

From “Family-State Unity” to “Individual Awakening”: The Evolution of Musical Values in *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and *Nezha 2: The Devil Boy Churns the Sea* in the Context of Chinese Social Transformation

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Abstract: As two classic works from different eras in the Nezha film series, *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979) and *Nezha 2: The Devil Boy Churns the Sea* (2025) occupy crucial positions in the evolution of Chinese cinema. Through a comparative analysis of their musical compositions, this study identifies three significant transformative trajectories. First, there is a shift from the innovative integration of traditional Chinese instruments like chime bells and bamboo flutes with symphonic music to the intense collision between suona ensembles and electronic music. Second, the acoustic structure has evolved from hierarchical and strictly divided forms to freely collaged electronic pulses. Third, the musical rhythms have transitioned from being collectivist-oriented under the planned economy to individualistic styles shaped by the market economy. These changes in musical values not only disclose the internal logic of the development of Chinese animated film music from traditional aesthetic paradigms to modern pluralistic styles but also deeply reflect China’s ideological transformation from collectivism to individualism over five decades, as well as the influence of economic restructuring on musical creation. Examining the musical value systems of these two films offers a unique auditory perspective for understanding contemporary Chinese cultural ecology. It also provides referential models for the innovative development and creative transformation of traditional culture in the digital age through musical narratives. By systematically analyzing the inheritance of cultural genes and temporal innovations in the musical creations of these two

generations, this study contributes to constructing the identity of Chinese animated film music in the global context, offers theoretical support for improving China's film music theoretical framework and exploring future development paths. As a result, it strengthens the reconstruction of Chinese cultural discourse in international communication and promotes creative breakthroughs and sustainable development within the paradigm of global cultural exchange.

Keywords: *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King; Nezha 2: The Devil Boy Churns the Sea;* Musical Values; Film Music; Social Transformation in China

Introduction

During the Spring Festival season of 2025, the animated film *Nezha 2: The Devil Boy Churns the Sea* (hereafter referred to as *Nezha 2*) triggered a worldwide cinematic sensation. Its remarkable visual effects, profound narrative structure, and intense emotional resonance captivated audiences globally. By April 24, 2025, the film had amassed a staggering box-office revenue of over 15.7 billion yuan (RMB), firmly establishing itself among the top five highest-grossing films in global box-office history. Additionally, it received an impressive rating of 8.2 on IMDb. The American entertainment authority *Variety* praised its “exquisitely crafted characters” and “jaw-dropping action sequences,” describing each battle as a “visually explosive spectacle” (Carlos Aguilar, 2025). However, as pointed out by Koh Ewe of BBC News, Western mainstream media raised certain controversies. They contended that the film's box-office success might primarily be attributed to the cultural identification within the global Chinese diaspora rather than the universality of its content (Ewe, 2025). This phenomenon underscores a deeper predicament in the cross - cultural dissemination of *Nezha 2*. Although advanced digital technology, through industrial iteration, enables the presentation of visual wonders, the cultural divide between the distinctive narrative logic of Eastern mythological frameworks and the Western cognitive paradigm of “individual heroism” still requires systematic decoding and reconstruction based on cross-cultural hermeneutics.

Amidst the heated discussions among the media, the public, and academia regarding the visual aesthetics and narrative architecture of *Nezha 2*, its musical component, which serves as a crucial medium for cultural signification, has not received commensurate scholarly attention. Drawing on the theory of musicologist T.W. Adorno, who, in his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, posited that “art is a mirror of society, and music serves as an acoustic cipher for ideology” (1962). Adorno emphasized that music not only sets the atmosphere and conveys emotions but also functions as a unique artistic semiotic system, reflecting the socio-cultural structures and value orientations of specific historical periods. This perspective offers a theoretical foundation for comprehending the profound significance of film music. It is not merely an element of the audiovisual experience; rather, it constitutes a critical text for interpreting the shifts in societal ideologies.

When tracing the development of Chinese animated cinema, the cinematic adaptation of the *Nezha* intellectual property (IP) has undergone significant evolution over the past four decades. The 1979 film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, stands as a milestone in Chinese animation and serves as the cornerstone of the *Nezha* film series. These two films, separated by a vast temporal span, act as a unique cultural mirror. The striking disparities in their musical compositions provide an exemplary case study for examining the value transformations in Chinese animated film music. Through a comparative analysis of these two works, this study endeavors to explore the trajectory of Chinese animated music’s evolution from a collectivist aesthetic paradigm to the awakening of individual consciousness. In doing so, it aims to uncover the far-reaching impact of socio-ideological changes on artistic creation.

I. Comparative Analysis of Ideology in Music

Music and ideology share a dialectical relationship characterized by mutual construction and deconstruction. As a powerful medium for ideological dissemination, music transforms abstract values into palpable auditory language through symbolic systems encompassing

melody, rhythm, and harmony. In doing so, it fosters the construction of collective identity and elicits value resonance among audiences. As Adorno argued in his sociology of music theory, music transcends mere emotional expression; it serves as an acoustic representation of social relations (1976). For example, Jean Sibelius's *Finlandia*, *Op. 26* (1899) masterfully employs majestic brass sections and tension-laden melodic lines to translate the Finnish people's struggle for independence into perceivable auditory symbols. This composition has since become a spiritual emblem that strengthens national consciousness. Similarly, Dmitri Shostakovich's symphonic works are deeply intertwined with the specific historical context of the Soviet Union. His intricate formal structures and dissonant intervals not only metaphorically mirror the dilemmas of the era but also achieve a musical transcription of political discourse, vividly demonstrating music's ability to render ideological expressions concrete.

Conversely, ideology exerts a profound influence on musical creation, dissemination, and cultural policy-making processes. In the Soviet Union, the "Socialist Realism" policy stipulated that musical works should embody "revolutionary optimism" and prioritize collectivist values. This historical backdrop gave rise to iconic segments in Sergei Prokofiev's *Symphony No. 5 in B-flat Major*, *Op. 100* and Aram Khachaturian's *Sabre Dance* (1939). In China, the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art established the principle of "art serving workers, peasants, and soldiers," which spurred the transformation of traditional Yangge (秧歌) opera into revolutionary art forms. Works such as *Brother and Sister Reclaim Wasteland* and *Husband and Wife Learn to Read* seamlessly integrated folk melodies with revolutionary lyrics, embedding ideological content within musical narratives.

This bidirectional interaction is vividly illustrated within the *Nezha* film series. *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979) innovatively combines traditional Chinese instruments, including chime bells and bamboo flutes, with Western symphonic music. By utilizing operatic percussion rhythms, it constructs a mythological narrative framework. The structured formal design and formulaic melodic development of its music subtly reflect the reverence for order

and authority inherent in a collectivist context. In contrast, *Nezha 2* breaks new ground by juxtaposing traditional Chinese folk music with electronic rock. The intense clash between suona (唢呐) ensembles and electric guitars, along with freely collaged rhythmic patterns, disrupts the linear narrative logic typical of traditional music. The fundamental differences in musical morphology between these two films mirror the ideological shift in Chinese society—from narratives centered on collectivist heroes to the awakening of individualistic values. Such musical innovations not only sonically interpret the spirit of the times but also drive the iterative renewal of societal values through continuous symbolic communication, thereby highlighting music's active role in both constructing and deconstructing ideological systems.

(I) The Evolution of Political Metaphors in Instrument Selection

The instrumentation employed in *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* functions as an acoustic cipher for ideological expression, profoundly reflecting the collectivist values and familial-state ethics prevalent in Chinese society during that era. The film commences with the ancient and resonant tones of chime bells (Bianzhong 编钟), instantly evoking a temporal realm characterized by order and solemnity. Since the Western Zhou Dynasty, chime bells have served as a core symbol of China's ritual-music system. Historically, they embodied strict hierarchical norms, with their scale, arrangement, and usage meticulously corresponding to distinct social strata. As such, chime bells functioned as cultural symbols that reinforced social order and power structures. In the film, the 65-piece Warring States-era bronze chime bells, which date back over 2,500 years, continuously amplify the authority and immutability of the familial-state order through their majestic timbre. Each strike of these chime bells metaphorizes the solemnity of collectivist values, as well as the individual's absolute obedience and loyalty to the collective and the nation. During the confrontation between Nezha and the Dragon King's Third Son at Chentang Pass, the urgent rhythms of the chime bells interweave with the tense visual scenes. The clanging tones of the chime bells evoke the sound of war drums, effectively igniting the audience's consciousness to defend justice and national interests. This

suggests that Nezha's act of rebellion essentially externalizes the collective will, representing a guardianship of group interests.

The utilization of traditional instruments such as the bamboo flute enriches the film's ideological expression from an additional dimension. In Chinese cultural contexts, bamboo flutes are often imbued with the spiritual imagery associated with literati. Their ethereal tones serve lyrical and aspirational functions. In scenes that depict Nezha's childhood innocence by the sea, the mellifluous melodies of the flute flow like clear springs, painting a poetic and idyllic world of youth. This soft timbre stands in stark contrast to the solemnity of the chime bells, creating a musical tension that balances strength and tenderness. This duality mirrors the harmonious blend of authority and compassion within the framework of familial-state ethics, thereby constructing a value system in which collective interests take precedence and individuals are able to develop harmoniously within the established order. As posited by Louis Althusser's ideology theory, such combinations of instruments subtly "interpellate" audiences into a specific ideological framework, enabling the implicit transmission of values.

In 1970s China, composer Jin Fuzai's pioneering fusion of Chinese and Western orchestration significantly expanded the film's musical vocabulary. The introduction of symphonic elements notably enhanced the film's dramatic expression. During Nezha's confrontations with the Dragon King, the frenetic notes and intense rhythms of the string section build suspense, escalating the conflicts to climactic heights. Meanwhile, the brass fanfares symbolize the power of justice and resistance. In the scene where Nezha makes the tragic sacrifice to save Chentang Pass, the somber melodies of the symphony, paired with the weeping strings and murmuring woodwinds, elevate the nobility of individual sacrifice for the collective. This organic integration of traditional and symphonic instruments not only showcases the profound depth of Chinese cultural tradition but also reflects an openness to Western musical elements, embodying the cultural confidence of that era. Ideologically, this approach constructs an aesthetic image that seamlessly blends national identity with international appeal, aligning with the state's strategic guidance for cultural development under

the umbrella of collectivism. As a result, it achieves a dual expression of cultural pride and ideological propagation.

In stark contrast to the collectivist acoustic narrative of the 1979 film, *Nezha 2* embarks on a cyberpunk-inspired sonic innovation journey. It deconstructs the traditional aesthetic order through a rebellious musical language that mirrors the individualist values prevalent in the era of a market economy. Eight suona horns form the core semiotic system of Nezha's character theme. Their piercing timbre can be metaphorically regarded as "vocal musculature." Traditionally associated with folk rituals, the suona's shrill brilliance transcends its conventional semantic field within the film, transforming into an auditory totem of individual rebellion. In Nezha's iconic entrance scene, the cacophonous blasts of eight suonas create a visceral auditory impact. Their characteristic "broken" tones align perfectly with the protagonist's mantra, "My fate is mine, not heaven's." Each note becomes an acoustic indictment of the shackles of fate, vividly embodying the zeitgeist of individuals defying authority in pursuit of free will. This subversive usage stands in sharp contrast to the 1979 chime bells' symbolism of order, vividly reflecting society's shift from collectivism to individualistic awakening.

The film further intensifies its modern and rebellious ethos through innovative reconstructions of suona and electronic music. The collision of electronic pulse rhythms, synthesized effects, and the raw timbre of the suona expands the sonic dimensionality, creating auditory spectacles that straddle the realms of tradition and modernity. Electronically processed suona tones acquire fantastical textures, preserving the instrument's cultural DNA while injecting avant-garde elements that are in tune with contemporary aesthetics. This cross-media sound collage mirrors the dual identity of the individual in modern society, rooted in cultural heritage yet daring to innovate, exemplifying the creative transformation of traditional culture in the digital age.

In the realm of cross-cultural soundscapes, *Nezha 2* innovatively merges Mongolian throat singing (khoomei) with electronic synthesizers, enhancing both the musical expressivity and

cultural depth. As an intangible cultural heritage, the polyphonic resonance of khoomei evokes a sense of primal mysticism, while the synthesizers infuse this tradition with a sci-fi futuristic flavor. In scenes depicting the celestial army's siege and the descent of the Heavenly Cauldron, the guttural drones of khoomei intertwine with the synthesized soundscapes, constructing an oppressive "malevolent" audio environment that bridges the ancient and futuristic sonic realms. This fusion of ethnic artistry and modern technology not only represents an innovative inheritance of tradition but also showcases the inclusive cultural stance of Chinese animation in the context of globalization. It celebrates the artistic allure of multicultural collision while metaphorizing the contemporary individual's quest to balance and transcend the dichotomies of tradition and modernity, as well as locality and globality, in the process of identity construction.

(II) Differentiation of Narrative Functions in Melodic Structures

American musicologist Leonard B. Meyer (1918–2007) posited in *Emotion and Meaning in Music* that "melody, through the dynamic organization of pitch and rhythm, can evoke associative cognition of emotional patterns in listeners" (1961). This insight underscores the potent semiotic function of melody within cinematic narration. Distinct melodic forms not only convey emotions but also construct unique narrative logics. For instance, in *Schindler's List* (1993), John Williams' "Theme and Four Variations" deftly employs stepwise descending melodies and sigh-like rhythms, emulating the pathos inherent in Jewish traditional music. By meticulously adjusting the orchestration, the music precisely mirrors the psychological states of characters across various scenarios. This intricate intertextuality between melody and narrative is also manifest in the two *Nezha* films. The disparities in their melodic structures profoundly reflect the differentiation of narrative functions and the shifts in societal values over time.

The melodic structure of *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese opera, exhibiting a rigorous linear narrative characteristic that aligns seamlessly with

the “sacrifice-redemption” logic underpinning collectivist values. In the pivotal “Nezha’s Self-Sacrifice” scene, the composer deploys operatic rhythmic variation techniques to construct a multi-layered musical narrative. The opening sequence features a slow, solemn melody that poignantly sketches Nezha’s inner turmoil, anguish, and resignation. As the tension gradually escalates, the rhythm tightens, with the fluid connection of notes reminiscent of the operatic *kuaiban* (fast beats 快板). This rhythmic transformation propels the multiple conflicts within the scene towards a climactic crescendo. At the moment of Nezha’s self-sacrifice, dramatic interval leaps and impassioned tones erupt, explosively channeling the profound grief of the moment and maximizing the tragic intensity. This linear melody, which strictly adheres to the temporal progression and plot development of the narrative, serves not only to unify the overall narrative arc but also to reinforce the overarching theme of “individual sacrifice for the collective.” Through the amplification of emotional resonance, it underscores that Nezha’s act is not a personal choice but a collective responsibility to safeguard the people of Chentang Pass. In this way, the melody becomes a powerful medium for transmitting collectivist values, effectively binding individual fate to communal interests and resonating strongly with the era’s imperative for societal cohesion and development.

In stark contrast, *Nezha 2* showcases a distinctly nonlinear, collaged melodic structure that audibly embodies the individualist values of the contemporary era. The music team utilizes fragmented electronic loops to disrupt the traditional linear development of melodies. Take, for example, the “Chaos Demon King” theme. It involves the repetition, variation, and random splicing of short musical fragments, which creates discontinuities in rhythm, pitch, and timbre. Simultaneously, this process generates unique rhythmic patterns through the fragmented repetition of these elements. This collaged structure serves as a metaphor for the contemporary individual’s existence in the context of a market economy, characterized by fragmented life experiences amidst a plethora of pluralistic choices and uncertainties. The repetition and recombination of musical fragments symbolize the ceaseless struggle of individuals to shape their own destinies, thereby foregrounding the protagonist’s mantra, “My fate is mine, not

heaven's." Such melodic expression not only strikes a chord with the lived experiences of modern audiences but also deconstructs traditional narrative logic, ultimately celebrating the agency and autonomy of the individual.

II. Value Expression in Sound-Image Relationships

Since Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) introduced the “sound-image counterpoint” theory in his 1928 *Statement on Sound*, highlighting how the conflicts and complementarities in rhythm and timbre between sound and image generate semiotic tension beyond the capabilities of single media, this concept has undergone continuous refinement. Michel Chion (b. 1947), in his work *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, further expounded on the notion of “added value,” revealing the unique capacity of sound to endow images with temporal depth and spatial dimensionality. As a comprehensive art form that integrates audio and visual elements, cinema's sound-image relationships not only serve to create atmosphere and propel narratives forward but also act as a vehicle for transmitting deeply ingrained values. For instance, in *The Lives of Others* (2006), static close-ups of surveillance equipment, accompanied by the metallic glints, tape scratches, and the sound of rotating reels, construct visual symbols of authoritarian surveillance. Simultaneously, off-screen sounds such as gentle piano melodies, poetry recitations, and ambient noise form a soundscape rich in human warmth. The stark contrast between the mechanical visuals and the humanized sounds vividly illustrates the erosion of individual freedom by totalitarianism, thereby demonstrating the powerful role of sound-image relationships in value expression.

The East Sea Dragon Palace scene in *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* serves as a prime example of how the synergy between sound and image conveys collectivist values. In this scene, the acoustic properties of chime bells are intricately interwoven with the visual composition to construct the oppressive symbolism of familial-state ethics. Acoustically, the chime bells' rich high-frequency overtones produce a bright and piercing timbre that dominates the complex soundfield, while their deep low-frequency fundamentals convey a sense of solid power. This

duality in timbre metaphorically represents the spatial characteristics of the scene: the high frequencies mirror the opulent decorations and stern guards within the palace, whereas the low frequencies symbolize its impregnable walls and the abyssal depths of the underwater realm, collectively creating an oppressive atmosphere.

The harmonic design in this scene also plays a crucial role in ideological coding. The composer employs tense harmonies, such as augmented triads and diminished sevenths, to reflect the rigid hierarchies, while contrasting bright major chords (symbolizing the Dragon King's authority) with somber minor chords (representing Nezha's defiance) to sonically encode the power disparities. This harmonious interplay between sound and image transforms the hierarchical order into a tangible text, reinforcing the principle of collectivist obedience and evoking the audience's acceptance of the rationality of the order through emotional resonance.

In Nezha's self-sacrifice scene, the interplay of sound and image elevates individual tragedy into a paean of collectivism. Drawing on the principles of film semiotics, the "interplay of void and substance" between the string music and minimalist visuals in this scene sublimates the act of sacrifice into an ethical grandeur. Musically, the string section utilizes dense high-register notes and intense vibrato to build tension, gradually crescendoing with accelerating phrases that simulate emotional turmoil. At the climactic moment, the piercing dissonances in the highest register of the strings strike the audience's psyche like daggers, amplifying the sense of despair. Visually, inspired by traditional Chinese *liubai* (negative space 留白) aesthetics, the scene refrains from explicitly depicting the act of sacrifice, instead using sparse lines and vast emptiness to stimulate the audience's imagination. This dialectical relationship between the emotional "substance" of the string music and the abstract "void" of the visuals echoes Zong Baihua's assertion in *A Stroll Through Aesthetics*: "Only through the unity of void and substance can art achieve true expression." The intensity of the string music elicits empathy from the audience, while the visual gaps prompt them to mentally complete the narrative, thereby deepening their identification with the concept of "individual sacrifice for the

collective.” This design not only reinforces the obedience to the familial-state order but also embodies the wisdom of traditional Chinese aesthetics regarding “the formless great image.”

In contrast, the Heavenly Cauldron scene in *Nezha 2* subverts traditional “divine mandate” narratives through radical sound-image strategies. The majestic appearance of the cauldron clashes sharply with its brutal function of refining souls. Departing from conventional orchestral or mystical Eastern instrumentation aimed at enhancing grandeur, the creative team instead combines electronic pulses with Mongolian throat singing (khoomei). The jagged and aggressive timbre of the electronic pulses disrupts the linearity of the harmony, with their staccato bursts defying auditory expectations. Rhythmically, the pulses disregard the rhythms of the cauldron’s descent or the flames, instead intervening with erratic and offbeat patterns. As the cauldron crushes lives, the irregular flickering of low-frequency pulses resembles trapped heartbeats or the countdown of fate, creating a disjunct counterpoint that heightens the tension between the oppression of “divine order” and the fragility of the individual. The guttural drones of khoomei add a layer of primal mysticism: their sustained bass hums clash with the shrillness of the electronic sounds, while the layered growls and roars during the cauldron’s descent construct a multi-dimensional soundscape. This polyphonic design hints at the complex power dynamics and ancient rules associated with the cauldron, while the conflict between the cold mechanized sounds and the raw wildness deconstructs the concept of “heaven’s mandate,” transforming sound-image relationships from tools of collective discipline into mediums for individual resistance. Through such innovative approaches, the film successfully achieves a creative transformation from traditional aesthetic expressions to modern pluralistic value narratives.

III. Social Contextual Shifts and Musical Transformation

Karl H. Marx (1818 - 1883) astutely posited that “the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life” (1976). This profound insight elucidates the intricate dialectical relationship between economic foundations and

superstructures. As a crucial medium for ideological expression, musical creation and dissemination are inherently intertwined with socioeconomic structures. The styles, techniques, and value orientations of music serve as a mirror, reflecting the productive modes and cultural psychology of specific historical eras. The evolution from the collectivized musical narratives of the planned economy era to the individualized sonic expressions under market economy conditions offers a pivotal perspective for observing societal transformation.

The 1979 film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* emerged during a critical juncture of China's economic transition. Although the reform and opening-up policy had been initiated, the lingering influence of the planned economy model continued to shape the value orientations and aesthetic paradigms of artistic creation. This era's characteristics are sonically manifested in the film's rhythm system, which is centered around Chinese operatic percussion. Through strict metric norms and formulaic expressions, this system constructs acoustic metaphors of collectivist values. Traditional operatic percussion not only regulates rhythm but also integrates stage performance order and intensifies emotions through fixed *luogu jing* (锣鼓经) patterns, such as *jiji feng* (urgent wind 急急风) and *man changchui* (slow long hammer 慢长锤). In *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, the *jiji feng* pattern is innovatively employed to underscore Nezha's martial arts training. The frenetic interplay of *ban gu* (wooden clapper 板鼓), *da luo* (large gong 大锣), *xiao luo* (small gong 小锣), and *naobo* (cymbals 铙钹) not only synchronizes with the character's agile movements but also metaphorically represents individual compliance with collective discipline. Through this precise rhythmic control, Nezha's training scene becomes a visual-auditory dual narrative of collectivist values, subtly guiding audiences to accept the principle of "individual subordination to the collective."

The systematic utilization of operatic percussion patterns in the film is a fundamental reflection of the artistic production mechanisms of the planned economy. The composer deploys the solemn *man changchui* rhythm for ceremonial scenes and the urgent *kuai changchui* to drive narrative climaxes. The formulaic alternation of these percussion patterns forms a rigorous musical logic, reminiscent of the highly organized societal operations under

the planned economy. This integration of traditional operatic elements with symphonic orchestration not only reflects the era's cultural policy, which pursued both "nationalization" and "modernization," but also highlights how collectivism deeply regulated art. In this context, music was not merely a means of emotional expression but a powerful vehicle for transmitting social ideologies.

The *danwei* (work unit 单位) system, a distinctive social organizational form of the planned economy era, significantly influenced individual life rhythms and temporal cognition. This institutionalized temporal order is palpable in the musical coding of *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*. Under the *danwei* system, unified schedules disciplined social life, aligning individual behaviors with collective work rhythms. The film's score mirrors this reality through musical symbols: scenes depicting civilian life in Chentang Pass feature regular beats, steady melodic lines, and uniform rhythms, constructing an auditory representation of mechanical repetition. This musical language not only creates a serene atmosphere but also tacitly resonates with the planned economy's collective demand for stable order. When Nezha's clash with the Dragon King's son disrupts this tranquility, the music undergoes a dramatic transformation, say, dense dissonances, abrupt rhythmic changes, and stark contrasts in dynamics and tempo generate a powerful auditory impact. This narrative strategy metaphorically illustrates how individual transgressions challenge the collectivist order and prompt ideological reconstruction.

The establishment of the socialist market economy reform in 1992 brought about a fundamental restructuring of Chinese society. Against this backdrop, *Nezha 2* showcases distinct temporal characteristics in its musical system. Dominated by electronic music, the film's sound design prioritizes improvisation as a core aesthetic feature, constructing an auditory reflection of individualist values in the market economy era. In the climactic battle scene, the music breaks free from traditional formal constraints. Rhythms exhibit nonlinear, unpredictable randomness, while synthesized timbres transcend the physical limitations of acoustic instruments, creating surreal soundscapes through free collage and distortion. This musical language deconstructs tonal centers and fixed forms, generating open, uncertain sonic

fields that culturally resonate with the pluralistic individualism of the market economy. As marketization diversifies career paths and empowers autonomous development models, this social reality is manifested in music through electronic composers' liberation from acoustic limitations, enabling them to achieve personalized expression via digital audio technologies.

The variational treatment of *Nezha 2*'s theme music also holds profound semiotic significance. Each recurrence of *Nezha*'s theme, presented in varied forms with altered melodic contours, transformed harmonic textures, and shifting instrumental colors, metaphorizes the fluidity of individual identity and the reconstruction of selfhood in modern society. At key narrative moments, such as during the protagonist's struggles in adversity or transformative growth, these variations externalize the character's psyche and symbolize contemporary individuals' continuous self-adjustment and identity remolding within complex social networks. Through this dynamic sonic evolution, the film captures the self-actualization process of individuals navigating value collisions in the market economy era.

The structural shifts in production relations have a profound impact on the forms and meanings of artistic expression, and the musical evolution across the two *Nezha* films exemplifies this dynamic in cinematic art. During the planned economy period, music served as a tool for ideological propaganda, assuming explicit political and social roles. In *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, the grand orchestral textures and majestic sonorities of symphonic music metaphorize state authority and collective power through musical semiotics. The regimented rhythms of operatic percussion, similar to ritualized collective commands, reinforce collaboration and communal identity through auditory means. This musical language transcends mere artistry, concretizing ideological discourse and integrating individuals into the collective will through sonic power, thereby shaping a social logic oriented towards collective goals.

With the rise of the socialist market economy, the transformed production relations have triggered a profound reorientation in art. In *Nezha 2*, music has shifted from being a collective megaphone to an individualized medium. The film's extensive use of electronic sound effects

transcends traditional musical boundaries. Their diverse timbral combinations and dynamic variations not only amplify the tension of fight scenes but also aurally define character personalities, enhancing the depth and uniqueness of the roles. This creative shift reflects the awakening of individual consciousness in art, driven by the market economy. As society transitions from “*danwei* persons” to “market persons,” the increased autonomy and choices have propelled artistic expression from collective narratives to individual stories, from standardization to personalization.

The identity shift from “*danwei* person” to “market person” has radically altered the interactions between individuals and society. Under the planned economy, individuals were tightly bound to their work units, and their behaviors and values were strictly regulated by collective institutions. Marketization, however, has granted unprecedented developmental freedom, catalyzing the emergence of individual value consciousness. This transformation is clearly manifested in music, that is, earlier works emphasized the role of music in consolidating collective consciousness, while contemporary works prioritize individual emotional and personal expression. Concurrently, this musical evolution reflects a significant value shift from “collective ethics” to “individual rights.” Collectivist ethics prioritized devotion and obedience to the group, whereas marketization has elevated individual rights and self-realization, driving artistic focus towards personal experiences. This ideological turn is fully realized through musical innovation.

The musical metamorphosis across the two *Nezha* films vividly projects the reforms in production relations onto the realm of art. In the planned economy era, music carried strong ideological attributes. The symphonic grandeur of the 1979 film symbolized state power and collectivist solemnity, while the unified rhythms of operatic percussion metaphorized collective collaboration. Music functioned as an invisible force binding individuals to the collective, channeling efforts towards communal goals. After the marketization reform, *Nezha 2* redefines music as a vehicle for individual expression. The personalized electronic soundscapes not only enhance the atmosphere of scenes but also aurally characterize personalities, deepening the

audience's engagement with the characters' inner worlds. This transition mirrors China's societal identity reconstruction from “*danwei* person” to “market person”, from unit-bound, regulated existences to autonomous agents prioritizing self-worth. Simultaneously, it embodies the value shift from collective ethics to individual rights, where self-realization and personal expression dominate artistic creation, resonating through groundbreaking musical languages.

Conclusion

The musical evolution from *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* to *Nezha 2* serves as a rich sonic archaeological specimen, meticulously documenting China's profound societal transformation over nearly half a century. As potent auditory symbols of ideology and vital acoustic carriers of cultural memory, the film scores adeptly translate the shift from collectivist aesthetics to the awakening of individual consciousness into a non-verbal narrative. This transformation is not merely evident in musical techniques, ranging from the use of symphonic and operatic elements to symbolically construct collective order, to the employment of electronic music for fragmented expressions of individual experiences. It also mirrors a significant paradigmatic shift in artistic creation, transitioning from “instrumental rationality,” which emphasized functionality under the planned economy, to “communicative rationality” that thrives in the context of transformed social production relations.

Jürgen Habermas' (b. 1929) theory of “communicative rationality” provides a compelling framework for understanding this evolution. In the digital age, revolutionary advancements in music technology have effectively deconstructed the unidirectional control of traditional ideology over artistic production. Instead, they have fostered multi-dimensional interactive models for creation, dissemination, and reception. Digital audio technologies have eroded professional barriers, turning music into a vibrant public sphere where the masses can actively engage in cultural construction. Algorithmic recommendations and streaming platforms have further created sonic communication spaces that transcend geographical limitations. Within this dynamic landscape, traditional cultural elements undergo creative transformation through

digital sampling, collage, and variation techniques. This process not only preserves the deep-seated structures of cultural memory but also forges meaningful connections with contemporary society, breathing new life into cultural heritage through auditory innovation.

In the ongoing dialectical tension between globalization and localization, Chinese animated film music is currently undergoing a crucial process of identity reconstruction and value re-evaluation. In terms of cultural inheritance, it has been actively constructing a unique auditory symbolic system. By reinterpreting national musical modes, traditional instruments, and operatic elements in modern contexts, it goes beyond simple replication and innovatively encodes the DNA of traditional music into perceivable and transmissible modern artistic symbols, thereby establishing distinct auditory markers of indigenous culture. In the realm of international communication, Chinese animation music has been leveraging cutting-edge technologies, such as electronic music and virtual vocals, to overcome cultural discount barriers and actively participate in the global discourse of animated film music. The timbral innovations enabled by digital audio and the dynamic scores generated by algorithms have shattered the spatio-temporal constraints of traditional musical expression. Through emotionally resonant and language-transcendent appeal, they have successfully propelled local music into the global cultural consumption arena.

Looking to the future, ensuring the sustainable development of Chinese animated film music necessitates maintaining a delicate balance between technological empowerment and cultural rootedness. On one hand, it is essential to fully explore the artistic potential of emerging technologies, such as AI composition and immersive soundfields, to expand the boundaries of musical expression. On the other hand, there is a pressing need to delve deep into the spiritual core of Chinese culture, distill universal cultural motifs, and construct distinctive aesthetic identifiers. Only by internalizing technological innovation as an integral part of cultural consciousness and achieving a creative integration of tradition and modernity, as well as locality and globality, can Chinese animated film music complete its identity transition from a “cultural other” to a “cultural subject.” This transformation will ultimately

lead to the reconstruction of cultural values and the enduring inheritance of artistic vitality, enabling Chinese animated film music to shine brightly on the global stage and contribute uniquely to the rich tapestry of world culture.

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