

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF CONFUCIAN ETHICS IN *NEZHA: BIRTH OF THE DEMON CHILD*

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ABSTRACT

Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019) is a significant example of how contemporary popular cinema reconfigures traditional Chinese cultural resources. Previous studies have examined the film through perspectives such as mythology, adaptation, and cultural identity, they have paid limited attention to the reconstruction of Confucian ethics. This study examines this reconstruction through the Three Bonds and Five Constants as the analytical framework. Drawing on Confucian ethics, adaptation studies, and popular culture theory, the study employs film/cinematic analysis and intertextual analysis to examine the film's narrative, characterization, dialogue, conflicts, and cinematic language in comparison with classical Confucian texts and *Investiture of the Gods*. The findings show that selected Confucian ethical relationships and virtues are reconfigured around individual characters, interpersonal relationships, emotional conflicts, and moral choices. The Three Bonds shift from a predominantly hierarchical and socially ordered framework toward interpersonal authority, parental responsibility, and familial cooperation, while the Five Constants are expressed through moral choice, compassion, normative conduct, discernment, and trust. The study identifies four major transformations: from political order to interpersonal relationships, from socially embedded moral norms to individual moral agency, from normative and philosophical conflict to emotionalized experience, and from abstract ethical concepts to cinematic embodiment. These transformations constitute a process of selective recontextualization through which inherited ethical resources are reorganized within contemporary cinematic forms. The study therefore proposes a preliminary model of ethical transformation based on contextual reconfiguration, interpersonalization, individualization, emotionalization, and cinematic embodiment.

Keywords: *Chinese Animation, Confucian Ethics, Confucianism, Film Adaptation, Five Constants, Nezha, Three Bonds.*

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SỰ TÁI CẤU TRÚC ĐẠO ĐỨC NHO GIÁO TRONG NA TRA: MA ĐỒNG GIÁNG THẾ

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TÓM TẮT

Na Tra: Ma đồng giáng thế (2019) là một trường hợp tiêu biểu cho việc tái cấu trúc hình các nguồn lực văn hóa truyền thống Trung Quốc trong điện ảnh đại chúng đương đại. Các nghiên cứu đi trước chủ yếu tiếp cận bộ phim từ góc độ thần thoại, chuyển thể và bản sắc văn hóa, tuy nhiên sự tái cấu trúc đạo đức Nho giáo vẫn chưa được quan tâm đầy đủ. Nghiên cứu này sử dụng Tam cương và Ngũ thường làm khung phân tích, kết hợp đạo đức Nho giáo, nghiên cứu chuyển thể và lý thuyết văn hóa đại chúng, đồng thời vận dụng phân tích điện ảnh và liên văn bản để đối chiếu bộ phim với các văn bản Nho giáo kinh điển và *Phong thần diễn nghĩa*. Kết quả cho thấy các quan hệ và giá trị đạo đức Nho giáo được tái cấu trúc thông qua nhân vật, quan hệ liên cá nhân, xung đột cảm xúc và lựa chọn đạo đức. Tam cương chuyển từ trật tự thứ bậc sang quyền uy trong quan hệ, trách nhiệm gia đình và sự hợp tác; Ngũ thường được thể hiện qua lựa chọn đạo đức, lòng trắc ẩn, hành vi chuẩn mực, khả năng phân định và sự tín nhiệm. Nghiên cứu chỉ ra bốn chuyển đổi chính: từ trật tự chính trị sang quan hệ liên cá nhân, từ chuẩn mực xã hội sang chủ thể đạo đức cá nhân, từ xung đột chuẩn tắc sang trải nghiệm cảm xúc, và từ khái niệm trừu tượng sang biểu đạt điện ảnh.

Từ khóa: Hoạt hình Trung Quốc, đạo đức Nho giáo, Nho giáo, chuyển thể điện ảnh, Ngũ thường, *Na Tra*, *Tam cương*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Released in 2019, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世] quickly became a phenomenon in Chinese cinema. Within three days of its release, the film grossed approximately 600 million RMB at the box office; after 12 days, it surpassed 400 million USD and ultimately concluded its theatrical run in China with over 703.7 million USD (approximately 5 billion RMB) in revenue (Mia, 2019). The film became not only the highest-grossing animated film in Chinese history but also the highest-grossing animated film ever in a single market and, at the time, the highest-grossing non-English-language animated film

in the world (Chen, 2019; Shackleton, 2019). This commercial success positioned the film as a significant cultural phenomenon and a relevant case for examining the contemporary reinterpretation of traditional Chinese cultural resources.

The film's re-presentation of the Nezha legend from the Ming-dynasty mythological novel *Investiture of the Gods* [Original Chinese: 封神演义] is not simply a transition from literature to cinema, but a process of meaning reconstruction and cultural transformation. It transforms a classical myth rooted in a premodern social order, in which concepts of cosmic authority, hierarchy, and obedience

were prominent, into a contemporary narrative centered on individual agency, familial relationships, and negotiating fate. This transformation can be examined through the film's creative reinterpretation of traditional Confucian ethics and its recontextualization of these values within contemporary cultural and cinematic forms.

As an important component of traditional Chinese ethical thought, Confucianism developed a systematic conception of moral relationships and virtues, including the Three Bonds and Five Constants [Original Chinese: 三纲五常]. These ethical categories played an important role in shaping Chinese social and moral norms and later provided a cultural repertoire for literary and popular-cultural representations (Trần, 2018). However, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世] neither reproduces nor entirely rejects these traditional values. Instead, it selectively reconstructs these values: the ethical relationships associated with the Three Bonds are reorganized through new narrative and emotional configurations, while the Five Constants—Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, and Trustworthiness—are rearticulated through the characters' choices, relationships, and actions. This phenomenon offers a case for examining how traditional ethical values are retained, transformed, and recontextualized in contemporary popular cinema.

Existing research on *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世] is relatively extensive, spanning cultural reconstruction, animation aesthetics, adaptation theory, visual art, cinematic translation, and innovation in contemporary Chinese animation. Nevertheless, in-depth studies focusing specifically on the film's reconstruction of

Confucian ethical values still exhibit two main limitations.

First, most studies treat Confucian elements as part of the broader category of traditional Chinese culture, concentrating on cultural adaptation, Eastern aesthetics, or general traditional values (Liu, 2019; Tan, 2026; Wang, 2026; Zhao, 2026), without conducting a dedicated analysis of the Confucian ethical system itself. In particular, scholars have not yet systematically conceptualized and examined the Three Bonds and Five Constants as an integrated analytical framework for understanding the film's reconstruction of traditional ethics.

Second, and more importantly, existing studies have paid limited attention to the mechanisms by which Confucian values are reconstructed during adaptation. The film does not simply transplant classical ethical categories onto the screen; it reinterprets them through cinematic language, including character construction, narrative development, dialogue, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, sound, visual symbolism, and emotional relationships (Liu, 2019; Wang, 2026). However, the logic underlying this transformation—namely, which Confucian elements are retained, modified, recontextualized, or omitted, and how the transition from classical narrative to contemporary popular cinema shapes these changes—has not been fully analyzed. This gap forms the central focus of the present study.

To address this gap, the study distinguishes among theoretical and analytical frameworks and the research methods. At the theoretical level, the study draws first on Confucian ethics to establish the philosophical basis for examining the moral relationships and virtues represented in the film. Confucian ethics provides the conceptual foundation for

interpreting moral cultivation, relational obligation, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness within the historical tradition. Second, the study draws on adaptation studies to understand the film as a transformative reworking of earlier narrative and cultural materials rather than as a simple reproduction of the source text. From this perspective, adaptation involves processes of selection, reinterpretation, restructuring, and contextualization. Third, popular culture theory provides a broader framework for examining how traditional ethical resources are transformed into contemporary mass culture.

Within these theoretical perspectives, the Three Bonds and Five Constants function as the study's specific analytical framework. The Three Bonds are examined as a system of ethical relationships, focusing on the film's reconstruction of the Ruler–Minister, Father–Son, and Husband–Wife relationships. The Five Constants are examined as a system of moral virtues, focusing on how Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, and Trustworthiness are represented, modified, and embodied in the characters' actions and choices. The framework therefore provides a structured set of categories through which changes in Confucian ethical meaning can be identified and compared.

Methodologically, the study combines intertextual analysis and film/cinematic analysis. Intertextual analysis examines the relationship between the 2019 film and the earlier *Nezha* narrative tradition, particularly the Investiture of the Gods, to identify continuities, transformations, omissions, and reinterpretations of ethical motifs. This study uses film/cinematic analysis to examine how these transformations are constructed through narrative structure, characterization, dialogue, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, sound,

visual symbolism, and emotional relationships. Together, these methods enable the study to move beyond identifying Confucian elements to examine how adaptation and cinematic representation transform their meanings.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the reconstruction of Confucian ethics in *Nezha* systematically: *Birth of the Demon Child* [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世] through the integrated use of Confucian ethics, adaptation studies, and popular culture theory, with the Three Bonds and Five Constants serving as the principal analytical categories. Specifically, the study pursues three interrelated objectives.

First, to identify the Confucian ethical values the film inherits and represents by recognizing and analyzing specific manifestations of the Three Bonds and Five Constants within its narrative structure.

Second, to analyze how the film reconstructs these values by examining changes in ethical relationships, individual moral agency, emotional experience, and cinematic representation as it recontextualizes classical ethical categories within contemporary cinema.

Third, to explain the cultural significance of this reconstruction by examining how the adaptation transforms traditional ethical resources within contemporary popular cinema, thereby illuminating the narrative and cinematic strategies through which traditional Chinese culture is reinterpreted in contemporary Chinese film.

Based on these objectives, the study raises three central research questions.

First, which elements of the Confucian Three Bonds and Five Constants appear in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世]? This question requires the identification and systematization

of Confucian ethical elements as manifested in the plot, dialogue, characterization, cinematic representation, and interpersonal relationships, thereby determining the specific positions of the Ruler–Minister, Father–Son, and Husband–Wife relationships and the virtues of Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, and Trustworthiness within the film’s narrative structure.

Second, how are the values of the Three Bonds and Five Constants reconstructed through the adaptation process? This question focuses on the mechanisms of transformation, examining how the film, through narrative structure, characterization, dialogue, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, sound, visual symbolism, and emotional relationships, recontextualizes traditional ethical categories within contemporary cinematic forms. Particular attention is given to shifts from political and hierarchical relationships to interpersonal relationships, from socially embedded moral norms to individual moral agency, and from normative and philosophical conflicts to emotionally structured cinematic experiences.

Third, what cultural functions does this reconstruction serve within contemporary popular cinema? Rather than assuming audience reception directly from the film’s commercial success, this question examines how the reconstructed ethical values function within a contemporary popular-cultural narrative and what this reveals about the reconfiguration of traditional Chinese ethics in contemporary cultural production.

By distinguishing the theoretical framework, analytical framework, and research methods, this study seeks to provide a more systematic account of the relationship between Confucian ethical traditions and their

contemporary cinematic reconstruction. It argues that *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* should be understood not merely as a contemporary retelling of a traditional myth, but as a process of cultural adaptation in which inherited ethical concepts are selectively reorganized, recontextualized, emotionally structured, and embodied through the narrative and cinematic conventions of contemporary popular cinema.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative methodology that combines film (cinematic) analysis and intertextual analysis to examine how the 2019 animated film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世] reconstructs Confucian ethical values. Rather than treating the film solely as an isolated case study, the study examines it as an adapted cultural text situated at the intersection of classical Confucian ethical thought, the Ming-dynasty mythological tradition, and contemporary popular culture. The methodological design therefore clearly distinguishes among the theoretical framework, the analytical framework, and the research methods employed in the study.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives: Confucian ethics, adaptation studies, and popular culture theory.

First, Confucian ethics provides the philosophical foundation for examining the moral concepts and relationships the film reconstructs. Confucian ethical thought emphasizes moral cultivation, interpersonal relationships, social responsibilities, and virtue. Within this study, these principles provide the theoretical basis for interpreting the ethical significance of the Three Bonds and Five Constants and for distinguishing their traditional

meanings from their contemporary cinematic representations.

Second, adaptation studies provide a framework for understanding the film as a transformative engagement with earlier cultural and literary materials. Adaptation is not understood as a process of simple reproduction or faithful transfer. Rather, the shift from a premodern literary and mythological narrative to a contemporary animated film involves selection, modification, recontextualization, and reinterpretation. This perspective enables examination of how changes in characterization, narrative structure, ethical conflict, and symbolic representation contribute to the reconstruction of traditional values.

Third, popular culture theory provides a broader framework for examining how traditional ethical resources transform in contemporary mass culture. As a commercially oriented animated film intended for a broad contemporary audience, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* communicates traditional cultural materials through accessible narrative structures, emotionally oriented characterization, and cinematic forms of expression. The study therefore considers the reconstruction of Confucian ethics not only as an adaptation of earlier cultural and literary materials but also as a process of cultural negotiation between inherited values and contemporary forms of popular representation.

Taken together, these three perspectives establish the theoretical basis for examining how Confucian ethical concepts transform as they move from classical philosophical and literary contexts into contemporary popular cinema.

2.2. Analytical Framework: The Three Bonds and Five Constants

Within the theoretical framework outlined above, the Three Bonds and Five Constants [Original Chinese: 三纲五常]

constitute the study's principal analytical framework. They serve as specific analytical categories through which the film's reconstruction of Confucian ethics can be systematically identified and examined.

The Three Bonds are analyzed primarily as a system of ethical relationships, focusing on the film's representation and transformation of the Ruler–Minister, Father–Son, and Husband–Wife relationships. Particular attention is given to how characterization, narrative conflict, interpersonal interactions, and emotional development maintain, modify, displace, or reinterpret hierarchical relationships.

The Five Constants are analyzed primarily as a system of moral virtues, focusing on Benevolence (*Ren*), Righteousness (*Yi*), Propriety (*Li*), Wisdom (*Zhi*), and Trustworthiness (*Xin*). The analysis examines how these virtues are represented, modified, and embodied through the actions, decisions, interpersonal relationships, and moral conflicts of the principal characters.

The framework does not assume that the film reproduces the Three Bonds and Five Constants in their historical form. Instead, these categories serve as analytical reference points for identifying continuities, transformations, omissions, and recontextualizations between traditional Confucian ethics and its contemporary cinematic representations.

2.3. Research Methods and Analytical Procedures

The study combines film/cinematic analysis and intertextual analysis. Film/cinematic analysis examines how narrative and cinematic language constructs ethical meanings. In contrast, intertextual analysis traces the relationship between contemporary film and the classical philosophical and literary traditions from which it draws its cultural and ethical resources.

The research process consists of two complementary analytical steps.

Step 1: Film/Cinematic Analysis

The first step systematically analyzes the film as a cinematic text. The analysis focuses on plot and narrative development, character construction and arcs, dialogue, major conflicts, emotional relationships, visual symbolism, and other relevant cinematic elements. Particular attention is given to *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing, and sound, especially when these elements shape and communicate ethical meaning.

The analysis examines scenes in which ethical values become explicit through characters' decisions, interpersonal conflicts, acts of sacrifice, or negotiations between individual interests and social or familial obligations. It also considers how character performance, spatial organization, framing, visual composition, editing patterns, and sound contribute to representing ethical relationships and moral choices.

This analysis identifies the specific scenes and narrative structures through which the Three Bonds and Five Constants are represented and provides the primary textual basis for examining their transformation within the film.

Step 2: Intertextual Analysis

The second step examines the film's relationship to the broader textual traditions from which its ethical and narrative resources derive. The study compares relevant elements of the film with classical Confucian texts, including the *Analects* [Original Chinese: 论语], *Mencius* [Original Chinese: 孟子], *Classic of Filial Piety* [Original Chinese: 孝经], *Book of Rites* [Original Chinese: 礼记], and *Doctrine of the Mean* [Original Chinese: 中庸]. These texts establish the historical and philosophical meanings of the ethical concepts under examination.

At the same time, the study compares the film with its principal mythological source, particularly the Ming-dynasty novel *Investiture of the Gods* [Original Chinese: 封神演义]. The comparison focuses on Nezha's characterization, the representation of family and authority, major narrative events, and the ethical conflicts surrounding the protagonist.

Through this intertextual comparison, the study identifies which elements of traditional ethics and the earlier mythological narrative the film retains, modifies, omits, or reinterprets. The analysis therefore moves beyond determining whether Confucian elements are present to examining how adaptation and incorporation into contemporary popular culture transform their meanings.

Combining film/cinematic analysis and intertextual analysis allows the study to connect what the film represents with how those representations are constructed and with the earlier texts they transform. This methodological approach provides a basis for examining the reconstruction of Confucian ethics as both a process of cinematic representation and cultural adaptation.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. Reconstruction of the Three Bonds

In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世], the Three Bonds—Ruler–Minister, Father–Son, and Husband–Wife—are represented through a network of relationships involving Nezha, Li Jing, Lady Yin, the Dragon Clan, and the Heavenly Court. Rather than presenting these relationships primarily through explicit doctrinal statements, the film communicates their ethical meanings through narrative situations, characterization, dialogue, performance, and cinematic language. In particular, *mise-en-scène*, spatial arrangement, cinematography, editing, sound design, visual

symbolism, action, and color help construct authority, familial relationships, conflict, and moral agency (Liu, 2019; Wang, 2026). The reconstruction of the Three Bonds can therefore be examined at both the level of narrative content and cinematic form.

3.1.1. Ruler–Minister Relationship: Authority and Moral Judgment

The Ruler–Minister relationship appears primarily through interactions between the Heavenly Court and human characters, as well as through the authority celestial institutions exercise over Nezha’s fate. The Demon Pill premise establishes a narrative in which Nezha’s identity is tied to a predetermined negative judgment. His status is therefore initially constructed through an external system of classification and authority rather than through his individual actions. This transformation can be read against the traditional Confucian concern with hierarchical moral relationships and social order (Trần, 2018).

The film’s mise-en-scène and spatial arrangement reinforce this distinction between institutional authority and individual experience; in scenes involving celestial authority, spatial positioning and visual composition place institutional figures within positions associated with greater symbolic power. In contrast, Nezha is positioned as the object of observation, judgment, or control. The organization of space and the relative positioning of characters within the frame consequently establish a visible hierarchy between the authority of the Heavenly Court and the individual subject. Here, spatial design functions not merely as a background for the narrative but as part of the visual construction of the Ruler–Minister relationship.

This hierarchical relationship is subsequently complicated through Nezha’s interactions with the institutions that define his

identity. Framing, pacing, editing, and sound design increasingly shift attention from external judgment toward Nezha’s own actions and decisions. Changes in visual composition and narrative rhythm reinforce this transition by emphasizing the protagonist’s response to the judgment imposed on him. Rather than presenting authority as absent, the film places institutional judgment alongside the possibility of individual moral choice. This tension provides a cinematic basis for examining how the film reformulates the traditional relationship between political or cosmic authority and individual conduct (Liu, 2019; Wang, 2026).

The well-known declaration associated with Nezha’s resistance to predetermined fate—“My fate is determined by myself, not by Heaven”—is therefore significant not only for its verbal content but also for its position within the film’s dramatic and cinematic structure. The line marks a moment at which the protagonist explicitly articulates his position in relation to the external forces that have defined him. Framing and visual composition reinforce its significance, while pacing and sound design mark the transition from externally imposed judgment to an explicit assertion of personal agency. Dialogue and cinematic form thus work together to construct the shift from being positioned as the object of judgment to becoming an active participant in determining his own course of action.

3.1.2. Father–Son Relationship: From Hierarchical Authority to Mutual Recognition

The Father–Son relationship is most prominently explored through Nezha and Li Jing. At the beginning of the film, their relationship is defined by conflicting perceptions: others repeatedly treat Nezha as a dangerous being, while Li Jing assumes responsibility for protecting and guiding his son. As a result, their relationship blends

parental authority, social expectations, protection, and emotional attachment.

The film constructs this relationship through both dialogue and cinematic representation. In emotionally significant interactions, close-ups draw attention to the father and son's facial expressions and reactions. At the same time, shot–reverse-shot structures organize their visual exchange during direct interactions. These techniques emphasize reciprocal responses rather than presenting the characters solely through their verbal statements. Framing and visual composition also shape their changing relationship, particularly when physical separation or proximity corresponds with different stages of conflict and recognition.

Editing further shapes this relational development. Changes in framing and editing rhythm distinguish moments of confrontation from moments in which emotional recognition becomes more explicit. The pacing of individual exchanges can therefore alter the viewer's perception of the relationship from immediate conflict toward a more sustained process of mutual response. Rather than functioning merely as a technical transition between shots, editing organizes the temporal structure through which the father and son respond to one another.

Sound design complements these visual and editing strategies. Changes in musical intensity, vocal delivery, and pauses within dialogue accompany shifts between conflict, misunderstanding, and emotional reconciliation. How lines are delivered, along with moments of silence or shifts in musical intensity, contributes to the emotional differentiation between stages of the relationship. Sound therefore works together with close-ups, shot–reverse-shot structures, framing, and editing to construct the father–son relationship through

affective interaction rather than through abstract ethical exposition.

The relationship consequently develops through a gradual process of mutual recognition. Li Jing's role is not limited to exercising paternal authority, and Nezha's development is not simply a rejection of parental control. Instead, the film situates parental responsibility and individual agency within a single emotional narrative. Through characterization, performance, close framing, reciprocal shot structures, editing rhythm, and sound, the relationship is presented as one in which authority and emotional recognition coexist. This configuration provides a basis for examining how the traditional Father–Son relationship is rearticulated through contemporary cinematic conventions of family, sacrifice, and emotional identification (Trần, 2018; Liu, 2019).

3.1.3. Husband–Wife Relationship: Family as a Relational Structure

The Husband–Wife relationship, represented principally through Li Jing and Lady Yin, occupies less narrative space than the Father–Son relationship but contributes to the film's broader construction of family ethics. The film presents their relationship primarily through their cooperation in protecting and raising Nezha and through their responses to the social and supernatural pressures surrounding the family.

The film's *mise-en-scène* and blocking often place Li Jing and Lady Yin in the same domestic or familial space, visually establishing them as participants in a shared familial structure. Their relative positioning within the frame and their coordinated movements contribute to the representation of the couple as acting within a common domestic context. Rather than constructing the relationship primarily through explicit statements about

marital roles, the film uses spatial arrangement and physical interaction to make their shared responsibility visually observable.

Dialogue and coordinated action further emphasize the two characters' cooperation. In moments of crisis, editing alternates between their actions and reactions, connecting their individual decisions into a common narrative. This alternation allows the film to present their responses as interconnected rather than isolated acts. Consequently, this temporal organization helps represent the Husband–Wife relationship as a relational structure based on coordinated action.

Lady Yin's representation is particularly relevant to this reconstruction of family relationships. Rather than functioning solely as a passive figure within the household, she actively participates in Nezha's protection and emotional support. Her characterization, physical actions, and performance help construct her role within the family. Together, blocking, characterization, action, dialogue, and editing therefore present marital and parental responsibility through participation and cooperation.

Visual composition also contributes to this representation by repeatedly placing the two characters within shared familial situations. Their physical proximity, coordinated movements, and responses to the same narrative pressures establish a visual pattern of shared responsibility. In this respect, the cinematic construction of the Husband–Wife relationship depends not on a single technique but on the interaction of mise-en-scène, spatial arrangement, characterization, performance, dialogue, and editing.

The film therefore presents the Husband–Wife relationship through a combination of familial obligation, emotional attachment, and shared responsibility. At the cinematic level,

these meanings are produced through spatial arrangement, blocking, characterization, action, dialogue, editing, and performance rather than through explicit discussion of the Three Bonds as a philosophical doctrine. This pattern is consistent with the film's broader tendency to reconstruct traditional cultural material through contemporary cinematic and emotional forms (Liu, 2019; Wang, 2026).

3.1.4. Cinematic Reconfiguration of the Three Bonds

Taken together, the three relationships demonstrate that the film's treatment of the Three Bonds operates at both narrative and cinematic levels. The Ruler–Minister relationship is represented by the interaction between institutional authority and individual moral agency; the Father–Son relationship by the negotiation between parental responsibility and individual development; and the Husband–Wife relationship by cooperation and shared familial responsibility.

The cinematic construction of these relationships relies on a combination of narrative and formal elements. Mise-en-scène and spatial arrangement establish hierarchies, proximity, separation, and shared familial space; cinematography, including close-ups, framing, visual composition, and shot–reverse-shot structures, organizes attention toward characters and their reciprocal responses; editing and rhythm structure transitions between conflict, recognition, and cooperation; and sound design, including musical intensity, vocal delivery, and pauses, contributes to the differentiation of emotional and relational states. Dialogue and characterization provide the narrative basis for these relationships, while visual symbolism, action, and color further contribute to the film's construction of identity, conflict, and relational responsibility.

Importantly, these representations should not be read as a simple rejection of the traditional Three Bonds. The film retains recognizable structures of authority, family obligation, and relational responsibility while placing them within contemporary narrative, emotional, and cinematic configurations. The transformation therefore occurs through a combination of narrative adaptation and cinematic representation. The Three Bonds are not reproduced as an explicit philosophical doctrine; instead, their relational structures are reconstructed through character interactions, conflicts, emotional responses, visual organization, and cinematic form (Trần, 2018; Liu, 2019; Wang, 2026).

The analysis of the Three Bonds consequently identifies a process of reconfiguration rather than simple replacement. Traditional relational categories remain recognizable, but their meanings are negotiated through new character relationships, conflicts, emotional structures, and cinematic forms. The film thus demonstrates how inherited ethical relationships can be reorganized through contemporary animation's visual, narrative, and audiovisual language. This observation provides the basis for the subsequent discussion of how the film reconstructs traditional Confucian ethics within contemporary popular culture.

3.2. Reinterpreting the Five Constants

The Five Constants—*Ren* (仁), *Yi* (义), *Li* (礼), *Zhi* (智), and *Xin* (信)—provide a second analytical dimension for examining the reconstruction of Confucian ethics in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世]. Whereas the Three Bonds are examined primarily as a system of ethical relationships, the Five Constants are analyzed as moral virtues represented through the actions,

decisions, and relationships of the film's characters (Trần, 2018).

The film does not present these virtues through explicit philosophical exposition alone. Instead, their meanings are constructed through character development, narrative conflict, dialogue, performance, *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing, sound, action, visual symbolism, color, and recurring motifs. The analysis therefore examines both the ethical concepts represented in the film and the cinematic means through which those concepts are constructed and communicated, following existing discussions of the film's cultural reconstruction and visual-narrative strategies (Liu, 2019; Wang, 2026).

For analytical purposes, the Five Constants are examined in relation to their meanings within classical Confucian thought and then compared with their cinematic representations. This approach does not assume that the film reproduces the historical meanings of the Five Constants unchanged. Rather, it investigates continuities, modifications, omissions, and recontextualizations that emerge when these ethical concepts are incorporated into a contemporary animated narrative.

3.2.1. *Ren*

In Confucian ethics, *Ren* (仁) is commonly associated with concern for and humane treatment of others. Confucius describes *Ren* in the *Analects* through the expression “爱人” (“to love others”), while Mencius associates it with the spontaneous feeling of compassion expressed in “恻隐之心，仁之端也” (“the sense of concern for others is the starting point of humaneness”) (*Mencius, Gongsun Chou I*) (Poon, 2015; Muller, 1995/2021). These formulations provide a conceptual basis for examining how the film represents responses to the vulnerability and suffering of others.

The first significant representation of *Ren* occurs during Nezha's encounter with the Yaksha. When the Yaksha abducts a young girl, Nezha intervenes despite having himself been rejected by the people of Chentang Pass. His statement, “妖怪，放开那个小女孩！” (“Demon, release that little girl!”), establishes his immediate response to the girl's danger. The ethical significance of the scene is reinforced by the contrast between Nezha's social position and his action: although the villagers regard him as a dangerous being, he responds to another person's vulnerability rather than reproducing the hostility directed toward him.

The cinematic construction of this sequence further emphasizes the contrast between social perception and individual action. The movement between the villagers' reactions, the endangered child, and Nezha's intervention creates a visual and narrative opposition between collective suspicion and individual response. The editing and transitions between these moments connect the community's reactions to Nezha's physical intervention, making the ethical contrast visible through the organization of action and response. The action sequence therefore allows *Ren* to emerge through behavior rather than through direct philosophical explanation.

The villagers' subsequent reaction provides a contrasting representation. After Nezha helps rescue the girl, the villagers continue to accuse and attack him. Their responses demonstrate the persistence of the social label attached to his identity, even when his actions contradict it. The juxtaposition between Nezha's conduct and the villagers' reactions creates an ethical contrast: the film separates moral behavior from socially assigned identity. The visual opposition between the hostile crowd and Nezha's actions consequently contributes to the construction of *Ren* as an

ethical quality demonstrated through conduct rather than social reputation.

A similar pattern appears in the relationship between Li Jing, Lady Yin, and Nezha. Their treatment of Nezha is represented through repeated everyday interactions rather than through abstract declarations of parental duty. Lady Yin's decision to play shuttlecock with Nezha after returning from demon-slaying, for example, establishes affection through gesture, physical presence, and repeated interaction. The domestic scenes provide a visual contrast to the hostility Nezha encounters outside the family. The difference between these spatial and interpersonal environments allows the film to construct familial concern through recurring actions and physical proximity.

Li Jing's use of the Life-Swapping Talisman constitutes another important representation of *Ren*. His statement, “他是我儿” (“He is my son”), places paternal commitment at the center of the decision. The scene connects verbal expression with physical sacrifice, transforming *Ren* from an abstract virtue into a concrete action involving personal cost. The relationship among dialogue, physical action, and characterization renders the sacrifice's ethical meaning legible through the cinematic event itself.

Taken together, these scenes portray *Ren* as compassionate, protective, physically present, and interpersonally attached. The film consequently relocates the discussion of *Ren* from abstract moral doctrine to concrete relationships and actions. At the cinematic level, editing, action sequences, visual contrast, characterization, gesture, and spatial organization participate in this reconstruction, while leaving open the question of how this contemporary representation relates to the broader Confucian understanding of humane conduct (Poon, 2015; Muller, 1995/2021; Liu, 2019).

3.2.2. *Yi*

In Confucian ethics, *Yi* (义) refers broadly to acting according to what is morally appropriate rather than according to personal benefit. The *Analects* states, “君子喻于义，小人喻于利” (“The gentleman understands what is right; the petty person understands what is profitable”), while Mencius associates *Yi* with “羞恶之心，义之端也” (“the sense of shame and dislike is the starting point of righteousness”) (*Mencius, Gongsun Chou I*) (Muller, 1995/2021). These formulations provide a basis for examining situations in which characters must choose between competing obligations and interests.

Ao Bing provides the most sustained example of this conflict. Although he initially displays concern for Nezha and the abducted girl, his subsequent actions are increasingly shaped by his obligations to the Dragon Tribe. The Ten Thousand Dragons Armor, the expectations placed upon him by the Dragon King, and the clan’s aspiration for restoration visually and narratively associate his individual identity with a collective mission.

The film represents this pressure through characterization and visual symbolism. The Ten Thousand Dragons Armor functions not only as a physical object but also as a recurring visual marker of Ao Bing’s connection to the Dragon Tribe. Its presence links his individual body to the collective expectations placed upon him. The visual representation of the armor therefore complements the narrative construction of his divided position: he is simultaneously an individual character and a representative of a collective group.

The narrative subsequently contrasts his obligations to the clan with his developing friendship with Nezha. Ao Bing’s characterization is constructed through this tension between personal attachment and

collective responsibility. His decisions, physical actions, and interactions with Nezha progressively reveal the difficulty of reconciling these competing demands.

Ao Bing’s decision to flood Chentang Pass represents the point at which these competing obligations become a direct moral conflict. His action places the interests of the Dragon Tribe above the safety of the local population. The film does not, however, portray this decision as the disappearance of his moral awareness. His subsequent reactions, including hesitation and remorse, indicate that the conflict between individual moral judgment and collective obligation persists in the narrative.

The final confrontation rearticulates this conflict. As Nezha confronts the Heavenly Thunder, Ao Bing intervenes and accepts its consequences alongside him. Through the integration of physical action, dialogue, visual effects, and sound, the sequence positions the two characters in a shared movement toward the same threat. Their coordinated action therefore constitutes a visual and narrative expression of personal commitment realized through bodily sacrifice.

Ao Bing’s decision can therefore be read as a cinematic representation of *Yi* as moral choice. Rather than acting primarily in the interests of his clan, he acts in light of his relationship with Nezha and his recognition of the consequences of his earlier actions. The ethical significance of this decision is constructed through the interaction of characterization, action, dialogue, visual effects, and sound rather than through philosophical exposition alone (Muller, 1995/2021; Liu, 2019; Wang, 2026).

The representation of *Yi* thus develops through a movement between competing obligations rather than through a simple opposition between virtue and vice. Ao Bing’s

trajectory illustrates how the film places individual moral judgment in tension with collective responsibility, then resolves that tension through a personal ethical choice.

3.2.3. *Li*

In Confucian thought, *Li* (禮) encompasses ritual propriety, normative conduct, and socially embedded forms of interaction. Confucius connects *Li* with the practice of *Ren* in the statement “克己复礼为仁” (“to subdue oneself and return to *Li* is *Ren*”) (*Analects*, Yan Yuan) (Legge, 1861; Muller, 1995/2021). The *Book of Rites* likewise associates *Li* with the organization of social relationships and normative order. Accordingly, *Li* should not be reduced to etiquette or external politeness; it encompasses practices through which moral and social relationships are expressed.

The film explores this dimension of *Li* through the relationship between formal social recognition and interpersonal relationships. The Map of Mountains and Rivers and States provides one visual representation of this tension. Taiyi Zhenren places Nezha inside the painting for cultivation and tells him that after mastering demon-slaying skills he will gain the respect of the people. The spatial isolation of the painting separates Nezha from the community that he wishes to enter. The mise-en-scène and spatial setting therefore connect physical separation with the narrative question of whether technical achievement can produce social recognition.

The spatial organization of this sequence is significant because the painting creates a distinct environment in which Nezha is physically separated from the social world outside it. The visual contrast between the enclosed space of cultivation and the community from which he remains excluded contributes to the film's representation of the relationship

between individual conduct and social recognition.

A similar tension appears in the birthday banquet organized by Li Jing. The banquet brings together formal elements of social interaction—invitation, ceremony, gathering, and public recognition—but these elements become unstable when the participants' underlying attitudes toward Nezha are revealed. The organization of the banquet space, the gathering of characters, and the subsequent changes in interaction create a contrast between the formal appearance of social inclusion and the persistence of social exclusion.

The contrast between these situations becomes particularly important in the film's final sequence. After deciding to confront the Heavenly Thunder, Nezha kneels toward his parents from a distance. Unlike the birthday banquet, this gesture occurs without a formal audience or elaborate ceremony. Its significance is constructed through the character's physical gesture, spatial separation, and the emotional context of the scene. The bodily action of kneeling functions simultaneously as a recognizable ritualized gesture and as an expression of personal recognition toward his parents.

Editing and scene juxtaposition further connect these two representations of *Li*. The birthday banquet foregrounds the social and public dimensions of ritualized interaction, whereas Nezha's final gesture foregrounds personal emotion and familial recognition. The contrast does not necessarily eliminate the normative dimension of *Li*; rather, it shifts the emphasis between public social form and interpersonal meaning.

The film therefore retains recognizable forms of ritualized conduct while relocating their significance toward interpersonal relationships and emotional recognition. Through mise-en-scène, spatial arrangement,

characterization, gesture, and contrast between scenes, *Li* is represented as a relationship between social form and the moral meanings attached to that form (Legge, 1861; Muller, 1995/2021; Liu, 2019).

3.2.4. *Zhi*

In Confucian ethics, *Zhi* (智) concerns moral understanding and the capacity to distinguish and respond appropriately to situations. The *Analects* and *Doctrine of the Mean* associate wisdom with knowledge, discernment, and the ability to understand moral distinctions (Muller, 1995/2021). These ideas provide a basis for examining the film's representation of knowledge, self-understanding, and moral judgment.

Nezha's development provides the central narrative through which this virtue is represented. Throughout the first half of the film, his understanding of himself is shaped by competing external descriptions. The people of Chentang Pass identify him as a demon, while his parents conceal his actual identity by presenting him as the reincarnation of the Spiritual Pearl. His self-understanding is consequently mediated by conflicting interpretations provided by others.

This conflict is represented through dialogue, characterization, and narrative revelation. The contradictory descriptions of Nezha's identity establish competing versions of who he is, while dialogue functions as the immediate means through which these interpretations are communicated. At the birthday banquet, Shen Gongbao's disclosure of Nezha's identity disrupts the narrative that Nezha has previously accepted. The revelation changes the meaning of earlier events and forces the protagonist to reassess his relationship with his parents, the villagers, and his own identity.

The cinematic organization of this revelation is important to the representation of *Zhi*. The disclosure functions as a narrative turning point because it changes the interpretive framework through which Nezha understands the preceding events. The transition from previously accepted information to newly revealed information therefore parallels the character's movement from an externally mediated understanding toward active reassessment.

The subsequent sequence involving the Wind-Fire Wheels further develops this process of recognition. The visual presentation of Li Jing's sacrifice allows Nezha to reconsider his previous understanding of his father and of himself. The scene connects visual information with emotional recognition, enabling the protagonist to reinterpret an earlier relationship in light of newly perceived motives and actions.

Nezha's statement, “我命由我不由天，是魔是仙，我自己说了算” (“My fate is determined by myself, not by Heaven; whether demon or immortal, I decide for myself”), summarizes this transformation at the level of dialogue. Its significance, however, is produced by the narrative and cinematic development that precedes it. The statement follows a sequence of revelation, emotional confrontation, and self-reflection, allowing the declaration to function as the articulation of a newly formed moral position rather than merely as a slogan of rebellion. Dialogue, characterization, narrative pacing, visual composition, and sound therefore converge in the construction of this turning point.

Ao Bing's trajectory provides a parallel but distinct representation of *Zhi*. Unlike Nezha, his difficulty lies less in the uncertainty of his identity than in his inability to recognize the extent to which his individual judgment has been shaped by the expectations of the Dragon Tribe. His eventual decision to assist Nezha

therefore involves a reconsideration of his relationship to the collective mission imposed upon him.

The film consequently represents *Zhi* through processes of recognition, reassessment, and moral discernment. Rather than presenting wisdom solely as the acquisition of external knowledge, the narrative associates it with the capacity to reconsider inherited identities and judgments in light of new experience. This process is constructed through dialogue, narrative revelation, characterization, visual development, and the placement of key statements within the film's broader dramatic structure (Muller, 1995/2021; Liu, 2019).

3.2.5. *Xin*

Within Confucian ethics, *Xin* (信) is associated with trustworthiness, reliability, and the fulfillment of commitments. The *Analects* states, “人而无信，不知其可也” (“If a person lacks trustworthiness, it is unclear how they can function”), emphasizing the importance of trust in interpersonal and social relationships (Muller, 1995/2021).

In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, *Xin* is most visibly represented through the relationship between Nezha and Ao Bing. Their first encounter establishes a relationship that contrasts with the identities imposed upon them by their respective communities. After jointly confronting the Yaksha, Nezha gives Ao Bing a shuttlecock and states, “以后我们就是朋友了” (“From now on, we are friends”). The object subsequently functions as a recurring visual motif associated with their friendship.

The shuttlecock is particularly significant because it is connected to Nezha's attempts to establish an interpersonal relationship. Its movement between the two characters provides a simple visual representation of reciprocity and acceptance. The use of the object as a recurring prop allows the film to connect

separate moments in the relationship through a shared visual sign. *Xin* is therefore constructed through an everyday object and a brief interpersonal exchange rather than through an explicit statement of moral theory.

The relationship is subsequently disrupted at the birthday banquet when the identities of the two characters are revealed. The narrative transforms their relationship from friendship into opposition, while the emotional reactions of both characters indicate that their earlier connection remains relevant to the later conflict. The contrast between their earlier interaction and subsequent confrontation creates the central dramatic tension through which trust is tested.

Characterization and dialogue contribute to this transformation. The differences between the characters' earlier friendly interaction and their later confrontation are communicated through changes in behavior, speech, physical positioning, and emotional response. The conflict therefore operates not only at the level of plot but also through the changing audiovisual representation of the relationship.

When Nezha later tells Ao Bing, “敖丙，你是我唯一的朋友” (“Ao Bing, you are my only friend”), the statement recalls their earlier relationship while simultaneously confronting the rupture between them. The repetition of the friendship motif connects the two scenes and gives the earlier interaction a renewed significance within the later conflict. The dialogue and recurring prop thus function together as narrative and visual devices that link different stages of the relationship.

The final cooperation between Nezha and Ao Bing resolves this relational tension. Their decision to confront the Heavenly Thunder together restores their cooperation through action rather than through verbal reconciliation alone. The coordinated physical action of the

two characters provides a visual expression of renewed relational commitment.

The film therefore represents *Xin* as a form of interpersonal trust that is tested by conflicting identities, social obligations, and moral choices. At the cinematic level, this reconstruction is produced through characterization, dialogue, action, prop symbolism, visual motif, repetition, and the contrast between earlier and later interactions (Muller, 1995/2021; Liu, 2019; Wang, 2026).

Taken together, the five virtues are represented through distinct but interconnected narrative and cinematic structures. *Ren* is associated with compassion and protection; *Yi* with moral choice amid competing obligations; *Li* with the relationship between social form and interpersonal meaning; *Zhi* with recognition and moral discernment; and *Xin* with trust and relational commitment. These representations do not simply reproduce the Five Constants in their classical formulations. Rather, the film places traditional ethical categories within contemporary situations of identity, family, friendship, social exclusion, and individual choice.

At the cinematic level, this reconstruction is achieved through the interaction of characterization, dialogue, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, sound, action, visual symbolism, color, and recurring motifs. These elements do not function merely as stylistic devices; they participate in constructing ethical meaning by organizing the presentation of characters, relationships, conflicts, and moral decisions. The Five Constants therefore function not only as philosophical concepts represented by the characters but also as ethical meanings constructed through the formal language of animation.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Boundaries of the Adaptation of Confucian Thought in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*

Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世] reconfigures several Confucian ethical relationships and virtues through contemporary narrative and cinematic forms. The preceding analysis has shown how the film places particular emphasis on family relationships, individual moral choice, emotional attachment, and the preservation of personal agency. These meanings are constructed not only through narrative and characterization but also through mise-en-scène, spatial arrangement, cinematography, editing, sound, visual symbolism, action, and recurring motifs. At the same time, examining the film alongside the broader intellectual dimensions of Confucian thought reveals several areas that receive comparatively limited representation. These should not necessarily be understood as shortcomings in the film itself, but rather as boundaries of its particular adaptation strategy. The film selectively foregrounds certain dimensions of Confucian ethics while leaving others less developed, especially those concerning political governance, the relationship between family and community, philosophical debates over moral order, and the extension of self-cultivation into social responsibility. The following discussion examines these boundaries from four related perspectives.

4.1.1. The Moralization and Depoliticization of Confucian Thought

Confucian thought encompasses both individual moral cultivation and questions of political governance. The *Analects* · *Wei Zheng*, for example, connects political order with moral conduct: “For governing by virtue, it is like the

North Star—it stays in its place while all the other stars revolve around it.” [Original Chinese: 为政以德，譬如北辰，居其所而众星共之.] (Muller, 1995/2021) Moral cultivation and political responsibility are therefore not necessarily separate domains within the Confucian tradition. The *Analects* also associates self-cultivation with the capacity to bring peace to others and to the people, while the *Great Learning* places the governance of the state within a broader sequence extending from self-cultivation and family regulation to the ordering of the world.

Mencius similarly connects moral principles with political responsibility. His formulation that “the people are the most important; the altars of the land and grain come next; the ruler is the least important” [Original Chinese: 民为贵，社稷次之，君为轻.] (*Mencius · Jinxin II*) Sabattini (2012) illustrates the importance of the people in his conception of a legitimate political order. Other classical formulations, including the warning that oppressive government is fiercer than a tiger and Mencius’s criticism of rulers who accumulate wealth while their people suffer, likewise demonstrate that Confucian thought contains a substantial concern with public governance and political morality.

Against this broader intellectual background, the film places greater emphasis on the personal and relational dimensions of ethical experience than on institutional or political questions. The major conflicts surrounding Nezha, Ao Bing, the Li family, and the people of Chentang Pass are primarily articulated through personal relationships, moral choices, and emotional responses. The film provides comparatively little narrative space for examining the institutional structures through which these conflicts emerge.

This tendency can be observed in the representation of the Heavenly Court and the Heavenly Tribulation. The Heavenly Court possesses considerable authority over the lives of the protagonists, while the Dragon Clan occupies a subordinate position despite its service to the established order. These circumstances establish a broader question concerning the operation and legitimacy of the existing hierarchy. Yet the narrative does not develop this question into an extended examination of political institutions. Instead, the conflict is largely reframed through Nezha’s individual response to the fate assigned to him. His declaration, “My fate is determined by myself, not by Heaven” [Original Chinese: 我命由我不由天], consequently functions primarily as a statement of personal agency.

The cinematic structure reinforces this emphasis by concentrating ethical conflicts within individual characters. Nezha’s struggle against social prejudice, Ao Bing’s conflict between personal attachment and collective obligation, and Li Jing’s decision to exchange his fate for his son’s are all presented through character-centered narrative sequences. Their ethical significance is further constructed through close attention to characterization, framing, action, dialogue, editing, and sound. The resolution likewise takes the form of individual action and interpersonal solidarity. The institutional order that establishes the Heavenly Tribulation and the Dragon Clan’s position is not substantially transformed by the conclusion of the narrative.

This does not mean that the film entirely eliminates questions of authority or social order. Rather, such questions are translated into a predominantly personal moral register. The Heavenly Court provides the structural setting for the conflict, but the narrative’s ethical and emotional resolution occurs through the

protagonists' choices rather than through institutional reform. The cinematic emphasis on individual faces, bodily action, interpersonal confrontation, and emotionally charged dialogue further concentrates these broader structural tensions within character experience.

The distinction is significant for understanding the film's reconstruction of Confucian thought. Rather than representing the full relationship between moral cultivation and political governance found across the Confucian tradition, the film concentrates on the transformation of the self and the restoration or renegotiation of interpersonal relationships. Its treatment of Confucian ethics can therefore be understood as a process of moral and interpersonal recontextualization, in which questions of institutional order remain present as narrative conditions but are not developed as an independent object of ethical reflection.

4.1.2. Elevation of the Family While Narrowing the Concepts of Community and State

The prominence of family relationships in the film corresponds with an important dimension of Confucian ethics. The *Great Learning* states: "Those who wished to govern well their states first harmonized their clans. Those who wished to harmonize their clans first cultivated themselves." [Original Chinese: 欲治其国者，先齐其家；欲齐其家者，先修其身。] (Muller, 1992/2018) This formulation places the family within a broader ethical sequence rather than treating it as an isolated sphere of private life.

Similarly, Confucian discussions of moral concern extend beyond immediate kinship. In *Mencius · Jinxin I*, the extension of care from one's own family toward others provides one basis for understanding how particular relationships can develop into broader forms of social concern. The formulation "all within the four seas are brothers" [Original Chinese: 四海

之内皆兄弟] likewise expresses an ideal of expanding interpersonal responsibility beyond the immediate family.

In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, however, the family constitutes the most developed and emotionally elaborated ethical space. Li Jing's decision to exchange his fate with Nezha, Lady Yin's continued companionship and support, and Nezha's final gesture toward his parents all establish the Li family as the central site in which ethical commitment is demonstrated. As shown in Section 3.1, these meanings are constructed through dialogue, performance, spatial proximity, blocking, characterization, and the organization of emotionally significant scenes. Family relationships therefore become closely associated with protection, sacrifice, recognition, and mutual responsibility.

When the analysis moves beyond the Li family, however, the representation of broader social relationships becomes comparatively less developed. The people of Chentang Pass appear primarily as a collective rather than as a differentiated community. Their attitudes toward Nezha change across the narrative: they initially fear and reject him, later withdraw from him, and finally recognize his actions after he protects the city. Their function is therefore closely connected to the protagonist's social experience and character development.

This representation distinguishes between family, as an internally developed ethical relationship, and community, as a more collective narrative category. The film gives individual family members distinctive emotional trajectories, whereas the people of Chentang Pass receive considerably less individualized characterization. As a result, the community primarily functions as the social environment within which Nezha experiences exclusion and later recognition, rather than as a

fully developed object of ethical reflection in its own right.

A similar pattern can be observed in the treatment of the state and larger political order. The film establishes institutional structures through the Heavenly Court, the Dragon Clan, and the position of Li Jing as commander of Chentang Pass, but these structures remain largely part of the narrative setting rather than becoming sustained objects of political deliberation. The central conflict remains geographically and narratively concentrated around Chentang Pass and the immediate relationships among its principal characters.

This differs in emphasis from the broader historical and dynastic framework of *Investiture of the Gods* [Original Chinese: 封神演义], in which Nezha's story forms part of a larger narrative concerning political authority, dynastic transformation, and the establishment of a new order. The 2019 film does not reproduce this wider political framework in the same form. Instead, it reorganizes the narrative around a more localized conflict involving family, social prejudice, personal identity, and the community's survival.

The result is a particular configuration of Confucian ethics in which family ethics receive substantial narrative, emotional, and cinematic elaboration, while the movement from family ethics toward community, state, and broader social responsibility remains comparatively understated. This does not invalidate the film's representation of filial or familial ethics; rather, it indicates that the adaptation selects one segment of the broader Confucian ethical structure for greater narrative and cinematic development.

4.1.3. Philosophical Contradictions Reconfigured as Personal Conflicts

Confucian thought contains a number of philosophical tensions concerning the

relationship between human action and Heaven, emotion and principle, individual desire and moral norms, and moral ideals and political reality. These tensions have generated different interpretations throughout the development of Confucian thought. Confucius's statement "knowing that it cannot be done, yet still doing it" [Original Chinese: 知其不可而为之] (*Analects · Xian Wen*), for example, illustrates a complex relationship between human agency and circumstances that cannot be fully controlled. Likewise, the contrast between Mencius's account of innate moral tendencies and Xunzi's theory of human nature demonstrates that Confucian thinkers did not provide a single, uniform account of the relationship between human nature, morality, and cultivation.

The film engages with some of these questions, but it primarily expresses them through the personal conflicts of its protagonists. The tension between heavenly determination and human agency is concentrated in Nezha's relationship with the Heavenly Tribulation and with the identity assigned to him as the Demon Pill. The narrative consequently transforms a broader question concerning Heaven, destiny, and human action into a conflict experienced through an individual character.

Nezha's declaration, "My fate is determined by myself, not by Heaven" [Original Chinese: 我命由我不由天], is central to this process. Within the narrative, the statement expresses his rejection of an externally assigned identity and his insistence on the significance of personal choice. However, as shown in Section 3.2.4, its significance is not produced by dialogue alone. Its position within the sequence of revelation, confrontation, characterization, visual composition, pacing, and sound allows the statement to function as the articulation of a developing moral position.

At the same time, the film does not substantially explore the different meanings that *tianming* (天命) acquires within the longer history of Confucian thought. Confucian discussions of Heaven include not only the question of external determination but also questions concerning moral responsibility, human conduct, and the limits of human knowledge. Confucius's injunction to "revere heavenly mandate" [Original Chinese: 畏天命] (*Analects · Ji Shi*), for instance, presents a different relationship between human agency and Heaven from the binary opposition suggested by the film's central declaration.

A comparable simplification is evident in the film's representation of good and evil. The division of the Primordial Pearl into the Demon Pill and the Spiritual Pearl establishes a clear narrative distinction between two origins. This structure provides an important basis for Nezha and Ao Bing's parallel character trajectories: both characters inherit identities and expectations associated with their respective origins, while their subsequent choices complicate those initial classifications.

The film therefore simultaneously establishes and challenges an origin-based moral distinction. Nezha is associated with the Demon Pill and is consequently treated as dangerous, while Ao Bing is associated with the Spiritual Pearl and is initially regarded as virtuous. As the narrative develops, however, their behavior does not consistently align with these initial classifications. The contrast between inherited identity and subsequent moral choice becomes one of the film's principal ethical conflicts.

From the perspective of Confucian thought, this configuration can be read alongside longstanding debates concerning human nature and moral cultivation. Mencius emphasizes the development of innate moral tendencies,

whereas Xunzi emphasizes transformation through ritual, education, and deliberate practice. The film does not reproduce either position directly. Instead, it translates the question of moral formation into the narrative opposition between inherited identity and individual choice.

This reconfiguration is also a process of cinematic embodiment. Philosophical questions that might otherwise require abstract conceptual exposition are expressed through character design, performance, action, visual contrasts, dialogue, narrative revelation, and audiovisual transitions. The ethical problem is consequently experienced through the protagonists' changing relationships and decisions rather than articulated primarily as a philosophical argument.

The adaptation consequently renders questions of destiny, moral identity, and human nature through personal conflict and cinematic narrative. At the same time, some of the conceptual complexity of the underlying philosophical debates remains implicit rather than being developed through sustained philosophical argument.

4.1.4. Elevation of Individual Agency and the Relative Underdevelopment of Social Responsibility

Confucian theories of self-cultivation generally connect the formation of the individual with responsibility toward others. In the *Analects · Xian Wen*, Confucius describes successive forms of self-cultivation as "cultivate oneself to achieve reverence," "cultivate oneself to bring peace to others," and "cultivate oneself to bring peace to the people" [Original Chinese: 修己以敬、修己以安人、修己以安百姓]. The ethical development of the individual is therefore linked to an expanding sphere of responsibility.

Similarly, the principle “If you wish to establish yourself, help others to establish themselves; if you wish to achieve, help others to achieve” [Original Chinese: 己欲立而立人, 己欲达而达人] (*Analects* · *Yong Ye*) connects individual moral development with the development of others. From this perspective, self-cultivation is not necessarily an endpoint in itself but can provide a basis for social participation and responsibility.

Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child places considerable narrative emphasis on individual agency. Nezha’s struggle to determine his identity, his resistance to the expectations tied to the Demon Pill, and his eventual decision to confront the Heavenly Tribulation all contribute to a narrative centered on personal choice. The statement “My fate is determined by myself, not by Heaven” functions within this structure as a concise articulation of individual agency.

This emphasis also has points of correspondence with Confucian discussions of moral independence. The *Analects* states that “the commander of three armies can be captured, but the will of a common man cannot be taken away” [Original Chinese: 三军可夺帅也, 匹夫不可夺志也] (*Analects* · *Zi Han*). The film’s emphasis on Nezha’s determination can therefore be read in relation to a broader Confucian concern with maintaining moral resolve under external pressure.

Nevertheless, the film’s narrative arc places greater emphasis on establishing one’s own identity and overcoming external judgment than on the subsequent expansion of that moral agency into sustained social responsibility. Nezha’s development is closely tied to his desire to move beyond the identity imposed on him by the people of Chentang Pass. His eventual act of protecting the city demonstrates that his individual struggle has consequences for others, but the film provides comparatively limited

exploration of what sustained responsibility toward the community might involve after the immediate crisis has been resolved.

This distinction is also visible in the narrative and cinematic structure. Much of Nezha’s journey is organized around questions of identity, recognition, and the relationship between personal choice and external expectations. The protection of Chentang Pass becomes the decisive moment through which his moral agency is translated into protective action. In this sense, action and spectacle provide the cinematic form through which individual agency becomes publicly consequential. Social responsibility is therefore most visible at the point where personal agency is translated into action on behalf of others, rather than being developed throughout the narrative as an independent ethical objective.

The contrast with *Investiture of the Gods* is again primarily one of narrative scale and emphasis rather than a question of fidelity. The earlier mythological narrative situates Nezha within a broader political and dynastic framework, whereas the 2019 film reworks his story around personal identity, family relationships, social recognition, and immediate communal survival. Consequently, the relationship between individual moral development and larger historical or political responsibility occupies a less prominent position in the contemporary adaptation.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the film places particular emphasis on those dimensions of Confucian ethics that can be articulated through personal agency, emotional relationships, moral choice, and self-cultivation. Other dimensions—especially the extension of self-cultivation toward sustained social and political responsibility—remain less fully developed. The resulting representation should therefore be understood not as a comprehensive

reproduction of Confucian ethics, but as a selective reconstruction shaped by the narrative priorities and cinematic form of contemporary popular culture.

The boundaries identified above are important for understanding the cultural function of the adaptation. The film does not simply reproduce Confucian ethics in their historical configuration, nor does it entirely abandon them. Instead, it reorganizes selected ethical concepts around a contemporary narrative centered on individual agency, family attachment, moral choice, and interpersonal solidarity. The preceding analysis also shows that this reorganization operates through cinematic form: relationships and ethical conflicts are rendered through spatial arrangements, framing, editing, sound, performance, action, visual symbolism, and recurring motifs. The significance of the adaptation therefore lies not only in what it retains, but also in the pattern of selection, recontextualization, and cinematic embodiment through which traditional ethical resources are reorganized within contemporary popular cinema.

4.2. The Cultural Rationale for Adapting Confucian Thought in Contemporary Cinema

The preceding discussion has identified several boundaries in the film's reconstruction of Confucian thought, particularly the relatively limited treatment of political governance, broader community responsibility, and the philosophical complexity of Confucian concepts. These boundaries, however, do not by themselves determine the cultural significance of the adaptation. Rather, they point to a broader question concerning the conditions under which a premodern ethical tradition can be represented within contemporary popular cinema.

From this perspective, adaptation can be understood not simply as a choice between preserving and changing tradition, but as a

process through which inherited concepts are selected, reformulated, and placed within new systems of meaning. In the case of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世], this process can be examined in relation to three interconnected factors: changes in the contemporary social and ethical context, the expressive characteristics of the cinematic medium, and the continuing reinterpretation of tradition across historical periods.

4.2.1. Changes in the Contemporary Context of Reception

Ethical traditions do not circulate independently of the historical contexts in which they are received. Concepts developed within premodern social structures may acquire different meanings when represented in societies with different understandings of individual agency, equality, family relationships, and social identity. Contemporary audiences do not necessarily approach concepts such as filial piety, authority, or moral obligation with exactly the same assumptions as audiences in earlier historical periods.

This contextual difference is particularly relevant to the representation of Nezha. In *Investiture of the Gods* [Original Chinese: 封神演义], the episode commonly associated with “cutting the flesh and returning it to the mother and the bones to the father” [Original Chinese: 剔骨还父] is embedded within a narrative structure in which filial obligation, parental authority, and supernatural hierarchy are closely connected. The 2019 film does not reproduce this configuration in the same form. Instead, it reorganizes the Father–Son relationship around Li Jing's willingness to exchange his fate with Nezha and his repeated efforts to protect and recognize his son.

This transformation changes the ethical emphasis of the relationship. Rather than presenting filiality primarily through obedience

to parental authority, the film places greater emphasis on mutual recognition, emotional attachment, protection, and sacrifice. The result is not simply the removal of filial ethics, but a change in the relational structure through which filiality is represented within the narrative.

A similar process occurs in the treatment of individual agency. The statement “My fate is determined by myself, not by Heaven” [Original Chinese: 我命由我不由天] provides a particularly concise expression of the film’s emphasis on personal choice. Within the narrative, Nezha is confronted with an identity imposed upon him by his origin as the Demon Pill and by the judgments of the surrounding community. His response is consequently framed through the question of whether inherited identity should determine subsequent moral action.

This emphasis can be placed in dialogue with Confucian discussions of moral agency and self-cultivation. The *Analects*, for example, emphasizes the importance of maintaining one’s moral resolve even under external pressure: “The commander of three armies can be captured, but the will of a common man cannot be taken away” [Original Chinese: 三军可夺帅也，匹夫不可夺志也] (*Analects* · *Zi Han*). The film does not reproduce this idea as a philosophical proposition. Instead, it translates the question of moral determination into the narrative experience of a character struggling against an externally assigned identity.

The adaptation can therefore be understood as a process of contextual translation. Concepts such as filiality, moral responsibility, and personal resolve are not presented exclusively through their historical institutional forms; they are reorganized through relationships and conflicts situated within a contemporary narrative context. This contextualization is reflected in the prominence of emotional

recognition, individual choice, and interpersonal solidarity in the film.

At the same time, such contextual translation has consequences for what becomes less visible. As discussed in Section 4.1, the greater emphasis on individual and familial experience leaves the political and institutional dimensions of Confucian thought relatively underdeveloped. Adaptation therefore involves not only the recontextualization of ethical concepts, but also the establishment of a particular hierarchy of emphasis among the different dimensions of a tradition.

4.2.2. *The Expressive Characteristics of the Cinematic Medium*

A second factor concerns the characteristics of cinema itself. Confucian ethical concepts are often formulated through philosophical propositions, discussions of ritual and conduct, and reflections on relationships and moral cultivation. Cinema operates through a different expressive system. Abstract concepts must be represented through characters, situations, performances, dialogue, visual composition, sound, editing, and narrative development.

The proposition “To subdue oneself and return to ritual is humaneness” [Original Chinese: 克己复礼为仁], for example, can be examined conceptually within the *Analects*. A cinematic narrative, by contrast, can represent related ethical questions through a character’s concrete actions and relationships. In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, questions of *Ren* emerge through Nezha’s interactions with other characters; questions of *Yi* are represented through choices made under conflicting obligations; *Li* is associated with both social forms and interpersonal relationships; and *Zhi* and *Xin* are developed through processes of recognition, judgment, trust, and cooperation.

The cinematic form consequently translates ethical concepts into narrative, visual,

and auditory forms. An ethical problem is constructed not only through what a character says, but also through facial expression, movement, interaction with others, spatial position, framing, visual composition, editing, sound, and the scene's temporal organization. In this respect, the adaptation of Confucian thought is inseparable from the formal properties of the medium.

This process also explains why some philosophical distinctions become less explicit in the film. A philosophical discussion can sustain conceptual ambiguity over an extended argument, whereas a feature film must organize ethical conflicts within a limited narrative duration. The opposition between the Demon Pill and the Spiritual Pearl, for instance, provides a clear narrative structure through which the film can dramatize questions of identity and moral choice. The film then complicates this distinction through the actions of Nezha and Ao Bing, but it expresses the philosophical question of human nature primarily through character development rather than sustained theoretical exposition.

The same principle applies to the film's treatment of *tianming* (天命). The tension between Heaven and human agency is rendered through the concrete conflict surrounding Nezha's predetermined fate. The statement "My fate is determined by myself, not by Heaven" [Original Chinese: 我命由我不由天] consequently condenses a complex conceptual problem into a memorable narrative proposition. This does not exhaust the philosophical meaning of *tianming*, but it provides a cinematic form through which the question is rendered as an individual conflict.

The commercial circulation of cinema also forms part of this context. *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* became a major commercial success in China, indicating the capacity of

contemporary animation to circulate traditional cultural material on a large scale. However, box-office performance alone cannot establish how audiences interpreted or internalized the film's ethical messages. What can be observed more directly is that the film employs a combination of familiar mythological material, character-centered conflict, humor, emotional relationships, action sequences, and contemporary narrative structures to organize its representation of traditional values.

The film also incorporates narrative patterns common in contemporary popular storytelling, including the misunderstood protagonist, conflict between inherited identity and personal choice, moral transformation, and self-sacrifice. These patterns provide a narrative structure through which traditional mythological and ethical materials are reorganized for contemporary popular cinema. This observation does not imply direct reproduction of any particular external narrative model; rather, it illustrates how inherited Chinese cultural materials can be articulated through narrative structures associated with contemporary mass entertainment.

Accordingly, the transformation of Confucian thought in the film should not be understood simply as a reduction from "philosophy" to "entertainment." It is more precisely a change of representational form: philosophical and ethical propositions are reorganized into character relationships, conflicts, visual motifs, emotional trajectories, and narrative resolutions. What becomes less explicit at the level of conceptual elaboration is consequently represented through other cinematic forms, including characterization, visual composition, editing, and sound.

4.2.3. *Adaptation as a Mode of Cultural Continuity*

A third perspective concerns the historical

character of tradition itself. Treating tradition as something that can survive only through exact preservation assumes that its meaning remains independent of historical interpretation. Hermeneutic approaches, however, emphasize that understanding is historically situated and that inherited texts acquire new meanings through their encounters with later interpreters and contexts (Gadamer, 2004).

This perspective is particularly relevant to the history of Confucian thought. Confucianism has never existed as a completely static body of propositions. Different historical periods have selected, interpreted, and reorganized earlier concepts in response to changing intellectual and social circumstances. Confucius described himself as one who “transmits but does not create, believes in and loves antiquity” [Original Chinese: 述而不作, 信而好古] (*Analects · Shu Er*). Yet the Confucian tradition that subsequently developed was shaped by continued reinterpretation of earlier concepts.

Mencius, for example, developed distinctive accounts of human nature, moral cultivation, and humane government in response to the Warring States period’s intellectual and political circumstances. Later Confucian thinkers likewise reformulated earlier concepts through new intellectual vocabularies and in response to Buddhism, Daoism, and other philosophical developments. Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, including discussions of *tianli* (天理) and *liangzhi* (良知), shows how concepts inherited from earlier Confucian traditions could acquire new philosophical configurations.

The historical development of Confucian thought therefore provides a useful context for understanding contemporary adaptation. The question is not simply whether a modern cultural product reproduces an earlier formulation word for word, but how it selects

and interprets inherited concepts under new historical conditions.

Within this framework, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* can be understood as one contemporary instance of such reinterpretation. The film does not reproduce the Three Bonds and Five Constants as a complete historical ethical system. Instead, it selects specific elements—filial attachment, compassion, moral choice, personal resolve, trust, and interpersonal responsibility—and situates them within a contemporary narrative about identity and fate.

The transformation of filiality is especially illustrative. The film moves away from a representation centered primarily on hierarchical obedience and places greater narrative emphasis on reciprocal emotional commitment between parents and child. Likewise, *Yi* is represented by decisions made when personal attachment and collective obligations conflict, while *Zhi* is associated with processes of recognition and reassessment. *Li* is reconfigured through the relationship between formal social norms and interpersonal recognition, while *Xin* is represented through the development and testing of trust between Nezha and Ao Bing. These transformations do not exhaust the historical meanings of the concepts, but they demonstrate how ethical categories can acquire different narrative functions when relocated into a contemporary cinematic environment.

From this perspective, adaptation is better understood as a mode of cultural continuity through reinterpretation. Continuity does not necessarily require preserving every historical feature. It can also involve the continued circulation of concepts whose meanings are renegotiated in response to new social conditions, media forms, and interpretive contexts.

This understanding also provides a basis for connecting the findings of Sections 3 and 4.

The reconstruction identified in the film should not be evaluated solely on whether it matches classical formulations exactly. Nor should the presence of transformation automatically be interpreted as a loss of cultural authenticity. Instead, the analytical question is how the film redistributes emphasis among different dimensions of Confucian ethics and what new configurations emerge from that redistribution.

The case of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* therefore demonstrates both the possibilities and boundaries of contemporary adaptation. On the one hand, the film provides a cinematic form through which concepts such as filiality, *Ren*, *Yi*, *Li*, *Zhi*, and *Xin* can be integrated into character-centered narratives and interpersonal conflicts. On the other hand, the same process gives less narrative prominence to political governance, institutional critique, and the broader relationship between self-cultivation and public responsibility.

These two dimensions should be considered together. The cultural significance of the adaptation does not lie simply in its successful “preservation” of Confucianism, nor in its departure from an earlier text. Rather, it lies in the specific pattern of selection, transformation, and recontextualization through which Confucian ethical resources are incorporated into contemporary popular cinema.

The case therefore points toward a broader pattern of ethical reconfiguration, which is examined in the following section.

4.3. Adaptation of Confucian Thought as a Process of Cultural Reconfiguration

The preceding sections have shown that the adaptation of Confucian thought in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世] involves both retaining recognizable ethical concepts and redistributing emphasis among their different dimensions. The film foregrounds family relationships,

individual moral agency, emotional attachment, and interpersonal responsibility, while giving comparatively less narrative space to political governance, institutional order, and broader communal responsibility. These observations suggest that the adaptation should be understood not simply as the modification of individual values, but as a broader reconfiguration of the structure through which Confucian ethics is represented.

Rather than assuming that this reconfiguration necessarily makes the film more appealing to audiences—a proposition that would require independent reception data—the present study focuses on what can be established through textual and cinematic analysis: what kinds of ethical meanings become more prominent when Confucian concepts are reorganized within contemporary popular cinema, and what dimensions become comparatively less visible. The case of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* suggests four interconnected transformations: the shift in ethical emphasis from political order to interpersonal relationships, the individualization of moral norms, the emotionalization and cinematic embodiment of ethical conflict, and the resulting reconfiguration of ethical meanings within contemporary popular culture.

4.3.1. From Political Order to Interpersonal Relationships

One of the most visible transformations identified in this study is a shift in the narrative location of ethical meaning. In broader Confucian thought, moral cultivation, family relationships, political governance, and concern for the people constitute interconnected dimensions of an ethical order. In the film, however, ethical conflicts are concentrated primarily within interpersonal relationships.

The Three Bonds illustrate this shift. The Ruler–Minister relationship appears in Nezha’s

encounter with the Heavenly Court and the authority of the Heavenly Tribulation, but the film does not develop it into an extended examination of political governance. By contrast, the Father–Son relationship between Li Jing and Nezha receives substantial narrative and emotional development, whereas the Husband–Wife relationship between Li Jing and Lady Yin is characterized by mutual support and shared concern for their child.

The same pattern appears in the treatment of the Five Constants. *Ren* is articulated through acts of protection and compassion; *Yi* through moral choices made under conflicting obligations; *Li* through social practices and interpersonal relationships; *Zhi* through recognition and moral discernment; and *Xin* through the establishment and testing of trust between characters. These virtues are therefore primarily represented through relationships among identifiable characters rather than through an institutional or political framework.

This reorientation can be described as a movement from ethics as an ordering of society toward ethics as a negotiation among persons. The film does not eliminate the larger structures of authority. The Heavenly Court, the Dragon Clan, and the political position of Chentang Pass remain important elements of the narrative world. However, these structures primarily establish the conditions within which individual relationships and choices develop.

The shift is particularly apparent in the film’s treatment of filiality. Rather than organizing the Father–Son relationship primarily around hierarchical obedience, the narrative emphasizes Li Jing’s recognition of Nezha and his willingness to assume personal risk on his son’s behalf. Filiality is consequently represented through a reciprocal emotional relationship involving recognition, protection, and sacrifice.

This transformation does not establish that interpersonal ethics are more authentically Confucian than political ethics. Rather, it indicates a change in the scale at which Confucian ethics is narratively represented. Questions concerning the organization of political and social order become comparatively less developed, while relationships that can be directly dramatized through character interaction receive greater narrative emphasis.

4.3.2. *From Moral Norms to Individual Moral Agency*

A second transformation concerns where moral judgment is located. Confucian ethical thought frequently articulates moral conduct in terms of roles, obligations, patterns of conduct, and processes of self-cultivation. In the film, these ethical questions are frequently reframed through the choices of individual characters.

Nezha provides the clearest example. His identity as the Demon Pill establishes an externally assigned moral expectation before his actions have fully developed. The central question of his character arc is therefore whether inherited identity should determine moral judgment. His declaration, “My fate is determined by myself, not by Heaven” [Original Chinese: 我命由我不由天], expresses the narrative’s emphasis on the individual’s capacity to respond to circumstances through choice.

Ao Bing follows a parallel but more complex trajectory. As the bearer of the Spiritual Pearl and a member of the Dragon Clan, he is subject to a network of expectations regarding his family and clan. His eventual decisions demonstrate the tension between inherited collective obligations and personal moral judgment. The ethical significance of his actions therefore lies not simply in whether he follows or violates an established norm, but in how he

responds when competing obligations come into conflict.

The Five Constants are similarly individualized in their cinematic representation. *Yi* becomes visible through decisions made in concrete situations involving conflicting obligations; *Ren* through acts of care and protection; *Xin* through the establishment and testing of interpersonal trust; *Zhi* through recognition and reassessment; and *Li* through the relationship between normative forms and their interpersonal meaning. In each case, an ethical category attaches to characters, situations, actions, and consequences rather than appearing primarily as an abstract proposition.

This can be termed the individualization of ethical norms. The relevant moral question is increasingly represented not only as “What does an established norm require?” but also as “How does an individual respond when different expectations conflict?” This transformation is especially visible when Nezha and Ao Bing confront identities and obligations that precede their choices.

The significance of this pattern lies not in replacing Confucian ethics with individualism, but in changing the narrative mechanism through which the film represents ethical agency. The film locates moral meaning in the characters’ capacity to interpret circumstances, make choices, accept consequences, and redefine relationships. Individual agency thus becomes a principal narrative mechanism through which ethical questions are dramatized.

4.3.3. From Ethical Conflict to Emotional and Cinematic Experience

A third transformation concerns how ethical conflicts are represented. Philosophical texts can articulate ethical problems through conceptual distinctions and sustained argument. Popular cinema operates through a different

expressive system: it communicates moral questions through situations, relationships, performances, dialogue, visual composition, editing, sound, and narrative consequences.

The film consequently emotionalizes and cinematically embodies ethical conflict. The conflict between parental obligation and personal vulnerability is evident in Li Jing’s relationship with Nezha. The tension between clan responsibility and personal choice is embodied in Ao Bing’s decisions. The problem of social prejudice is constructed through Nezha’s encounters with the people of Chentang Pass. Friendship between Nezha and Ao Bing provides a concrete context in which *Xin* is established and subsequently tested.

This emotionalization does not mean that the ethical concepts cease to have normative significance. Rather, their normative content is represented through affective and interpersonal situations. Instead of explaining *Ren* primarily through philosophical exposition, the film constructs situations in which compassion or indifference can be observed through action. Instead of presenting *Yi* solely as a theoretical principle, it places characters in situations where different obligations come into conflict. *Zhi* is represented through processes of recognition and reassessment, while *Li* is expressed through the interaction between formal social practices and interpersonal moral relationships.

The cinematic medium allows these ethical relationships to be constructed through multiple formal elements simultaneously. Character performance communicates hesitation, fear, affection, or determination; mise-en-scène and spatial arrangement establish relationships of proximity, separation, or hierarchy; framing and cinematography direct attention toward facial expression and interpersonal response; editing organizes the

temporal development of conflict and recognition; dialogue articulates competing ethical positions; and sound contributes to the emotional organization of particular scenes. Recurring visual motifs, such as the shuttlecock associated with Nezha and Ao Bing's friendship, can likewise connect different stages of a relationship and give earlier actions new significance within later scenes.

The treatment of *tianming* provides another example. Rather than presenting the relationship between Heaven, necessity, and human action through sustained philosophical exposition, the film renders the problem through Nezha's confrontation with a predetermined fate. "My fate is determined by myself, not by Heaven" [Original Chinese: 我命由我不由天] consequently functions as a condensed cinematic expression of the conflict between externally assigned destiny and individual agency. Its significance derives not only from the dialogue itself, but also from its position within the character's dramatic development and the visual and auditory organization of the surrounding sequence.

Accordingly, the film's reconstruction of Confucian ethics operates at two interconnected levels: what ethical values are represented and how those values are rendered through cinematic form. The movement from philosophical proposition toward embodied character conflict does not necessarily eliminate normative meaning; rather, it changes the representational conditions through which that meaning is communicated.

4.3.4. A Preliminary Model of Ethical Transformation and Its Cultural Implications

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest a preliminary model for understanding how Confucian ethical values are transformed when incorporated into contemporary popular

cinema. The model consists of four interconnected shifts:

- (1) From political order to interpersonal relationships

Ethical meaning is relocated from broader questions of political and institutional order toward relationships among identifiable individuals, especially family and friendship.

- (2) From socially embedded norms to individual moral agency

Moral principles are increasingly represented through the choices, judgments, and actions of individual characters confronted with competing expectations.

- (3) From normative or philosophical conflict to emotionalized experience

Abstract ethical tensions are translated into conflicts involving affection, fear, recognition, exclusion, sacrifice, trust, and responsibility, making them narratively perceptible through character relationships and cinematic form.

- (4) From abstract philosophical concepts to cinematic embodiment

Ethical ideas are materialized through character performance, dialogue, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, sound, recurring visual motifs, and narrative resolution.

These shifts can be summarized as follows:

Confucian ethical tradition → contextual reconfiguration → interpersonalization → individualization → emotionalization → cinematic embodiment

This model does not suggest that all contemporary adaptations of Confucian thought necessarily follow exactly the same sequence. Rather, it provides a preliminary analytical model derived from the present case study for

identifying a recurrent direction of transformation. In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, this movement is particularly visible in the transition from broader structures of authority and social order toward family relationships, individual choice, emotional conflict, and cinematic representation.

The model also clarifies the relationship between the possibilities and boundaries identified in Sections 3 and 4. The same processes that facilitate the representation of ethical concepts within character-centered popular storytelling can simultaneously reduce the narrative visibility of political institutions, collective responsibility, and philosophical complexity. Interpersonalization can foreground family ethics while giving less space to public ethics; individualization can emphasize moral agency while placing less emphasis on socially embedded obligations; emotionalization can represent ethical conflicts through affective relationships while reducing the space available for sustained conceptual argument; and cinematic embodiment can give abstract values concrete form while necessarily selecting particular dimensions of their historical meanings.

The value of this model therefore lies not in ranking one form of representation above another, but in making the mechanism of transformation more explicit. It shows that reconstructing Confucian ethics in contemporary cinema involves redistributing ethical emphasis rather than simply preserving or rejecting it.

The cultural significance of this process lies in the way traditional ethical resources are reorganized within contemporary popular culture. In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, selected concepts—including filial piety, Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, Xin, and tianming—are incorporated into narratives of identity, agency, family

attachment, interpersonal trust, moral choice, and responsibility. The film therefore provides a case through which the continuing circulation of traditional ethical concepts can be examined without assuming that their historical meanings remain unchanged.

At the same time, the present study does not establish the effects of this representation on audience attitudes or international perceptions. Such claims would require reception studies, audience surveys, interviews, or other empirical evidence beyond the scope of the present research. What can be established from the film itself is that contemporary cinematic adaptation creates a particular configuration of cultural meaning: some dimensions of Confucian ethics become more narratively prominent, while others remain comparatively peripheral.

The case consequently suggests that adaptation is best understood not through a binary opposition between fidelity and distortion, but through the concrete mechanisms by which inherited ethical resources are selected, reconfigured, embodied, and redistributed within new cultural forms. In this sense, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* demonstrates how continuity and transformation can operate simultaneously within the contemporary cinematic representation of Confucian thought.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the reconstruction of Confucian ethics in the 2019 animated film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世] through the analytical framework of the Three Bonds and Five Constants. By combining film/cinematic analysis with intertextual analysis, the study has examined how ethical relationships and virtues associated with Confucian thought are

retained, modified, recontextualized, and embodied within a contemporary animated narrative. Rather than treating adaptation as a question of fidelity to an earlier text, the study approaches the film as a process through which inherited ethical resources are reorganized within contemporary popular cinema.

Regarding the first research question, the analysis demonstrates that the Three Bonds and Five Constants provide useful analytical categories for identifying the reconstruction of Confucian ethics in the film. The Three Bonds are represented primarily through relationships involving authority, family, and familial cooperation, while the Five Constants are articulated through the moral choices, interpersonal relationships, and conflicts of the principal characters. At the same time, these categories do not appear in an unchanged historical form. Characterization, narrative conflict, dialogue, performance, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, sound, and recurring cinematic motifs reorganize their meanings. The reconstruction therefore occurs not only at the level of narrative content but also through the formal language of animation and cinema.

Regarding the second research question, the study identifies several major transformations in the representation of Confucian ethics. Within the Three Bonds, the Ruler–Minister relationship receives comparatively less narrative elaboration as a hierarchical political relationship and instead centers on questions of authority, judgment, and individual moral response. The Father–Son relationship emphasizes mutual recognition, emotional attachment, parental commitment, protection, and sacrifice, whereas the Husband–Wife relationship centers on cooperation and shared familial responsibility. Similarly, the Five Constants are recontextualized through concrete interpersonal and moral situations: *Ren* is

associated with compassion and protection; *Yi* with moral choice under conflicting obligations; *Li* with the relationship between normative forms and their underlying moral meaning; *Zhi* with recognition, reassessment, and moral discernment; and *Xin* with interpersonal trust and relational commitment. These transformations indicate a movement from relatively abstract or socially embedded ethical categories toward forms that are represented through individual characters, interpersonal relationships, and emotionally structured narrative situations.

The analysis further suggests a broader model of ethical transformation in contemporary adaptation. The case of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* can be understood through four interconnected shifts: from political order to interpersonal relationships, from socially embedded moral norms to individual moral agency, from normative or philosophical conflict to emotionalized experience, and from abstract philosophical concepts to cinematic embodiment. In this process, Confucian ethical resources are neither simply preserved nor discarded. They are selectively reorganized through character-centered narrative, interpersonal conflict, emotional development, and cinematic representation. This model is derived from the present case and should therefore be regarded as a preliminary analytical proposition rather than a universal sequence applicable to all adaptations.

In response to the third research question, the study argues that this reconstruction performs several cultural functions within contemporary popular cinema. First, it relocates ethical questions into interpersonal and familial relationships, allowing them to be represented through character development and narrative conflict. Second, it foregrounds individual moral agency by presenting characters who

negotiate inherited expectations, social judgments, and personal choices. Third, it translates ethical concepts into emotional and cinematic forms through performance, visual composition, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, sound, visual motifs, and narrative structure. Finally, it provides a contemporary cultural form through which selected elements of traditional ethical thought can be incorporated into popular cinema. These observations concern the adaptation's cultural and textual functions rather than empirically established audience responses. Claims about whether such reconstruction increases audience appeal or yields interpretations among Chinese or international viewers require reception-based evidence beyond the scope of the present study.

The study contributes to existing scholarship in two principal respects. First, it clearly distinguishes among the theoretical framework, the analytical framework, and the research methods. Confucian ethics, adaptation studies, and popular culture theory provide broader theoretical perspectives; the Three Bonds and Five Constants serve as the principal analytical categories; and film/cinematic and intertextual analyses provide the methodological means by which these categories are applied to the film. Second, the study proposes a preliminary model for examining ethical transformation in contemporary adaptation: Confucian ethical tradition → contextual reconfiguration → interpersonalization → individualization → emotionalization → cinematic embodiment. Although this model is grounded in a single case and therefore requires further comparative testing, it provides a basis for examining how traditional ethical systems may be transformed when they enter contemporary visual and popular-cultural forms.

The study also has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single case, *Nezha: Birth of*

the Demon Child [Original Chinese: 哪吒之魔童降世] and therefore does not claim that the identified patterns represent all contemporary Chinese mythological films or adaptations of Confucian thought. Second, although the analysis incorporates cinematic elements, its interpretation remains primarily qualitative and is therefore subject to scholarly interpretation. The use of Confucian classical texts and existing scholarship provides a basis for contextualizing these interpretations but does not eliminate the interpretive dimension of film analysis. Third, the study focuses on Confucian ethics and does not systematically examine the interaction between Confucianism and Daoism, Buddhism, folk religion, or other intellectual and religious traditions that may contribute to the film's cultural framework. Finally, the study focuses on the completed cinematic text and does not investigate in detail the production processes through which adaptation decisions were made, including cultural policy, censorship, industrial organization, production practices, or market considerations.

Future research could extend this framework in several directions. Comparative studies of multiple Chinese mythological films could test whether the four identified shifts—political order to interpersonal relationships, socially embedded norms to individual moral agency, ethical conflict to emotionalized experience, and abstract concepts to cinematic embodiment—appear across adaptations or vary by genre, historical period, and production context. Audience reception studies could further examine how different viewer groups interpret reconstructed Confucian values and whether the textual transformations identified in this study correspond to differences in audience response. Production-oriented research could investigate how screenwriters, directors, animation studios, cultural policies,

and market conditions shape the selection and transformation of traditional ethical resources. More broadly, interdisciplinary research that combines film studies, philosophy, adaptation studies, cultural studies, and communication studies may further clarify how traditional ethical systems are continually reconfigured as they move across historical periods, media forms, and cultural contexts.

Ultimately, the case of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* demonstrates that the contemporary adaptation of Confucian ethics is better understood as a process of selection, reconfiguration, and cinematic embodiment than as a binary opposition between preservation and distortion. The film retains recognizable

ethical resources while redistributing their emphasis among interpersonal relationships, individual moral agency, emotional experience, and cinematic representation. This perspective matters not to determine whether a contemporary adaptation faithfully reproduces tradition, but to examine how, and through which mechanisms, inherited ethical resources are transformed when they enter contemporary popular cinema. The case therefore demonstrates that continuity and transformation can operate simultaneously: traditional ethical concepts remain recognizable while their narrative functions, relational contexts, and modes of cinematic expression are reorganized within a contemporary cultural form.

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