



Research on the Anti-Hero Character Design Elements in the Animation *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child*

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DOI: 10.32629/asc.v5i6.3446

Abstract: By analyzing the character design elements in *Ne Zha (The Devil Child)*, this study investigates the appearance, personality, and behaviors of anti-hero characters, revealing how such characters, while challenging traditional moral norms, evoke empathy and identification in audiences. The research first explores the definitions of animated characters and anti-hero roles. Through the analysis of *Ne Zha's* appearance, personality, and behavior, the study highlights how the elements of familiarity, originality, humor, and multifaceted emotions embody the charm of anti-hero characters. This study aims to provide pragmatic insights for the design of anti-hero characters.

Keywords: Animation, Character design, *Ne Zha*, Anti-hero protagonist

1. Introduction

Since the 20th century, heroes have captured significant attention, especially through Marvel and comics, with a noticeable rise in interest recently. In 2021, four of the top ten box office films in China were hero-themed, underscoring the genre's ongoing appeal. However, alongside heroes, villains are gaining traction, as they often fulfill personal needs in contrast to the altruistic nature of heroes. This binary classification of characters oversimplifies their complexities; even heroes exhibit morally ambiguous behaviors, leading to the emergence of anti-heroes. These characters resonate with audiences navigating the gray areas of morality in modern society. This paper explores the worldview of anti-heroes in animation, particularly focusing on *Ne Zha*, a successful 2019 Chinese animated film that reinterprets traditional culture. By analyzing character design elements—appearance, personality, and behavior—and their relationship to the anti-hero worldview, the study identifies originality and polysexuality as key traits, while personality most effectively conveys this worldview. The findings aim to inform the development of future anti-hero characters, offering insights into character construction and potential directions for collaboration with international creators.

2. Case Analysis of *Ne Zha*

2.1 Appearance

Ne Zha (The Devil Child) reinterprets the classic image of *Ne Zha* with a fresh visual design, displaying a blend of originality and multifaceted artistic characteristics. The film boldly breaks away from the established framework of *Ne Zha's* traditional image. Typically, *Ne Zha* is depicted as a righteous, dignified hero, yet in this film, he is portrayed as a “Devil Child,” with an aura of rebellion and a sinister charm. For instance, his facial design is imbued with a strong anti-hero essence: his large, intense eyes and sharply arched eyebrows convey a sense of nonchalance and defiance. This image not only overturns the audience's expectations of traditional heroes but also showcases the character's inner emotional complexity.

Additionally, *Ne Zha's* appearance reveals his multifaceted nature, reflecting his internal world and the conflict of his dual identities. Although his “Devil Child” side is highlighted by fierce facial features, he retains a childlike body proportion and youthful facial features, effectively conveying the character's vulnerability and loneliness. His attire further emphasizes this complexity. His main outfit is predominantly red, a color traditionally associated with righteousness and strength in Chinese culture, yet his simple clothing and bare feet hint at his destined loneliness and uncertainty. This visual contrast strengthens *Ne Zha's* internal conflict over self-identity. Thus, the multifaceted presentation of *Ne Zha's* appearance makes the character more vivid and complex, adding deeper narrative and visual layers to the film.

2.2 Personality

Ne Zha's character design redefines traditional heroic narratives, presenting him as a complex anti-hero. Initially labeled a “Devil Child,” he feels misunderstood and isolated, which fosters a deep emotional connection with the audience. His rebellious nature arises not from evil but from societal rejection and confusion about his identity. Through playful mischief,

Ne Zha expresses his dissatisfaction while seeking understanding and affection, allowing viewers, particularly those who feel similarly pressured, to empathize with his plight.

Additionally, Ne Zha’s originality sets him apart from conventional heroic figures in Chinese mythology. Instead of embodying a righteous hero, he showcases a rebellious spirit, challenging traditional storytelling and offering a modern reinterpretation of the character. His sense of humor further enhances his relatability; despite his rebellious traits, he maintains a lighthearted demeanor. His humorous antics, especially in the film’s opening, endear him to the audience, providing a dynamic rhythm that highlights his complex inner life.

Ultimately, Ne Zha’s multifaceted nature makes him a richly layered character. His bravery in confronting societal challenges contrasts with his feelings of loneliness and insecurity. This inner conflict culminates in moments of self-sacrifice, showcasing his growth into a responsible figure. Ne Zha thus transcends the binary of good and evil, reflecting the complexities of human nature and enriching the film’s narrative.

2.3 Behavior

The character design of Ne Zha diverges from traditional heroic narratives, crafting a complex anti-hero figure. His familiarity stems from a rebellious and lonely nature, which fosters a deep emotional connection with the audience. In the film, Ne Zha, known as the “Devil Child,” faces misunderstanding and social rejection, leading to a life marked by loneliness. His rebellion is not rooted in evil but arises from societal confusion about his identity. This defiance is expressed through playful mischief, revealing a longing for understanding and affection, allowing viewers—especially those who feel similarly marginalized—to empathize with his struggles.

Ne Zha’s originality is showcased by his departure from the archetypal hero seen in classic Chinese mythology, where he is typically portrayed as a righteous figure symbolizing justice. In “Ne Zha (The Devil Child),” the director boldly reinterprets him, instilling clear anti-hero traits. Ne Zha embodies an unruly spirit that challenges traditional storytelling and offers a modern take on heroism.

Moreover, his strong sense of humor adds a lighthearted element, making him more relatable. Despite his rebelliousness, Ne Zha is not heavy or serious; instead, he employs humorous language and antics to navigate his circumstances. This humor alleviates tension and vividly portrays his character. His playful interactions with villagers endear him to the audience, and his self-deprecating humor highlights his dissatisfaction with fate, enriching his complex inner world.

Ultimately, Ne Zha’s multifaceted nature is central to his design, presenting contradictions that deepen his character. He displays bravery and defiance in the face of societal pressures while grappling with loneliness and insecurity. This internal conflict culminates in moments of self-sacrifice, showcasing his growth into a responsible figure. Through this complexity, Ne Zha transcends simplistic notions of good and evil, embodying the intricacies of human nature and significantly enhancing the film’s depth and appeal.

3. Conclusion

The film uses rich narrative techniques and meticulous character depiction, presenting Ne Zha as a character full of contradictions and conflicts while resonating with the audience’s emotions. Table 1 summarizes the findings of the anti-hero study on character design elements. Through the characteristics of anti-hero Ne Zha’s appearance, personality, and behavior, the worldview of an anti-hero character is comprehensively conveyed. The transformation from rebellion and destructiveness to self-sacrifice illustrates a layered growth process, endowing the character with immense emotional tension and narrative depth. This personality design not only gives Ne Zha a unique charm but also reflects the modern animation industry’s pursuit of character complexity and its response to the emotional needs of the audience.

Table 1. Findings of the anti-hero study on character design elements

	Familiarity	Originality	Humor	Multifaceted Nature
Appearance		•		•
Personality	•	•	•	•
Behavior		•	•	•

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