology-mediated precision distribution model allowed the film to subtly gain global recognition of its cultural value.

Personalized integrated marketing strategies were formulated based on the characteristics and user demographics of different social media platforms. Leveraging the "grass planting" community nature of Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), users were encouraged to actively and spontaneously share viewing experiences and interpretations, making it a key ground for word-of-mouth fermentation. As the core UGC (User Generated Content) platform, Douyin launched BGM for popular catchphrases like "Thunder rolling in the sky, I'm so scared that I'm falling apart" triggering audience imitation of character performances and the creation of secondary videos. Bilibili fostered a "hardcore"

dissemination trend by analyzing film Easter eggs and special effects technology. Moreover, fan fiction creations of the "Zha Bing CP" (Ne Zha & Ao Bing pairing) generated 3.9 million pieces of content, which in turn fed back into the official narrative. Douban leveraged the bellwether effect of professional film reviews and short comments to disseminate deep content and influence the decisions of core film fans.

Matrix-based operation of the IP ecosystem can build sustainable cultural influence and commercial value. Concurrent with the film's release, Ne Zha-themed streetwear brands appeared on overseas crowdfunding platforms. Parisian Galeries Lafayette displayed Li-Ning co-branded Qiankun Quan sneakers. Ao Bing's dragon-scale armor design debuted at Milan Fashion Week. This fashionable interpretation of cultural symbols allowed the IP's vitality to break beyond the screen. "NeZha2" also conducted co-branded collaborations with over 10 brands including Mengniu, Honor, Tutu Mama (Rabbit Head Mom), Great Wall Motors, and Pop Mart, covering fields like food, technology, automobiles, maternal & infant products, and collectible figures, achieving a closed loop of "IP empowering sales, sales feeding back IP." Ne Zha partnered with scenic spots to launch "free admission with movie ticket stub" activities, driving two-way growth in cultural tourism consumption and film popularity. Co-branded blind box merchandise with cultural and creative products exceeded ten million RMB in sales within 8 days of launch. UGC and film-game linkages, such as the Ne Zha-themed mobile game, expanded the boundaries of IP derivatives, forming an ecological closed loop of "film-derivatives-fan community."

4. Resource Integration and Industrial Upgrading Path

"NeZha2" employed a resource integration strategy encompassing technological innovation, industrial chain collaboration, and policy support to propel the Chinese film industry's upgrade from workshop-style production towards a digital industrial system.

"NeZha2" contained 1948 special effects shots. 138 animation companies nationwide and over 1400 production personnel collaborated for five years. They independently developed core technologies such as a virtual production system and AI motion capture 2.0, breaking Hollywood's monopoly in special effects technology and establishing full-process autonomous control capability. This "distributed creative network" broke the traditional model of elite monopoly in the film and television industry, achieving cross-regional and cross-disciplinary collaboration, evolving towards "human-machine collaboration—collective co-creation." Its modular production system decomposed linear processes into parallel tasks: using cloud computing to distribute special effects rendering to 1200 nodes globally, improving production efficiency by 30% and reducing costs by 40%^[6]. Utilizing AI voice synthesis for multi-language version synchronization shortened the production cycle by 60% (Guangming Online, 2025). AI prediction models enabled precise ad placement, tripling marketing efficiency. Modular division of labor prompted the replacement of the "traditional industrial chain" with a "technology supply chain," allowing SMEs to participate in the global division of labor through technology interfaces, driving the industry's shift from scale expansion to quality upgrade, and bringing about a deep transformation of industrial form from "vertical integration" to "ecological symbiosis." From production to promotion, the Chengdu Tianfu Changdao Digital Cultural and Creative Park gathered companies like Coco Animation and More VFX, enabling efficient collaboration across the entire industrial chain, achieving "hard drive direct transfer, face-to-face communication," shortening the production cycle by 30% and reducing costs by 20%, setting a benchmark for Chinese animation industrialization^[6]. Overseas experts accounted for 15% of the 1400-person production team, representing a systematic fusion of creative methodologies. The collision between the Hollywood script doctor system and the Eastern collective creation tradition gave birth to a "three-act play + chapter-style" narrative structure, ensuring international market acceptance while preserving cultural subjectivity. When the film received a 10-minute standing ovation at its Cannes premiere, the world witnessed artistic expression supported by an industrialized system.

"NeZha2"'s achievement of "defying fate" (nì tiān gǎi mìng) was inseparable from policy support. Sichuan Province provided 300 million RMB in cultural and artistic support funds. Chengdu City offered office space subsidies. Liangjiang New Area introduced "cultural industry land guarantee" measures. These collectively formed a full-cycle policy system covering creative incubation, production, and market expansion. The construction of this "policy ecology" was not merely financial investment but also institutional and mechanistic innovation. Initiatives like copyright pledge financing, industry-education integration colleges, and the establishment of intellectual property courts eliminated talent, funding, and legal constraints on industrial development and upgrading.

5. Conclusions

The penetration of digital technology into film creation is triggering deep cultural contradictions. Algorithmic recommendation mechanisms generate so-called "blockbuster formulas" based on mined historical success data. While this can enhance market predictability, it risks causing a crisis of creative convergence, where artistic expression is gradually replaced by traffic logic. If this trend continues unchecked, it could erode cultural diversity and innovative vitality. The practice of "NeZha2" provides a balanced template. While using the AI storyboarding system to optimize production efficiency, the director team insisted on retaining a "humanistic veto," resisting algorithmic standardization suggestions at key narrative nodes^[7]. For instance, the film rejected changing the ending to an American-style individual heroism victory mode, instead adhering to the collective value core of "order reconstruction" in Eastern philosophy. This dialectical relationship between technological instrumentality and humanistic agency provides crucial insights for creative ethics in the digital era: technology should serve as an aid to expression, not the master of narrative.

The practice of the Chinese film industry expanding overseas has exposed the structural disconnect between technological output and cultural interpretative authority. Taking "NeZha2" as an example, while its special effects technology gained international recognition and even entered the Hollywood production system in reverse, the interpretation of Chinese mythological values in overseas markets remains largely at the level of curiosity. This contradictory situation of "technology adopted but culture misinterpreted" indicates that the struggle for cultural interpretative authority is still profoundly influenced by the Western-centric discourse system. Emerging technological scenarios like artificial intelligence and the metaverse provide experimental space to break this impasse. The film explored incorporating cultural value into blockchain ownership relationships through NFT digital collectibles development, attempting to build a decentralized value recognition network. The cross-media operation of the "Oubing" (Lotus Root Cake - referring to the Ne Zha & Ao Bing pairing) virtual idol explored avenues for disseminating cultural symbols among digital native generations. These practices suggest that the core function of future cultural intermediaries might shift from "translating content" to "constructing scenarios," gradually competing for dominance in defining interpretative authority by reshaping the logic of cultural experience in virtual spaces.

Current industrial policies, while stimulating market vitality, also face the challenge of "imbalance between quantity and quality." Taking the special effects industry as an example, policy incentives led to a rapid increase in the number of enterprises. However, the lack of a modular collaboration network resulted in insufficient technological sedimentation. Innovation in SMEs often remains at the level of superficial technology application, failing to form sustainable iterative capabilities. This situation reveals the limitations of industrial support policies: mere quantitative growth cannot automatically transform into qualitative breakthroughs; deep collaboration needs to be guided through institutional design. Future policy innovation should focus on ecological collaboration, promoting the construction of cross-enterprise technology sharing pools, connecting scattered innovation points into knowledge networks, and insisting on cultural independence to prevent virtual production technology from eroding local artistic language. Such systematic reconstruction might help the Chinese film industry maintain cultural subjectivity during rapid technological development, ultimately achieving a historic leap from "scale catch-up" to "paradigm output."

References

- [1] Maoyan Professional Edition. May 6, 2025. <https://piaofang.maoyan.com/dashboard>
- [2] Southern Metropolis Daily. Third- and Fourth-Tier Cities Contribute Over Half of "NeZha2" Box Office, Over Ten "Chentang Passes" Found Nationwide. February 14, 2025. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1823986664169216374&wfr=spider&for=pc>
- [3] Guangming Online. Traditional Culture's Modern Expression Seen from "Ne Zha Topping the Charts". May 9, 2025. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1831606405198746854&wfr=spider&for=pc>
- [4] William Fech. *More than Movies: Art House Cinemas in the Digital Age [D]*. Doctor of Philosophy (Film and Moving Image Studies) at Concordia University Montreal, Quebec, Canada. November 2021.
- [5] Chen Wei. *Chinese Original IP Drives Mass Publishing Transformation—Taking the Cross-Media Ecological Construction of Works like "NeZha2" as an Example [J]*. China Publishing, 2025, (07):37-40.
- [6] George Musgrave. *Collaborating to compete: the role of cultural intermediaries in*

hypercompetition [J]. International Journal of Music Business Research, October 2017, vol. 6 no. 2.
[7] Li Lei, Xu Yixuan. "NeZha2": Media Interpretation of Film Industrial Aesthetics and the Triple Myth of Imagination Consumption [J]. *Future Communication*, 2025, 32(02):95-103. DOI:10.13628/j.cnki.zjcmxb.2025.02.004.