

## THE LEGEND OF NEZHA

The eternally youthful child-god Nezha 哪吒 has an ancient origin.<sup>1</sup> Historians trace the genesis of Nezha to the Hindu prototype Nata (or Nalakubara), a son of Kubara, or Vaisravana.<sup>2</sup> The cult of Nezha was brought from India to China, where he became a minor Buddhist deity, and later a Daoist deity. The legend of Nezha is not easy to trace because each of these religious traditions has several variations on the story recorded in their writings.<sup>3</sup> This article, however, is mainly concerned not with ancient texts but with present-day popular religious belief in Macao, where Nezha is worshipped as a Chinese Daoist deity.

Images of Nezha normally depict him as a small boy with magical treasures: he wears a red silk *dudou* 肚兜 apron called the *hun tian ling* 混天绫 (Sky-muddling Damask). In his upraised fist, he holds a ring or hoop of gold called the *qian kun quan* 乾坤圈 (Universal Ring). In the other hand he holds a spear called the *huo jian qiang* 火尖枪 (Fire-tipped Spear), and under his feet are a pair of wheels called the *feng huo lun* 风火轮 (Wind-fire Wheels). Each of these accessories has supernatural powers. The best-known and most complete story of Nezha, relating his miraculous birth, supernatural powers, quick temper and military prowess, is told in chapters 12 through 14 of the Ming dynasty novel *Fengshen Yanyi* 封神演义, which has been published in an edited English translation as *Creation of the Gods*.<sup>4</sup> He is also a minor character in the even more popular Ming dynasty novel *Xi Youji* 西游记 (*Journey to the West*).<sup>5</sup> Children in China love Nezha as he has been the subject of the popular animated cartoon series *Nezha Chuanqi* 哪吒传奇 *The Legend of Nezha* and the animated feature film *Nezha Nao Hai* 哪吒闹海 *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*. His image has even been used on packages of sweets.

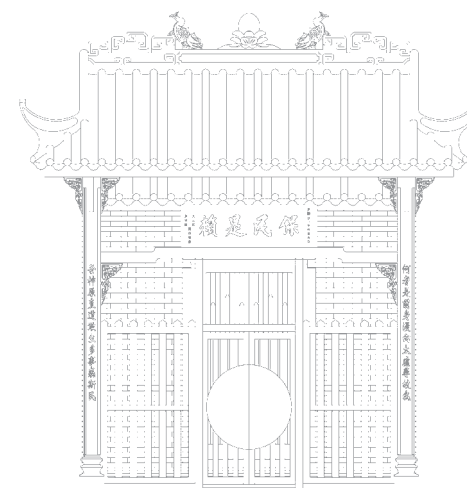
As the beliefs of Macao people about the life of Nezha are based mainly on the account in the *Fengshen Yanyi*, it is useful to summarise that story. Nezha was born at Chentang Pass in Shandong province about three thousand years ago in the final years of the Shang dynasty. His title *San Taizi* 三太子 (Third Prince) refers to his position as the third son of the commander of the garrison at the pass, General Li Jing 李靖. After three-and-a-half years of pregnancy, Madame Yin still has not delivered her third child. Then one night in



## Chinese Folk Religion in Macao: Ritualism or Relief?

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a dream a Daoist burst into her bedroom and threw something at her abdomen. Soon her labour begins and she gives birth to a ball of flesh, which rolls across the floor while the maidservants scream in terror. Li Jing cuts it open, and out springs Nezha wearing a red silk apron and a gold bracelet. The next day a Daoist master, Taiyi Zhenren 太乙真人 (Fairy Primordial), comes and prophesises that the child will break the commandment against killing.

Seven years later the young boy goes to play outside his house for the first time on a hot day in May. To cool himself, he dips his red *dudou* apron into a stream, but as it is a magic weapon, it shakes the water all the way down the river to the undersea palace of Ao Guang 敖光, the Dragon King of the Eastern

Sea. The Dragon King dispatches a sea patrolman to investigate, and Nezha is found to be the cause of the disturbance. An argument ensues, and Nezha splits the dragon's head open with his Universal Ring. Next the third son of the Dragon King confronts him, and Nezha kills him and removes his tendon to make into a belt for his father. The Dragon King is an old friend of Li Jing, so he comes in human form to see Li Jing and complains bitterly about what has happened. Li Jing assumes there is some mistake as Nezha is only a child, but the boy naively confesses all that he has done. The Dragon King vows to report the crime to the Jade Emperor in Heaven. Nezha's father and mother bewail the disaster that their son has brought upon them, but he resolves to take responsibility for all the trouble and to protect his parents. Nezha flies away on a cloud of dust to ask Fairy Primordial what to do. The master gives him an invisibility charm so that he can ambush the Dragon King. At the gates of Heaven, Nezha beats the Dragon King, pulls off some of his scales, and forces him to transform himself into a tiny snake to put into his sleeve. Nezha quickly returns home and tells his father that he has been to the gate of Heaven to ask the Dragon King not to make his complaint to the Jade Emperor but to return with him. Li Jing believes his son is lying until he takes the snake out of his sleeve and it transforms itself into human form. The Dragon King, now angrier than ever, swears to summon the dragon kings of all the four seas. By now, Li Jing realises that his son is no ordinary mortal. His mother, seeing that Li Jing was still angry, told Nezha to go and play in the back garden. There he finds a bow and arrow and decides to practice archery, unaware that this is a magic bow that no one has been able to draw since ancient times. The arrow that he shoots flies to the White Bone Cave, home of a fairy called Shiji Niang Niang 石矶娘娘 (Lady Rock), where it kills one of her disciples.

To save his parents from punishment, Nezha decides to kill himself, 'returning' his body to his parents. Soon afterward, his spirit appears with his mother in dreams asking her to build a temple dedicated to him. She has the temple built secretly in a remote place to escape the attention of her husband, who would forbid it. Worshippers who come to visit the temple receive miraculous results from their supplications, while Nezha's soul receives nourishment

Nezha.





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from their offerings. Before Nezha can receive enough energy to be fully reincarnated, however, his father finds out about the temple and destroys it. Nezha’s immortal mentor, Taiyi Zhenren (Fairy Primordial), then reconstitutes Nezha’s body from lotus flowers and stems. The immortal also gives him the Fire-tipped Spear and the Wind-fire Wheels that can carry him swiftly through the air. Nezha sets out to take revenge on his father, who flees to another immortal, Randeng Daoren 燃灯道人, for protection. This immortal gives Li Jing a wonderful pagoda that he can use to restrain and punish the unruly boy whenever necessary. Finally tamed, Nezha becomes a filial son. Later he joins his father and brothers in battles to help overthrow the decadent Shang dynasty.

Chinese iconography depicts Li Jing dressed as a fierce general holding a pagoda on his upturned palm.

Li Jing is considered to be a mortal who became an immortal. Nezha, however, is considered to be a god rather than an immortal because he was sent to the earth by the Jade Emperor as the incarnation of Ling Zhuzi 灵珠子 (the Pearl Spirit) and possessed miraculous powers. Nezha also has the title Zhongtan Yuanshuai 中坛元帅 (Guardian of the Central Altar).<sup>6</sup>

In *Journey to the West* Nezha is called *Sanshisian Tian Nezha Taizi* 三十三天哪吒太子 (Prince Nezha of the Thirty-third Heaven). There are various explanations for this title. In Buddhist belief, there is an important guardian deity named Dishi 帝释 who lives in a city on the summit of Mount Xumi encircled by 32 Heavenly Kings, each with his own city, making a total of 33 Heavenly Cities. In folklore, Nezha’s father, Li Jing, is one of the North Heavenly Kings, also known as Duowen Tianwang 多闻天王, so the title ‘Prince

Nezha of the Thirty-third Heaven’ means that Nezha is the son of the North Heavenly King. It is interesting to note, however, that popular belief in Macao has some different ideas about this title. One informant explained that the points of the compass may be subdivided into 32 directions, with Nezha occupying the center, which is the 33<sup>rd</sup> point. Another informant related, ‘Nezha was inside a ball when he was still in the womb of his mother. He burst out of the ball after 33 days. That’s why he is called the ‘Prince of the Thirty-third Heaven [or Day]’ (The word *tian* 天 can mean either ‘heaven’ or ‘day’). The website of the Museu de Macau states that the customs and beliefs of Macao advocate ‘Prince Na Cha in 33 days’, without offering any explanation of the term.<sup>7</sup>

Chapter 37 of the *Fengshen Yanyi* mentions the unusual characteristics of Nezha’s body and soul. In

Chinese belief the human body is animated by two forces or souls: the *hun* 魂 and the *po* 魄 (or alternatively ten souls: three *hun* and seven *po*).<sup>8</sup> Some Daoists identify the *hun* and the *po*, respectively, as the *yin* and *yang* aspects of the soul, and they pursue immortality by cultivating the *hun* virtues and controlling the *po* passions.<sup>9</sup> The *hun* is responsible for the three spiritual energies that direct activity and are responsible for man’s intellect and capacity for spiritual experiences; the *po* is responsible for the physical strength of the body and the seven passions.<sup>10</sup> At death the *hun* and *po* are separated. Nezha, however, is not like mere mortals. In one of the many battles he fought, he defeated Zhang Guifang 张桂芳, a sorcerer able to disperse a person’s soul by calling aloud the name of the person. The sorcerer called out Nezha’s name three times in battle, by which he intended to separate Nezha’s *hun*

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



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





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and *po* to make him collapse, but since Nezha had been reincarnated from lotus flowers, he had neither *hun* nor *po*, and thus was immune to Zhang Guifang’s sorcery.<sup>11</sup> Nezha’s lotus body also makes him immune to plague and invulnerable to certain magical weapons such as the Yin Yang Mirror, the Soul Dropping Bell, a thunderbolt, the Paralysing Rings, and the White Bone Pennant, each of which are employed against him in battle. As one foe declares in chapter 79, ‘I couldn’t hurt Nezha with my pennant because he was born from the pearl spirit and is soulless.’<sup>12</sup> Despite this, Nezha can still be harmed. He is wounded in battle by a girl, Deng Chanyu 邓婵玉, throwing a pebble in his face. Twice he is captured by enemy sorcery: once in the Red Sand Trap and again in a white light, being rescued on these two occasions by the Immortal of the South Pole and the Buddha Zhundi 准提, respectively.

The city of Beijing is also called the City of Nezha. This is because when the city was founded, the Daoist priest Liu Bowen 刘伯温 laid out the design for the city according to the principles of geomancy and the supposed interactions among the five elements, the five viscera, and other parts of the body of Nezha, oriented with his head toward the south.<sup>13</sup>

The Chinese pantheon contains many types of deities, which may be classified according to their origin, function, rank or other characteristics. Nezha is characterised differently by different authors. Keith G. Stevens classifies Nezha as a deity of fate and destiny.<sup>14</sup> The Macau Government Tourist Office writes that Nezha is celebrated to bring ‘fine weather and nets full of fish’, implying that he is a water deity.<sup>15</sup> Christina Cheng Miu Bing says that Nezha is honoured as the God of Lotteries and Gambling, as well as being a patron of children.<sup>16</sup> She points to the elements of anti-authoritarian rebellion and escapist fantasy in the legend of Nezha as reasons for the enduring appeal of his cult. This may well be true in a historical sense, but comments made by our informants indicate that Nezha’s devotees in Macao venerate him principally as a guarantor of good health.



THEORETICAL VIEWPOINTS

The Oedipal overtones of the Nezha story, in which the boy tries to kill his father and competes with him for the affection of his mother, have been noted by Steven Sangren.<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Chamberlain hypothesises that the legend of Nezha is either a Daoist satire on the legend of the Buddhist goddess Guanyin 观音 or, more likely, a political satire on the successful usurpation of the throne by the Yongle Emperor in the Ming dynasty.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the *Fengshen Yanyi*, whenever the rebels confront the forces loyal to the emperor, they argue the principle that the emperor has lost the mandate of Heaven because of his wickedness and cruelty. The rebels, therefore, are following the will of Heaven by overthrowing him and re-establishing righteous government. The theme of rebellion against patriarchal authority in the story of Nezha related in the novel is parallel to the theme of rebellion against imperial authority. Shi Changyu points out that the feudal principle of the divine right of the king over his officials is derived from the patriarchal principle of the father’s authority over his son.<sup>19</sup> At one telling point in the conflict between Nezha and his father, elder brother Muzha 木吒 advises his younger brother, ‘Parents are always right on matters concerning their children!’ To which Nezha retorts, ‘But don’t you know that I returned my flesh and bones to him! No relationship exists between us as father and son now.’<sup>20</sup>

Stephan Feuchtwang characterises Chinese religion as ritualistic, meaning that the emphasis is on precise performances of ritual to achieve desired results (for health, wealth, etc.) as opposed to religions that stress personal belief, such as Christianity and Islam.<sup>21</sup> The prayers that the Taoists are hired to perform at the Nezha temples in Macao are ritualistic, but statements made by members of the temples seem to indicate a belief emphasising personal spiritual growth. ‘For Chinese, worshipping god is simple—it is to achieve spiritual relief; it does not represent a religion’, said one man. Some members of these temples categorically

reject ‘superstition’, by which they seem to mean ‘magic’. Also, they talk about the importance of volunteering one’s services and improving one’s character. One woman said that her expectation of Nezha is that he will help people be moral, kind, and intelligent.

Robert P. Weller has noted how the varying social relations of the adherents of a cult allow varying interpretations of belief.<sup>22</sup> In particular, social elites and accomplished practitioners are systematic in their religious ideology. In contrast, popular tradition offers piecemeal interpretations that easily change as social conditions change.

An example of an elite interpretation of the Nezha legend can be seen in a talk given by the Head of the Academic Department of the Hong Kong Taoist Association on 9 October 2005 in Macao. Dr. Tong says that Nezha is an admirable god because he possesses the five virtues that Chinese cherish: *ren* 仁 benevolence, *yi* 义 righteousness, *li* 礼 propriety, *zhi* 智 wisdom, and *xin* 信 fidelity. As one of the examples of Nezha’s benevolence, Dr. Tong cites his slaying of the third son of the Dragon King. Although the *Fengshen Yanyi* portrays this violent deed as virtually unprovoked, Dr. Tong describes it in a new light: ‘The Dragon King’s third son had made use of his family’s name and damaged the social order.’ Dr. Tong points out that Nezha fought many evil beings who could never recover from their wounds, whereas Nezha could repair his broken bones with pieces of lotus plants. This, says Dr. Tong, is Nezha’s ‘wisdom’. The legend also tells how, after his father destroyed his temple, Nezha repeatedly tried to kill his father and was finally tamed only after his father received a magical pagoda with which to capture and burn his son whenever necessary. Dr. Tong explains, ‘However, Nezha did not blame his father. He only spoke to his teacher and asked for help.... Nezha shows his spirit of restraining himself and respecting his elders.’ It seems that Dr. Tong will go to some length to fit the facts of the Nezha legend to a systematic and syncretic ideology. He concludes:

Nezha is a combination of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. He remains himself mysterious, but somehow full of cultural manner. There is meaning in his three weapons: The apron is red, square-shaped to symbolize the earth, and it can absorb every worldly thing. The yin-yang hoop is green, round to represent heaven, and powerful enough to protect all people. The wind and fire

wheels are shaped like *taiji* 太极 to enlighten the truth, and they energize the world.<sup>23</sup>

METHODOLOGY

This research is a preliminary qualitative case study to examine the customs, beliefs and motivations of present-day worshipers of Nezha in Macao in order to learn who they are, what they do, what they believe, and why.

To locate informants, we contacted leaders of the two temple associations to introduce ourselves and ask them to allow us to interview some of their members. They kindly agreed to set up appointments for us to meet the officers of the associations in their headquarters, which were near each temple. We interviewed six informants from the Persimmon Hill Old Nezha temple, and seven from the Sanba Nezha temple.

Because this is a preliminary case study, we conducted qualitative research interviews that allowed the informants to tell us what they wanted us to know and allowed us to pursue in-depth information around the topics.

The interviews, which were recorded with MP3 players, were conducted mainly in Cantonese, with student translators acting as the go-betweens translating the questions from English to Cantonese, and the answers from Cantonese to English. Sometimes informants spoke Mandarin directly with my co-investigator Prof. Yan Wenjie or English with me. The translators typed the transcripts of the interviews in English, and these transcripts were edited by me.

The translators are students recommended by the University of Macau Research Committee for this project. They speak English, Cantonese and Mandarin. One of them is uniquely qualified for the study of the Nezha temples because her family belongs to one of them. Her father is one of the informants, and our first recorded interview was with him.

I analysed the transcripts of the interviews to identify themes in the believers’ stated beliefs and practices as well as to learn more about the history of the temples and their traditions.

REASONS TO BELIEVE

Given the fantastic elements in the story of Nezha, it may seem incredible at first to a non-Chinese

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person that anyone could believe it to be true, but to his followers, their belief in Nezha is no more illogical than a belief in any other figure reputed to have been born in miraculous circumstances, sacrificed his life for others, been resurrected, and gifted with healing powers.

The members of both Nezha temples in Macao view the deity principally as a guardian against disease, and they credit him with the power of healing. Relating the story of an epidemic that occurred in Macao, a man at the Persimmon Hill Nezha temple said, ‘No matter how many people were killed in the epidemic, no one in the area of Persimmon Hill got infected.’ The Sanba Nezha temple was also built in honour of the god after he saved people in that neighbourhood from an epidemic. People visit the Nezha temples to ask for healing, and there were special prayer services held during the SARS epidemic in 2003. Although some of the leaders disapprove of the practice, they admit that ‘some people even pray to Nezha when they are sick. They ask the oracle [shake the fortune sticks] and follow the paper oracle in getting some Chinese medicines to cure their disease.’

When people see the evidence of supplications being answered, their belief is reinforced. ‘People prayed to Nezha, and someone dreamt of Nezha after saying prayers. Nezha helped them, and so people started to believe in him.’ Particular gods are invoked for particular purposes. ‘People choose to worship gods that are responsible for certain events. They will worship the god that they believe can help with the event that troubles them... Nezha is responsible to fight off the epidemic and to calm the sea.’ Service is also a form of supplication. ‘Serve Nezha whole-heartedly, and then you will be rewarded with what you want.’

Asked what role Nezha plays in his life, one man replied, ‘Nezha is dwelling in my heart, and I can feel his existence. Nezha blesses and protects me.’ Like many believers, he trusts in the health-preserving power of Nezha: ‘Because I am working for Nezha, I feel that I am much healthier and stronger than before. This is because Nezha wants us to work for him, and so he bestows upon us a healthy body.’

The two reasons most often given for worshipping Nezha are to ensure good health and to follow tradition. Most of the members are following in the footsteps of their parents. As one woman said, ‘My father worshipped Nezha, and this belief passed to my generation.’ Another person admitted, ‘How did

this temple get founded? Well, we don’t know. We just know that this is passed from one generation to another generation.’ Another observed, ‘There is an altar in the home of every Chinese. That is why they are used to worshipping deities.’

THE FUNCTIONS OF BELIEF

The legend of Nezha is a popular Chinese myth, and like all myths it serves the four functions of myths as identified by Joseph Campbell: metaphysical, cosmological, sociological, and pedagogical.<sup>25</sup> The metaphysical function awakens a sense of awe and mystery. The cosmological function explains the nature of the universe and our place in it. The sociological function validates our customs, ethical principles and social roles. The pedagogical function teaches how to live through the various stages and crises of life. The comments made by followers of Nezha in Macao indicate that they intuitively recognise these functions.

*Metaphysical function:* Worshipping Nezha gives confidence to his devotees. As one said, ‘You would have a feeling of safety when you worship [Nezha] and would be spiritually strengthened, so I think it is good because it makes you feel positive.’ One informant stated that Nezha ‘helps people gain spiritual relief... I feel easy after worshipping him. I can feel his protection.’ This ‘spiritual relief’ seems to give them contentment and peace of mind.

At least one informant was aware of receiving a deeper sort of peace. When asked if Nezha gave him anything like good health or a happy family, he laughed, ‘Nothing! No, he does not give me anything.’ He expressed his disapproval of fortune telling and superstitions: ‘Other temples have fortune telling, but we do not want to do that. It is not that the god fulfils people’s requests and gives them everything they want. The most important thing is that the believers themselves take the initiative to reach Nezha’s spirit... Nezha is in the believers’ heart.’ Asked to describe Nezha’s spirit, he replied, ‘It is almost impossible for me to describe the spirit of Nezha. My relationship with Nezha is profound. I was born next to the temple, and my whole family has been living here for generations. I was raised up and cared for by Nezha believers. That is why I cannot find a single word to describe the spirit of Nezha.’ Such comments, while acknowledging the

influence of tradition, show the psychological assurance that can come from personal faith.

*Cosmological function:* The myth of Nezha and the temple activities show the believers their place in both the material and spiritual worlds. One woman said, ‘I have worked for Nezha for ten years. I also feel that everything in my life runs smoothly. Things get better and better, and I also feel better, with better spiritual relief. It is probably because I work for Nezha, and so he grants me a good life and good health.’

Some informants explained the prayers that were offered for ‘peace’ on the birthday of Nezha: ‘The main purpose of the ceremony performed on the birthday of Nezha is to ask for peace... Paper sacrifices are burnt for ghosts or roaming spirits in order to calm their souls. The ghosts or spirits will be pacified.’ Plainly the purpose of this ritual is not to pray for world peace and an end to war but rather to pray for freedom from fear of ghosts, which is a common feature of Chinese folk religion.

*Social function:* Both Nezha associations promote social activities. The Sanba Nezha temple, for example, has a monthly meeting with a traditional dinner called *pen cai* 盆菜 (basin dish). The Persimmon Hill Nezha temple also has group meals at each festival. Both associations have annual banquets to which many guests are invited. The membership of each association seems to come mainly from the neighbourhood around each temple, though families that have moved to other parts of Macao may retain their loyalty to Nezha and support the association.

The temple is an important part of the community. ‘People living in the Persimmon Hill neighbourhood were so close to each other. Later, an association was founded. This association worked like a security guard... With this security guard, there was someone to protect the Nezha temple and the neighbourhood.’

‘We belong to the same temple and we are brothers’, said one man. The Nezha association ‘unites people, stabilises the community, and effectively creates harmony among people.’ More than one informant credited Nezha with helping bring harmony to their family. One man expressed a typical assessment: ‘I have believed in Nezha for more than ten years. I am healthier than before. Everything goes smoothly and there is harmony in my family.’

Another man, explaining why Nezha is popular in Macao, said that it was ‘because people who are in charge of the Nezha temple are influential and have good

connections.’ This might imply that some people can be attracted to the temple by a desire for social mobility.

*Pedagogical function:* One informant had his unruly daughter ‘adopted’ by Nezha in a temple ceremony, and afterward she learned to control her temper. ‘She was very clever, and when she was young, she behaved very well at school. However, when she returned home, perhaps she wanted to release herself. As a student, she was excellent, but at home, she was very naughty, and ill-tempered—horrible... Some of my friends were in charge of the Nezha temple. They told me that if [my daughter] was ill-tempered, maybe Nezha could help her, since Nezha was also an ill-tempered child... We sent her to the temple. It is easy to be adopted by gods. Just pray and perform some ceremonies. She was then adopted by Nezha... After being adopted by the local god, Nezha, she behaved better and we found that she improved a lot and can control her temper... Maybe she was afraid that the god was watching her’, he said.

There are also some school children who invoke Nezha for help with their grades. ‘There are quite a lot of students in this temple. On the first and fifteenth of each month they come and ask about their study’, said another informant.

NEZHA TEMPLES IN MACAO

Macao is a unique location for observing and recording living Chinese religious traditions that have

The traditional dinner called *pen cai*.





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The façade of Guandi Gu Miao.

remained relatively unchanged since the Qing dynasty. This is in marked contrast to the Chinese mainland where anti-superstition campaigns that were waged first by the Republican government and later by the Communist government resulted in the demolition of many temples and the suppression of many religious practices. Nezha has been worshipped in Macao for at least three hundred years.

There are two Nezha temples in Macao, each with its own association. Unlike Hong Kong, Macao has no laws specifically regulating religious organisations. The Nezha associations in Macao are organised according to the same laws as secular associations, with a General Assembly, Executive Council, and Fiscal Council.

The cult of Nezha has no creeds, commandments, doctrines, scriptures, or sacraments such as in the Roman Catholic Church. The Nezha temples in Macao have no educational activities such as Sunday schools, sermons, or prayer groups. There is no clergy in the association, and when rituals are required on special occasions, priests from the Daoist Association are invited to perform them. On any day you can see lay devotees of Nezha burning joss sticks and paper offerings as in most Chinese temples.

Statues of Nezha are also found on the altars of several other temples in Macao, such as the Tian Hou Gu Miao 天后古庙 on Rua dos Pescadores, the Guandi Gu Miao 关帝古庙 next to the São Domingos Market, and the Shi Gan Dang 石敢当 chapel at the corner of Rua da Pedra and Travessa da Ponte. Most Chinese temples, especially Daoist ones, have many gods placed on their altars in addition to the principle god of the temple. Likewise, images of Guanyu 关羽, Guanyin, Sun Wukong 孙悟空 and other gods can be seen in the temples of Nezha.

THE PERSIMMON HILL OLD NEZHA TEMPLE

The cult of Nezha has a long history in Macao. The older of the two Nezha temples, on Travessa de Sancho Pança at the corner of Calçada das Verdades, is at least three hundred years old, having been built in the early Qing dynasty.<sup>26</sup> It is named Shishan Nezha Gu Miao 柿山哪吒古庙 (Persimmon Hill Old Nezha temple) from the persimmon trees that once grew there.

Concerning the legend of this temple, elderly residents of the area relate a story that varies somewhat



Guandi, flanked by Liu Bei 刘备 and Zhang Fei 张飞 in Guandi Gu Miao.

from one informant to another: One night several hundred years ago a Portuguese woman saw a barefoot boy frolicking on a large boulder (or playing with other children). He was wearing a red apron and short trousers (or he was naked). When she approached him, he vanished (or shot up into the sky). She told what she had seen to her Chinese neighbours, who believed that the boy must have been an apparition of the god Nezha, so they built a shrine next to the boulder. Another version of the legend says, 'Children witnessed a child riding a fiery wheel across the heavens sporting golden bracelets and blood-red clothes, whom villagers believed was Na Cha.'<sup>27</sup>

In 1895 bubonic plague entered Macao from Hong Kong.<sup>28</sup> The epidemic was especially severe in the neighbourhoods around Tap-Siac and the St. Lazarus Church, which are just down the hill from the Nezha temple, but the Persimmon Hill neighbourhood was spared, the people said, thanks to the protection of Nezha. Increasing numbers of people came to pray for health and happiness, and contributions were collected to raise a pavilion over the shrine in 1898, at a time when the epidemic was at a peak. The pavilion provides a roof over the shrine, but there is a wall on only one of the four sides of the temple, except for a small office for the temple caretaker. Without walls, there are no windows or doors, so this temple is unique in Macao as being the only one that never closes. An antithetical couplet carved into the stone columns testifies to the age of the shrine when the pavilion was erected:



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二百余年赫声濯灵，泽敷莲岛  
数千万众报功崇德，亭建柿山  
*Er bai yu nian he sheng zhao ling, ze fu lian dao;  
Shu qian wan zong bao gong chong de, ting jian  
shi shan.*

[Two centuries renowned for his cleansing spirit,  
like the waters around the Lotus Isle;  
Innumerable people acclaim his merit and  
worship his virtue,  
so the pavilion is built on Persimmon Hill.]

There are about two dozen honorific wooden tablets hanging in this temple, mostly inscribed with supplications for cures from diseases, reflecting the functionality of this temple to its visitors. A couple of tablets seem to have been placed by lucky gamblers, such as, ‘Instant Winning when Supplicated.’ One tablet contains a memorial written by Edmond Ho Hao Wah 何厚铨 before he became the Chief Executive of the Macao S.A.R. Government: *yonghu liandao* 永护莲岛 (Eternally Protecting Lotus Isle).’ Lotus Isle is a poetical appellation for Macao.

Mr. Chiang Kun Kuong 郑权光 has written a vivid description of the traditions followed in the annual Nezha Festival:

The birthday of Nezha is celebrated on the eighteenth day of the fifth lunar month. During the preceding month a group of neighbours goes from door to door collecting donations in support of the birthday celebrations. The celebrations may include public entertainments, catching a lucky coin, and a procession. Early in the 1920s, there were performances of puppet shows. During the 1960s, live theatre became dominant. The performers, often brought in from Hong Kong, would stage shows that lasted four days and five nights. The cost of such performances was exorbitantly high.

The highlight of the celebrations was catching the lucky coin. Businesses or families that contributed money in support of the celebrations were eligible to participate in this event. The competition took place around a circular table four feet in diameter with a firecracker placed in the center. Each explosion of the firecracker represented a wish for the participants. A bronze coin was placed on the firecracker. The moment the firecracker was set off, the coin flew high up

into the air, and the participants vied to catch it. This coin was considered a lucky charm. Whoever got a hold of it was allowed to keep a Nezha statue for the whole year, and then they would have to return both the statue and the lucky charm to the temple before the next year’s celebration. Having the privilege to host the statue for a year was considered the pinnacle of good luck, bringing good health and fortune to the people in that family or association. It was not uncommon that well-intended jostling over the lucky charm escalated into violence resulting in bloodshed.<sup>29</sup>

The most colourful event of the celebration is the procession of Prince Nezha. His carriage has to be lifted by eight people, who ideally should be unmarried men around the ages of 15 to 20. Two men escort the carriage by walking along either side, and two elder men walk in front. Trailing along behind the carriage are young girls and boys. The girls are dressed like fairies and carry flower baskets, while the boys, often Nezha look-alikes, may be carried aloft on the shoulders of adults. The fairy-girls toss flower petals to spectators while the boys sprinkle holy water on the crowd.

According to tradition, the streets through which the procession passes must be clear of laundry or any other things hanging from above. To ensure this, an older woman walks in front of the procession calling out to residents on both sides of the lane to promptly take in the clothes they have left drying outside their windows. Two older men guide the procession holding signs to direct traffic and to quiet down the crowds. Leading the procession are the lion dancers from the Kit Yee Tóng martial arts association. At each temple along the route the procession stops to pay respect by bowing down three times.

The Nezha festival has always been an important tradition for the Persimmon Hill Old Nezha temple. Unfortunately, due to social and political turmoil in Macao in 1966, the tradition came to a halt. Only twenty-nine years later, in 1995, was the tradition revived. However, due to a shortage of funding, the celebration in most years is limited to the procession and some small-scale theatrical performances.<sup>30</sup>

The annual budget of the temple is not made public, but income derives from membership fees, private donations, and grants from the government of Macao. The Instituto Cultural gave 50,000 patacas in 2005 to repair the roof. Unfortunately, they also removed an awning, allowing rainwater to get into the temple.

The Persimmon Hill Old Nezha temple has a very close and long-standing relationship with the Associação Desportiva Macau e Hong Kong Si San Kit Yee Tong de Artes Marciais Chineses 澳港柿山结义堂, which is a martial arts club with its headquarters directly across the street from the temple. Many individuals are members of both associations. The notable martial arts master Lee Fok Ng (李福伍 Li Fuwu, 1887-1932) joined this club in 1910 to teach kung fu and eventually changed the name of the club from Chun Yee Tong to the present Kit Yee Tong. Since 1922 the Kit Yee Tong has assisted the temple with the annual celebrations of Nezha’s birthday. The Kit Yee Tong has the responsibility of carrying the carriage with the statue of Nezha in the procession and of performing traditional lion dances.

The Kit Yee Tong has a history of patriotic and philanthropic activities. In 1931 they helped raise money to assist people affected by flooding in northern China; in 1940 they helped raise relief money for Guangdong and Guangxi provinces; and in 1950 they raised money for Kiang Wu Hospital in Macao. During World War II several members of the Kit Yee Tong went to the mainland to help defend the nation from the Japanese invaders.<sup>31</sup> Master Lee Fok Ng went to Shanghai to join China’s 19th Route Army when Japanese forces attacked Shanghai in January 1932. He became an instructor in the use of the sabre and fought on the front lines, where it seems he died, as he never returned from the war.<sup>32</sup>

The Persimmon Hill Old Nezha temple is supported by an association that counts 280 families as members. The association maintains friendly ties with Nezha temples in the city of Yibin in Sichuan province, the city of Jiangmen in Guangdong province, and Madou near Tainan, Taiwan. One informant explained, ‘The thing that connects Taiwan and Macao is that there were three statues transferred to Taiwan. There is a tradition in Taiwanese culture: things have to come back to their motherland three times in three years. That is why the statues have been transferred back and forth between Taiwan and Macao for three years. Therefore, we have to get in touch

at least once a year to manage the transportation. However, eventually the statues will stay in Taiwan.’ These visits establish a ‘genealogical’ relationship between the statues in Taiwan and Macao.<sup>33</sup>

There is also a Nezha temple in Hong Kong—the Sam Tai Tze 三太子 temple adjacent to a smaller Pak Tai 北帝 temple at number 196 Yu Chau Street in Sham Shui Po—but the temples in Macao do not seem to have any links to it. It was erected in 1898 in gratitude to Nezha for saving the neighbourhood from an epidemic in 1894 after Hakka people brought the image of the Third Prince from their native Huiyang, in Guangdong province, to parade through the streets of the district.<sup>34</sup>

Near the Persimmon Hill Old Nezha temple there used to be a two-storey house that served as a Chinese pharmacy. Inhabitants of the neighbourhood went there to fill their prescriptions, which they said were very effective for all types of illnesses.<sup>35</sup>

THE SANBA NEZHA TEMPLE

The other Nezha temple in Macao is Dai Sanba Nezha Miao 大三巴哪吒庙, built adjacent to the Ruins of St. Paul’s cathedral. The name ‘Sanba’ is a Chinese phonetic transliteration of ‘St. Paul’. The Sanba Nezha temple was founded in 1888, when there was a cholera epidemic in Macao. In the seventeenth century, Christian refugees came to Macao from Nagasaki, Japan, and they helped to build the Catholic cathedral that is the iconic symbol of Macao. The area where the Sanba Nezha temple is located is called Cilinwei 茨林围 (Pátio do Espinho). It is said that the temple is situated in the ‘positive’ area at the top of the slope, while the bottom of the hill below the Ruins of St. Paul’s is the ‘negative’ area.

An officer of the temple association related the following legend about why the Sanba Nezha temple was built:

Why do we believe in Nezha? It was said that there was a severe epidemic in Macao more than a hundred years ago. It had a great impact, especially in our district. We didn’t know what to do aside from asking help from a god. One day, a fellow said that he dreamt of a god (Nezha), who descended from the sky. The god asked him to go and get some water from the spring on the hill nearby—that is the hill where the Macao Museum is now located—and let everyone drink

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the water. Because the god himself had cast a spell on the water, it cured them of the disease. There were many Portuguese living in this area at that time. They also drank the water when they heard about what happened to us, and they were also cured. Therefore, we decided to build a temple to worship him. It was then people founded a Nezha temple. However, the one built at that time was much smaller than the present one. The flush-gable roof of the temple is in the traditional *yingshan* 硬山 style. Since the temple is quite small, it was built with no open space between the porch, in *xieshan* 歇山 style, and the single-chamber interior.<sup>36</sup> Two fish on the cornice of the porch are water symbols that are supposed to protect the building from being destroyed by fire. A pearl between the fish indicates that the temple is a precious treasure. Flanking the entrance of the temple is a couplet in praise of Nezha.

乾坤圈镇妖邪灭  
风火轮添泽国安  
*Qian kun quan zhen yao xie mie; feng huo lun tian ze guo an.*  
[The Universal Ring suppresses monsters and demons.  
The Wind-fire Wheels increase beneficence and peace.]

In 2005 the Sanba Nezha temple association had about 120 member families. Among the members were merchants, government employees, police, and even members of triads (organised criminal societies), including the leader of the Macao branch of the 14K Triad, ‘Broken-Tooth’ Wan Kuok-koi 尹国驹. It may seem incongruous that both police and criminals would choose the same god as their patron, but this is not uncommon in Chinese popular religion. Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon is the cult of Guanyu 关羽, a deified general who is a symbol of loyalty—a quality highly prized by secret societies and police forces alike. The Sanba Nezha temple is one of 25 historic structures in Macao that were placed on UNESCO’s List of World Heritage in July 2005.<sup>37</sup> The Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Macao S.A.R. Government lauds this temple as an example of East-West harmony: The location of this temple is a perfect example of the dignity and distinctive nature of the local Chinese religious traditions in Macao, a unique

multicultural dichotomy that is well represented by this small temple. Na Tcha is also considered an irreverent god and, as such, the distinctive identity of Macao is again evident at this site, where a traditional Chinese temple stands close to the remains of the principal Jesuit enterprise of the region, presenting a dialectic of western and Chinese ideals, as one of the best examples of Macao’s multicultural identity and religious freedom.<sup>38</sup> This temple was built in a corner between the ruined Catholic cathedral and the last remaining section of the old city wall, and it is probably this unique location that won it a spot on the List of World Heritage, for this small temple has little historical importance and no unusual architectural features. The architecture is traditional Chinese with no trace of Western influences. Although there are many Chinese temples and many Catholic churches in Macao, nowhere else but here can they be found side-by-side. This proximity of two sacred structures, one Chinese and the other Christian, should not be taken as a sign of ‘multicultural identity and religious freedom’ because when the Sanba Nezha temple was founded in 1888, St. Paul’s had been an unused ruin for more than half a century after it was destroyed by a fire in 1835. The prolific Macao historian and priest, Fr. Manuel Teixeira, even dared to recommend that this temple be removed in order to clear the area around the church.<sup>39</sup>

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO  
TEMPLES OF NEZHA IN MACAO

The old Persimmon Hill and new Sanba Nezha temples are located on the south side and west side, respectively, of the hill that is called Monte de São Paulo in Portuguese,<sup>40</sup> and Monte Hill in English.<sup>41</sup> They are only one-third of a kilometre apart on the map. Why are there two temples so close together dedicated to the same deity and what is the relationship between them? Most informants insist that there is no animosity between them. Nevertheless, there is not a very close friendship either because the members seldom participate in each other’s social or ritual ceremonies. Macao historian Wong Chau Son 黄就顺 said in a public lecture on 9 October 2005 that the people in the neighbourhood of St. Paul’s asked the Persimmon Hill temple for some place to build something, but

were refused, so they built their own temple. An informant from the Persimmon Hill temple stated that long ago there had been a struggle for power between two factions within the temporal association, and the losing faction decided to build their own Nezha temple next to the Ruins of St. Paul’s. Another officer of the Persimmon Hill temple related a more detailed story about the events concerning the establishment of the Sanba Nezha temple: A man called Uncle Four lent the images of Nezha and his two brothers, Jinzha 金吒 and Muzha, to the new temple when it was opened. Then people from the new temple gave some money to Uncle Four, and he agreed to let them keep the two brothers, but the image of Nezha had to be returned to the old temple. That is why they need to borrow them back occasionally. After that time, the two temples had a strained relationship, and there were occasional incidents of arguing or fighting in the streets, though the tension has eased in recent years.<sup>42</sup> The members of the Sanba Nezha temple do not acknowledge that there has ever been any dispute. They insist that they have no statues of Jinzha or Muzha. It is difficult now, after more than one hundred years have passed, to know the details of what happened. In 1997 the Persimmon Hill Old Nezha temple extended the hand of friendship to the Sanba Nezha temple. An officer of the Persimmon Hill temple tells the story: In 1996 the structure of the [Persimmon Hill] Nezha temple committee was reorganized. Some of the old members left, and we started to join. We thought that since Macao is a comparatively small community, we will see each other very often even if we do not really intend to. I thought maybe it was time to invite them to eat or something. In 1997 we invited those from the other Nezha temple to come here to worship and have dinner on Nezha’s birthday. You know it is our custom to hold a big banquet here on Nezha’s birthday. We had a very big banquet nine years ago, and they all came with cars and people. There were so many people that the road had to be closed. Our banquet was on the eighteenth day of the fifth month, and the next day they had their banquet, and they also invited us to go. After that, we started our friendship and have maintained the relationship until now. We start to realize that we are actually worshipping

the same god, and we believe that it is the god that connects us. However, it seems that the initiative undertaken in 1997 did not lead to a full and lasting reconciliation, as the two communities did not continue to invite one another to their banquets. Some low-level contacts continue. For example, on 5 July 2004, lion dancers from the Sanba Nezha temple performed at the Persimmon Hill Nezha temple. There may be some differences in belief and practice between the two Nezha associations. Members we spoke to at the Persimmon Hill Nezha Old temple say they reject superstitious beliefs in magic, and even admitted that Nezha had not answered their prayers by granting any specific requests. Their attitude is that if one is a devoted follower, one will live a virtuous life. One of their officers explained their belief as follows: Each religion is meant to lead people to do good deeds. They do not want to lead people into superstition. The Nezha religion is different from other religions. Nezha is in the believers’ heart. Other temples have fortune telling, but we do not want to do that. It is not that the god fulfils people’s requests and gives them everything they want. The most important thing is that the believers themselves take the initiative to reach Nezha’s spirit. Members of the Sanba Nezha temple, on the other hand, give some credence to the powers of prayer, amulets, and even exorcism. One woman explained, ‘I work for Nezha, and so he grants me a good life and good health. The most important thing is to serve Nezha whole-heartedly, and then you will be rewarded with what you want.’ A vice-president of this association, who credits Nezha with saving his life after he fell off an opera stage at the age of ten, said, ‘You see, we all carry a charm with us. This charm protects us from evils, and we will bring it with us wherever we go so that we will be safe when traveling and will not easily get sick. Nezha is also there in our heart.’ This man even credits Nezha with saving his life when he was a child: ‘People used to perform Chinese opera in front of the Nezha temple... on the night of the birthday of Nezha. I was playing on the stage when suddenly I fell off and was knocked unconscious. They took me to the temple and prayed. Luckily, because Nezha protected me, I was saved.’ A blind fortune-teller, named Mr. Lo, is sometimes in the Sanba Nezha temple to answer



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people’s questions and determine if they are bothered by evil spirits. ‘People approach Mr. Lo, who afterwards will try to check or detect what has happened to that person. If he detects the existence of some evil spirits, he will perform some rituals in the Nezha Temple... Some people even come from Hong Kong to ask him to perform it for them. If they are possessed by evil spirits, they will come and pray to Nezha, and some will pray for a better marriage.’ They say this fortune-teller has no power of his own, but receives it from Nezha. ‘The special power does not really belong to Mr. Lo. It is Nezha who bestowed the special power on him, and he is like a medium. Through him Nezha helps people.

RELIGION AND POLITICS

The Sanba Nezha temple has a powerful political supporter. The honorary president of their association is David Chow Kam Fai 周锦辉, who was a member of the Legislative Assembly of Macao from 1996 to 2009. At the 2005 annual banquet of the Sanba Nezha temple, he administered the oath of office for the officers of the association. They do not endorse candidates, and the officers of the association refused to discuss political matters in specific terms. When asked if the association members supported Chow Kam Fai in the upcoming elections in Macao, they declined to give an answer. Nevertheless, one officer of the temple association recognised the link between the temple association and politics in Macao. He acknowledged that the members of the association are likely to support certain candidates in the elections, and thus the temple can influence government policies. Moreover, certain prominent people donate large sums of money to the temple. The government supports the temple financially by granting funds for the annual Feast of Nezha and repair works on the temple. Thus the members of the temple association are indirectly influenced to vote for candidates who support the temple. The believers see this as the power of the god developing into political power.

One member pointed out the traditional link between religion and the state:

In fact, in China, God is a political influence. We all say that during peaceful years, kings encourage people to worship God—Buddha—because Buddha makes you peaceful, but in harsh years gods (the statues) will be destroyed... If there are more temples, it means the country is at ease. So

you see, even the Communists encourage the establishment of temples. You can know whether China is stable or not by two things: First, the Buddhist temple. The second thing is the temple of Confucius. These temples encourage people to be loyal to the king.

As this religious party gets more influential, due to God’s power, fundamental political power will be created. This power gradually develops in the society and becomes a great power. This power can show its influence in the coming election. I think, politically speaking, the new temple [Sanba Nezha temple] has greater influence because they make connections with a lot of famous people in Macao... Because the vice president can speak good Portuguese and as he worked in the government before, he has very good connections with all kinds of people, and so he is very influential. Chow Kam Fai is one of the honorary presidents. He donated some money to the temple and asked people to vote for him. Even the head of the triad, Broken-Tooth, belongs to the Temple.

CONCLUSION

Although there are some rituals performed at the Nezha temples in Macao, the thinking and activities of the people who frequent these temples are not merely ritualistic. Rather, these people often profess the sincerity of their personal belief and religious experience. As an example of Chinese folk religion in Macao, the beliefs and practices of the followers of Nezha satisfy several of their social and psychological needs. The members of the two Nezha temple associations in Macao preserve colourful local traditions in their ceremonies and benefit from fellowship in their meetings. They support charitable and patriotic activities. They are morally strengthened by their beliefs and encouraged to live virtuous lives. The Nezha temples in Macao are a precious part of Macao’s cultural heritage. **RC**

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NOTES

1

The name 哪吒 is variously spelled Nezha, Nojia, No Cha, No-cha, Nuozha, Na T'cha, Na Cha, Nacha, Nazha, etc. The standard pinyin spelling with the tone marks is used for Chinese names and words in this article, except for the names of certain people and places in Macao and Hong Kong, where the Cantonese dialect of Chinese is spoken.

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This is the 'flower-cannon catching' activity, which was popular at many temple festivals. Rival groups formed flower-cannon associations to increase their chances to win the honour of keeping the sacred image for the year. The violent fights that often ensued at the Nezha temple festival pitted the two Nezha temples against each other. To keep the peace, the government asked the temples to select winners by lottery. See: Tik-sang Liu, 'A Nameless but Active Religion: An Anthropologist's View of Local Religion in Hong Kong and Macau, *The China Quarterly*, no. 174, June 2003, p. 381. See also: Chan Kwok-shing, 'Temple Festivals, Social Networks, and Communal Relationships: The Development of a Local Cult in Macau', *Berliner China-Hefte/ Chinese History and Society* 35, 2008, pp. 121-122.

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