

# In Search of Folk Humor The Rebellious Cult of Nezha in Macao

CHRISTINA MIU BING CHENG\*



## THE LEGEND AND THE TWO TEMPLES OF NEZHA IN MACAO

Macao exemplifies the harmonious co-existence of polymorphic religious beliefs, and allows different religious experiences and liturgical traditions. Despite the fact that Catholicism has been the dominant religious discourse in this former Portuguese enclave, Buddhism and Daoism also flourish. These two religions go hand in hand with popular beliefs and folklore, and borrow each other's philosophical concepts and divinities selectively. Among the multitudinous Chinese deities in peninsular Macao, the child-god Nezha 哪吒 is perhaps the most eccentric. Nezha (variant spellings: No-cha, Nacha; Nuozha; Na Tcha) is often affectionately addressed as Nezha Taizi 哪吒太子 (Prince Nezha), or Nezha San Taizi 哪吒三太子 (the Third Prince Nezha).

Nezha is represented as a maverick child of seven years old, sporting a cute hairstyle—three round tufts of hair, one at the front and two over the ears. His belly is draped with the magic Sky-muddling Damask, and he wears short trousers. Riding on the two Fire-wind Wheels, he holds the gold Universal Ring and wields the formidable Fire-tipped Spear. What is special about this divinity is that he straddles the religious boundaries between Buddhism and Daoism and is honoured in both pantheons.

A fully formed cult depends largely on legends, and combines various genres of magical power. The development of the cult of Nezha in Macao was predicated on mythological lore.<sup>1</sup> There are two versions of the same legend.<sup>2</sup> One has it that there were once some children playing on the slopes of Shishan 柿山 (Persimmon Hill), which was named for the persimmon trees that grew there. Very often a child who did not live in this area would join the group. He would stand on a large rock and lead the children in games. One day, he bid farewell to the local children and left. Some residents saw him riding on two wheels, disappearing into the clouds. They believed this was an apparition of Nezha and began building a tiny temple, called Shishan Gumiao 柿山古庙 (the Old Temple of Persimmon Hill), to this deity on that spot.

\* 郑妙冰 Received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, M.A. in Literary Studies, and B.A. (Hons) from the University of Hong Kong. Honorary Research Fellow at the Centre of Asian Studies. Author of *Macao: A Cultural Janus* (1999) and a number of articles on Macao and Hong Kong.

*Doutoramento em Literatura Comparada, Mestrado em Estudos Literários e Bacharelato em Artes (Hon.) pela Universidade de Hong Kong. Membro Honorário de Pesquisa no Centro de Estudos Asiáticos, também em Hong Kong. Autora de Macao: A Cultural Janus (1999) e de diversos artigos sobre Macau e Hong Kong.*

## RELIGIÃO

Another version holds that a Portuguese woman saw a child playing alone on a slab of stone at midnight. His attire was different from ordinary children. Since it was late in the evening, she came up to him and tried to tell him to go home. But he disappeared immediately. She then relayed this incident to the local Chinese, who believed that it was the apparition of Nezha. A small temple was soon built to the deity on the same location. The two versions of the legend show a degree of uniformity. After one or more residents saw the apparition of Nezha, the Chinese began building a small temple. In this way, mythological lore became a part of the development of the Nezha cult.

Apart from such mythological lore, there were also important socio-ethical values that contributed to the development of the Nezha cult and its magical existence in Macao. In 1898 devastating epidemics spread through Macao, resulting in the loss of many lives. Only the residents around Persimmon Hill area remained miraculously unscathed. When this fact

became known, local people flocked to the temple to pray for divine blessings and seek medical treatment from Nezha. In the same year, donations were collected and the temple was extended and renovated into its present form. The name of the temple was changed to Nezha Gumiao 哪吒古廟 (the Old Temple of Nezha). It is plain to see that the founding of the Nezha cult in Macao was triggered by a public health crisis and the fears of the general public. The myth of Nezha was thus turned to suit this critical situation: it served to calm the populace and raise the morale of those who suffered during these rampant epidemics.

In Macao, there are two small Nezha temples, and Nezha represents another layer in the spirit world by providing “subsidiary” divine assistance. He is mostly revered as the patron of children. The “primordial” Old Temple of Nezha is simple and unembellished. It is located at Travessa de Sancho Pança, No. 15, halfway up the Calçada das Verdades, which the Chinese used to call Persimmon Hill. It was first built in the early Qing dynasty (1644-1911), and has a history of more than three hundred years. The earliest extant honorific wooden tablet bears the date 1898. This temple does not follow the formal Chinese temple layout. It looks more like a pavilion than a temple. It is so simple that it has no door and there are not even any guarding lions. The altar for Nezha stands on the slope where people can pass through the temple. Over the altar is written the temple’s original name in Chinese—Shishan Gumiao (the Old Temple of Persimmon Hill). As rocks are held to be the dwelling place of gods,<sup>3</sup> this may explain why “a divine abode” was built on this steep and rocky site.

The second temple is called “Nezha Miao” 哪吒廟 (Nezha Temple) in order to differentiate it from the older one. This single-chamber temple is situated on the Pátio do Espinho, No. 6, at the end of Calçada de S. Francisco Xavier. It is located just next to a section of the Old City Wall, which was built by the Portuguese as early as 1569 for defensive purposes. On the lintel, an honorific wooden tablet bears the date of 1901, which suggests that the temple was built no later than this year. In July 2005, the tiny “newer” Nezha Temple was put in the international spotlight. It was on a list of more than a dozen monuments, buildings and *largos* (or public squares) that were part of Macao’s successful application to UNESCO for inclusion in the World Heritage List. It now outshines

The “primordial” Nezha Temple at Travessa de Sancho Pança.





## RELIGION



The original "Shishan Gumiao" in the Old Nezha Temple.

the "primordial" Nezha Temple, and has become part of the historico-cultural zone known as the "Historic Centre of Macao".<sup>4</sup>

In these two temples, honorific tablets address Nezha as "Prince Nezha of the Thirty-third Heaven" Sanshisantian Nezha Taizi 三十三天哪吒太子. The concept of "the Thirty-third Heaven" is in fact of Buddhist origin.<sup>5</sup> It is believed that Dishu (帝释, the short form of Dishitian 帝释天), an important guardian deity of Buddhism, lived in the central part on top of Mount Xumi 须弥山. At each of the four directions of Mount Xumi there dwelt eight Heavenly Kings, each in his own city, so there were a total of thirty-three Heavenly Cities. In folklore, Li Jing 李靖, Nezha's father, was appropriated as one of the North Heavenly Kings, also known as Duowen Tianwang 多闻天王 in Chinese. Hence, the title "Prince of the Thirty-third Heaven" means that Nezha is the son of the North Heavenly King.

Nezha is worshipped in his form as a child. In Chinese mythology, immortality implies a state of eternal youth, and thus Nezha never grows older. He is perpetually a lovely seven-year-old deity. Apart from being addressed as Prince Nezha of the Thirty-third Heaven, he is given numerous grand titles, such as Zhongtan Yuanshuai 中坛元帅 (General of the Central Altar), Zhongying Shenjiang 中营神将 (Divine Commander of the Central Battalion),<sup>6</sup> Taizi Yuanshuai 太子元帅 (the Princely General) and Nezha Yuanshuai 哪吒元帅 (General Nezha). These variant

titles readily speak for Nezha's tremendous popularity in folk culture.

## THE MYTHOPOEIA OF NEZHA

Just like many ancient Chinese myths, the "mythemes"<sup>7</sup> that constitute the Nezha myth are scattered across different narratives, and this mythical figure has a syncretic etiology. He was derived from the Hindu-Buddhist tradition and later became sinicized. The mythopoeia of Nezha underwent gradual changes before he appeared in *Fengshen Yanyi* 封神演义 (Creation of the Gods) and *Xiyou Ji* 西游记 (The Journey to the West). The earliest account of Nezha is found in the Buddhist text "Kaitian Zhuanxin Ji" 开天传信记 of the late Tang dynasty (9<sup>th</sup> century), collected in *Congshu Jicheng Xinbian* 丛书集成新编 (The New Edition of a Collection of Books). In this fragmentary text, Nezha is narrated as the son of Vaisravana, the Hindu-Buddhist deity of the north. He is depicted as a young man and the guardian of Buddhist monks.

The procession of Nezha, 2006.



RELIGIÃO

The procession of Nezha, c. 1950. Reproduced from Cecília Jorge & Rogério Beltrão Coelho, eds., *Glimpses of the Past* (Macao, Livros do Oriente, 2005).





## RELIGION



The "Apparition Rock of Prince Nezha" in the Old Nezha Temple.

The name Nezha is believed to be derived from "Nalakubara," the name of a Hindu-Buddhist deity. A Chinese transliteration of Nalakubara, Na-luo-jiu-po 那罗鸠婆 can be traced back to the Northern Liang period (397-439). The sinicized name "Nezha" 哪吒 first emerged in the early Tang dynasty, but a slightly different version, Nazha 那吒, also appeared interchangeably. In addition, the name Nazha is said to be translated from the Sanskrit name "Nata". Although Nezha was originally a minor Buddhist deity, he was incorporated as a Daoist immortal during the Northern Song period (960-1126).

A comparatively more complete short story, entitled "Nazha Taizi" 那吒太子, was included in the compilation *Sanjiao Yuanliu Soushen Daquan* 三教源流搜神大全 (The Complete Collection of Gods and the Origins of Three Religions) during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). The text reads:

"Nazha was originally a Daluo Xian 大罗仙 (a Daoist immortal) serving the Jade Emperor. He was over sixty-five feet tall and wore a gold halo on his head. He had three heads, nine eyes and eight arms. When he exhaled dark-green vapour, stepped on a rock, held the spell of order, and yelled aloud, clouds gathered and rain poured down; the heaven trembled and the earth quaked. Since there were many demon-kings on earth, the Jade Emperor ordered him to descend to the mundane world. He was incarnated as the son of the Pagoda-bearing Heavenly King Li Jing. His mother was Madame Suzhi 素知夫人, who had already given birth to her eldest son Junzha 军吒

## RELIGIÃO

and her second son Muzha 木吒. Nazha was her third son. On the fifth day after his birth, Nazha took a bath in the East Sea. He trampled on the Crystal Hall and flew up to the Precious Pagoda Palace. Because Nazha disturbed the Palace, the Dragon King was enraged and challenged him to a fight. On the seventh day after his birth, he was already able to fight and killed nine dragons. The old Dragon King had no alternative but appealed to the Jade Emperor. The Commander [Nazha] learned of this. He intercepted the Dragon King and fought with him outside the Heavenly Gate. The Dragon King was killed. Inadvertently, Nazha went up to an altar dedicated to the emperors, lifted the Rulai bow and arrow and shot and killed Shiji Niang Niang's 石矶娘娘 son. So Shiji launched an attack. The Commander took his father's Demon-Subduing Pestle, went fighting Westward and killed Shiji. His father was furious because he understood that Shiji was the chief of all demons, whose army would come to avenge him.

The Commander cut up his own flesh and bones and returned them to his father. His soul then went to seek help from the Buddha. As he could subdue demons, the Buddha broke a lotus bud to form his bones, used the rhizome to form his flesh, the stalk to form his calves, and leaves as his clothes. He was thus reincarnated. The Buddha taught him the esoteric principles of the *Dharmacakra* (the Wheel of the Law) and gave him a three-word name, Mu Zhang Zi 木长子. Thereafter, Nazha could transform himself into any size, huge or small at his will. He could penetrate the rivers and seas, and remove the stars and constellations.... When he thrust his spear (or lance), the sky rotated and the earth turned; when he threw his embroidered ball, the mountains slid and the seas parted... Therefore, all the demons, including the Bull Demon-King, the Lion Demon-King, the Elephant Demon-King, ...were suppressed. He even struck the red monkey and quelled the evil dragon. Consequently, the demons were all vanquished. The Commander was powerful and efficacious and could make any kind of transformations.... The Jade Emperor at once appointed him the Chief Commander of the thirty-six Heavenly

Generals. He thus became the leader guarding the Heavenly Gate forever." (my translation)

Here Nazha is given a new identity as Daluo Xian, guarding the Thirty-sixth Heaven (the highest Daoist heaven). In this narrative, he has been completely appropriated as a prominent Daoist immortal. He becomes the son of Li Jing, thus severing the tie with his Hindu-Buddhist father, Vaisravana. His tie to Buddhism, however, still remains. In this way, Nazha becomes entangled with both Buddhism and Daoism: a syncretic deity. Containing fantastic and bizarre episodes and grafting both Buddhist and Daoist elements into the narrative, the legend of "Nazha Taizi" in the *Sanjiao Yuanliu Soushen Daquan* may have served as the prototype of the full-fledged Nezha story that emerged in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644).

NEZHA IN *FENGSHEN YANYI*

Needless to say, Nezha is best known through the Daoist mythological narrative, *Fengshen Yanyi*, first published sometime between 1567 and 1619. The story of Nezha is related primarily in just three chapters out of one hundred, but these three chapters render a compelling scenario. Here is a synopsis:

"Nezha was the *avatar* of Lingzhu Zi 灵珠子. He was reincarnated as the third son of Li Jing and Madame Yin 殷夫人. Li Jing was a loyal commander serving the tyrant King Zhou 纣 at Chentang Pass. Their eldest son was called Jinzha 金吒 and the second son Muzha. Nezha was ordered by the Jade Emperor to become the disciple of Taiyi Zhenren 太乙真人 at Golden Light Cave on the Qianyuan Mountain. He was sent into this world to assist Jiang Ziya 姜子牙 to terminate the Shang dynasty and establish the Zhou dynasty. Madame Yin had been pregnant for three years and six months but was still not in labour. One night, when she fell asleep, a Daoist rushed into her bedchamber and threw something at her stomach. Soon she gave birth to a fleshy ball. Li Jing struck it with his sharp sword and a baby boy jumped out with a white, beautiful face, wearing a gold bracelet on his right wrist, his belly covered with a piece of red damask silk.

At age seven, Nezha was already six *chi* 尺 tall [almost 2 metres]. One hot day, he took a bath at the Nine Bend River, which flowed into the

## RELIGION

East Sea. Unknowingly, he dipped his magic red Sky-Muddling Damask in the water, which shook the Sea Palace. In a quarrel, he killed a sea patrolman and the Dragon King's third son, Ao Bing 敖丙. When the Dragon King went to accuse him in Heaven, he assaulted him before he could see the Jade Emperor. Meanwhile Nezha accidentally killed Shiji Niang Niang's disciple with the Qiankun Gong and Zhentian Jian, which were once used by Xuan Yuan Huang Di 轩辕黄帝. In a fight to protect Nezha, his master Taiyi burned Shiji down to a piece of rock. As the four Dragon Kings threatened to seek divine justice, Nezha paid for his misdeeds by committing self-mutilation. This was an act of returning his flesh and bones to his parents. His suicide satisfied the marine plaintiffs and saved his parents from punishment.

Upon the advice of Taiyi, he appeared to his mother in a dream and requested that she build a temple in his honour, so that his soul could be worshipped and he could be once again embodied in human form. Madame Yin secretly did so. However, when Li Jing discovered the temple, he ordered his soldiers to burn it down and to destroy his son's image, because of the disgrace he had brought to the family. Thus Nezha only acquired a very faint human form. The wandering soul sought help from Taiyi, who arranged for his rebirth from the lotus flowers. After reincarnation, he had a body sixteen *chi* tall (almost 5.3 metres) and became very powerful. Taiyi gave him two Wind-fire Wheels and the Fire-tipped Spear. In a vengeful rage, he went to kill his father. In the nick of time, Randeng Daoren 燃灯道人 came to the rescue and gave Li Jing a magical gold pagoda to suppress Nezha. So Li Jing became known as the Pagoda-bearing Heavenly King. Randeng then told Li Jing and Nezha to stop serving King Zhou and instead help sage King Wu 武 establish a new dynasty."

It seems that the author of *Fengshen Yanyi* elaborated on what his precursors had produced, and borrowed the skeleton outline of the antecedent narratives. He reshaped, recounted, and extrapolated from previous sources to form the myth of Nezha in the vernacular Chinese tradition. Showing a marked degree of

innovation, he created some interesting and daring episodes,<sup>8</sup> such as the miraculous birth of Nezha, the destruction of Nezha's temple by Li Jing, the episode of patricidal vengeance, and the ultimate reconciliation.

Given the odd circumstances of Nezha's birth, his father Li Jing shows hatred for him from the beginning. As a seven-year-old boy, Nezha initiates a series of offensive misdeeds, some knowingly and some unknowingly. Although these erroneous incidents are poignant, they also arouse pathos and a comic catharsis. Nezha's humiliation of the Dragon King represents his primal conflict with a father figure, who metonymically signifies patriarchal authority and the "law". The contrastive scenario of Nezha's child-like naivety and Li Jing's parental indifference gives rise to mounting tension between father and son. Meanwhile, Nezha comes to collide with Shiji Niang Niang, or Lady Rock, who symbolizes a mother figure and the matriarchal dominance from which Nezha seeks to revolt. Nezha's macabre suicide in order to save his parents from divine accusation is a sign of filial piety.

Nezha's yearning for a temple to be built for him draws a parallel with his yearning to return to the symbolic "womb." In the Hindu-Buddhist context, the design of a temple is often premised on an analogy between the *atman* (soul or the divine aspect of a person) and an embryo in a womb or something hidden in a cave. The innermost sanctuary of a temple is thus technically known as the *garbha-griha*, which literally means the "womb-house."<sup>9</sup> Returning to the "womb" is the only way Nezha can retrieve his human form and be resurrected. For this reason, the construction of a new temple in his own right is of paramount importance for his rebirth.

Li Jing's destruction of Nezha's temple and statue in the "womb-house" reveals his extreme cold-heartedness towards his own son. This callous disregard for Nezha's reincarnation condemns his soul to the status of lonely ghost. Such a heartless deed is considered heinous in Chinese culture. As the interpretations of the story often emphasize the unconventional revenge Nezha takes on his father, Taiyi's admonition of Li Jing unveils the deeper meanings of human relations, which depend on forgiveness and tolerance. Li Jing's relentless treatment of his son not only shatters the unity of the family, but also fractures a harmonious social structure in a broader sense. Li Jing's hardened action



## RELIGIÃO

is so anomalous that the audience feels sympathy for Nezha, and Li Jing is implicitly relegated to the wicked and inhumane father.

Nezha is portrayed as a rebellious child who dares to scoff at divine power and at value systems consecrated by tradition. In particular, he defies patriarchal dominance with Promethean courage. In the wake of his self-mutilation and miraculous reincarnation from the lotus flowers, he takes his revenge and tries to kill his father. Patricide is, of course, a taboo that is totally out of the social norm in any society. While it is a reactionary form of behaviour against paternal authority in a feudal system, it is also a stark violation of the moral of filial piety advocated in Confucian tradition. Filial piety is considered the first and foremost cardinal virtue, and the central credo of Chinese social life. In particular, love of one's living parents is regarded as a vital sentiment in the ethics of Chinese kinship.

As the story revolves around tensions between father and son, Nezha's murderous hostility towards Li Jing, however, enjoys widespread currency in Chinese popular culture. In the nick of time, Li Jing is saved by Randeng. Nezha is thus spared the fate of being a patricidal son, and his master Taiyi, too, is acquitted of the crime of being the instigator of patricide. It is an open-ended narrative. Nezha's resentments are suppressed, and reconciliation is forcibly imposed. Both father and son, nevertheless, know well that without the magical Gold Pagoda, their relationship would not be sustained. Nezha still cannot forgive Li Jing, and has no contrition even at the denouement.

NEZHA IN *XIYOU JI*

The open-ended Nezha story as told in *Fengshen Yanyi* seems to continue in another mythological narrative, *Xiyou Ji*. The Nezha story in *Xiyou Ji* shows

The masquerade Parade of Jinzha (gold-faced), Muzha (black-faced) and Nezha (pink-faced), 2006.





## RELIGION

obvious intertextual influences; there are many similarities to that of *Fengshen Yanyi*, although it also differs in many important respects. Various material sources are stitched together, and a Buddhist-oriented hagiography of Nezha is presented:

“... When this son had been born to the heavenly king [Li Jing], the word *Ne* was written on the palm of his left hand and *Zha* on his right one, which was why he was called Nezha. When only three days old, the young prince had caused great trouble by plunging into the sea to clean himself. He kicked down the Water Crystal Palace, captured a dragon, and insisted on pulling out its sinews to make a belt. On learning of this, the heavenly king became so worried about the disastrous consequences that he decided to kill the boy. This made Nezha so indignant that he seized a sword, cut off his flesh and returned it to his mother, then picked his bones clean and gave them back to his father. Having returned his father’s seed and his mother’s blood, he took his soul straight off to the Western Paradise to appeal to the Buddha. When the Buddha, who was expounding on the sutras to all the assembled Bodhisattvas, heard a cry for help from within his curtained and jewelled canopy, he looked with his wise eyes and saw that it was Nezha’s soul. He made Nezha bones out of green lotus root and clothes out of the lotus leaves, and then recited the spell to revive the dead. Thus it was that Nezha came back to life. He used his divine abilities and great magical powers to subdue ninety-six caves of demons through the dharma. After this, Nezha wanted to kill his father in revenge for having had to pick the flesh off his own bones, leaving the heavenly king with no choice but to beg the help of the Tathagata Buddha. For the sake of harmony the Buddha gave the heavenly king an intricately made golden “as-you-will” reliquary pagoda, in each storey of which were Buddhas radiant with splendour. The Buddha called on Nezha to regard these Buddhas as his father, thereby ending the hatred between them. This is why Heavenly King Li is called the Pagoda-bearer”.<sup>10</sup>

Nezha’s role is transposed here, as he plays the hero in this Buddhist fiction. His unbridled nature is tamed and the agnatic tie between father and son is forged. Li Jing and Nezha are loyal soldiers of the



The seals of Prince Nezha.

celestial authority, serving the Jade Emperor in Heaven. Symbolizing a disciplining force, Nezha plays an auxiliary role helping the Monkey King, protecting the saintly monk Xuanzang 玄奘 and his acolytes during their journey to the West.

In *Xiyou Ji*, the chief character is the mythic Monkey King. This animal-turned-supernatural is dramatized as possessing immense transcendental powers. He can transform himself into seventy-two different human and animal forms. Being proud, fun-loving, restive, undisciplined, and rebellious, he wreaks havoc in Heaven, and is even antagonistic towards the immortals. The Jade Emperor appoints Nezha to the position of the God of the Three Altars of the Masses, charged with arresting Monkey. In order to make use of Monkey’s magic arts and to suppress his Prometheus-like mischief, the Bodhisattva Guan Yin 观音, acting on a decree from the Buddha, assigns him to look for the scriptures with Xuanzang.

Nezha’s rebellious and defiant prototype also appears in the characterization of Honghai’er 红孩儿, or the Red Boy. Almost being a counterpart of Nezha, the Red Boy in *Xiyou Ji* is an immortal child with an imposing title: the Great Sacred Infant King. He

## RELIGIÃO



The elaborate palanquin carrying the Nezha Statue (the Old Nezha Temple), 2006.

has cultivated his conduct and his magical powers for three hundred years on the Fiery Mountain and his martial skills are tremendous. He is depicted wearing no helmet or armour, clad only in an elegant battle-kilt of embroidered brocade around his waist, and he goes barefoot. Like a mirror image of Nezha, he is depicted as a lovely yet powerful seven-year-old boy, who wields the same powerful weapon: a Fire-tipped Spear.

Nezha, the Monkey King, and the Red Boy together exemplify the theme of rebellion and defiance. They can aptly be called a “rebellious trio”. These mythical figures dare to challenge the divine order and literally fight with high-ranking immortals in Heaven. They never show heartfelt submission, but only succumb to powerful weapons that they cannot resist. If Nezha had not been intimidated by Li Jing’s Pagoda, he would not have reconciled with his father. If the Monkey King and the Red Boy had not each had a Gold Band fastened around their heads by Guan Yin,

the former would not have agreed to protect Xuanzang on the perilous journey, and the latter would not have consented to be a page-boy in Guan Yin’s service. But the unbridled minds of the rebellious trio are finally tamed, and their defiant temperaments subdued.

These two classical literary works developed over centuries from the folk art of storytelling, and were put into book form in the 1590s. They share similar characteristics in which historical events are interwoven with mythical and legendary materials within a cultural tradition. These eclectic mythic elements are adopted as part of folk belief and constitute part of the religious life of the common people. Mythological narratives, as Anne Birrell contends, are sacred narratives because “they relate acts of the deities in addition to other episodes, and they embody the most deeply felt spiritual values of a nation”.<sup>11</sup> These two mythological narratives thus serve as indispensable sources that not only reveal a variety of “mythemes” of the Nezha myth,



## RELIGION

but also illustrate a vivid imagination and a lively sense of folk humour.

As *Fengshen Yanyi* exemplifies the borrowing of Buddhist deities into the Daoist pantheon, *Xiyou Ji* illustrates the confluence of divinities from both religions. Literary texts are always already a reflection of their contexts. The specific trend of any religious thought carries with it a specific mode of cultural reception, which in turn influences literary production. Hence, literature cannot be understood outside the total context of the culture of a given epoch. These two novels reveal the prevailing spiritual change and demonstrate the dynamics of religious syncretism.<sup>12</sup> The heyday of religious syncretism was ushered in during the Ming dynasty, whereupon it flourished to an unprecedented degree. The pre-eminent syncretist at that time was Lin Zhao'en 林兆恩 (1517-1598), who fervently espoused *sanjiao heyi* 三教合一 (the harmonization of the Three Teachings). He demonstrated and promoted the dynamics of syncretism that would tolerate disparate beliefs. Given that these two mythological novels transgress religious boundaries and accept each other's divinities without scruple, general readers would have hardly been able to distinguish the religious association of each and every deity.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE NEZHA MYTH

Created, as they were, beyond the pale of social norms, the three self-contained chapters on Nezha in *Fengshen Yanyi* can almost stand alone as an independent and entertaining story. The narrative surpasses all previous works on Nezha and outshines the Nezha episodes in the contemporaneous *Xiyou Ji*. Cultural anthropology has a habit of focusing on the specific, that is, on cultural particularity. Anthropological studies of China have generally noted that Chinese culture has long valorised—has even been obsessed with—filial piety. The Nezha story may well shed light on a greater variety of human experiences and provide further insights into Chinese culture. Though impetuous and belligerent, Nezha is not an unfilial son at the start. His plan to use the slain Ao Bing's main tendon to make Li Jing an armoured belt shows a positive regard for his father. In addition, his self-mutilation can be construed as a filial act, because it is at the threat of the four Dragon Kings that he sacrifices himself to save Li Jing from divine punishment. Nevertheless, Nezha's

filial piety goes completely unappreciated. Even worse, Li Jing tries to condemn his soul to eternal suffering by depriving him of the chance to be reincarnated. For the Chinese, the attempt to destroy the soul of one's own offspring is indeed an outrageous act.

From the moment of Nezha's birth, Li Jing shows no fatherly love for him and falls utterly out of the category of a compassionate father. As the indispensable

The flower-decked palanquin carrying the Nezha Statue (the Dasanba Nezha Temple), 2006.



## RELIGIÃO

unit of social organization, compassionate parents and filial children constitute the cornerstones for the operation of the family, and their mutual respect can encourage and perpetuate the kinship system. Li Jing simply violates Confucian orthodoxy and fails to reinforce the cohesion and solidarity of his family. Chinese patriliney and filial piety are qualities that define its cultural uniqueness. The Nezha story, however, testifies to a peculiar variability in Chinese society. Applying an anthropological and psychoanalytic approach, P. Steven Sangren is of the opinion that the mythical narrative of Nezha reveals a mode of production of desire—the desire for autonomy, freedom and escape from the overbearing patriarchal authority and the patrilineal, virilocal Chinese family system. The internal complexity of Nezha's desire thus amounts to a kind of primal narcissism or egocentrism.<sup>13</sup> That is, his desire is to displace the father, who is representative of the law, discipline and authority.

In addition, Nezha immerses himself in a narcissistic fantasy of radical autonomy, to the point of negating any relations with his parents at all. Sangren maintains that the significant dimension of the Nezha story “is an imaginary constitution of the ‘self’ as an autonomous, *self*-producing subject”.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, the Nezha myth valorises the transgression of orthodox values and the rejection of the role of a submissive son in the patrilineal Chinese culture; on the other, it focuses on the egocentric struggle for the empowered (male) subject-position.

In early Chinese folklore, there were mythic cults which were serious in tone and organization, and which often carried didactic messages and moral instructions. The cult of Nezha, however, is totally subversive of traditional values. Nezha is perhaps the most iconoclastic child-god in Chinese mythology. He is an agent of disturbance and has audacious courage to defy Heaven—the supreme power. Not only does he mock the established value system, he also betrays Chinese feudal ideology by nearly committing patricide. While the mythical narrative is extremely counter to the social decorum of mainstream culture, it embraces rich elements of folk humour and appears comic in the sense that the cultic figure ridicules and upends everything official, authoritarian and one-sidedly serious.

Mythological narratives often speculate on the transgression of traditional values and roles. Nezha clearly represents one such adamant transgression.

His subversion of traditional values is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of carnival. In a Bakhtinian sense, Nezha furnishes a carnivalesque mode of reversal to liberate people from the “official” realm of the world, and turns the hierarchy upside-down.<sup>15</sup> For Bakhtin, carnival and carnivalization are the people's “second life” outside officialdom. Carnival aesthetics offers a temporary suspension of hierarchies and prohibitions, and translate a symbolic egalitarianism through the switching of roles. He elaborates and associates the carnival spirit with literary carnivalization. The militantly anti-authoritarian attitudes of Nezha, the Monkey King and the Red Boy evidently embody the carnival imagery. The carnivalesque stories in these two mythological novels neatly produce decentralizing forces that militate against official power and ideological inducements. In addition, the comic manifestations belong to the culture of carnivalesque humour, which turns the “world inside out” within the leaven of popular-festive forms.

Just as laughter gives form to carnival rituals that completely free people from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety, the myths of Nezha, the Monkey King, and the Red Boy celebrate liberation from the monotonic truth and from norms of etiquette imposed by tradition. Most especially, they provide people with a chance to transpose themselves to a world of fantasy, which is sharply distinct from the real world. Such a temporary escape becomes a needed antidote to the grim reality, and makes these cult forms hugely popular and enduring. It is through this kind of rebellious quality that these mythic figures have become time-honoured elements in the epics of Chinese culture.

The portrayal of Nezha has changed through the ages. In the Tang dynasty, he was normally depicted in Tantric texts as having one head and two arms, holding a halberd or a pagoda. In the Northern Song dynasty, he was portrayed as an adult, a guardian deity of Buddhist monks. He possessed magical powers and could change himself into a fierce form with three heads and eight arms. In the Ming dynasty, he was represented as a seven-year-old boy, but exceptionally tall—six *chi*, or almost 20 metres. He could also transform himself into a figure with three heads and six or eight arms. Nezha does not merely evolve from a “foreign” religious belief; he also *devolves* from a decorous young man into a daring child.

Being an unbridled iconoclast in *Fengshen Yanyi*, Nezha conveys an “ideal-disconfirming” message. In



## RELIGION

a different vein, he represents an “ideal-confirming” scenario, and his “polluted” heart/mind is cleansed in *Xiyou Ji*. He takes up a positive role, being a righteous deity and a compliant son. Moreover, the untamed mind and nature of the Monkey King and the Red Boy are also cleansed and cultivated. The proscription of the dark side and the cultivation of the bright side of the heart/mind fall in line with the late Ming intellectual development of *xinxue* 心学 (School of the Heart/Mind). *Xiyou Ji* is laced with specific aspects of philosophical thought in the Neo-Confucian context of the Ming dynasty.

In *Fengshen Yanyi*, Jiang Ziya canonizes three hundred and sixty-five mortals and spirits in a celestial hierarchy comprised of eight departments that deal with the affairs of the mundane world. Li Jing, Nezha and his two elder brothers, Jinzha and Muzha, are invested as gods, freed from the cycle of death and rebirth. They become immortals without ridding their bodies of mortal flesh; the process is termed *roushen chengsheng* 肉身成圣 (a mortal body becomes an immortal). What is special in the Nezha myth is that Nezha’s body is not flesh and blood anymore, but rather a re-constituted botanical body made from the lotus flowers.

Nezha’s descent from Heaven is an example of the religious concept of soteriology. After undergoing a “journey” from *samsara* (the provisional) in the mortal world, he achieves *nirvana* (the ultimate) and is canonized as god. His mission to assist Jiang Ziya is a soteriological pattern to attain the ultimate eternal bliss. Since its publication, the novel has played a pivotal role in sustaining Chinese mythology in the popular consciousness. Folklore has it that the deities depicted in *Fengshen Yanyi* are the most orthodox gods in the Daoist pantheon. The novel thus has become a vehicle to consolidate the autochthonous Chinese myth-symbol complex.

The characterization of Nezha falls in line with a chain of motifs commonly found in epics from different parts of the world: a near-immortal parent, a dramatic birth, an extraordinary childhood, an aristocratic social position, a sense of antagonism towards established power, and a divine sponsor. Similar to the usual emphasis on the moral virtue of Greco-Roman mythic heroes, Nezha possesses exceptional strength, and kills monsters with the help of special weapons. He embarks on ferocious battles against evil with Jiang Ziya, and performs deeds of valour to help establish a new dynasty. He assists the Monkey King in subduing monsters, demons, spirits and



The altar inside Dasanba Nezha Miao (the Nezha Temple of the Ruins of St. Paul's).

ghosts so that Xuanzang and his disciples can continue their journey. Needless to say, he represents the “hero myth.” And yet, the folk humour in the Nezha myth alludes to an attitude in which all official certainties are inverted or parodied. In light of his boundless ability and dauntless courage to oppose officialdom, he dares upset the divine world and laughs at the rigidity of traditional value systems. He is the mischievous figure in the “rebellion myth.” These two representations thus point to the contrasting images of Nezha.

Myths should not be read simply as stories about gods and goddesses. Rather, myths often contain deeper truths about humankind, and a single mythical personage may condense and comprise of many layers of meaning. The birth-death-rebirth pattern of the Nezha myth was seemingly created as an entertaining story, but it conceals a serious purpose in its underlying structure. The serious tone is to demonstrate human imperfections, psychological needs, conflicts, desires, fantasies, fears, vengeance, atonement and reconciliation. On the surface, Nezha represents rebellious and disruptive forces; but the narrative also suggests his victimized experience in Confucian tradition based on the notion that “the father is the most honoured. Though the father is not compassionate, the son should not be unfilial”.

Nezha’s divine mentor, Taiyi Zhenren, is a decisive character. He is the one who “sends” Nezha

## RELIGIÃO

to the mortal world and the producer of Nezha's reconstituted body from the lotus flowers, but he is also the instigator of Nezha's attempted patricide. Moreover, he provides a dialogic perspective that fractures the established value system by indirectly (through Randeng Daoren) urging Li Jing not to serve King Zhou, and by implicitly approving Nezha's revenge on his father. He represents an "unofficial" voice that exposes the revolutionary potential challenging the dominant Confucian teachings of *zhongxiao* 忠孝 (loyalty and filial piety). Above all, he exercises poetic justice in lamenting Li Jing's heartlessness, and criticizes the hierarchical social relationship of "father over son", in which the father does not deserve to be respected by his son. The Nezha myth appears to espouse a reciprocal relationship between a compassionate father and a filial son. Such a relationship necessarily helps maintain a harmonious social structure.

In the early twentieth century, a *sutra* dedicated to this child-god was "invented" in Taiwan. It is entitled "Zhongtan Yuanshuai Qiangmo Zhenjing" 中坛元帅降魔真经 (The Demon-Subduing Genuine Sutra of the General of the Central Altar). In the *sutra*, Nezha reveals himself as a Tianzun 天尊 (the Celestial Honoured), which is a very prestigious status. He is ultimately elevated to a prominent deity in the Daoist pantheon.

## NEZHA'S ROLE IN MACAO

Nezha is an undisciplined boy and his world is "a world inside out"; but he never lacks worshippers, and is mostly revered by housewives in Macao. Mothers pray to him when their children are sick and ask for his protection and healing. If their children are unruly, they might tie a "divine bond" with Nezha so that he becomes their godfather. It seems ironic that mothers would seek help from an unruly child-god to chasten their disobedient children and change their bad behaviour.

In Macao, on Nezha's birthday, the 18<sup>th</sup> day of the fifth lunar month, children are taken to the Old Temple of Nezha for a paediatric ritual: the stamping of the belly-button. A square wooden seal bearing the Chinese words *Sanshisian Tian Nezha Taizi Baoxi* 三十三天哪吒太子宝玺 (the Precious Seal of Prince Nezha of the Thirty-third Heaven) is used to perform this annual ritual. The seal, dipped in red ink, is stamped on the children's bellies. As an amulet to drive away pernicious spirits and to prevent illness, this "umbilical stamp" is believed to

be valid for one year. In this way, Nezha is convincingly constructed as the patron deity of children. According to one informant, adults may also be stamped on their bellies, arms, or even on their clothes or on towels. In addition, there is an antique "temple seal" which has been passed down by previous generations. This seal is made of tin, but the words on it are not recognizable. On Nezha's birthday, the "temple seal" is used to stamp on small pieces of paper, which are distributed as amulets to believers for protection and good luck.

The Old Temple of Nezha is adorned with a total of twenty-four honorific tablets which are hung high up on the wall. One prestigious tablet bearing the four characters *yonghu liandao* 永护莲岛 (Eternally Protecting Lotus Flower Island) was presented by Edmund Ho Hau Wah in 1998, just before he became the Chief Executive of Macao in 1999. Edmund Ho's tablet certainly bestows an aura of glamour to the temple, and in a sense consolidates Nezha's additional divine duty as the patron deity of Macao—a city whose poetic name is *Liandao* 莲岛 (Lotus Flower Island). Nezha's new role is similar to that of St. John the Baptist, who is upheld by the Catholic community as the patron saint of Macao.<sup>16</sup>

Nezha has also been worshipped as the God of Lotteries and Gambling for some time. It is believed that among all the Chinese gods, he is probably the only one mischievous enough to disclose the winning numbers; hence he is revered by those seeking luck at gambling or in business.<sup>17</sup> In the Old Nezha Temple, there are two honorific wooden tablets testifying to his ability to provide divine services to gamblers. The tablets were donated by winners who wanted to express gratitude to Nezha for his assistance. Despite the fact that these two tablets were put up, informants at the Old Nezha Temple emphasized that Nezha's role as the patron of gamblers was not generally emphasized.<sup>18</sup>

Since the termination of the casino monopoly in 2002 and the subsequent awarding of new gambling licences, Macao abounds with myriads of modern Las Vegas-style casinos. At the dawn of the third millennium, Macao has never been so true to its old nicknames—the "Far East Las Vegas" and "Monte Carlo of the Orient." And, like Macao's metamorphosis from a Catholic bishopric into Asia's foremost modern City of Gambling,<sup>19</sup> the transformation of Nezha from the guardian of Buddhist monks to the patron of gamblers is not without irony. As we can see, religious traditions,



## RELIGION

which are networks of myths, symbols and rituals, are not fixed, but susceptible to changes. They evolve over time by adapting to changing circumstances and by pandering to people's needs, interests and fancy.

While the Old Temple of Nezha maintains good relations with the "mother" Nezha Temple in Yibin, Jiangyou county, Sichuan province, it also has close ties with the Madou Taizi Gong 麻豆太子宮 (Prince's Palace of Madou) in Madou, Tainan, in southern Taiwan. In Macao's Old Nezha Temple stand three identical Nezha statues that have been ritualised as the manifestations of the original Nezha statue in Yibin. They were "invited" from Sichuan and brought to Macao in October 1997. Three years later, thanks to the amicable relationship between believers in Macao and Taiwan, and with the consent of the Old Nezha Temple, the Madou Taizi Gong "re-invited" one of the Yibin Nezha statues to reside in its temple. At the beginning of 2001, a delegation from the Old Nezha Temple went to the Madou Taizi Gong to participate in a religious ceremony inaugurating Nezha's "visit." The manifestation of the Nezha statue from Yibin thus links three places with a common belief. As part of the religious custom, this statue will have to pay three "return visits" to Macao (with no specific time frame) before it can stay at the Madou Taizi Gong forever. These return visits are termed *huiluan* 回銮.

On Nezha's birthday in 2006, the loaned-out statue in Madou "returned" to Macao and paid homage to the Old Nezha Temple. His birthday was celebrated elaborately, with a seminar, processions, and dragon and lion dances, all attended by Macao dignitaries. Believers from Yibin, Taiwan, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Macao thronged to participate in this annual carnival-like event. In discussing the purpose of temples, John A. Brim has said that temples act as an important focus of religious life and contribute to the maintenance of social alliances and cohesion through collective rituals.<sup>20</sup> On a minimal level, the Old Temple of Nezha, too, becomes a focus for community and religious activities, and offers a kind of community-integrative function; the ritual celebrations held on Nezha's birthday, for example, reconfirm the bond among believers.

Given the cultural, religious, and ethnic ties shared by the people on either side of the Taiwan Strait, the "invitation" of the Nezha statue is a significant statement. It is an endorsement of cultural interaction on a religious level, despite different political systems

and contrasting ideologies. By means of religious contacts, ethnic bonding is intensified and a collective cultural identity fostered. Inadvertently, Nezha is endowed with the weighty role of uniting the Chinese people from different places, and the Old Nezha Temple is the conduit for this almost unnoticeable mission.

In Taiwan, Tian Hou 天后 is worshipped extensively because the ancestors of many of today's believers were migrants from Fujian province, where the cultic figure was born.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Nezha began to gain popularity in Taiwan following an offshoot of the cult of Nezha from Quanzhou, in Fujian province, which was established in Tainan in 1663. Nowadays, the cults of Tian Hou and Nezha serve to forge a closer relationship among the different ethnic groups in various parts of China; they also help justify, encourage and perpetuate the cultural tie on unofficial occasions. The national/cultural bonding of the people separated by the Taiwan Strait is thus strengthened by religious interaction.

An organization called the Nezha Temple Association was formed in the 8<sup>th</sup> lunar month of 2003, charged with the task of looking after the affairs and events of the Old Temple of Nezha. Located near the temple at Calçada das Verdades, the Association aims at promoting the cult of Nezha. Apart from organizing the annual Nezha birthday procession, the Association distributes vegetarian porridge to the general public free of charge on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> day of each lunar month, as a gesture of charity. Local people like to receive this "blessed" porridge in the hope of warding off malicious *qi* 气 (energy).

The "newer" Nezha Temple, now better known as Dasanba Nezha Miao 大三巴哪吒庙 (the Nezha Temple of the Ruins of St. Paul's), lags behind the "primordial" temple in maintaining religious ties with Taiwan and in providing monthly charity services to the general public. Nevertheless, given its newly crowned "halo"—its 2005 inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage list as part of Macao's historico-cultural zone—a celebration of Nezha's birthday was held for the first time in 2006. Joined by Daoist organizations from Hong Kong and Macao, the celebration included a spectacular procession of the Nezha statue as well as Cantonese opera performances. Hence, the two Nezha temples organized two separate processions of the Nezha statue on the same day. Needless to say, the two temples are vying with each other, and do not seem willing to compromise and converge in unity.

RELIGIÃO



The "Offshoot" Nezha Temple at Pátio do Espinho.



## RELIGION

The Nezha Temple of the Ruins of St. Paul's symbolizes an "architectural subversion." The humble structure is an architectural metaphor ridiculing the looming, magnificent façade of the Ruins of St. Paul's, and defying the grand Chinese temple complexes in Macao. Just as the rebellious nature of the Nezha myth challenges authority and official truth, this offshoot temple finds a way to survive at the foot of the monumental Christian ruins. Notably, it now incorporates the name *Dasanba* 大三巴 (the Ruins of St. Paul's) in identifying its new status.

In Macao, the child-god Nezha is not found in company with major Buddhist/Daoist deities in any temples. Rather, he is venerated in his own right, in two smaller venues. Despite their small size, the two Nezha temples represent the tangible cultural heritage

of Macao. Above all, they help foster cultural cohesion and religious alliances, and provide evidence for the enduring popularity of this mythic cult in Macao. Over the centuries, readers have been entertained by the humour of Nezha's daring transgressions and anti-authoritarian attitudes. Indeed, the myth of Nezha strikes a deep chord with the audiences. After all, comic catharsis is an essential antidote to the bleak reality. That the archetypal rebellious figure has survived into the modern era surely reflects the power of myth to re-enact and affirm the cultural tradition of folk humour. **RC**

**Author's note:** This text was written with a Research Scholarship granted by the Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Macao S.A.R. Government.

## NOTES

- 1 The term "mythological lore" refers to traditional and unscientific forms of knowledge or beliefs, lacking factual basis or historical validity, which are transmitted usually by word of mouth.
- 2 On the two Chinese versions of the Nezha legend, see *Aomen Shishan Nezha Gumiao Kuojian Bainian Jinian Tekan* 澳门柿山哪吒古庙扩建百年纪念特刊. Shishan Nezha Gumiao Zhilihui Bianyin 柿山哪吒古庙值理会编印, 1998.
- 3 J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Routledge, 1990. (Second Edition), p. 274
- 4 Macao was the only site nominated by China for the World Heritage List in 2005. Macao became a World Heritage city upon receiving official recognition as such from the UNESCO World Heritage Committee (meeting in Durban, South Africa) on July 15, 2005. The historical zone, which is described as a "unique, peerless jewel" and the newest tourism product, includes twenty-two architectural sites of cultural importance and eight *largos* (or public squares). See *South China Morning Post*, 16 July 2005 and *Macao Daily News*, 16 July 2005.
- 5 On the Buddhist Thirty-third Heaven, see *Ci Hai* 辞海. Hong Kong: Zhonghua Shuju, 1977.
- 6 In Chinese military organization, there are five *ying* 营 (battalions)—east, south, west, north and central.
- 7 Levi-Strauss' term "mytheme," meaning the synthesis of the relational units in myth, is borrowed from the linguistic concepts of phoneme and morpheme. See Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth" in *Structuralists From Marx to Levi-Strauss* (ed. by Richard and Fernande de George). New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1972, pp. 169-194.
- 8 The author also selected and reorganized some miscellaneous and discordant materials and put them into a single unified Nezha story. See Liu Ts'un-Yan, *Buddhist and Taoist influences on Chinese novels*. Wiesbaden: Kommissionsverlag Otto Harrassowitz, 1962, Chapter XI, "The Story of Vaisravana and Nata."
- 9 The exact central point of the "womb-house" is the most important and auspicious area in the whole temple. Paradoxically, it is the least decorated part, having neither pillars nor windows. On a metaphysical level, the dark interior adds to the mystery of the divine presence.
- 10 W. F. J. Jenner (transl.), *Journey to the West*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1990, pp. 310-311.
- 11 Anne Birrell, *Chinese Myths*. London: British Museum Press, 2000, p. 7.
- 12 The etymology of the term "syncretism" derives from a historic incident in which the citizens of Crete overcame internal disputes and united against a common enemy. Hence, "syncretism" denotes the reconciliation or fusion of conflicting religious beliefs or principles.
- 13 P. Steven Sangren, *Chinese Sociologies: An Anthropological Account of the Role of Alienation in Social Reproduction*. London: The Athlone Press, 2000, pp. 189-195.
- 14 *Ibidem*, p. 209.
- 15 On Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968, Introduction. See also Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought*. London: Routledge, 1995, Chapter 3.
- 16 On June 24, 1622, the Dutch invaded Macao with a force of 1,300 men. They were defeated by a handful of Portuguese priests, citizens and African slaves. That day was the Feast of St. John the Baptist, who thus became the patron saint of Macao.
- 17 "Li Nezha: the deity from Chinese mythology," on [www.godchecker.com/pantheon/](http://www.godchecker.com/pantheon/)
- 18 In an interview with Zheng Guangguang [Chiang Kung Kuong] 郑权光 and Mai Guangrong [Mak Kuong Weng] 麦光荣 of the Nezha Temple in May 2006, they reiterated that Nezha should not be venerated in relation to gambling.
- 19 Notably, gaming revenue from Macao's twenty-four casinos surged 23 per cent to US\$6.87 billion during 2006, out-shadowing the Vegas Strips US\$6.69 billion over the thirty-nine casinos. See *South China Morning Post*, 12 February, 2007.
- 20 John A. Brim, "Village Alliance Temples in Hong Kong". In Arthur P. Wolf (ed.), *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*. California: Stanford University Press, 1974, pp. 102-103.
- 21 Tian Hou is the spiritual representation of a living maiden, named Lin Mo 林默 (960-987), who was born into a seafarer's family in Meizhou, Fujian province.