

# Nezha Across Cultures: Language and Translation in Nezha (2019) and Nezha 2

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**Abstract:** The animated films *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019) and its sequel, *Nezha 2*, have not only seen great box-office success in China but also gained global attention. The dialogues, rich in traditional Chinese culture, have captivated audiences worldwide. This paper uses the theories of domestication and foreignization to explore how these translation strategies affect the interpretation of characters and cultural significance by different audiences. It also examines the challenges translators face in preserving the language features and cultural implications of the original dialogues while effectively conveying the film's messages to foreign audiences. By analyzing key lines from the films, this study highlights the role of translation strategies in cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** Nezha; Language in Nezha; Domestication; Foreignization; Cross-cultural communication

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## 1. Introduction

Since its release, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019) and its sequel, *Nezha 2*, have achieved box office success in China and played a significant role in spreading Chinese animated films and the culture globally. These films blend traditional Chinese mythology with contemporary values, engaging audiences with their production, emotional depth, and iconic characters. The dialogues, deeply rooted in Chinese culture and language, are a major allure.

Translation plays a crucial role in making these films accessible to global audiences. However, translating culturally rich content, such as humor, idioms, dialect-based jokes, and puns, poses challenges in retaining the original tone and meaning while making it resonate with audiences unfamiliar with Chinese culture.

This paper explores the English translation of some dialogues in the *Nezha* series using domestication and foreignization. While domestication adapts the source language to make the translated version familiar and accessible, often losing some cultural elements, foreignization seeks to retain the cultural features of the source language, allowing the audience to sense its "foreignness."

By analyzing key lines, this paper examines how these strategies influence the audience's interpretation of the characters and the cultural significance embedded in the dialogue and discusses the challenges translators face in preserving distinctive humor, puns, and other Chinese cultural elements while ensuring clarity in cross-cultural communication.

By exploring these issues, this paper highlights the impact of translation choices on cross-cultural exchange and offers some ideas for effectively translating culturally rich animated film dialogues.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Domestication and foreignization in translation studies**

Translation studies have long been focused on balancing the preservation of a source text's foreignness with adapting it to the target culture. This balance is shaped by two key strategies—domestication and foreignization—first introduced by the American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti in his work *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* <sup>[1]</sup>.

In this work, he proposed two main approaches to translation. The first is the foreignizing strategies, which aim to bring the reader closer to the author. By retaining the foreign flavor and cultural distinctiveness of the original text, the translated text allows readers to experience the linguistic charm of the source text. The second is the domesticating strategies. This approach aims to bring the author closer to the reader. By adapting the source text to align with the reader's linguistic habits and cultural background, the translated text becomes easier to understand and accept for the target audience.

Both strategies have their advantages. Foreignization preserves cultural elements of the original text, while domestication makes the text more accessible and reader-friendly. The choice between them often depends on the translation's purpose, audience expectations, and the nature of the source text. Together, they enrich the diversity of translation, allowing each language to express itself in its own unique way.

### **2.2. Review of the two strategies in film translation**

Recent studies have examined the use of domestication and foreignization in film translation, particularly in Nezha. Yang Ziyu found that domestication strategies are often preferred in Chinese animated films translation to ensure efficient information transmission. Creative omissions and adaptations improve the target audience's understanding, but may sacrifice cultural value <sup>[2-3]</sup>. Zhu Huiting and Han Zhulin suggested that translations should be adapted to the cultural habits of the target audience, making their viewing experience more natural and immersive <sup>[3-4]</sup>. Li Mengjie argued that translation is about preserving cultural meaning, not just words <sup>[5]</sup>. Liu Sijie and Fang Qinghua suggested strategies like reinterpretation, explanatory translation, and contextual adaptation to bridge cultural gaps <sup>[6]</sup>.

While domestication helps target audiences understand messages better, it may result in a loss of cultural authenticity. Foreignization preserves cultural identity but can confuse viewers unfamiliar with the source culture. Striking this balance requires carefully tailored strategies. The following section explores how these approaches shape audience interpretation.

### **2.3. Film translation and reinterpretation**

Film translation is crucial in bridging cultural gaps, particularly when dealing with humor, idioms, and other culture-related elements like myths, beliefs, and traditional values. These expressions are deeply rooted in specific

cultural and linguistic contexts, making direct translation challenging, as they rely heavily on shared cultural knowledge. To accurately convey the intended meaning of the source language while preserving its comedic effect and cultural essence, translators often use creative strategies like reinterpretation, explanatory translation, and contextual adaptation. Effective translation balances staying true to the original and making the film accessible and enjoyable for foreign audiences.

### **3. Language and cultural elements in Nezha**

#### **3.1. Linguistic style of Nezha and other key characters**

One of the successes of the two Nezha films lies in their unique linguistic features. Based on traditional Chinese mythology, the films incorporate humor, puns, and modern internet slang into the dialogue, making it humorous, appealing, and resonating with modern young audiences. For example, Nezha's iconic lines “我是小妖怪，逍遥又自在，杀人不眨眼，吃人不放盐” (I am a little monster, free and at ease, killing people without blinking an eye, eating people without salt) are catchy and rhythmic. The playful tone and exaggerated phrases such as “killing without blinking” and “eating people without seasoning” sound absurd yet humorous. This way, a rebellious, carefree, and mischievous boy with a strong personality is vividly created.

Besides, the use of regional dialects also helps bring the characters to life in a more vivid and entertaining way. Take Taiyi Zhenren, for example. He speaks Sichuan dialect, known for its distinctive exaggerated tone and witty and amusing way of expressions. When he says “靓仔来了!” (Here comes the handsome guy!), his playful tone immediately sets the mood for the audience, adding a local cultural touch and highlighting his easy-going personality.

The third language feature of the films is the reinterpretation of traditional mythological characters. Unlike the loyal, righteous, and heroic Nezha in classic mythology, the Nezha in these films is rebellious and defiant. His journey of self-acceptance and personal growth is exemplified by his iconic declaration: “我命由我不由天，是魔是仙，我自己说了算!” (“I am the master of my own fate, not heaven. Whether I am a demon or a god, I decide!”). The resilience and indomitable spirit align with the contemporary values and connect with today's young people deeply.

Similarly, Taiyi Zhenren, traditionally depicted as a composed and dignified mentor, is funny and straightforward in the films, exemplified by his exaggerated line “我 可 是 仙 人 !” (I am an immortal, you know!). Shen Gongbao, the typically cunning and sinister villain, is portrayed as a multidimensional and complex character. His line “人心中的成见就像一座大山，任你怎么努力也休想搬动” (“Prejudice in people's hearts is like a mountain—you cannot move it no matter how hard you try”) adds depth to his character, making him more relatable.

#### **3.2. Traditional Chinese cultural references in dialogue**

With an abundance of traditional Chinese cultural elements integrated into the dialogue, the two Nezha films exhibit a unique charm. First, traditional idioms and expressions are skillfully adapted through dialect humor, contextual contrasts, and modern reinterpretations, yet their core meanings are retained. One of Taiyi Zhenren's most iconic lines, “急急如律令” (Hurry up, do not delay!), is derived from a Taoist incantation that originally means “Execute swiftly, like a law that cannot be disobeyed.” However, in the films, when expressed in the Sichuan Mandarin dialect, the line softens the seriousness of the Taoist magic command, entertaining the audience

while reflecting the traditional values it embodies.

Second, traditional stories from classical literature are reconstructed with modern interpretations in a fascinating way. A case in point is the relationship between Nezha and Ao Bing. They were long-standing enemies in *Fengshen Yanyi* (The Investiture of the Gods). In the two films, they transform into friends and work together to fight against “天劫咒” (the Heavenly Tribulation Curse), which represents an unavoidable fate and prejudice. Nezha is referred to as the “Demon Pill” (魔丸), and Ao Bing as the “Spirit Pearl” (灵珠), concepts rooted in the yin-yang philosophy of traditional Chinese culture. This philosophy, grounded in Taoist thought, emphasizes the unity of opposites. Nezha, fiery and explosive, symbolizes yang within yin, while Ao Bing, gentle and fluid, represents yin within yang. When they join forces to fight against the heavenly tribulation, their yin and yang energies harmonize, thus challenging the conventional belief that “destiny is inevitable.”

### 3.3. Challenges in translating humor and wordplay

Translating humor and wordplay in the two Nezha films can be challenging, particularly when dealing with puns, slang, and double meanings in Chinese. The films use puns such as “魔丸” (Demon Pill) and “灵珠” (Spirit Pearl), which carry connotations of demon and spirit, evil and good, deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture. This makes them difficult to translate without losing their cultural significance. Additionally, modern slang such as “我命由我不由天” (“My fate is mine to control”) reflects the Chinese philosophical struggle between destiny and personal agency, a concept that’s difficult to fully capture in English as it has no direct equivalent in English culture. These challenges call for a careful translation approach that maintains linguistic precision, preserves cultural depth, and ensures accessibility for audiences, so that the Nezha films’ humor and deeper meanings are effectively conveyed to viewers across languages and cultures.

## 4. Case study: Translation strategies in Nezha films

### 4.1. Key translated lines

The key lines from the Nezha films, which are deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese cultural context, present considerable challenges when translated, as they must be adapted into expressions not only understandable but also meaningful to audiences who have little or no knowledge of Chinese culture. Basically, two different approaches of translation are employed, namely, domestication and foreignization<sup>[7]</sup>. Each aims to resonate with the target audience in its distinctive way.

Take “我命由我不由天” as an example. It is one of Nezha’s iconic lines, reflecting his strong, rebellious, and independent personality. By saying this, Nezha expresses his refusal to submit to fate or the will of heaven, and his determination to take control of his own destiny. This line originates from the Taoist philosophy of defying fate and changing one’s destiny. Below are two different English translations.

The first one, “I am the master of my fate,” adapts the well-known line from William Ernest Henley’s poem *Invictus*. This domesticated version simplifies the original Taoist philosophy of defying destiny and the emotional depth, making it more accessible to English speakers, but at the cost of losing the cultural essence.

The second one, “Heaven has no say in my fate!” is foreignized, retaining the Chinese concept of “天” (heaven) symbolizing fate or natural law. While this translation might sound awkward to Western audiences, it preserves the philosophical idea of challenging destiny and introduces a unique Chinese cultural element.

Other lines in the films illustrate these translation strategies. Madam Yin (Nezha’s mother)’s line “生活你全



是泪，没死就得活受罪” is translated as “Life’s a bitch, and then you die”, using English slang to express the same sense of despair and frustration, making it more accessible to Western audiences, but losing the charm and unique tone of the regional dialect in the original line. Meanwhile, “成见是座大山” is translated as “Prejudice is a great mountain.” While this comparison might feel unnatural in English, it preserves the poetic imagery and cultural essence.

## 4.2. Challenges translators face and suggested strategies

Translating films with culture-loaded elements, like *Nezha*, presents challenges beyond linguistic accuracy. It requires balancing accessibility with cultural context.

*Nezha*’s line “生活你全是泪，没死就得活受罪！” conveys the main message of “being forced to endure suffering” with a mix of dark humor and irony. The phrase “活受罪” has no exact equivalent in English. And the challenge is to preserve its original meaning while ensuring that foreign audiences can understand the sense of frustration and dark humor it carries. A more straightforward translation might be “Life’s all tears, and I am cursed with this pathetic existence!”, conveying the basic idea of feeling helpless by adapting it to resonate emotionally with English speakers. While it loses some cultural weight, it maintains the original tone.

Apart from culturally-specific phrases, the translation of humor and wordplay is also a key challenge, as seen with *Taiyi Zhenren*’s “不 — 好 — 啦！” in Sichuan Mandarin, delivered with an exaggerated, prolonged tone that expresses panic and humor, adding a strong comedic effect. Such expressions are difficult to interpret directly, as there is no equivalent linguistic feature or humor style in English. A possible English equivalent is “Holy—crap—!”, capturing the tone of shock or alarm, though it differs culturally. The key is to prioritize readability, using expressions that resonate with the target audience.

Dialogues like this often carry significant cultural connotations that may be lost in direct translation. Therefore, reinterpretation becomes necessary. Take *Nezha*’s line “你是我唯一的朋友啊，敖丙”，which reflects his deep loneliness and strong desire for acceptance, as he has been labeled a “monster” by others. Ao Bing, sharing a similar sense of isolation, is the only one who truly understands and accepts him. Through this line, *Nezha* intends to mean “Everyone fears and hates me. You’re the only one who sees me for who I truly am.” A literal translation, “You’re my only friend, Ao Bing,” conveys the basic meaning but does not fully capture the emotional depth. A more culturally resonant translation, “You are the only light in my dark world”, would better express *Nezha*’s desperation for connection and understanding, while preserving the emotional and cultural depth of the original line.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper explores the language and translation strategies in *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and its sequel, *Ne Zha 2*, focusing on the balance between domestication and foreignization. While domestication makes the films more accessible, foreignization preserves cultural essence. The success of translating such films lies in understanding the target audience’s expectations while staying true to the source text. Effective strategies help bridge cultural gaps, allowing audiences worldwide to appreciate and connect with the depth and beauty of Chinese mythology and culture.

However, the paper is limited to specific case studies. Further research could include exploring a wider range of texts and languages, audience responses, and how the unique Chinese cultural elements like humor can be

preserved in cross-cultural communication, and the brilliant Chinese traditional culture and values can be spread to the whole world in the most effective and appropriate way.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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