The Myth of ACGN Nationalism in China

- Animation, Audiences and Nationalism

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the prevalence of nationalism in the reception of Chinese animated films. One example of this is the widely-circulated online expression of 'the rise of Chinese animation' by engaged audiences and fans. The term 'ACGN nationalism' (*erciyuan minzu zhuyi*) has been coined to describe this phenomenon in previous research. This study aims to contribute to a further exploration of its forms and rationales, and most importantly, the hidden power mechanisms of this so-called 'ACGN nationalism' (ACGN: the abbreviation of animation, comics, games and novels).

Guided by a qualitative methodology, this study applies 'triangulation' in the examination of the case *Ne Zha* (2019). In order to explore the forms of ACGN nationalism, it analyses audiences' comments and performances towards this animated film, in the digital environment; and beyond that, it also highlights audiences' consumption, performances and daily talk on the ground, in reproducing a sense of nation in their engagement with this animated film. In addition, this study investigates the nationalistic ideology embedded in the production and promotion of *Ne Zha*, which is considered nationalism from above. This contextual knowledge assists the main analysis of the audience study in the investigation of the rationales of ACGN nationalism. Further, it probes into the youth group who constitute the core audience of this animated film and explores their power in the construction of nationalism.

As is shown in the findings, this thesis argues that it is both the online and offline form of ACGN nationalism which, collaborating together, reproduce a salient nationhood in the reception of *Ne Zha*. There are various rationales in the contribution of ACGN nationalism, including the outstanding quality of the animation production, the spirit of craftsmanship of the production team, the nationalistic ideology embedded in *Ne Zha*, and crucially, the national identity of domestic audiences. It further uncovers that there are three sources of power hidden behind ACGN nationalism: power from those born in the 80s (the production), the 90s (the audiences), and from the state. This thesis contributes to the newborn study of ACGN nationalism, which is an evolving form of nationalism in digital China, in terms of its forms, rationales and the hidden power mechanisms.

Keywords: ACGN nationalism; nationalism; animation; audiences; fans; youth; subculture; myth; Ne Zha; Chinese animated films; China; everyday nationalism; online and offline

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Prevalence of ACGN Nationalism

The reception of Chinese animation is surrounded by nationalism (Bai, 2015; Li and Liu, 2020). Affective discourses, such as 'the rise of Chinese animation' (*guoman jueqi*), are prevalent in audiences' engagement with high-quality domestic animation. The common title given to different animations is 'Chinese/domestic animation' (*guoman*), rather than the stateless phrase 'animation'. An 'imagined community' is built through audiences' engagement with Chinese animation (Anderson, 1983).

According to the search engine index on Baidu (2020), the word 'Chinese/domestic animation' (*guoman*) has achieved various small search peaks over the past decade. Most of these small peaks are attributable to the release of domestic animated films, such as *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015) and *Big Fish and Begonia* (2016), etc. This makes the genre of Chinese animated films salient in the study of nationalism around domestic animation, as well as the main focus of this thesis. Notably, the word 'Chinese/domestic animation' had reached its search climax (2,299) from 29th July 2019 to 4th August 2019, when *Ne Zha* (2019) was released in cinemas.[1] This animated film had achieved 5.01 billion yuan at the domestic box office, and became the highest-grossing Chinese animated film, as well as the second highest-grossing film in domestic film history.[2] Both the outstanding statistics and the nationally-framed articulation, motivate this thesis to look closely at nationalism constructed in the reception of Chinese animated films by ordinary people.

Previous studies have referred to it as 'ACGN nationalism' (*erciyuan minzu zhuyi*) (Bai, 2015).[3] It relates to the national sensibilities constructed spontaneously in the individuals' engagement with the ACGN subculture, an abbreviation of animation, comics, games and novels (Bai, 2015; Ding, 2016). Audiences and fans, who self-identify as 'tap-water'

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[1] The data was accessed on 14th May 2020. See Appendix 1 for more details of the graphics on Baidu Index.

[2] See http://m.endata.com.cn/Movie/MovieDetails?Mid=662685.

[3] Some studies translate it as 'two-dimensional nationalism' with the signification of the two-dimensional space of these types of subculture (Wang, 2019). However, this thesis uses the term 'ACGN nationalism' due to its neutral attribute. More details are discussed in the chapter of 'Literature Review'.

(*zilaishui*), play a significant role in shaping and spreading nationalistic comments online in order to promote domestic-made animated films. ACGN nationalism is considered an evolving form of nationalism in digital China, which highlights a strong sense of nationhood embodied in the ACGN subculture through the online environment (Lin, 2016).

Merit is found in spotlighting and conceptualising ACGN nationalism in previous studies; however, existing research simply touched the surface of this phenomenon and there are a lack of studies systematically investigating its forms, rationales, and hidden power mechanisms. More specifically, audience studies are absent in the examination of ACGN nationalism in previous work; whilst, the reception of animated films is where individuals' national sensibilities emerge. This, therefore, leads to a simplification of the forms of ACGN nationalism – only the form of online affective discourses is mentioned, rather than both online and offline. In addition, practical rationales are missing. The one and only inference is that it is the legitimate desire of the ACGN subculture from young audiences, and the nation-branding ideology from official institutions, collaboratively creating the appearance of ACGN nationalism (Li, 2017; Lin, 2016). Although this argument may provide an insight into the roles of the different actors involved, it can easily cause an overgeneralisation of the rationales of ACGN nationalism. This, again, is due to a neglect of audience studies. Further, the examination of the power mechanisms hidden behind ACGN nationalism is lacking, but is crucial for the analysis. An in-depth study on the identities of the young audiences who wield the power and why they have such power, can help to achieve an analytic generalisation for similar studies in the future (Bazeley, 2013).

This thesis therefore aims to address gaps in the forms, rationales and hidden power mechanisms in the analysis of ACGN nationalism, through conducting an audience study. It uses *Ne Zha* (2019) as a paradigmatic case in the examination of Chinese animated films (Flyvbjerg, 2001), due to its strong national sensibilities in its response and its top-ranking box office status within domestic animated films. The audience study is loosely guided by the 'everyday nationalism' analytical framework proposed by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008). This framework highlights the human agency of ordinary people in their quotidian participation in reproducing the nation, which helps this thesis to investigate domestic audiences' active roles in constructing nationalism in their engagement with *Ne Zha*. Meanwhile, this thesis includes an analysis of the nationalistic ideology from the production and promotion of *Ne Zha*. This serves as contextual knowledge for the audience study, and most importantly, it also avoids

the neglect of studying nationalism from above in the examination of nationalism from below (Knott, 2015).

Based on these, this thesis proposes three research questions as follows:

RQ1: How is the nationalistic ideology embedded in the production and promotion of *Ne Zha*?

RQ2: How is ACGN nationalism constructed in the audience's engagement with *Ne Zha*, both online and offline?, and What is the relationship between online and offline ACGN nationalism?

RQ3: Why does ACGN nationalism appear in the reception of *Ne Zha*?, and How does it enable the understanding of the power mechanisms hidden behind ACGN nationalism in China?

Chapters Overview

Several chapters are presented in this thesis. The first chapter introduces the examined topic, namely the prevalence of ACGN nationalism in China, and its salience of being examined, which is an evolving form of nationalism in digital China. It also demonstrates the research aim of this thesis, which is to explore the forms and rationales of ACGN nationalism, and further uncover the hidden power mechanisms.

Moving on to the second chapter, it provides a glimpse of the situation of this thesis among relevant theoretical frameworks. To be more precise, it starts with a review of the concept 'nationalism' as a theoretical basis for this thesis, and is followed by locating this thesis in the field of ACGN nationalism. Existing studies of everyday nationalism are then discussed and the motivation of using it as an analytical framework, in the exploration of ACGN nationalism, is mentioned. A discussion of existing literature on audience studies, as used in this thesis, is also included. It ends by presenting a socio-historical context of Chinese animated films.

After a scholarly walk of the literature, this thesis provides a detailed reasoning of the methodological choices in the third chapter. Guided by a qualitative methodology, it illustrates the requisite to apply a case study, and more than that, it gives the rationality of

examining only one concrete case. In addition, the use of multi-methods, namely 'triangulation', is necessary in gaining comparable data to reveal nationalism both embedded in and out of *Ne Zha*, and both online and offline. More specifically, it applies visual, aural and narrative analysis in the study of nationalism embedded in the animated film *Ne Zha*; and out of the animated film, it employs qualitative text analysis to the analysis of online comments, and one-to-one semi-structured interviews to the examination of audiences and fans offline.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters are in regards to the main analysis of the proposed research questions. Starting with unveiling the 'myths' of nationalistic ideology embedded in the production and promotion of *Ne Zha* in the fourth chapter, the thesis investigates how nationalism from above is banally constructed by the production team and the state. This provides contextual knowledge to further explore nationalism constructed from below in the fifth chapter. More precisely, it investigates different types of ACGN nationalism in both online and offline environments, and this is followed by revealing the interrelationships between online and offline forms of ACGN nationalism. The sixth chapter moves beyond the marker-tracking of different types and forms of ACGN nationalism, and probes into the causes behind this phenomenon. Afterwards, it uncovers the power mechanisms hidden behind ACGN nationalism, in which the power of the youth is highlighted.

The final chapter ends by exhibiting the results, critically reflecting on this thesis project, and considering potential pathways for future studies on ACGN nationalism.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

This chapter consists of five subchapters: (re)defining nationalism, researching ACGN nationalism in China, everyday nationalism as a guide, audience studies, and reviewing Chinese animated films. It starts with a review of the concept 'nationalism' as a theoretical basis for this thesis, and is followed by situating this thesis in the relevant field of ACGN nationalism. Existing studies of everyday nationalism are then discussed and the rationality of applying it as an analytical framework, in the exploration of ACGN nationalism, is explained. A discussion of existing literature on audience studies, as used in this thesis, is also included. Last but not least, a socio-historical context of Chinese animated films is also provided. This is to provide an understanding of how nationalistic ideology has been inserted into previous animated films, to allow the further investigation of why nationalism emerges in the reception of this genre.

(Re)Defining Nationalism

Benedict Anderson's seminal book *Imagined Communities* (1983), creates a crucial foundation for the exploration of nationalism studies. The nation is defined as an 'imagined community', in which individuals may not know most of the members within the community but 'in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson 1983: 6). Here, nationalism is a way of imagining the nation, in which collective identities are highlighted.

Previous studies on nationalism adopt a normative distinction between 'nationalism' and 'patriotism': patriotism refers to positive sentiments and a loyal attachment to a group, which is therefore perceived as benign; while nationalism refers to extreme and exclusive sentiments against outgroups, which is often considered malign (Schneider, 2018).

However, scholars problematize such a sharp distinction as it omits the similar psychological mechanisms hidden behind these two terms (Gustafsson, 2014; Schneider, 2018). For example, Schneider notices that patriotism and nationalism are usually interchangeable in China: 'patriotic sentiments can become the seed for nationalist movement' because they

share very similar underlying psychological mechanisms in terms of group loyalty (2018: 40). Gustafsson (2014) argues that the separation between patriotism and nationalism fails to recognise the unfixed meaning of patriotism. He therefore raises a question: 'If a wide array of actions, ranging from benign to malign, can be legitimized in the name of patriotism, is patriotism then so distinct from nationalism?' (Gustafsson 2014: 3). British scholar Michael Billig (1995: 57) also perceives the parallel psychological dynamics and highlights the problem in the distinction of the two concepts, because 'even the most extreme of nationalists will claim the patriotic motivation for themselves'.

These ideas therefore create a need for this study to (re)define nationalism, in order to provide a clear understanding of 'nationalism' as the theoretical basis of this thesis. Chen (2005) proposes that we should see 'nationalism' as an analytical term rather than in its conventionalised derogatory sense. This is also what this thesis argues for its theoretical grounding. Instead of simply dividing positive and negative tones in studying nationalism, this thesis argues that it is more important to consider nationalism as a theoretical term for the investigation of the motivations and power issues hidden behind the 'imagined community'.

The second point to mention is that academic literature on Chinese nationalism has long been scrutinised in two dimensions: nationalism from above and nationalism from below (Chen, 2005; Fang and Repnikova, 2018; Zhang, Liu and Wen, 2018). Some scholars notice that nationalism in China was primarily a top-down construction monopolised by the Chinese government before the 1990s (Chen, 2005; Zhang, Liu and Wen, 2018). This nationalism from above was therefore viewed as state-led. The late 1990s noticed an evolution: popular nationalism, as nationalism from below, had emerged (Zhang, Liu and Wen, 2018). Individuals spontaneously expressed their national sensibilities in international disputes beyond the state's control, and this happened particularly on the Internet (Wang, 2016; Zhang, Liu and Wen, 2018). Recent studies highlight the dynamics between the top-down and bottom-up nationalism in contemporary China, suggesting that national sensibilities are constructed through an innovative interplay between different stakeholders:

> Chinese nationalism has been promoted and to no small degree designed by elite actors, most notably political leaders, as part of their nation building and nation-maintenance efforts. However, citizens rework, reinterpret, and redeploy the building blocks of this nationalism in their everyday personal quests for meaning and security, leading to highly

diverse and idiosyncratic discourses of the Chinese nation that are not under anyone's full control. (Schneider 2018: 56)

This provides a theoretical support for studying nationalism from different dimensions, and further justification for this thesis to investigate ACGN nationalism from below, along with the nationalistic ideology from above.

Researching ACGN Nationalism in China

Chinese scholar Bai (2015) initially coined the term 'ACGN nationalism' (*erciyuan minzu zhuyi*), in his study of the social function of the adult-oriented animated film *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015). The term 'ACGN nationalism' refers to an imagined community built in the reception of ACGN (Bai 2015: 53). This can be seen in the way audiences spontaneously promote the film in the digital environment, based on their national identities, which ultimately help the animated film achieve a high box-office status. Bai considers these actions as 'nationalistic practices by the ACGN generation' (2015: 54).

There is a need to clarify the English translation of 'ACGN nationalism' adopted in this study. Some studies translate the original Chinese word '二次元民族主义' (*erciyuan minzu zhuyi*) into 'two-dimensional nationalism' (Wang, Y., 2019). The term 'two-dimensional' refers to a flat virtual world that is distinguished from the three-dimensional real world we live in (Feng, 2017). Examples can be animation, novels, games, etc. This makes the distinction between the ACGN world and the real world apparent and easy to recognise. However, it might generate a potential prejudice and belittle the ACGN group. As Zheng points out, '[t]erminology is a serious question, and sometimes a political question' (2016: 23). In this sense, this study chooses the wording of 'ACGN', which is neutral and avoids potential harm.

After Bai (2015), subsequent studies by Li and Liu (2020) and Lin (2016) argue 'ACGN nationalism' is one of the various types of nationalism in digital China, which highlights the evolution of nationalism in the digital era. These studies demonstrate that there is a close relationship between ACGN nationalism and the online environment. Indeed, Zhang, Liu and Wen (2018) observe that nationalism in China has been on the rise recently, especially among digital communities. Similarly, Schneider (2018: 3) notes that in China 'nationalism today is

shared through digital information and communication technologies (ICTs). It is adopted, filtered, transformed, enhanced and accelerated through digital network'. From these perspectives, to take a closer look at ACGN nationalism contributes to the existing studies of nationalism in the online environment. However, there is also a need to investigate the offline environment. As Schneider points out, 'nationalism in digital spheres interacts in complicated ways with nationalism "on the ground", challenging simple dichotomies of online versus offline politics' (2018: 3). This motivates this thesis to explore both online and offline environments in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of ACGN nationalism.

The emergence of ACGN nationalism in China signifies that the 'wall' between subculture and dominant culture is broken (Bai, 2015; Li, 2017). As it is shown in previous studies, ACGN is a foreign product coming from Japan, and has developed as a youth subculture in China (He, 2019; Lin, 2016). It is favoured by the youth who have both economic capital and cultural capital (He, 2019). They have their own 'internal culture, identity, and discourse system' where people outside this subculture would not be able to understand their 'codes' (Feng 2017: 47). Nevertheless, ACGN nationalism reflects a contradictory situation. The 'wall' between subculture and dominant culture is smashed: ACGN as subculture, joins together with nationalism, as dominant culture. This generates a newborn type of nationalism, and most importantly, it reveals the power of nationalism in contemporary China, which is strong enough to break the 'wall' between subculture and dominant culture (Wang, Y., 2019).

Of note, ACGN nationalism is considered different from more traditional aspects of youth subculture, such as 'refusal' (Hebdige, 1979) or 'resistance' (Clarke et al., 2017). It is, instead, harmonious to the dominant culture. Additionally, Liang (2019: 70) argues that 'from solo to ensemble, the ACGN subculture eventually appeared in front of the public, through the stages of margin, replenishment, and reverse feeding'. ACGN nationalism therefore can be viewed as a reverse cultural feeding from subculture to dominant culture. *Ne Zha* is a good example to understand this reverse cultural feeding: through animation it reinforces national identity and constructs nationalism.

Everyday Nationalism as a Guide

This study draws upon the theories from 'everyday nationalism' studies, which is a subfield within nationalism studies (Knott, 2015), and uses it as a guide to support the main analysis

of ACGN nationalism. This is because there is a lack of analytical framework in existing research on ACGN nationalism. The concept of 'everyday nationalism', which highlights the human agency of reproducing the nation (Antonsich, 2016; Knott, 2015), provides useful and appropriate guidelines for this study to investigate the forms and rationales of ordinary people in actively building a sense of nationhood in the reception of *Ne Zha*.

'Everyday nationalism focuses, in particular, on the agency of ordinary people, as opposed to elites, as the co-constituents, participants and consumers of national symbols, rituals and identities', Knott (2015: 1) gives a brief definition of everyday nationalism in her review of the existing literature within this field. Here, it is crucial to point out that this theory stresses the active role from ordinary people in constructing nationalism, rather than that from elites or institutions, which is consistent with the main focus of this thesis. Everyday nationalism argues for a sense of self-consciousness in reproducing the nation (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). Ordinary people are 'active producers' rather than 'passive consumers' of national discourse (ibid.: 539).

This is in contrast with Michael Billig's theory of 'banal nationalism' (1995). This concept refers to the mindlessly ideological method of shaping nationhood. An example from Billig (1995) would be, a flag hanging unnoticed on the street in public. It highlights the 'forgotten reminding' of the nation, and stresses the construction of national identity during this unnoticed remembering. This is unlike the foregrounded human agency and self-awareness of the 'everyday nationalism' theory, in which the nation is 'creatively and self-consciously deployed and manipulated by ordinary people' (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008: 539). Also, different from the focus of 'everyday nationalism', which is nationalism from below, Billig's (1995) idea of 'banal nationalism' is considered a top-down nationalism which 'hold[s] onto a rather state-centric conception of nationhood' (Antonsich 2016: 24). This encourages this thesis to bear in mind the relationships between these two types of nationalism, particularly in the study of the nationalistic ideology from above and whether it contributes to the rationales of ACGN nationalism.

In order to better understand how ordinary people act as 'active participants in the quotidian production and reproduction of the nation', Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008: 538) develop an analytical framework for the examination of everyday nationalism. They propose four modalities: talking, choosing, performing and consuming the nation. 'Talking' suggests looking at how the nation is constructed through discourses in daily talk; 'choosing' aims to

investigate how individuals make national choices by making it physically outstanding; 'performing' considers how people create national bonding through ritual performances; and 'consuming' focuses on national sensibilities embedded in mundane consumption habits (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008: 537-538). This analytical framework involves both discursive and practical modalities, which allows this thesis to gain a nuanced understanding of domestic audiences' national sensibilities constructed in various ways, during their engagement with *Ne Zha*.

There is also a need to mention the methodological choices adopted by the 'everyday nationalism' theory. Previous studies on everyday nationalism predominantly concentrate on the offline setting, and apply traditional methods such as interviews (Condor, 2000), focus groups (Antonsich, 2016; Skey, 2011), and participant observation (Hearn, 2007; Surak, 2012). There is a lack of research in regards to everyday nationalism in an online environment, and this leads to a gap within the methodological choices of this field. Nevertheless, the online setting is one of the key centres of this thesis, which therefore needs a comparable method in data collection in the digital environment. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter of 'Methodology and Methods'. However, it also provides a critical reflection of the existing studies of 'everyday nationalism'. More focus should be put on the digital environment, in which nationalism has become more and more prominent (Schneider, 2018; Zhang, Liu, Wen, 2018).

Although the theoretical framework of 'everyday nationalism' offers valuable guidance for this study, there are also critiques of this concept that this study needs to recognise, and try to avoid. For example, it is argued that everyday nationalism mainly focuses on human agency and there is a neglect of institutional restrictions from above (Malešević, 2013, cited in Knott, 2015). As the investigation of the nationalistic ideology is also a part of this study's focus, although not the main concern, there is no need to worry about the lack of the involvement of nationalism from above. In addition, there are doubts in relation to its causal generalisation, due to its focus being too descriptive (Smith, 2008, cited in Knott, 2015). In this thesis, part of the goal is to understand the rationales and the hidden power mechanisms behind ACGN nationalism, which drives the study to move beyond descriptive representation. It therefore avoids being too micro-analytical and contextual. Another critique is regarding viewing ordinary people as a homogeneous group rather than various individuals (Smith, 2010, cited

in Knott, 2015). This study takes into account this critique and will account for different individuals' demographics, such as gender, city, etc.

Audience Studies

The aim of this thesis is to gain an understanding of the forms, rationales and hidden power mechanisms of ACGN nationalism, which is a type of nationalism from below. It is therefore crucial to conduct an audience study, in order to investigate how audiences actively reproduce the nation in their viewing experience of *Ne Zha*.

Hall's (1980) theories of 'encoding/decoding' introduces the field of audience research, which calls attention to a read of the meaning structure in the reception. This encourages the subsequent concept of 'active audiences' (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998; Jin, 2011; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013; Livingstone, 1998), in which audiences are no longer thought to be passively receiving media content. This creates a fertile base from which later researchers can investigate the sense-making activities in the audience's active interpretation and engagement with the meaning structure of media.

Engagement is a key concept in guiding this thesis to investigate audiences' national sensibilities. While there are various paths to study audience engagement in support of different theoretical frameworks, this thesis mainly draws on Hill's (2019) concept of engagement as it provides rich insights into the exploration of the viewer's subjective state and how this builds the relationships between the viewer themselves, the animated film and the nation.

Engagement is also a slippery concept and as a result Hill (2019: 61-62) argues for a 'spectrum of engagement': 'There is a spectrum that includes affective, emotional and critical modes, switching between positive and negative engagement, to disengagement'. She continues to explain that positive engagement means the emotional identification and sympathetic response generated in the engagement process, while negative engagement refers to the emotional dis-identification and unsympathetic response produced in the engagement practice. It is worth-noting that these two emotional modes of engagement usually emerge in tandem (Hill, 2019). Disengagement, on the other hand, refers to the cessation of the engagement, which can either appear unanticipatedly, or gradually. A spectrum of

engagement, according to Hill (2019: 55), 'captures the multidimensionality of engagement' in the reception, which highlights the complexity of the concept of 'engagement'.

It is worth investigating how affective, emotional and critical modes of engagement are interwoven to construct national sensibility in the audience's engagement with *Ne Zha* in this thesis. As a genre that has been notoriously synonymous with poor quality in the past (Zhao, 2019), the notion of 'a spectrum of engagement' helps to uncover the ways it shifted from largely negative engagement to mostly positive engagement in Chinese animated films. These can help to provide a nuanced understanding of the multidimensionality of audience engagement, which can further lead to the unpacking of ACGN nationalism, especially in terms of its forms.

The audience study conducted by Jiang and Huang (2017) regarding the Chinese animated film *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, focuses on Chinese audiences' and fans' engagement as valuable contributions in the popularisation of the animated film, which provides empirical knowledge for the thesis to further examine ACGN nationalism in the reception of *Ne Zha*. For example, they observe that a newborn group, self-identified as 'tap-water' (*zi lai shui*), emerged due to the animated film *Monkey King: Hero is Back*. Members in the group were described as Internet mercenaries who were willing to spontaneously promote the animation on social media for free. 'These self-identified spokespersons reveal the desire of the audiences to participate in a community of shared identity and shared purpose' (Jiang and Huang 2017: 134). 'Amway' (*an li*) was also a newborn term, used as an analogy to the brand 'Amway', referring to the eager promotion of the animated film (ibid.). This process of community building is related to Hermes' (2005: 10) idea of 'cultural citizenship', which is found in the bonding offered by popular culture in the practices of 'reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticising' the cultural product. It also highlights the practices of rights and responsibilities in the audience's engagement with popular culture.

Apart from the strong recommendation of the animation to others, these 'tap-water' also contribute their own efforts in the improvement of the box office of the animated film. This can be found in 'posting long positive reviews on social media', or 'watching the film three times to better its box-office performance', or even 'paying for her friends and relatives to invite them to the cinema who otherwise wouldn't come at their own expense', etc. (Jiang and Huang 2017: 133-134). Although nationalism is not mentioned in their research, Jiang and Huang (2017) provide nuanced findings that serve as an empirical background for this

thesis to investigate ACGN nationalism in the reception of *Ne Zha*. For example, it gives support for this thesis to explore nationalism in both online and offline environments, in which the audience's engagement takes place.

Of note, the concept of 'consumer nationalism' can be helpful in the investigation of ACGN nationalism in relation to the audience's consumption practices. This concept focuses on the close relationships between consumers' national identities and their consumption choices: consumers accept or refuse products from their country or foreign countries, based on their nationalistic beliefs (Castelló and Mihelj, 2017; Gerth, 2003; Wang, 2005). It is worth-noting that nationalist buycotts are an example of consumer nationalism in a political dimension. As Castelló and Mihelj point out:

> If we take a closer look at the various "buy domestic" campaigns and related initiatives, we can quickly see that they are often supported or even explicitly launched by state agencies or political parties, or by economic actors and civil society organisations with particular political agendas. (2017: 14)

This signifies that consumer nationalism includes not only the efforts of the consumer, or the audience, in this thesis, but also covers the endeavours of other stakeholders, such as the government, economic operators, etc. This is particularly common in the Chinese context (Gerth, 2003), which motivates this thesis to involve the promotion of *Ne Zha* and its relationships with the rationale of ACGN nationalism.

Fans also play a significant role in the reception of Chinese animated films, as shown in Jiang and Huangs' (2017) study discussed earlier. According to Jenkins (1992), fans apply active interpretation in their re-reading practices of media products. This thesis therefore needs to look closely to fans' or engaged audiences' interpretations of the animated film *Ne Zha*, and how these interpretations further help to construct nationalism. 'Fans actively shaping a sense of self through the object of fandom', as Sandvoss (2005: 157) points out. This idea provides an understanding of how one's fandom of object shares a close affinity with one's identity. Interestingly, when one's fannish object becomes the nation, national identity is therefore produced. This leads to dual identities – fan identity and national identity, which encourages this thesis to account for this within its audience study.

Reviewing Chinese Animated Films

This subchapter provides a socio-historical contextualisation of the genre of Chinese animated films, in order to gain an understanding of how nationalistic ideology is embedded in previous animated films; and more importantly, this helps to further investigate why nationalism emerges in the reception of this particular genre.

Nationalism in Animated Films in the Eras of Individual Workshop and Planned Economy

Animated films in China were produced by individual animators prior to the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Chen, 2018). The Wan brothers (Wan Laiming, Wan Guchan, Wan Chaochen and Wan Dihuan), who are considered 'the fathers of Chinese animation', created the first animated short called *Uproar in an Art Studio* (1926), influenced by Western animated films (Chen, 2018; Xiao and Pillgrab, 2012). From 1931 to 1941, the animated films produced by the Wan brothers were thematically patriotic. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, in particular, animated films in China were anti-Japanese, against imperialism and feudalism, or educative, and fable-based (Guo and Li, 2017; Lent and Xu, 2017). For example, according to Lent and Xu (2017: 155), *Citizens, Wake Up* (1932) was seen as the initial impetus in the anti-Japanese campaign: 'Using lion and whale allegories, the film called upon Chinese to give what they had to resist the Japanese'. In addition, the first feature-length Chinese animated film *Princess Iron Fan* (1941) also had strong anti-Japanese undertones. *Dog Detective* (1933) told a story about 'a girl and her dog who find the source of the opium the Chinese are smoking to be an imperialist warship and proceed to burn it', using a combination of live-action and animation (Lent and Xu 2017: 155). These examples by the Wan brothers, indicate that animated films were presented patriotically in wartime; however, they were in essence propaganda, and promoted extreme nationalism, with strong anti-Japanese and anti-Western sentiments.

The establishment of the PRC in 1949 meant that animated films entered the era of the planned economy. Animators also came up with a new title 'fine arts films' for animation in socialist China to replace the borrowed Western term 'cartoon' (Xiao and Pillgrab, 2012). In 1956, the Chinese animated film *Why the Crow is Black* (1955) was mistaken as Soviet

animation at the Venice International Film Festival, which motivated domestic animators to develop a Chinese style of animation (Chen, 2018; Du, 2016a; Lent and Xu, 2017). *Proud of the General* (1956) was therefore created in the same year, following the director Te Wei's official statement of a 'road to the national style' *(road to minzu style)* (Xiao and Pillgrab, 2012: 3). As Zhao (2019: 89) observes, '[i]n this work, Chinese traditional architectural art such as pavilions, carved beams and paintings, the art of Chinese paintings with heavy paintings, the theatrical art of facial characters, and the seamless integration of Peking Opera performing arts have become a new work'. Nationalistic interests were embedded in this animated film to differentiate itself from Western styles, which helped this animation to become the first animated film with a strong and unique Chinese approach.

Afterwards, the first state-owned animation studio 'Shanghai Animation Film Studio' (or Shanghai Fine Art Film Studio) was established, which was considered the representative of the national style in the history of Chinese animation (Du, 2016a). It focused on 'creating China's national spirit by resorting to traditional ink and wash painting, cut-paper, origami, landscape painting and puppet theatre in film-making' (Guo and Li 2017: 117), and also 'adapting stories from China's literature, folklore and proverbs' (Xiao and Pillgrab 2012: 3). Incorporating specialised knowledge, creative methods and government support, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio witnessed Chinese animation's first 'golden age' during 1957-1964 (Lent and Xu, 2017). However, this was destroyed by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which the Shanghai Animation Film Studio had to shut down and only a limited amount of animated films were produced (Du, 2016b; Giesen, 2014).

It is evident that animation in socialist China (1949-1976) created a unique style of Chineseness. Nationalistic ideologies were implanted in various animated films, in order to assert national identity and create animation that 'must reflect Chinese customs, stories and techniques', as Te Wei insisted (Lent and Xu 2017: 163). This was continued during the post-Cultural Revolution period, in which Chinese animation witnessed its second 'golden age'. An example given is the animated film *Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979) produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. It was adapted from the Chinese mythology 'The Investiture of the Gods', and was considered authentically Chinese, especially in 'inviting Zhang Ding as character designer, absorbing traditional Door Gods and mural painting that was highly adorning and colourful in style, and using Peking opera and stringed-instrument

music' (Lent and Xu 2017: 175). However, this second 'golden age' soon faded due to the transformation from a planned economy to a market economy.

Nationalism in Animated Films in the Era of Market Economy

At the end of the 1980s China shifted from a national planned economy to a market-oriented economy, which had a large influence on the Chinese animation industry (Giesen, 2014). The state-owned animation studios had undergone a talent drain, due to the lure of higher wages from foreign studios in Southern China (Lent and Xu, 2017; Zhao, 2019). A number of young animators had no patience or enthusiasm for artistic animation. 'Because of mismatch between the budgets and the amount of work needed to be done for quality works, animators have to trade quality with speed of getting jobs done quicker, which means quality becomes the lower priority' (Xiao and Pillgrab 2012: 5-6). The popularity of television in China in the 1980s also changed both the viewing mode and the production pattern of animation. '[A] large number of Japanese and American animations, such as *Astro Boy*, *Saint Seiya*, *Popeye*, *Transformers* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, have begun to occupy Chinese TV screens' (Zhao 2019: 91). Constant imports of foreign animation caused a lack of both quantity and quality in the domestic animation industry, which was filled with low-level animated TV programmes or pure copies of Western animation (Guo and Li, 2017; Xiao and Pillgrab, 2012). Artistic animated films, as well as its previous title 'fine arts films' (*mei shu pian*), almost disappeared. Following the Japanese context, animation and comics in China were given a combinatorial name '*dongman*', in which animation was called '*donghua*' and comics were called '*manhua*' in China (Xiao and Pillgrab, 2012).

In order to control the power of foreign animation and promote Chinese animation, the government issued statements and introduced policies to support the domestic animation industry in the 2000s (Lent and Xu, 2017). For example, the Ministry of Culture suggested the implantation of China's national spirit into domestic animation. The former premier Wen Jiabao also encouraged China to cultivate its own animation industry, due to his experience of his grandson frequently watching the Japanese animation *Ultraman* (Giesen, 2014; Ishii, 2013). Policies were applied to limit foreign imports and support domestic industry, such as banning foreign films and TV series that include animated aspects in live-action performance, replacing foreign animation by domestic animation during the 5pm-8pm prime time slot,

introducing new tax incentives to attract investments, reinforcing copyright laws to protect domestic animation works, and opening animation programmes for students at a number of universities (Giesen, 2014; Jiang and Huang, 2017; Lent and Xu, 2017). Ishii (2013) comments that the control policies for both Japanese and American animation were driven by nationalistic interests, in order to protect the Chinese animation industry. These policies were targeted at both animated TV series and films, providing a glimpse into how the top-down nationalism was implanted in supporting Chinese animation in the era of the market economy. It is also worth-mentioning that animated films during this period were considered child-oriented, for example, the animated film series *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* (2009 -) were popular in their cinematic pattern of 'small hands (children) with big hands (parents)' (Chen, 2018; Xiao and Pillgrab, 2012).

With the help of governmental policies, the use of advanced technology, the ingenuity of the producers and the influence of foreign animation, the animation industry in China, particularly in terms of animated films, has flourished in recent years (Jiang and Huang, 2017; Lent and Xu, 2017). As Lent and Xu (2017: 188) note, 'the number of Chinese animated films in 2013 rose to thirty-three with box office revenues of 1.64 billion yuan (up 13.34 percent year-on-year)'. Jiang and Huang (2017) point out that the animated film *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015) created 956 million yuan at the domestic box office, and was considered a milestone of domestic animation due to it being the highest grossing film in the history of Chinese animated films. Their analysis also shows that the success of this animated film was due to several reasons, such as producing high-quality visuals, targeting both adults and children, using a Chinese mythological story that is familiar to domestic audiences, and inserting sincere attitudes in the production, etc. (Jiang and Huang, 2017). Other studies on Chinese animated films also disclose the success of the subsequent animated films in the domestic market, such as *The Guardian Brothers* (2016) (Zhao, 2018), *The Wind Guardians* (2018) (Li and He, 2019) and *White Snake* (2019) (Hong, 2019), etc.

It is worth-noting that Chinese mythology has been adapted frequently in recent animated films, which signifies the hidden nationalistic interests from above. Liu (2019: 3) notices that 'China's long-standing and incomparable folk cultural resources provide rich soil for domestic animation creation'. Zhao (2018) also discovers that Chinese animated films have absorbed mythologies since the Wan brothers' *Princess Iron Fan* in 1941. Traditional mythological stories have now regained significance in the genre of Chinese animated films,

after vanishing along with high-quality animated films in previous decades. Different from nationalism existed in both aesthetics and stories in Chinese animated films in the planned economy era (Chen, 2018), recent animated films focus on using Chinese mythological stories to banally create a Chinese trademark. They act as 'reminders', or 'flaggings', and 'operate mindlessly, rather than mindfully' (Billig 1995: 38). Through this domestic audiences' national identities are reinforced.

Roland Barthes' (1972) concept of 'myth' can help to understand the nationalistic ideology constructed in the adaptation of traditional mythological stories in recent animated films. In Barthes' notion, 'myth is a system of communication' and it is a 'message' (1972: 107). He considers that 'myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification' (1972: 143). This therefore demonstrates how myths are used in animated films as a communicative tool interacting with domestic audiences. During this 'banal', 'innocent' or 'natural' approach of mythological storytelling or character redesign, audiences' national identities are constructed or reinforced.

To summarise, this chapter provides an exploration of relevant themes and topics, including (re)defining nationalism, researching ACGN nationalism in China, everyday nationalism as a guide, audience studies, and reviewing Chinese animated films. It provides a comprehensive understanding of nationalism, the ACGN subculture, audiences and fans, and the genre of Chinese animated films, for subsequent analysis.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology and Methods

This thesis project adopts a qualitative methodology. As Bazeley (2013: 4) notes, qualitative research concentrates on 'observing, describing, interpreting and analysing the way that people experience, act on, or think about themselves and the world around them'. This is in accordance with the goal of this thesis, which aims to understand how ordinary people construct a sense of nationhood in their viewing experience of *Ne Zha*, and what are the rationales and the hidden power mechanisms. It is guided by a pragmatic philosophy, which considers that '[r]eality for any person is derived directly from their experience' (Bazeley 2013: 22).

The Case

The application of a case study is crucial to qualitative research (Bazeley, 2013). According to Flyvbjerg, phronetic social science hopes to generate 'concrete, context-dependent knowledge', and a 'case study is especially well-suited to produce this knowledge' (2001: 72). Pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty also considers that 'the way to re-enchant the world […] is to stick to the concrete' (Rorty 1991: 175, quoted in Flyvbjerg 2001: 129). Hence, this thesis looks closely to a concrete case, *Ne Zha*, instead of large random examples.

Ne Zha is currently the highest-grossing Chinese animated film, as well as the second highest-grossing film in Chinese film history.[4] It achieved 5.01 billion yuan at the domestic box office, more than five times higher than the second highest-grossing domestic animated film *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, which had gotten 0.9 billion yuan. It also generated stronger national sensibilities in its reception than ever. From the information of the statistics and the obvious national sensibilities, *Ne Zha* can therefore be seen as an appropriate, concrete case to fulfil the research aim.

It might be argued that a single case is limited in its ability to generalise. However, 'the strategic choice of case may greatly add to the generalisability of a case study', according to

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[4] See Appendix 2 for a scenario of *Ne Zha*.

Flyvbjerg (2001: 75). *Ne Zha* can be seen as a 'paradigmatic' case, which has the ability to 'highlight more general characteristics of the societies in question' (Flyvbjerg 2001: 80). This is due to the intense national pride in its reception and its highest box office status within domestic animated films. Maxwell (2012, quoted in Bazeley 2013: 411) also notes that a single case enables a 'qualitative exploration of process and causality that is foundational to causal generalisation'. Hence, as a paradigmatic case, *Ne Zha* is more likely to unfold attributes of nationalism in its reception and provide a causal generalisation for similar issues.

Methods and Samples

The aim of this study is to understand the forms and rationales of ACGN nationalism, before an investigation of its hidden power mechanisms. To be more precise, there is a need to study how audiences construct a sense of nationhood in the online and offline environments, in order to understand the forms of ACGN nationalism. In addition, it is crucial to include the analysis of the production and promotion of the animated film *Ne Zha*, which serves as the important contextualisation for the investigation of the rationales of ACGN nationalism. In other words, it helps to explore whether ACGN nationalism is highly influenced by the nationalistic ideology from above.

Therefore, multi-methods are incorporated and applied on different samples, in order to achieve this aim. This includes the use of visual, aural and narrative analysis to the animated film *Ne Zha*; and for the audience study, qualitative text analysis is applied to online audiences' comments, and one-to-one semi-structured interviews are used in the study of audiences on the ground. The combination of multiple methods is also referred to as 'triangulation' in social science, which can help to achieve comparable data and enhance data validation (Denzin, 1978, cited in Jick, 1979). The complex mix of different methods is time-consuming and increases the difficulty of the research, but this is the only way to achieve credible data for the research aim.

More specifically, in the study of the nationalistic ideology embedded in the production of *Ne Zha*, Rose's (2016) method of 'compositional interpretation' is applied to investigate the visual and aural representation of Chineseness in this animated film; and Bordwell and Thompsons' (2012) method of 'film narrative analysis' is employed to examine the Chineseness embedded in the narrative of *Ne Zha*. Of note, both of these methods emphasise

the descriptive modality of what is shown, and are both restricted in concerning the social modality of meaning-making (Rose, 2016). Therefore, this thesis draws upon Barthes' (1967) idea of 'semiotics' to investigate the hidden social modality. As Barthes (1967: 41) notes, 'as soon as there is a society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself'. That is to say, everything can be read as a sign in a certain society. He also considers 'denotation' as the descriptive level of the reality object, while 'connotation' as the social and cultural meaning attached to the object (Barthes, 1967). His ideas help to uncover the nationalistic ideology hidden behind the seemingly-natural visual, aural and narrative elements of *Ne Zha*. With the support of these combined methods, all visual and aural elements in relation to the nation, and the story, plot and characters carrying national meanings, are delineated as descriptive codes (denotation) and afterwards turned into analytical codes (connotation) for subsequent analyses.[5]

There are also secondary sources used in the analysis of the promotion of *Ne Zha*, such as the celebratory art poster on *Ne Zha*'s Weibo account and the screening information of *Ne Zha* in cinemas. Although the promotion side is not the central focus of this study, there should be salience in this advertising process, which can be inferred from the high box office of the film. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the rationales of ACGN nationalism, it is worth including secondary sources from the promotion as contextual knowledge. Therefore, this study chooses a celebratory art poster from its online official Weibo account, and the screening information of the film from the offline environment, as the contextualisation of the promotion, due to their ubiquity.

The main methods used in this thesis are qualitative text analysis and one-to-one semi-structured interviews. They contribute to the analysis of ACGN nationalism constructed in the audience engagement with *Ne Zha*, online and offline respectively. Of note, although this study is guided by the analytical framework of everyday nationalism, there is a lack of research in regards to everyday nationalism in an online environment. This leads to a gap within the methodological choices of this field. However, the online environment is an indispensable focus of this study, which therefore requires a corresponding method in digital data analysis.

'Qualitative text analysis' (Kuckartz, 2014) is used to analyse online audiences' comments towards *Ne Zha*. The samples of comments are selected from two websites: Bilibili and

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[5] See Appendix 3 for more details of coding the animated film *Ne Zha* and Coding Table 1.

Douban, due to the large degree of audience engagement with this animated film (the large amount of comments) and the popularity of the platforms among young people.[6]

A total of 81 comments have been chosen. More specifically, there are 46 comments (out of 476,639) chosen from Douban, and 35 comments (out of 11,982) selected from Bilibili.[7] They are collected from the 'short comment section', rather than the 'long comment section', on both of these websites, as the former is more popular among the audience. It is worth noting that the short comments collected from Douban are not brief; instead, they are presented in paragraph.

The samples chosen from Douban are based on these criteria: including keywords, such as 'nation'/'country' (*guo*) or 'China'/'Chinese' (*zhongguo*), and have been posted since 26th July 2019 when *Ne Zha* was officially released in cinemas. These comments are collected under the filter of 'popularity'. Although biases might have been brought in the use of this algorithmic search strategy, this is the most applicable way to collect data on this website, because other filters, 'up-to-date' and 'friends', could either provide limited comments or create more biased data. Notably, these 46 comments collected are all the appropriate and available data on Douban.

Comments from the other website Bilibili, to some degree, help to add comparable data and minimise potential biases. Similarly, the sample selection on Bilibili follows the same criteria as that used on Douban. However, different from Douban, Bilibili is not restricted in presenting all comments, and this requires the thesis project to apply extra strategies on the sampling process. More specifically, 1 of the every 10 relevant comments is chosen (those including the specified key word/words and posted since the particular date as mentioned), which aims to avoid cherry picking and ensure the data is spread over time. Ultimately, there are 35 comments selected from 350 relevant comments under the 'default' filter on Bilibili.

To note, although different sampling strategies are applied to gather reliable data, it is hard to guarantee a 'data saturation' among these large databases of comments (Bazeley, 2013). Therefore, instead of aiming to pursue universal knowledge that is unfeasible in social

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[6] Bilibili is famous for its ACGN attributes, and self-claims a 'cultural community for the Chinese youth' on their online introduction. More details can be found on their website https://www.bilibili.com/blackboard/aboutUs.html. In addition, Douban is a Chinese website famous for ratings and reviews for films, television programmes, books, music, etc.

[7] The data from Douban is collected on 26th March, 2020, and that from Bilibili is on 7th April, 2020.

science (Flyvbjerg, 2001), this thesis focuses on 'working intensively with small samples' in order to provide an 'insider view of the social world' (Bazeley 2013: 27).

Additionally, the coding process is conducted in Chinese. This keeps consistency with the original language of the online comments, and avoids introducing translation biases during this analytical stage. As a result, 237 descriptive codes have been generated from the 81 online comments for subsequent analyses.[8]

One-to-one semi-structured interviews are used to study the construction of ACGN nationalism in the reception of *Ne Zha* offline. It provides the interviewees a relatively free environment to share their understandings and experiences in regards to Chinese animation, without any pressure from groups or others. There were a total of 14 interviews conducted, with 8 female participants and 6 male participants, ranging from 19 to 32 years old.

Of note, this study planned to recruit those who are aged between 20 and 30, as this age group was considered as accounting for the largest proportion in watching *Ne Zha* in the cinema (Peng and Shi, 2019). Yet, there are two exceptions in the actual recruitment process: one interviewee is 19 years old and one is 32 years old. It might be argued that this would lead to unreliable results; however, this deviation is only tiny and would not generate a huge impact on the existing data as a whole.

All participants are Chinese mainlanders, ethnically Han, and come from different locations in China.[9] Although previous studies argue that 'demographics do a poor job of predicting nationalism' (Woods and Dickson 2017: 179), this study still includes the basic demographic information of the interviewees, in order to provide a comprehensive vision for the analysis.

Most of these interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling. It is acknowledged that a snowball sampling might bring participants that share similar attributes or situations (Byrne, 2012). In order to avoid these potential biases, the study tries to recruit participants from different friends or networks. Through this the interviewees recruited are from a variety of backgrounds, such as different cities (from both the North and South of China) and positions (from students to those working for the government or for private enterprises), etc.

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[8] See Appendix 4 for Coding Table 2 of the online comments.

[9] See Appendix 5 for the demographics of the interviewees.

However, there is one interviewee, Ou (22-year-old, female, student), recruited through the online community-based group called 'The Rise of Chinese Animation'. This study was intended to recruit interviewees from this group, given that it might be worth interviewing someone who agreed with, or has ever posted, this widely-circulated comment. Nevertheless, Ou, the creator of this community-based group, informed the researcher that advertised posts were not allowed to publish within the group, and this included any recruitment post for academic research. Although the request was rejected by Ou, she expressed her positive attitude to participate in this research. Of note, in order to avoid potential vulnerabilities for this online group, the study chooses not to mention the name of the online platform and only to provide the name of the group.

The interview guide includes different topics, such as the 'viewing context' and the 'viewing experience' of *Ne Zha*, and 'audiences' perspectives of Chinese animated films'.[10] Notably, an extra topic 'fandom' was built into the conversation with Ou, who is a fan of Chinese animation, and created the online group 'The Rise of Chinese Animation'. The final interview guide was shaped after a pilot study with 6 people.

This was due to the difficulty of studying nationalism in everyday settings – as 'much talk is simply non-national' (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008: 557). The pilot study revealed that ordinary people's expressions offline were less national than those in the online environment. This is particularly found in the affective comment of 'the rise of Chinese animation' online, which is absent in the pilot study offline.

Based on this, the interview guide combined a 'wait-and-listen' approach that the nationhood is naturally captured by avoiding nationally framed questions (ibid.), and, a relatively active approach by asking the interviewees to reflect upon 'the nation' explicitly (Fox and Van Ginderachter, 2018). Through these different approaches, this study is able to take account of when and how a sense of nationhood emerges, and what are the differences when compared to online data.

The interview data are collected from 5th March 2020 to 31st March 2020. All interviews are conducted through a voice call on Wechat, due to the availability of the app for, and the willingness of, all participants.[11] The language used is Chinese, which allows the

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[10] See Appendix 6 for the final interview guide.

[11] Wechat is one of the most popular social media apps in China, which allows texts, voice messages, voice and video calls, and tweets, etc.

interviewees to 'speak in their own voices and with their own language' (Byrne 2012: 209). All interviews are recorded, transcribed into text (in Chinese), and afterwards, coded.[12]

The coding of interview data combined a deductive approach, which was guided by the 'everyday nationalism' analytical framework (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008), and an inductive approach, which allowed for data-driven category construction (Kuckartz, 2014). As Bazeley notes,

> Coding data is the steady work component of the analytic process, necessary to gain meaningful results supported by data. It involves seeing and interpreting what has been said, written, or done; reflecting on evolving categories; deciding what is important to follow up. (2013: 15)

This led the coding process towards a pathway to build a sense of affinity with the interview data.

More specifically, each transcript was coded line by line during this first stage of 'seeing and interpreting'. Two transcripts (from Meng and Ou) were used as pilots. A number of keywords were noted on memos in order to prepare for the subsequent construction of potential categories.

Further, coloured spider-grams were applied to help to form different categories and sub-categories. A coloured coding scheme was temporarily generated, as this was subjected to changes when more descriptive codes are employed. Afterwards, a final coloured coding scheme was created, and all descriptive codes were assigned to different categories.

Moreover, through 'reflecting on' the coding table, this study realised that there was extra data needed to 'follow up', such as the detailed explanations of some ambiguous accounts. Through 'moving back to go forward' (Bazeley 2013: 15), all themes, categories and descriptive codes are finally generated.[13]

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[12] See Appendix 7 for a full transcript of one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

[13] See Appendix 8 for Coding Table 3 of one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

Ethics

There are ethical concerns in conducting the research both online and offline. To be more specific, numbers are assigned to each online commentator, instead of directly showing their usernames. This is to ensure the privacy protection of the commentators, which is suggested in conducting digital media research (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). In addition, the original comments are translated into, and shown in, English. This is not only for the purpose of keeping a consistent language system within this thesis, but also, most importantly, to minimise the risk of traceability.

In terms of the one-to-one semi-structured interviews, written informed consent was obtained from the participants to ensure that they were informed and secure (Byrne, 2012). [14] Pseudonyms are given to the interviewees in order to guarantee anonymity (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). [15] Empirical materials provided by the participants, such as their user profiles or posts on social media platforms, are used only with their informed consent, although possible identifiable information is removed to ensure confidentiality.

This study also includes a follow-up debriefing with the participants. It will explain the results of the research to all of the interviewees and welcome any potential comments and feedback (Byrne, 2012).

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[14] The consent form is originally given to the participants in Chinese. See Appendix 9 for the consent form translated into English.

[15] Although there is an exception that one participant desired to use her/his real name instead. This participant was reminded that the use of her/his real name might lead to identification.

CHAPTER 4

The Nationalistic Ideology embedded in Ne Zha

Top-down nationalism is found in both the production and the promotion of *Ne Zha*. This chapter is divided into three subchapters, with the analysis starting from the use of the myth of Ne Zha in China, to the representation of Chineseness in *Ne Zha*, and finally to the promotion of this animated film. The first two subchapters focus on the examination of the nationalistic ideology in the production of *Ne Zha*, and the last subchapter reveals the nationalistic ideology inserted at the promotion stage. The study of the nationalistic ideology embedded in the animated film, provides the contextualisation for the subsequent analysis on the construction of ACGN nationalism in the reception. This also ensures that the study of nationalism from below does not neglect the institutional power from above (Knott, 2015). In other words, it considers how a sense of nationhood is built through the communication between the production and the reception.

The Myth of Ne Zha: Original and Adaptation

The nationalistic ideology implanted in *Ne Zha* can first be found in the use of a popular Chinese myth. Similar to the 1979 version of 'Ne Zha' – *Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King*, the 2019 version is adapted from the classic Chinese mythology 'The Investiture of the Gods'. In this classic mythological story, Ne Zha is represented as a liberal, rebellious child hero, who is famous for his three heads and six arms (Wu, 2014). He shows his rebelliousness by fighting against both the Dragon King and his father, Li Jing, who are connoted as signs of feudalism and patriarchy respectively (ibid.). He also kills the Dragon King's third son, Ao Bing, and pulls out his tendons. In order to take responsibility and protect his parents from the revenge of the Dragon King, he kills himself and returns his bones to his father and his body to his mother. Ne Zha, a mythological character, is deeply rooted in Chinese people's minds, as a symbol of braveness and rebellion. Hence, *Ne Zha*'s application of the traditional Chinese mythology 'The Investiture of the Gods' reflects the nationalistic ideology of the production team.

The theme of the new adaptation *Ne Zha* is the breaking of stereotypes and fighting against destiny: Ne Zha is born as a demon and therefore faces people's prejudices, but he never accepts his fate. This idea also partly embodies nationalistic ideology. According to Yu Yang, the director of *Ne Zha*, there are two reasons for proposing this theme: one is due to his personal experience of suffering from prejudice, after shifting his major from medicine to animation (Yang, 2019a); the other is because of the stereotype Chinese animation faces in the domestic market:

> A lot of companies took the outsourced work from us. They were willing to produce the film without earning money, because they really agreed with the theme of the film, which was to break the stereotypes and change the destiny – to break the audience's stereotypes of Chinese animation. (Yang, 2019b)

The account of the director shows that the nationalistic ideology is also buried in the consideration of the theme of *Ne Zha*, which is with regard to the hope of changing the stereotypical status of Chinese animation. It is worth-noting that this nationalistic motivation is implicit, making the choice of the theme in *Ne Zha* seem to be natural. This is in accordance with what Barthes observes: 'Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent' (1972: 143). Supported by this nationalistic motivation, the production team invests huge passion in making this animated film, despite not making a profit. The 'myth' of nationalism from above, therefore, rises from the thematic choice of this animated film.

The Representation of Traditional and Modern Nationalistic Cultures in Ne Zha

Different from the 1979 version of 'Ne Zha' which conveys its Chineseness in both style and content, this 2019 version presents nationalistic elements mainly through its content. More specifically, it mixes traditional and modern Chinese cultures, in the aspects of religious philosophies, values, gender, family roles and relations, and visual and aural elements.

There are three pillars in Chinese religious philosophies: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The first two originate from China while Buddhism is an imported religious

philosophy from India, but successfully merged with Chinese culture (Guang, 2013). These Chinese philosophies are embedded in *Ne Zha* through the character design and the interpersonal relationship, with the main focus on Confucianism and Taoism. For example, 'filial piety' (*xiao*), one of the Confucian virtues (Guo, 2004), is represented in the child characters Ne Zha and Ao Bing. To be more specific, Ne Zha tears apart the amulet of life exchange, which his dad Li Jing requests from a god for giving away his life in order to save Ne Zha. He ties up his parents so they cannot stop him from leaving, and kneels down to kowtow to them, as a farewell. During this the Confucian 'filial piety' is anchored in Ne Zha's behaviours, including keeling down as well as kowtowing to his parents and protecting their lives. The same virtue can be found in the character Ao Bing but represented in a different way. In this new adapted version, Ao Bing shoulders the heavy mission from his father, which requires him to help his clan get rid of the sea purgatory. He shows his filial obedience to his father, the Dragon King, for which he even fights against his only friend Ne Zha. Another Confucian virtue, 'loyalty' (*zhong*), is represented in the character Li Jing, who is not only Ne Zha's father but also the commander-in-chief of the town. He shows his faithfulness to the nation and his responsibilities to the people in the town.

In addition, 'harmony' (*he*), a significant trait in both the Taoist and Confucian philosophies (Guo, 2004; Zhang, 2014), is found in the interpersonal relationship between Ne Zha and his parents, and between Ne Zha and Ao Bing. Compared to the original work, which emphasises the tense relationship between Ne Zha and his father (Cui, 2001), this new adaptation highlights the harmonious relationship between Ne Zha and his parents. Even though Ne Zha is born as a demon, his parents still show their deep love to him; his father, Li Jing, would rather give away his life to save Ne Zha's life. From the perspective of cultural nationalism, promoting traditional cultures and virtues in popular culture helps to maintain national spirits and reconstruct national identity (Guo, 2004). Of note, 'harmony' is not only a traditional Chinese virtue, but also used as one of the core values of socialism in the contemporary Chinese context (Zhang, 2014). Therefore, the 'harmony' trait represented in this new adaptation can be read as advocating a nationalistic virtue and building national identity in contemporary China.

Similarly, the relationship between Ne Zha and Ao Bing is not strained as shown in the original work. Although Ne Zha is born as a demon pill (evil) and Ao Bing as a spirit pearl (good) in the new adaptation, 'harmony' is represented by their friendship. This can be

understood in the Confucian philosophy, in which the two oppositional segments can co-exist calmly:

> In the eyes of Confucians, the world is dualistic, but they do not look upon the two component elements as hostile and incompatible. Rather, opposites merge into a unified harmony and co-exist peacefully in mutual interdependence as a harmonious organism, as in the case with *yin* and *yang*. (Guo 2004: 79)

Here, the features of *yin* and *yang*, in relation to masculinity, are worth explaining. Fang (2007) observes that there are two types of Chinese masculinity nourished by the Confucian elements *yin* and *yang*: they are respectively soft masculinity and rigid masculinity. Ao Bing, who is gentle and modest, stands for the Confucian *yin* masculinity (soft masculinity), while Ne Zha, who is energetic and rugged, represents the Confucian *yang* masculinity (rigid masculinity).

Gender issues are also embedded in family roles. Ne Zha's father Li Jing signifies a traditional Chinese father, who is taciturn and reserved. He shows his deep love to Ne Zha through actions rather than words. Ne Zha's mother Lady Yin, on the other hand, signifies a modern Chinese mother, who cares for and even spoils her child. Zhang (2019: 65) comments that 'this is typically a contemporary Chinese nuclear family, which will surely resonate with the audience'. It is worth-noting that Lady Yin is the only female main character in this animated film. However, she is represented as strong and independent, and can be considered as a sign of a career woman, rather than the traditional image of mothers who would stay at home to look after their husband and children in the past. The character Lady Yin therefore signifies the rising consciousness of feminism in contemporary China. These traditional and modern gender elements represented in family roles reflect nationalistic ideology and may further construct national identity.

Apart from family roles, the animated film also highlights identifiable family relations in Chinese society. For example, the typical family value regarding children being the hope of the whole family in China, is represented through the heavy responsibility Ao Bing takes up from his father and his clan. In addition, Ne Zha is always left alone at home because his parents are busy working. This connotes the issue of 'left-behind children' in Chinese society.

As Barthes (1972: 107) notes, 'myth is a system of communication'. Through the mythical representation of family relations, *Ne Zha* communicates nationalistic reality with its domestic audiences.

The Chineseness is not only embedded in the abstract concepts mentioned above, such as religious philosophies, values, gender and family relations, but also represented through concrete features, such as visual and aural elements. For example, Ne Zha's red belly band is an example of typical Chinese clothing, which is usually worn, in the past, by women and children. The logo of the lotus on his red belly band, is a type of flower well known in China. This, in Billig's (1995) words, further 'flags' the Chineseness banally, despite this shot only lasting a few seconds. Additionally, the activity of shuttlecock kicking is repeatedly shown in this animated film. This seemingly natural and familiar folk game to most Chinese people, however, serves as a banal reproduction of nationhood and as a 'forgotten reminder' to reinforce national identity (Billig, 1995). Similar visual elements acted as nationalistic signs can be found in architecture (e.g. traditional tile-roofed houses, special door holders, and Buddhist towers and temples), religious items (e.g. Taoist incantations, amulets), and even some supporting characters (the Barrier Beasts are a reference to the bronze statue cultural relic in Sanxingdui Museum), etc. There is, to some extent, barely 'expressive content' of nationalistic elements (Rose, 2016), because everything appears as 'natural'. This reveals the banality of nationalism from above, and it will be interesting to investigate whether domestic audiences engage, or ignore, these 'naturally' visual elements in subsequent analyses.

Nationalistic ideology is also embedded in aural elements, such as the background music, Peking opera, and even the speech. More specifically, the background music in *Ne Zha* mostly uses traditional Chinese musical instruments, including Suona, Erhu, Sheng, Bamboo flute, Zheng, etc. There are even scenes of a band performance, showing the details of these Chinese musical instruments beyond the auditory sensation, to banally emphasise these nationalistic signs. A short piece of Peking opera is also played when Ne Zha first meets Ao Bing. These seemingly innocuous acoustics help to once again 'flag' the nationhood (Billig, 1995). In addition, Chineseness is also embodied in the speech in *Ne Zha*. For example, Ne Zha's master Taiyi Zhenren has a thick Sichuan accent, due to the fact that, in the original work, he is from Sichuan, a province of China. A lot of internet buzzwords are used in the dialogue, such as 'young master' (*xiao ye*), 'lad' (*xiao gege*), 'streaking' (*luoben*), 'wuss' (*song*), etc. Doggerel also appears frequently in Ne Zha's dialogue. As Guo (2004: 92) points out, 'language is a component of national identity'. Different types of speech mentioned

above can therefore be considered as nationalistic elements communicated via auditory sensation. Again, through these 'naturally' aural elements, nationalism from above is inserted in *Ne Zha*. This can be seen as a communicative system, which can further construct national identities and reproduce a sense of nationhood in the reception.

To summarise this subchapter, nationalistic elements are represented through various facets, such as religious philosophies, values, gender, family roles and relations, and visual and aural elements. Both traditional and contemporary Chinese cultures are found in the representation. During this the Chineseness is constantly 'flagged', or reminded, in a banal way. Everything seems natural and innocent in the film. This unconscious, familiar reminding may further serve to reinforce national identity and generate nationalism from below, which this thesis will discuss in the next chapter of audience study.

The Promotion of Ne Zha: Nationalising Animated Films

The nationalistic ideology is not just found within the production of *Ne Zha*, but also beyond it. The promotion process, into which efforts are put by both the production company and the state, serves as another birthplace for nourishing nationalistic ideology.

For example, one of the most popular Chinese social media platforms, Weibo, was used frequently by the production team from July to October 2019, during *Ne Zha*'s release in cinemas. Every time the film hit one hundred million yuan in the domestic market, an art poster created by the director was posted on its official Weibo account. A promotional slogan, the number at the box office as well as an accurate time, a comic spin-off, the grading from different websites and, the film title, are the common elements shown in the art poster (Figure 1). Here, it is worth-noting that the nationalistic ideology is embedded in the promotional slogan of the poster. This can be found in some slogans involving the nation, such as 'a new box-office record for Chinese animated films', 'the top grossing animated film in Chinese film history', and 'the second highest grossing film in Chinese film history', etc. Nationhood is continually 'flagged' in these celebratory moments, which serve to build the link between the genre of animated films and the nation. This reminder may further encourage the audience to improve *Ne Zha*'s box office in cinemas.

Additionally, the nationalistic ideology from the state is also hidden behind the scale and the period of the screening schedule of *Ne Zha* in cinemas. According to the box-office statistics on 6th August 2019, *Ne Zha* accounted for 47.84% of the screening schedule, while other foreign animated films and a domestic child-oriented animated film only accounted for a fairly small amount of screening opportunities on the same day.[16] To be more specific, *Lion King* (2019) and *The Snow Queen: Mirrorlands* (2018) made up 1.22% and 2.39% of the screening schedule respectively, and the child-oriented domestic animation *Seer Movie 7:Crazy Intelligence* (2019) took only 2.24% of the screening opportunity. Given that the screen culture in China, such as films and television programmes, are under the control of the state (Voci and Hui, 2018), the high exposure of *Ne Zha* can be read as nationalistic ideology from the state, serves to promote adult-oriented, high-quality domestic animated films to as many audiences as possible. This is more obvious in the period of the screening schedule of *Ne Zha*. The screening period of *Ne Zha* was extended twice in domestic cinemas, which helped the genre of animated film to create the second highest grossing record in Chinese film history.[17] In this sense, the nationalistic ideology from the state can be revealed from both the scale and the period of the screening schedule of *Ne Zha*, which aims to achieve the goals of 'cultural confidence' (Wang, C., 2019) and becoming a 'strong nation of animation' (Giesen, 2014). This, further reveals that the theme of changing the 'destiny' of Chinese animation in *Ne Zha*, is not simply the effort made by the production team. It gains stronger, mysterious power from the state. Therefore, it is these two types of power (the production and the state) that join together to construct nationalism from above.

It is also worth pointing out that nationalistic ideology is not only uncovered in the promotion of *Ne Zha*, but also found in the promotion of the forthcoming domestic animated films, or, the genre of Chinese animated films. In the end of *Ne Zha*, the post-credits scene shows that there will be two domestic animated films in the future: *Ne Zha 2* and *Jiang Ziya*. The accompanying subtitle 'The Series of Chinese Mythology made by Coloroom' also signifies the intention of producing a cinematic universe of Chinese Mythology, which is similar to the Marvel cinematic universe in the west. As Barthes (1972: 107) notes, 'myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message'. The Chineseness is 'flagged' in the utterance of this subtitle, compared to the stateless title of 'Marvel cinematic universe' in the western context. The nationalistic ideology hidden behind the post-credits

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[16] See https://www.sohu.com/a/331806991_100193305.

[17] See https://www.sohu.com/a/341406988_260616.

scene, in this sense, creates the new myth: the genre of animated film in China has become 'nationalised'. In other words, the nation is centrally positioned in Chinese animated films. Nationalism from above may further serve as a crucial factor in reproducing a sense of nationhood in the reception of this animated film.

Figure 1:
The art poster[18]

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[18] Translation of the texts: 'the second highest grossing film in Chinese film history', '49 hundred million', 'Take it easy. Trust my taste – I will make you become more handsome', said Taiyi Zhenren, when using the lotus roots to remake Ne Zha's body.

CHAPTER 5

Forms of ACGN Nationalism

Online ACGN Nationalism

The study of the nationalistic ideology in the previous chapter provides a picture of nationalism from above. This chapter, however, shifts the focus to the audience, as ordinary people, and their active participation in reproducing the nation online and offline, during their engagement with *Ne Zha*. Loosely oriented by the 'everyday nationalism' analytical framework proposed by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008), this subchapter examines the ways audiences comment and perform on digital platforms, in which their sense of Chineseness is discursively and practically constituted.

'The Rise of Chinese Animation' – Commenting the Nation

According to Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008: 539), ordinary people are 'active producers – and not just passive consumers – of national discourse'. In other words, the nation is invoked through one's conscious expression in everyday life and there is no exception to this in the digital era. Schneider's (2018) study of nationalism in digital China shows that internet users shape an imagined community through commenting online. Hence, instead of 'talking the nation' (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008), 'commenting the nation' is more appropriate in presenting ordinary people's discursive construction of the nation in the digital environment. This is also consistent with the situation that ACGN nationalism is initially found in the digital environment, and the shared 'internal culture, identity, and discourse system' within the ACGN group in the digital environment (Feng 2017: 47).

There are various ways Chinese audiences build a sense of nationhood in their comments on *Ne Zha*. This can firstly be found in the way that audiences actively link *Ne Zha* to Chinese animation. For example:

The gap of my favourite, and the best, the most satisfying 3D computer-generated Chinese animated film, has finally been made up by *Ne Zha*. This is wonderful, amazing, and exciting! (Commentator 77)

Who would have thought that the wild kid Ne Zha can carry the banner of summer films this year? The visual, characterisation and storytelling are all remarkable. But the internet buzzwords as well as the parodies are too grounded and a bit awkward, which lower the film. Overall, it is actually an amazing work of Chinese animated films. (Commentator 72)

National sensibilities are shaped in these audiences' engagement with *Ne Zha*, through commenting 'Chinese'. More specifically, the former commentator shows a strong sense of positive emotional engagement with this domestic animated film, which can be considered to help create a feeling of national pride. The latter commentator, differently, reflects a spectrum of engagement, shifting back and forth between positive and negative engagement (Hill, 2019). From 'remarkable', to 'awkward' and 'lower', and finally to 'amazing', the latter commentator constructs nationalism in her/his negotiation process with *Ne Zha*.

Secondly, apart from building a link between *Ne Zha* and Chinese animation, nationhood is also found in the way that audiences simply comment 'Chinese animation', without mentioning 'Ne Zha':

This is really the best and the most conscientious Chinese animated film I've ever seen! (Commentator 9)

Hot-blooded. Adolescent Delusions. Exhilarating. The special effects are badass! The imagination is badass! This is the Chinese animation that we can truly be proud of. (Commentator 81)

Or,

The rise of Chinese animation! (Commentator 29)

The conscientious Chinese animation! (Commentator 21)

Hope Chinese animation becomes better and better! (Commentator 6)

These examples make the nationhood a salient attribute: the former type of commentators embodies national pride in substituting 'Ne Zha' by 'Chinese animation', and the latter type of commentators activates national sensibilities by strongly expressing their positive emotions towards 'Chinese animation'. Both of these two types of expressions manifest the agency of the domestic audience in their engagement with *Ne Zha*, showing that nationhood can be 'creatively and self-consciously deployed and manipulated by ordinary people' (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008: 539).

One thing to note is that 'The rise of Chinese animation!' is a popular discourse, which is not only seen in *Ne Zha* but also commonly found in previous Chinese animation (Bai, 2015). Here, a sense of nationhood is shaped in the way of phrasing animation as 'Chinese animation'. The word 'rise' in Chinese denotes the status of 'emerging suddenly to a towering position', or relates to 'the emergence of a power'.[19] Its reference can be traced back to the classic quote 'Reading for the rise of China' by Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of China, in the early twenty century when he perceived humiliations of the nation from the imperialist invasion. In Bo'ao Forum for Asia 2003, the Chinese politician Zheng Bijian proposed the idea of 'China's peaceful rise', as an attempt to respond to the 'China threat theory' from some western advocates (Wuthnow, 2008; Zheng, 2005). However, the term 'peaceful rise' has been replaced by 'peaceful development', due to the powerful significance embedded in the word 'rise' (Wuthnow, 2008). From these historical perspectives, the term 'rise' is always closely related to the nation, also associated with foreign impacts. Similarly, in the discourse of 'The rise of Chinese animation!', the word 'rise' is attached to the national branding of animation, signifying the increasing power of China among a world of nations. According to Foucault (1978: 101), 'discourse transmits and produces power'. His idea of 'power-knowledge relations' further helps to understand how nationalism is constructed in this brief comment (Foucault, 1977). It is Foucault's viewpoint that 'there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' (1977: 27). That is to say, discourse generates power, and power is closely linked to knowledge (Foucault, 1977; 1978). In this sense, 'The rise of Chinese animation!', with the help of the exclamation point in emphasising the tone, can therefore be seen as a short but affective discourse in generating knowledge – the knowledge of a strong nation, namely China. A sense of strong national

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[19] See https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E5%B4%9B%E8%B5%B7.

pride and national identity is embedded in the articulation. Through this, nationalism is constituted.

There is also development of this expression:

> The modelling and rendering is great – better than that in previous 3D Chinese animation. The storytelling is exhilarating and adolescents delusional (in a positive way). Cool! Chinese animation does sit-up again. Looking forward to *Jiang Ziya*. (Commentator 2)

'Sit-up' is a recent buzzword in symbolising something that goes up and down iteratively.[20] By commenting 'Chinese animation does sit-up again', the audience actively and creatively constructs the nation in her/his positive engagement with *Ne Zha*. National sensibility is embedded in the use of Internet buzzwords. This highlights the characteristics of ACGN nationalism, which is an evolving form of nationalism in digital China, and emphasises that nationalism has the intrinsic value to the ACGN subculture.

Extra Mark(s) because it is Chinese-made – Performing the Nation

As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008: 538) observe, 'the production of national sensibilities through the ritual enactment of symbol'. That is to say, nationalism can be constructed through ordinary people's ritual performance. This is found in domestic audiences' engagement with *Ne Zha* in the digital environment, mainly by rating it extra mark(s):

> Conventionally give an extra mark because it is Chinese-made. (Commentator 52)

> Five stars for encouragement. (Commentator 60)

> One extra star for supporting Chinese animators. (Commentator 68)

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[20] See https://jikipedia.com/definition/221674526.

De Certeau's (1984) theory of 'tactics' helps to understand this performance. He considers that 'many everyday practices are tactical in character' (ibid.: xix). By saying this, he differentiates 'tactics' from 'strategies': a strategy is made and imposed by power systems or institutions, whilst a tactic is used and manipulated by ordinary people in their everyday life (de Certeau, 1984). In this sense, giving *Ne Zha* extra grading(s) online can be seen as a daily tactic employed by domestic audiences, in order to improve its reputation and enhance its influence due to its 'Chinese-made' attribute. 'People build their worlds and identities […] by using different tactics' (Manovich 2009: 322). National identity is without exception. Therefore, the tactical rating performance online can be seen as a way audiences build their national identities, through which their sense of 'Chineseness' is practically constituted.

Offline ACGN Nationalism

Studying ACGN nationalism online provides an understanding of how the nation is reproduced in domestic audiences' comments and performance, during their engagement with *Ne Zha*. However, there is also a need to include the offline setting, because both the online and offline environments play an important role in ordinary people's lives. This subchapter therefore continues to explore the ways nationalism is constructed on the ground in the audience's everyday life. Likewise, drawing on Fox and Miller-Idriss' (2008) analytical framework of 'everyday nationalism', this subchapter investigates how domestic viewers actively produce national affinities through consumption, performance and daily talk.

Watch it Twice because it is Chinese-made – Consuming the Nation

Nations, to some degree, can be considered as products (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). Individuals constitute national sensibilities through daily consumption practices. In the case of *Ne Zha*, audiences present various ways of consumption behaviours, in which their sense of nationhood is shaped. This can initially be found in watching this animated film in the cinema:

> I watched it in the cinema, firstly because it is Chinese-made. If it is a foreign film, I wouldn't go to the cinema to watch it. (Sheng, 20-year-old, male, video dubber)

I know some Chinese animation teams are working very hard and putting a lot of efforts in their works. So every time when there is a new Chinese animated film released, I will definitely go to the cinema to watch it. Every time! *Ne Zha* is no exception. (Lin, 21-year-old, female, operator)

I watched the pre-screening (of *Ne Zha*) in the cinema with my friend. I think fans or people who are concerned about Chinese animation, may go to watch the pre-screening in the cinema. (Ou, 22-year-old, female, student)

The first interviewee Sheng provides an understanding of consumer nationalism, which is seen in his acceptance to watch a domestic film and a rejection to watch a foreign film in the cinema, based on his nationality (Wang, 2005). As Fox and Miller-Idriss note,

[T]hrough shopping […] ordinary people make a national world visible to themselves and, potentially, those around them. The consumption of these national artefacts defines, demonstrates, and affirms the consumer's national affinities. It marks the products – and the people who consume them – nationally. (2008: 551)

Hence, through watching *Ne Zha* in the cinema, Sheng not only consumes nationally-marked goods but also intangibly reinforces his national identity.

Lin and Ou identify themselves as fans of Chinese animation. In this sense, dual identities – fan identity and national identity – are blended in their engagement with *Ne Zha*. With a passionate tone, Lin's account reveals that fan identity is embedded in her consumption of *Ne Zha* in the cinema, and this is highly motivated by her national identity. While Lin's account stresses 'frequency' ('every time'), Ou's expression highlights 'timeliness' ('pre-screening'). Through watching an early screening of *Ne Zha*, an imagined community is built in her assumption of other fans' participation in a pre-screening in the cinema, which unveils her dual identities. Edensor (2002: vii) observes that 'national identity is […] enmeshed in the embodied, material ways in which we live'. Both Lin's and Ou's viewing experience of *Ne Zha* in the cinema, therefore, reveals how audiences' national identities are materialised through the purchase of a film ticket.

In addition, re-watching *Ne Zha* in the cinema is another tactical practice that domestic audiences employ:

> I watched it twice. Some of my friends have watched it four or five times at maximum. The first time I watched it I missed some details – I realised it when I read the film reviews. This is why I re-watched *Ne Zha*. Another reason is because I wanted to contribute to its box office. Because it is Chinese-made, and is also a conscientious work. (Si, 28-year-old, female, finance)

> The second time I watched it was partly because I wanted to 'amway' my friends, partly because I wanted to watch again, and partly because I wanted to support Chinese animation. I thought it was worth it.[21] (Wan, 24-year-old, female, teacher)

Although there are several reasons contributing to watching *Ne Zha* twice, these interviewees clearly show how a sense of nationhood is consciously produced in their own consumption practices, or in guiding their friends to carry out consumption practices. This can also be understood in the viewpoint of Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008: 551): 'consumers don't simply buy national commodities; they constitute national sensibilities, embody national pride, negotiate national meanings, thus making nationhood a salient feature of their everyday lives'. One thing to mention is that Si also realises the box-office-celebrating poster created by the director on Weibo, and reflects upon this encouraging her to re-watch *Ne Zha* in the cinema. This provides a glimpse of how 'a system of communication', namely 'myth', as Barthes (1972: 107) articulates, is created between the nationalistic ideology and ordinary people. Here, the 'strategy' from above and the 'tactic' from below are not in 'conflictual or competitive relations' (de Certeau 1984: 24); instead, they are collaborative and harmonious.

It is Fox and Miller-Idriss' (2008: 551) notion that 'consumption doesn't only occur only at the cash register', and 'media that are national in scope, content and/or format can also contribute to the activation and reinforcement of national sensitivities'. Thus, re-watching *Ne Zha* at home is also a way of shaping nationhood. This can be seen in an interviewee's experience:

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[21] 'Amway' is an Internet buzzword in China, referring to a way of recommending something to others. See https://jikipedia.com/definition/44063413.

The second time I watched it I was with my family when we were at home. I thought it was a good Chinese animation and I wanted the elders in my family to also watch Chinese animation. I hoped that they could give up their prejudice towards Chinese animation and could stop considering that animation is only for kids. They were reluctant in the beginning because they still can't accept the genre of animation, but they liked it in the end as they eventually found it funny. (Dong, 25-year-old, male, product manager)

Such an example shows that Dong not only reinforces his own national identity, but also convinces his family to shape their national sensibilities in their engagement with *Ne Zha*. Through deliberately creating the in-house media 'togetherness' (Livingstone, 2005), Dong, and his family, who would never consume Chinese animation on their own, construct national affinities in their daily life.

Profile Photo, Post, and Group – Performing the Nation

Apart from the consumption practice of *Ne Zha*, the audiences' daily performances also help to shape a sense of nationhood. For example, both Dong and Si use Ne Zha as their profile photos on Wechat, after they watched this animated film in the cinema. The reasons given are 'a way of supporting the film' (Dong) and 'it is cute' (Si). 'Rituals provide occasions for the visual and audible realization of these symbolic attachments', according to Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008: 545). Although there is no flag existing, Ne Zha is still a traditional Chinese mythological character who carries a symbolic attachment to the nation. Therefore, using Ne Zha as their profile photos can be seen as a daily performance which embodies national sensibility, pride and identity. One thing to note is that Si's profile photo of Ne Zha has been altered during the Covid-19 period – Ne Zha is wearing a mask (Figure 2). Although she says that this picture is found online, it shows how ordinary people act as 'active agents in the consumption, production, appropriation, and manipulation of their own particular versions of the nation' (Fox and Van Ginderartcher 2018: 546).

Lin, differently, updated a post on Wechat after she watched *Ne Zha*, in which she wrote: 'Hope everyone can support Chinese animation. The 11th year I've been rooting for Chinese animation'. Her dual identities are represented along with a strong sense of belonging and

responsibility. This can also be seen, even visibly, in Ou's performance, who created an online community-based group called 'The Rise of Chinese Animation'. She explains:

> I binge-watched a lot of Chinese animation last summer, and found that they were very good works. I wanted to discuss with someone [on a particular social media platform], but I couldn't find a group for this. I saw the enthusiasm of the production teams, which inspired me a lot. I would like to cheer for them – to act as 'tap water' and help 'amway' [their works]. *Ne Zha* was released during that time, and it achieved a really high reputation online. I felt like Chinese animation was going to glow and be accepted by more and more people. This reinforced my idea of creating a group about Chinese animation [on a particular social media platform]. I thought that there must be people who like to watch Chinese animation, and it should be a lot of people. It was just about missing a place for this. Then I'll do it, I thought. (Ou, 22-year-old, female, student)

Ou's dual identities encouraged her to act of fan labour, or 'tap-water' in her self-identified words, creating a virtual imagined community in which like-minded audiences are included. The fannish object is, essentially, the nation. In this sense, Ou's performance of building the online community-based group, not only represents 'Fandom-Is-a-Way-of-Life' (Busse and Gray 2011: 431), but also manifests that nationalism is a way of life.

Notably, although these performances are told by the interviewees offline, they are closely connected to the digital environment. Offline nationalistic performances are transformed into online nationalistic symbols. This further demonstrates the digital characteristic of ACGN nationalism, and how its online and offline forms are firmly linked.
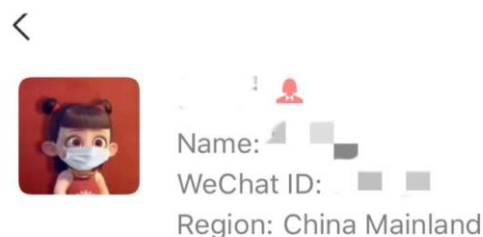

Figure 2:

The interviewee Si's profile photo on Wechat

'We Have a Rich Cultural Heritage in Our Chinese Culture – Talking the Nation

Different from ACGN nationalism in the digital environment, there is no utterance of 'the rise of Chinese animation' emerging spontaneously in the offline audiences' talk. Although most individuals agree with this expression, they present different understandings. For example, some people consider Chinese animation to be 'rising', instead of having 'already risen':

> To me it is rising instead of having already risen. If we say 'it has risen' it feels like it has reached its peak. But I'm sure it will be better in the future. I hope it can 'rise' forever. (Nian, 22-year-old, female, student)
>
> I think it is rising, because there are not many representative works. (Wan, 24-year-old, female, teacher)
>
> It is rising – there is a long way to go, especially compared to a lot of Japanese animation companies which have already achieved a mature industrial chain. (Ou, 22-year-old, female, student)

It is interesting to see that even Ou, who created the online group of 'The Rise of Chinese Animation', considers that Chinese animation is 'rising'. This also adds the value of the use of 'triangulation' in studying the offline setting in this research, which otherwise, may bring biases in simply studying the online environment.

When some interviewees provide their judgements regarding the tense of the word 'rise', others give their concrete understandings on the 'rise' in relation to an animation work or a time period:

> I think now it is just the beginning of 'the rise of Chinese animation'. *Ne Zha* is a good start for 'the rise of Chinese animation'. (Sheng, 20-year-old, male, video dubber)
>
> 'The rise of Chinese animation' is a certain event, and *Ne Zha* is an accidental event. (Dong, 25-year-old, male, product manager)

> To me the 'rise' of Chinese animation is due to *Monkey King: Hero is Back*. It is the pioneer of the 'rise', and *Ne Zha* is standing on the shoulders of giants. (Ke, 27-year-old, female, animation practitioner)

> Actually, 'the rise of Chinese animation' emerged during the boom of Shanghai Animation Film Studio around the 1960s. However, this was put out by some people later on. (Gang, 24-year-old, male, photographer)

Apart from this, it is also interesting to see how different people perceive the word 'Chinese animation' within the expression of 'the rise of Chinese animation'. Most interviewees consider that it only refers to adult-oriented animation:

> I don't think it includes child-oriented animation, like *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf*. They don't belong to the same concept. (Feng, 19-year-old, male, student)

> For me, as well as my group, we're talking about the rise of adult-oriented Chinese animation. (Ou, 22-year-old, female, student)

There is, however, rare, opposing voices:

> Some people think *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* and *Boonie Bears* don't count, but I think they are really good Chinese animation, particularly among children. They have mature industrial chains, good marketing strategies and stable audiences. The only difference between child-oriented Chinese animation and *Ne Zha,* or *Monkey King: Hero is Back,* is the way of telling a story. They [child-oriented Chinese animation] are just telling a story in a childish way. (Ke, 27-year-old, female, animation practitioner)

As it is shown in the varied accounts above, people embed their understanding of the nation in their perceptions of the word 'Chinese animation'. It reveals how nationalism can be 'consumed, articulated and mobilized differently by the different subjects involved', and how 'nationhood is made meaningful by these diverse participants', as Antonsich (2016: 3) notes.

It is also noticeable that there is a strong sense of 'we' in the interviewees' talk. Based on Billig's (1995) analysis of indexical reproduction of a nation, Antonsich (2016: 4) examines how 'nationhood is called into existence through the routine use of deixis ('we', 'them', 'here', 'the', etc.), which make nationhood appear like a natural presence in people's everyday life'. However, different from Billig's state-centred viewpoint (1995), Antonsich's (2016) perspective highlights the role human agency plays in building a sense of nationhood. In the case of *Ne Zha*, this study finds that the deixis 'we' is uttered outstandingly, compared to other deixis mentioned such as 'here' and 'the'. This may be owing to the different language usage and the research topic. Through the small word 'we', ordinary people reproduce the nation in their talk:

It has always been said that our special effects in China are not as good as those in America. But I have seen progress in our special effects when I watched *Ne Zha*. Also when I knew that we were going to have our 'Legend of Deification', just like America's 'Marvel Series', I was really excited! Really excited! I thought this was really cool because every character within it is worth watching. (Wan, 24-year-old, female, teacher)

Chinese animation has its own characteristics, which is its advantage. It uses our own culture [to tell a story], such as 'Classic of Mountains and Seas'.[22] This is not found in Japanese and American animation. (Ou, 22-year-old, female, student)

These accounts show that a sense of nationhood is built through a distinction of 'we' (China) and 'they' (Japan and America). This can be understood in Schneider's opinion that 'there can never be an in-group sentiment without some kind of out-group attribution' (2018: 40). Through shaping a strong sense of 'we' and making a distinction between 'we' and 'they', these interviewees embody national pride and construct nationalism in their talk.

In some situations, these distinctions embed 'taste':

Japanese animation is the best in the world, although I still support our animation. (Feng, 19-year-old, male, student)

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[22] 'Classic of Mountains and Seas' is a Chinese ancient text regarding mythological geography.

There are a lot of different topics of Japanese animation, and some of them are really thoughtful. You watch them, and you can reflect on certain social issues, enrich your inner world, and pursue your spirit and soul. But ours are still staying at the level of 'animation is only for kids'. (Di, 26-year-old, female, student)

I hope that Chinese animation can bloom in the future, just like Japanese and American animation. We can speak a lot of names of the production teams. (Ou, 22-year-old, female, student)

According to Bourdieu (1984), 'taste' is socially constructed and is able to differentiate. Most of these interviewees show their taste in the way of viewing Japanese animation as 'distinction' (e.g. 'the best', 'thoughtful'), through making a distinction between 'we' and 'they'. Meanwhile, they also embody national identities and national sensibilities in their talk (e.g. 'support our animation', 'ours'). It, therefore, shows that ACGN nationalism can co-exist with cosmopolitanism within ordinary people's conscious understandings of the nations, rather than being a synonym of hostile or unreflective.

The Relationships between Online and Offline ACGN Nationalism

With the guide of Fox and Miller-Idriss' (2008) analytical framework, the study has shown the salience of the nation in domestic audiences' talk, performance and consumption practices of *Ne Zha*, both online and offline. More importantly, there is a close relationship shared between ACGN nationalism online and offline.

To be more precise, online affective and positive comments, such as 'the rise of Chinese animation', and the digital practice of giving higher ratings, help to enhance *Ne Zha*'s reputation. These reinforce domestic audiences' national identities, activate their national pride, and turn into a motivation for them to constitute nationalism on the ground. This can be found in the fan labour of creating the online group called 'The Rise of Chinese Animation', and the written post on Wechat in using the phrase 'Chinese animation' instead of 'Ne Zha', the application of Ne Zha as the profile photo to help the promotion of the film, and the re-watch of *Ne Zha* in cinemas, etc. Some of these national practices offline, in turn, can convert into national symbols online, which, may further expand their influence to individuals offline, in a cyclic process. In this sense, the thesis argues that online and offline ACGN nationalism

work closely to integrate and to make nationhood a salient attribute in ordinary people's everyday lives.

CHAPTER 6

Rationales and Power Mechanisms behind ACGN Nationalism

Why ACGN Nationalism?

As Antonsich (2016) points out in his work, previous studies focused on asking questions such as 'what', 'when' and 'how' is the nationhood. However, it is crucial to propose the question of 'why', in order to avoid staying at the descriptive level (Knott, 2015). This is also the opinion of Antonsich and Skey: 'We can track markers of nationhood – symbols and signs, language and activities, building styles and consumer goods – until the cows come home but we also need to move beyond this to think critically about what they mean and why they might matter' (2017: 324). These studies motivate this thesis to explore the rationales hidden behind ACGN nationalism.

There are several reasons this thesis argues for 'why' ACGN nationalism appears in the reception of *Ne Zha*. Firstly, the outstanding production of *Ne Zha* has been recognised by domestic audiences, which can be seen as a crucial reason for ACGN nationalism. This can be found in the audiences' praise for the special effects (e.g. 'the special effects are badass', 'modelling and rendering is great'), the storytelling and the characterisation (e.g. 'the visual, characterisation and storytelling are all remarkable'). Notably, there are a number of female viewers who especially adore the character Ao Bing (Figure 3) or actively making character pairing:

> I like Ao Bing, simply because he is handsome [laughing], and he has a lovely voice. (Ke, 27-year-old, female, animation practitioner)

> When Ao Bing appeared, those girls sitting behind me in the cinema were like, 'Ahhhhh'. I'm actually a CP fan, I remember I unconsciously showed my 'aunt's smile' when I was watching the film in the cinema.[23] It is very obvious that these two people [Ne Zha and Ao Bing] are

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[23] The terms 'CP' and 'aunt's smile' are both common Chinese Internet slang. 'CP' is the abbreviation of 'character pairing' or 'couple', and 'aunt's smile' refers to older women's smile when they see young men they like. See https://jikipedia.com/definition/797190697 and https://jikipedia.com/definition/1029535421.

made as CP – one is fire and the other is ice. Their colours are also matching – red and blue. (Si, 28-year-old, female, finance)

Figure 3:

Ao Bing

Both Ke and Si have watched *Ne Zha* more than once. This shows that the characterisation of *Ne Zha* may serve as an indirect incentive for the constitution of nationalism, which works through female audiences' affective engagement with the male character Ao Bing.

Secondly, the spirit of craftsmanship of the production team of *Ne Zha* has been admired by the audience. For example:

After watching the film I also had a search online, and knew that Director Yang paid a lot of attention to the special effects. There is a story of the designer who had quit the company and joined another, but was still found to cooperate with *Ne Zha*'s production team in the end.[24] It

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[24] This is because the designer could not stand the strict requirements of the director.

shows how rigid Director Yang is, and he really pays attention to the details of the film. (Dong, 25-year-old, product manager)

You never thought that they would study the hometown of Taiyi Zhenren and then give him a voiceover with a Sichuan accent. (Cen, 32-year-old, Internet operator)

Thirdly, the nationalistic ideology from above also plays an important role in the construction of nationalism in domestic audiences' engagement with *Ne Zha*. This is initially seen in the audiences' interaction to its promotion. For example, the influence of the Weibo celebration poster on the viewers' re-watch experience in the cinema (in Si's situation mentioned earlier), and the impact of the post-credit scenes, which relate to the production of a cinematic universe of Chinese Mythology (or 'the Legend of Deification'), on the constitution of the audiences' excitement and expectation of national culture (in Wan's account mentioned earlier). However, there is no data in relation to the extended screening schedule of *Ne Zha*. Audiences show their re-watch experience in cinemas within one or two weeks of the release of the film. This further reveals their strong national sensibilities, which are embedded in these speedy consumption practices.

Meanwhile, the nationalistic ideology embedded in the adaptation of the myth of 'Ne Zha', and in the representation in *Ne Zha*, also serves as a mythical communication system in reinforcing national identity and constructing a sense of nationhood in the reception (Barthes, 1972). For example, audiences strengthen their national identities in reading the mythological character of Ne Zha:

Ne Zha and Sun Wukong are two of the most rebellious characters in China. People like them, because they reflect the yearning of Chinese people in their sub-consciousness – the subversion of destiny and rules, which most people cannot get rid of in their lifetime. (Commentator 74)

Or in perceiving family roles and relations, and gender issues:

Li Jing is a traditional Chinese father – he is strict, not good at expressing himself, but he loves his son […] Lady Yin is very cool! She is a career woman – very strong. She also gave birth to such a powerful son. She's just like an heroine in some contemporary novels, or an independent women today. Who doesn't want to become such a person! (Nian, 22-year-old, female, student)

When Li Jing is willing to exchange his life for Ne Zha's, he says: 'Because he is my son' [sobbing]. (Di, 28-year-old, female, student)

My mother is similar to Lady Yin, and my situation is exactly the same as that of Ne Zha. I am the only child in my family. My parents both need to go to work and they always leave me at home. (Feng, 19-year-old, male, student)

Through the interpretations of a 'Chinese father', the Chinese relations between father and son, and the self-identified 'left-behind children' issue and the awareness of feminism in contemporary China, these audiences reinforce their national identities and negotiate national meanings, which can further help to construct nationalism.

Additionally, visual and aural elements also act as nationalistic signs in shaping a sense of nationhood in the reception:

Ne Zha's red belly band […] Are there other countries that wear belly bands? I think it's only China. (Nian, 22-year-old, female, student)

The traditional folk game of shuttlecock kicking has gained a new life through the new medium of animation. I personally think that this is a rare but good example of spreading Chinese culture in recent years. (Commentator 73)

The soundtrack is amazing!! It is full of Chinese characteristics. I really love that part with Suona. (Commentator 7)

In their active readings of Ne Zha's red belly band, the shuttlecock kicking and the musical instrument, these audiences build a communal bond between themselves and the nation. One thing to mention is that the role of visual and aural symbols are not as salient as that of narrative elements, in the construction of national identities. There are not many relevant data

found in the online comments, and this is even pessimistic in the interviews conducted offline. There is a need to actively ask the interviewees to reflect upon the 'Chineseness' embedded in the visual and aural representation, in the offline setting, in which the 'wait-and-listen' approach is inactive (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008).

Dong (25-year-old, male, product manager) reflects on this in his interview: 'Maybe this is because I'm Chinese – I don't pay attention to them [Chinese elements]'. That is to say, the 'Chineseness' is internalised due to the domestic audience's strong national identity, which, is discussed in detail in the next paragraph.

Fourthly, it is the audience's strong internal national identity which turns into a series of discursive and practical construction of nationhood, both online and offline. A couple of extra quotes are added to demonstrate this:

> Personally, I am more tolerant of Chinese animation. It is for true that it cannot be compared with some foreign animation in terms of production. However, as a Chinese, I will definitely support Chinese animation. (Ou, 22-year-old, female, student)

> Even though sometimes Hollywood animation can have rubbish stories, there is still a visible gap between our production and theirs. But I still support Chinese-made. I didn't watch *Frozen* again although it is an epic. (Ke, 27-year-old, female, animation practitioner)

It is to be recalled that Ke has watched *Ne Zha* in the cinema for three times. As it is shown in these interviewees' accounts, national identity is a crucial reason for the emergency of ACGN nationalism among the audience. Who are these audiences? Why do they have such a strong power in popularising *Ne Zha*, a subculture, and pushing it to gain the second highest box-office in Chinese film history? The thesis will further unveil the 'myth' of the audience hidden behind ACGN nationalism in *Ne Zha* in the next subchapter.

The Power Mechanisms

According to the data, the 20 to 30 year-old age group constitutes the largest proportion (53.54%) of watching *Ne Zha* in the cinema (Peng and Shi, 2019). This age group, in other words, is those who were born in the 90s. They are considered the core audience of ACGN in China (Ding, 2016; Li, 2017). In order to uncover the power of this youth group, this subchapter looks closely at different aspects related to their conditions, including economic, cultural and social facets.

It would be worth starting with an interviewee's quote:

> Now the young generation accept animation more easily than the old generation, because it is the stuff that our generation likes. The young generation has their economic foundation and their own discursive power, which is also an important reason for the opinion 'the rise of Chinese animation' […] Also, we, the young generation, are the active ones on the Internet. We use our own way and our own strength to promote the film and attract more audiences. (Dong, 25-year-old, male, product manager)

Economically, people born in the 90s and participating in ACGN in China have high family income, which provides them the spending power for use on ACGN products (iResearch, 2019). This youth group differs from the other generations, those born in the 70s and the 80s, as they are more than willing to pay for their favourite Internet products or virtual products, and this, is labelled 'consumerism of people born in the 90s' by Feng (2017: 48). In the case of *Ne Zha*, the re-watch experience of domestic audiences in the cinema manifests the consumption capacity and willingness of this youth group (e.g. 'I watched it twice', 'some of my friends have watched it four or five times at maximum'). In addition, He (2019) notices that young people participating in ACGN have both economic capital and cultural capital, and are located mainly in the city, rather than the countryside. This uncovers the hidden social hierarchy related to the ACGN subculture, in which its in-group members are rich, urban citizens.

The environments this youth group lived or are living in, are also crucial to be examined, from the cultural and social perspective. More specifically, people born in the 90s spent most of their childhood consuming domestic and Japanese animation (iResearch, 2005). Watching animation has become a habit in the audience's everyday life, as one interviewee says:

I've been watching animation since I was a child. It is one of my habits. I think I've got a very special feeling towards non-real people. To me animation is definitely more attractive than real people – it is an attractive art form because it is utopian. (Meng, 23-year-old, female, student)

Through expressions such as 'one of my habits', 'more attractive', and 'utopian', Meng, who is one of the youth members in ACGN, shows how animation is a unique and important genre for her in her lifetime. This, as well as another interviewee Dong's opinion mentioned earlier ('it is the stuff that our generation likes'), disclose a close relationship between people born in the 90s and the genre of animation. This explains where the power of this youth group partly comes from – it is 'their genre' that they pay more attention to.

In addition, the digital environment this youth group is living in today also provides them an opportunity to construct and spread their power. Feng (2017: 48) notes that those born in the 90s are growing up in the Internet era, and 'their world views, lifestyles, their ways of making friends, and ways of communication are highly influenced by the Internet'. Li and Liu (2020) consider how the Internet is actively used by this youth group in expressing their opinions, such as loving their nation, as a new way of emotional sustenance. If Feng's (2017) perspective is in regards to the impact of the Internet on people born in the 90s, Li and Lius' (2020) idea is concerning the other way around – the agency of this youth group in employing the Internet to construct their discursive power. These opinions demonstrate a close tie between people born in the 90s and the Internet, and reveal that this youth group is taking a discursively dominant role in the digital environment today. Again, the short but affective expression of 'the rise of Chinese animation' can be seen as an example of the discursive power those who were born in the 90s wield in the online environment, in the construction of nationalism within the ACGN subculture.

The analysis of the core audience of *Ne Zha* and their power in terms of economic, cultural and social facets, helps to uncover the 'myth' of this youth group who embeds nationalism in their engagement with this animated film. However, there is a gender issue which needs to be foregrounded, which is missing in previous studies of ACGN nationalism. As it is discussed in the earlier subchapter, young female audiences or fans show their affective engagement with the characterisation, such as Ao Bing and his ambiguous relationship with Ne Zha, more

than their male counterparts. Henry Jenkins' (1992) studies on female media fans and their interpretative practices on male characters, namely 'slash', provide an understanding of the power and subversion of female fans in popular culture. It is also Jenkins' suggestion that fan studies should avoid falling into 'the trap of dealing with fandom as if it were gender-neutral', and there is a need to 'develop a more complex picture of how gender operates within fandom' (2014: 102). Also, McRobbie and Garbers' (1991) study on girls and subcultures reveals an absence of the exploration of female members in youth subculture, in which they notice females play a different role compared to their male counterparts. These perspectives from Jenkins (1992; 2014) and McRobbie and Garber (1991), provide an inspiration on highlighting gender in the analysis of ACGN nationalism. In other words, it is crucial to investigate how young female audiences or fans merge their fandom of object into nationalism in their engagement with ACGN. The power of the young female audiences or fans in *Ne Zha* can be viewed as an example of foregrounding the gender issue within ACGN nationalism, while detailed future research is welcome.

The investigation of people born in the 90s unveils the power of the youth in the reception of *Ne Zha*, however, it is important to also notice the power of the youth in its production. The data from iResearch (2015) show that those who were born in the 80s make the largest contribution to the production of Chinese animation. This youth group was influenced deeply by Japanese animation during their childhood, and because of this some people started businesses relating to ACGN when they grew up (iResearch, 2015). They put a lot of effort into producing and promoting high quality ACGN works.[25] The director of *Ne Zha*, Yang, is an example of this, and shows a spirit of craftsmanship in the production of this animated film in order to 'break the stereotypes and change the destiny […] of Chinese animation' (Yang, 2019b), as discussed in the earlier chapter. During this the nationalistic ideology – 'changing the destiny of Chinese animation' – has therefore been embedded into the animated film, by those involved in its production.

Therefore, this thesis argues that there are in fact three types of power which constitute the mechanisms hidden behind ACGN nationalism: power from those born in the 80s (the production), the 90s (the audiences), and from the state.

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[25] There are of course other generations which contribute to the production of Chinese animation, however, those who were born in the 80s are found to account for the majority of the production field.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

This study has explored different forms and rationales of ACGN nationalism in the Chinese context, and has further revealed the power mechanisms hidden behind this evolving form of nationalism in digital China. It has been argued that there are three sources of power which constitute the mechanisms hidden behind the 'myth' of ACGN nationalism: power from those born in the 80s (the production), the 90s (the audiences), and from the state.

How is the nationalistic ideology embedded in the production and promotion of Ne Zha?

This thesis has uncovered nationalism from above through a detailed exploration of the nationalistic ideology implanted in the production and promotion of *Ne Zha*. To be more precise, the 'myth' of nationalism from above arises from the adaptation of the mythological story of *Ne Zha*, which is used as a national sign to build an 'imagined community' within domestic audiences (Anderson, 1983; Barthes, 1972). The seemingly-naturally thematic choice of this new adaptation, 'breaking stereotypes and fighting against destiny', also reveals how nationalism from above purifies the genuine hope of changing the stereotypical situation of Chinese animation.

In addition, it was found that the nationalistic ideology is embedded in the representation of traditional and modern 'Chineseness' in *Ne Zha*, which, more specifically, is through religious philosophies, values, family roles and relations, gender issues, and visual and aural elements. Firstly, it was noticed that the Confucian and Taoist philosophies and the core value of socialism, are immersed in the representation of character designs as well as interpersonal relationships. More specifically, there is the Confucian 'filial piety' (*xiao*) anchored in the relationships between Ne Zha and his parents, and between Ao Bing and his clan. The Confucian 'loyalty' (*zhong*) is found in the character Li Jing, particularly in his faithfulness to the nation and his responsibilities to the public, as a commander-in-chief of the town. 'Harmony' (*he*), which is not only a traditional virtue in both the Taoist and Confucian philosophies, but also a core value of socialism in contemporary China, has been observed in the kinship between Ne Zha and his father, and the friendship between Ne Zha and Ao Bing.

This is different from the tense interpersonal relationships stressed in the original work of *Ne Zha*. Through advocating these nationalistic virtues, cultural nationalism is constructed (Guo, 2004).

Secondly, it was revealed that 'Chineseness' is embedded in the representation of family roles as well as relations, and gender issues, in *Ne Zha*. This is discovered through the family and gender roles of Ne Zha's parents, a reserved father in a traditional way and a caring mother in a contemporary style. It is also uncovered through family relations regarding the typical family value of viewing children as the hope of the family, and the connoted 'left-behind children' family issues in China. Additionally, the consciousness of feminism in the contemporary Chinese context is also represented through the only female main character Lady Yin. In this sense, the 'myth' of nationalism is embedded in the narrative designs of family roles and relations, and gender issues, which acts as 'a system of communication' that resonates with domestic audiences (Barthes 1972: 107).

Thirdly, beyond the focus of the narrative, this thesis has also unveiled the nationalistic ideology embedded in the visual and aural elements of *Ne Zha*. The clothing, folk game, architecture, religious items and supporting characters, can be considered as nationalistic signs carried via visual sensation; and the use of traditional musical instruments, Peking opera, regional accents and Internet buzzwords, can be viewed as nationalistic signs conveyed through auditory sensation. All of these visual and aural elements serve as a 'forgotten reminder' in reproducing a sense of nationhood (Billig, 1995). Notably, nothing is expressive outstandingly; instead, it is the seemingly natural and innocent elements that help to 'flag' the nation through different sensations (ibid.).

Apart from the study of the production, this thesis has investigated the promotion of *Ne Zha*, in which it was uncovered that the nationalistic ideology from both the production team and the state. For example, the promotional slogan on the art posters on the production team's Weibo account, can be seen as a means of building an 'imagined community' in a celebratory moment (Anderson, 1983). Besides the power from the production team, it has also revealed the more mysterious power from the state, which is hidden behind the screening schedule of *Ne Zha* in cinemas. Further, this thesis has unveiled a new myth – the genre of Chinese animated film has become 'nationalised', through an investigation of the post-credits scene in the end of *Ne Zha*.

To answer the first research question, this thesis has uncovered the nationalistic ideology, from both the production company and the state, embedded in the production and the promotion of *Ne Zha*. Through an exploration of nationalism from above, this thesis has gained a contextualisation before studying the ACGN nationalism among domestic audiences.

How is ACGN nationalism constructed in the audience's engagement with Ne Zha, both online and offline?, and What is the relationship between online and offline ACGN nationalism?

Through a detailed study of online and offline forms of ACGN nationalism, loosely guided by the 'everyday nationalism' analytical framework (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008), this thesis has provided a nuanced vision of how domestic audiences actively construct a sense of nationhood in their engagement with *Ne Zha*.

It has initially examined ACGN nationalism in the digital environment, from which audiences' national sensibilities are thought to emerge (Bai, 2015). The focus has been put on how the nation is discursively and practically constructed in the audiences' own way. More precisely, this thesis has unveiled various ways individuals reproduce the nation in their comments on *Ne Zha*. This has been observed in the active connection they built between 'Ne Zha' and 'Chinese animation', or through direct interaction with 'Chinese animation', without mentioning 'Ne Zha'. This study has also analysed the widely-circulated discourse 'The rise of Chinese animation!', and has further unveiled how power is produced through the use of this short but affective expression in building and spreading nationalism in the online environment. The development of this expression, namely 'Chinese animation does sit-up again', can be viewed as a more active and creative way of constructing ACGN nationalism, which also fits the nature of ACGN nationalism in digital China. In addition, this thesis has also exposed audiences' national sensibilities hidden behind the performance of giving higher ratings to *Ne Zha*. Through this tactical practice, audiences reinforce their national identities and constitute a sense of nationhood.

Unlike the online environment, there is no affective expression, such as 'the rise of Chinese animation', found in the offline setting. However, audiences' nationalism is constructed through a strong sense of 'we' in daily talk. These, notably, have added the value of the use

of 'triangulation' in this study, which otherwise, could have brought biases in simply studying the online environment.

It is crucial to note that the daily consumption practice has been found to be a salient trait in offline ACGN nationalism. This can be seen in watching *Ne Zha* in cinemas, re-watching it in cinemas, or by 'amwaying' friends to watch it in cinemas. Through these consumption practices, domestic viewers materialise their national identities through the purchase of a film ticket, which helps to construct their nationalism. Additionally, consumption occurs beyond money trading (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). Having an in-house viewing experience of *Ne Zha* with the elders of the family, can also be considered as consuming national content and reinforcing national identity. Most importantly, national sensibilities are built within the whole family rather than simply in the family member acting as the introducer.

Apart from the daily talk and the consumption practice, this thesis has also uncovered how audiences and fans act as active agents in performing the nation, during their engagement with *Ne Zha*. This has been observed in the use of Ne Zha, who carries a symbolic attachment to the nation, as a profile photo on Wechat. This has also been noticed in the fan's post regarding the support of Chinese animation, and the fan labour of creating the online group 'The Rise of Chinese Animation'. The study of fans' performances has revealed that, just as 'Fandom-Is-a-Way-of-Life' (Busse and Gray 2011: 431), nationalism is also a way of life manipulated by ordinary people.

This also demonstrates ACGN nationalism as an evolution of nationalism in digital China. Although these practices are performed and discussed offline, they are eventually transformed into online nationalistic marks. ACGN nationalism starts with the online affective comments and rating practices, progresses to influence the offline fan labour, fan posts and photo appropriation, and these in turn, convert into online nationalistic symbols. This has revealed the interrelationship between the online and offline form of ACGN nationalism, which can only be studied in tandem. Hence, this thesis argues that it is both online and offline ACGN nationalism working together to reproduce a salient nationhood in the individual's everyday life.

Despite the main focus of this thesis being ACGN nationalism, it has been loosely guided by the 'everyday nationalism' theoretical framework (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). This thesis, therefore, hopes to add a suggestion to existing studies of everyday nationalism, which is, to also consider ordinary people's national sensibilities produced in the digital environment.

This is because the simple focus of the offline setting is not compatible with the digitally mediatised world today.

Why does ACGN nationalism appear in the reception of Ne Zha?, and How does it enable the understanding of the power mechanisms hidden behind ACGN nationalism in China?

Through a comprehensive analysis of the forms of ACGN nationalism, this thesis has further discovered its rationales by asking the question of 'why'. It has argued that there are four key points in shaping ACGN nationalism in the reception of *Ne Zha*.

Firstly, this study has found that the high-quality production of *Ne Zha* is a crucial reason for the emergence of ACGN nationalism. This has been uncovered in the critical acclaim of the special effects, the storytelling and the characterisation of this animated film. Notably, this thesis has also revealed the power of the characterisation of Ao Bing. Female audiences show their affective engagement with this male character, and their active interpretation of character pairing between Ao Bing and Ne Zha. More importantly, these female audiences manifest that they have watched this animated film more than once. This illustrates that the power of the characterisation in *Ne Zha* may indirectly support the construction of nationalism, particularly among female audiences.

Secondly, it is also the spirit of craftsmanship of the production team of *Ne Zha*, that is recognised by domestic audiences, which helps to construct nationalism in the audiences' engagement with the animated film. Thirdly, this thesis has uncovered the role of the nationalistic ideology in building a sense of 'Chineseness' in the reception of *Ne Zha*, through the promotion and production of this film. More specifically, it has noticed that audiences' re-watch experience in cinemas is influenced by the celebratory art poster on *Ne Zha*'s Weibo account. There is also a strong sense of nationhood generated by the post-credit scenes in *Ne Zha*, which signifies that the genre of Chinese animated films has become 'nationalised'. However, there was no relationship between these occurrences and the extended screening schedule of *Ne Zha*. Audiences showed their strong national sensibilities, in their re-watch experience in cinemas, within one or two weeks of the release of the film.

Apart from the promotion of the film, the nationalistic ideology embedded in the production also helps to reinforce audiences' national identities and build an 'imagined community'

(Anderson, 1983). For example, audiences construct a sense of nationhood in their engagement with the nationally-marked character Ne Zha, in this new adapted animation. In addition, the representation of family roles and relations, and gender issues, plays an important role of strengthening viewers' national identities. This has mainly been found in audiences' reading of a 'Chinese father' carried by the character Li Jing, the relationship between father and son in the Chinese context, the self-identified 'left-behind children' issues, and the consciousness of feminism in contemporary China. Besides these, visual and aural elements also serve as a mythical communication system in constructing a sense of nationhood in audiences' engagement (Barthes, 1972). This has been exposed in the viewers' active readings of Ne Zha's red belly band as well as the logo of lotus flower, the folk game of shuttlecock kicking and the musical instrument of Suona. Notably, this thesis has revealed that the role of visual and aural elements are not as noticeable as that of narrative units, in reproducing the nation in the reception of *Ne Zha*. This has helped to disclose the strong national identity of domestic audiences in their internalisation of 'Chineseness'.

Fourthly, this study has also argued that the domestic viewer's national identity plays a significant role in their construction of nationalism both in speech and in practices. It has been considered a key rationale for the appearance of ACGN nationalism, and the analysis of its hidden power mechanisms.

It was found that those born in the 90s, namely the 20 to 30 year-old age group, accounted for the largest proportion of the viewing experience of *Ne Zha* in cinemas. The power of this youth group is uncovered in various aspects. To be more specific, those who were born in the 90s and engage with the ACGN subculture in China are, from an economic perspective, normally supported by a higher family income. Unlike those born in the 70s and 80s, this youth group have their own consumerism. Both their economic and cultural capital allow them to pay for their favourite or virtual products more freely. This was revealed in domestic audiences' willingness and ability to consume by re-watching *Ne Zha* in cinemas.

From a cultural and social perspective, the living environment of the past and the contemporary digital environment, were exposed as supportive factors in constituting the power of people born in the 90s. Growing up with the genre of animation, this youth group has cultivated their habit of watching animation in their everyday lives. They share a close affinity with this genre, which is why they are willing to pay more attention to it. This was seen in the interviewee Meng's account (23-year-old, female, student), in which she

described her special feeling towards this 'utopian' genre and watching it has become her 'habit'.

The power of this youth group is also highly influenced by the digital environment they are living in today, which allows them to freely and actively have their voices heard. People born in the 90s grew up in and were affected by the digital era, which in turn, helped to shape their discursive power in this virtual environment (Feng, 2017; Foucault, 1978). Online ACGN nationalism can be considered a new way of wielding this discursive power by those born in the 90s. The comment of 'the rise of Chinese animation' illustrates how power is embedded in this short but affective discourse by this youth group in constructing and spreading nationalism.

The gender issues of this youth group have also been uncovered in this study. Female audiences and fans, who have re-watched *Ne Zha* in cinemas, have also exposed their affective engagement with Ao Bing, and even actively make a character pairing between Ao Bing and Ne Zha. This has provided an insight into how young female audiences and fans integrate their fandom of object into nationalistic consumption. It has also revealed the power of these young female audiences and fans in their contribution to ACGN nationalism. Hence, there is an opportunity for future research to highlight gender in the analysis of ACGN nationalism, which has not been a focus of previous studies.

Although it has disclosed the salient power of people born in the 90s in constituting ACGN nationalism in the reception of *Ne Zha*, this thesis has also revealed the power of those born in the 80s, as another youth group, in their key contribution to the production of Chinese animation. The director of *Ne Zha* presents a spirit of craftsmanship, particularly in the aim of breaking the stereotypical status of Chinese animation. Of note, this group of people, deriving from the production side, is seen as constructing nationalism from above. In this sense, this study has argued that it is the power from those born in the 80s, as well as the state, and those born in the 90s, that together construct the power mechanisms hidden behind the 'myth' of ACGN nationalism.

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Appendix 1: The graphics of the word 'Chinese/domestic animation' (*guoman*) searched on Baidu Index

Appendix 2: A synopsis of *Ne Zha*

This animated film is based on a Chinese mythological figure 'Ne Zha', but adapted to a completely new story. There is a mixed bead, which absorbs powers of both good and bad. As it gets stronger, the god needs to subdue the bead. The bead is therefore separated into two parts – Lingzhu (good elements) and Mowan (bad elements). The god sets an incantation to destroy Mowan in 3 years with thunder, and Lingzhu will be reincarnated as the third son of Li Jing – the commander-in-chief in the town of Chengtangguan. During Labour day, Lingzhu is stolen by mistake leaving Mowan to be born to Li's family instead. Mowan therefore becomes Ne Zha, who is disliked by people because he is born as a demon, although he is actually not. The stolen Lingzhu becomes the son of the Dragon King, who is called Ao Bing. Will Ne Zha and Ao Bing know their true identities? Why did the Dragon King steal Lingzhu? Will Ne Zha be killed by thunder in 3 years?

Appendix 3: The details of coding the animated film *Ne Zha* and Coding Table 1

The Details of Coding the Animated Film

Although the nationalistic ideology embedded in the animated film only serves as a contextual knowledge for the core understanding of the construction of nationalism in the audience engagement, plenty of time is spent in repeatedly watching the film and efforts are put into selecting the appropriate methods. More specifically, Rose's (2016) method of 'compositional interpretation' covers an investigation of both visual and aural elements, including 'visual content', 'colour', 'spatial organisation', 'editing', 'sound', 'light' and 'expressive content'. Bordwell and Thompsons' (2012) method of 'film narrative analysis' includes an examination of the 'story', 'plot', 'cause and effect'(e.g. characters), 'time', 'space', 'openings, closing and patterns of development', etc.

It is worth-noting that not all elements mentioned in these methods are relevant in the examination of Chineseness in *Ne Zha*, for example, 'spatial organisation', 'editing', 'light', etc. Methods are 'analytical tools', and should be 'used flexibly' according to the particular film in study (Bordwell and Thompson 2012: 110). Therefore, instead of including all the proposed elements in the analysis, this thesis chooses only to cover the appropriate elements as checklists/categories, which includes 'visual content', 'sound', 'story' and 'plot', and 'characters'. The analysis is also loosely guided by Barthes' (1967) idea of 'semiotics', in order to reveal the nationalistic ideology (connotation) embedded in the visual, aural and narrative elements (denotation). All of the categories and codes are listed in Coding Table 1 as follows.

Categories	Sub-categories	Denotation (descriptive codes)	Connotation (analytical codes)
Visual Content	Objects	1. Charm 2. Amulet 3. Incantation 4. Pottery Liquor Jar 5. Lotus 6. Ensemble: zheng, sheng, bamboo flutes, drum, etc. 7.'The Self-Cultivation of the Immortals' (book)	1.2.3: A sign of Taoist culture. 4.5,6: Originally made in China. 7. Intertextuality: Stephen Chow's comedy films – enhance national identity.
	Clothing	1. Ne Zha's Red Bellyband (also with the lotus logo)	1. Traditional Chinese clothing for women and kids (the lotus logo anchors the 'Chineseness').
	Architectures	1. Tower 2. Temple 3. Tile-Roofed House 4. Special Door Holder	1.2: A sign of Buddhist culture. 3.4: Features of traditional China architecture.

Sound	Speech	1.Sichuan Accent	1.The highlight of the place Sichuan – a province of China.
	Music	1.Background music mostly uses suona horn, er-hu, sheng, bamboo flutes, zheng, etc. 2. A piece of Beijing Opera.	1. These musical instruments are originally from China – music serves as a sign of nationalistic elements. 2. A sign of national culture.
Story		1. *Ne Zha*'s IP	1. A Chinese popular mythological story in the domestic market.
Plot	Events	1.A chaos Pearl is subdued and divided into Spirit Pearl (good) and Demon Pill (evil). They eventually become Ao Bing and Ne Zha. 2. Ne Zha is born as a demon and therefore needs self-cultivation to get rid of the evilness. 3. Shuttlecock kicking activity: Ne Zha & his mother, Ne Zha & Ao Bing, villagers. 4. The first meeting of Ne Zha and Ao Bing:	1.2: A sign of Taoist and Buddhist philosophy – good and evil are oppositional. 3. A popular Chinese folk game. 4. The dance is akin to Beijing opera – a sign of national culture. 5. A reflection of contemporary issues in China: parents are busy with their work and have limited time to spend with their children. Children are always left at home

		Ne Zha gives a short introduction of himself and then dances.	while parents are at work. There is a word called 'left-behind children' in Chinese.
		5. Ne Zha's parents love him and care for him; however, they are always busy working and do not have enough time to spend with their child.	6. Li Jing is a representation of a traditional Chinese father – hiding his deep love from his child.
		6. Ne Zha's father requests an amulet of life-exchange in order to save Ne Zha from death, which he keeps secret.	7. A sign of typical Chinese family values: the hope of the family rests on the child, who takes the pressure from their parents.
		7. Ao Bing shoulders a mission from his father which requires him to be conferred to god in order to help his clan get rid of the purgatory under the sea.	
	Post-credits Scene	1. *Ne Zha 2* 2. *Jiang Ziya* – 'The series of Chinese mythology' made by Colouroom	Both 1 and 2: China plans to create its own animation series through the use of domestic mythological stories. The genre of animated film in China becomes 'nationalised'.

Characters		1. Ne Zha: active, rough; a popular mythological character in China.	1. Confucius 'yang' masculinity – rugged, energetic; also as a sign of Taoist culture.
		2. Ao Bing: good-looking, modest, restrained; also skilled in martial arts.	2. Confucius 'yin' masculinity – soft, gentle; contemporary male idol traits.
		3. Li Jing: responsible and loyal; Ne Zha's father, also the commander-in-chief of Chengtangguan.	3. Traditional Chinese father – implicit, deep love; a sign of traditional masculinity – protects people and defends the nation.
		4. Lady Yin: caring; Ne Zha's mother, also the general of Chengtangguan.	4. Modern Chinese mother – spoiling children; modern Chinese femininity – heroine, independent career woman.
		5. Barrier Beasts: a pair of guards, whose role is to stop Ne Zha leaving the house.	5. A sign of Buddhist culture.

Appendix 4: Coding Table 2 of the online comments

Colour Coding Scheme:

- Comment
- Perform
} ACGN Nationalism (online)

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories	Sub-subcategories	Descriptive codes (examples)
ACGN Nationalism (online)	Comment	Chinese animation		Hope Chinese animation gets better (6, 20); Root for Chinese animation (*add oil*) (10, 33); It's not that good but still hope Chinese animation can get better (13); Although Chinese animation gets mature, some scenes are still awkward (17); Moulding, voice acting, story board is great, hope it gets better (35)
			'The rise of Chinese animation'	The rise of Chinese animation (29); The light of Chinese animation (4); It's the best, I cried (77); Chinese animation does sit up again (2); Conscientious (21)
		Chineseness	Myth	Ne Zha and Wu Kong （74）
			Religious philosophies	The original work of Ne Zha is very Taoist （45）

				Values	Some scenes are disappeared due to the core values of socialism (53)
				Family roles/relations	Strict dad and caring mum – Chinese family philosophy (65)
				Visual and aural elements	Suona is very Chinese style (7); Shuttlecock kicking is a Chinese symbol (73)
				Americaness or Japaneseness	Although there is still a gap but it's a good beginning (56); Better than Disney - pride (70, 80); Hope it's eastern mythology which is beyond Hollywood's story (50)
	Perform	Grading			Give one extra star because it's domestic made (52); 5 stars for encouragement (60); 4 stars for encouragement (61); One more star for the Chinese animators (68)

Appendix 5: The demographics of the interviewees

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	City
Meng	23	Female	Student	Nanjing
Ou	22	Female	Student	Shijiazhuang
Sheng	20	Male	Video Dubber	Chongqing
Dong	25	Male	Product Manager	Shanghai
Wan	24	Female	Teacher	Quzhou
Feng	19	Male	Student	Xinyang
Ke	27	Female	Animation Practitioner	Liuzhou
Di	26	Female	Student	Jiujiang
Gang	24	Male	Photographer	Foshan
Xing	28	Male	Short Video Director	Beijing
Nian	22	Female	Student	Ganzhou
Cen	32	Male	Internet Operator	Xinyang
Si	28	Female	Finance	Urumchi
Lin	21	Female	Operator	Wuhan

Appendix 6: Interview guide

Topic 1: Viewing Context of Ne Zha

- When, Where and Why did you watch *Ne Zha*?
  - Any reason in relation to 'made in China'?
- How many times have you watched *Ne Zha*?
  - If more than one, why?
- Did you write any film review about *Ne Zha*?, or Did you recommend it to others?
- Have you watched other animated films in the cinema during that period, such as Disney's 'Lion King'?
  - If yes, how did you feel about these films compared to *Ne Zha*? If no, why not?

Topic 2: Viewing Experience of Ne Zha

- Were there any impressive plots in *Ne Zha*?
- Which character(s) did you like, and Why?
- How did you perceive the fact that there are mostly male characters within the animated film?, and How did you find Ne Zha's mother as the main female character?
- How did you feel the background music and the dubbing?

(Are there any Chinese elements embedded in the visuals, sound or plots?)

- Are there any visuals appealed you? How did you feel the special effects used in *Ne Zha*?
- Have you heard of the myth of *Ne Zha* before you watched the animated film? What's your opinion regarding the new story in this adapted film?

Topic 3: Audiences' Perspectives of Chinese Animated Films

- Have you watched other Chinese animated films before *Ne Zha*?, and Did *Ne Zha* change you attitudes towards Chinese animated films?
- How do you view the frequent appearance of Chinese animated films in recent years?
- How do you think of the use of Chinese mythological stories within animated films?
- How do you perceive the opinion, such as 'the rise of Chinese animation', surrounding Chinese animated films in recent years?
  - Do you agree? Why or why not?
  - Do you consider the word 'rise' (in Chinese) in a progressive tense or a perfect tense?

- How do you define 'Chinese animation' within the opinion of 'the rise of Chinese animation'? Do you think it includes both child-oriented and adult-oriented animated films?
  o How do you think of Chinese animated films in comparison with Japanese and American animated films?
    - For example, in terms of production, narratives, visuals, target audiences, etc.
  o How do you define 'Chinese animation' today? Do you think the meaning of 'Chinese animation' has changed?

Do you have anything else to share?

(For one interviewee who created the online group – Topic 4: Fandom)

  o Since when you became a fan of Chinese animation?
  o When and Why did you create the community-based group 'the rise of Chinese animation' online?, and What goals do you want to achieve?
    - Why did you choose this profile photo?, and How did you come up with the nickname 'gatekeeper' given to the group members?
  o How do you operate this group?
    - What do you usually post?
    - How do you recruit those are interested in Chinese animation as group members?
  o Did it bring any influence to your attitudes towards Chinese animation after you created this group?

Appendix 7: A full transcript of one-to-one semi-structured interviews

Interviewee: Dong, 25-year-old, male, product manager, Shanghai
Interviewer: Yunyi

Y: Can you tell me something about your viewing background of *Ne Zha*?

D: I watched *Ne Zha* in the cinema with my girlfriend about a week after *Ne Zha*'s release. I remember there were a lot of screenings of *Ne Zha* during that time. I watched it twice in total. The second time I watched it I was with my family when we were at home. I thought it was a good Chinese animation and I wanted the elders in my family to also watch Chinese animation. I hoped that they could give up their prejudice towards Chinese animation and could stop considering that animation is only for kids. They were reluctant in the beginning because they still can't accept the genre of animation, but they liked it in the end as they eventually found it funny.

Y: Why did you watch it in the cinema? Because it was produced domestically?

D: Yep, if it is domestically made, in the same circumstances, I would first support domestically-made [animation].

Y: I saw your profile photo on Wechat - you are using a poster of *Ne Zha* as your profile. Can you tell me the reason?

D: I'm not a fan, but I do like the film very much. I thought its production process was not easy... I also thought that these two people [Ne Zha and Ao Bing] were very cool. I searched their pictures online after I watched the film and used it as my profile photo. It can be seen as a way of supporting the film, I guess. I changed it once because at that time my girlfriend wanted me to use a couple's profile with her. But eventually she stopped using her couple's profile so I changed back to the one of *Ne Zha*.

Y: Have you posted anything on social media after you watched *Ne Zha*?

D: No, I didn't post anything online; but I discussed it with friends.

Y: Did you also watch Disney's *Lion King* during the same period?

D: No, I usually don't watch foreign films in the cinema - I watch them at home. I only go to the cinema to support Chinese films.

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Y: Any plots in *Ne Zha* that impressed you?

D: I was touched by the plot that Ne Zha's father was willing to sacrifice himself in order to save his son. Another plot that touched me was when Ne Zha was misunderstood by people but he was actually saving the little kid. It reminded me when Naruto [note: the main character in the Japanese animation *Naruto*] was misunderstood. This scene resonated with me.

Y: Which character(s) did you like in *Ne Zha*? Why?

D: I liked Lady Yin - Ne Zha's mother. As a female general, she was very responsible for the people in Chentangguan [note: a town, where the story is set]; as a mother, she also showed her care and love to Ne Zha. Even though she knew Ne Zha was a demon in the beginning, she still decided to raise him. She also kicked a shuttlecock with Ne Zha when she had time. One word that came to my mind when I was watching her was that she was a 'heroine'. I thought she was very responsible, both to other people and to her son. In addition, I also liked the look of Ne Zha after his transformation from a child into an adult - he showed his 'three heads and six arms'. It was very impressive.

Y: Did you think the character of Ne Zha was subversive in this adapted animation?

D: I personally liked this sort of adaptation very much. I think our Chinese culture has profound cultural heritage and there are a lot of traditional, mythological stories that are worth exploring. It is interesting to adapt these mythological stories, otherwise, it would be boring. I think appropriate adaptation is necessary because it can add new meanings to traditional myths. Adaptation is meaningful, both to the production and to the reception.

Y: How about other characters? What's your opinion of them?

D: As to Ao Bing, I thought he was going to have his tendons pulled out [by Ne Zha]... He was such an unsure person in this adapted version. He shouldered a mission given by his clan. He was also a kind person. I actually liked him as well. I thought the original version of *Ne Zha* was very dark and realistic, for example Ao Bing's tendons were pulled out and Ne Zha returned his bones to his father and skin to his mother. These sorts of plots were not suitable to be shown as a film for all ages today. The villains are no longer just bad people - they can be multi-faceted and they have their own hidden stories. I like this way of characterisation. Maybe director Yang had his own thoughts.

Y: Do you think there are any elements within *Ne Zha* which are typical of Chinese animation?

D: The story of Ne Zha is already a Chinese IP. I think Chinese elements are mostly shown in architecture, clothing, and the activity of shuttlecock kicking… Not a lot… The most impressive scene regarding cultural communication is *Your Name*, in which there are female psychics dancing. For me as a foreign audience, I can feel the Japanese culture, and it motivates me to visit Japan when I watch this. But I don't have this feeling when I watch Chinese animation. Maybe this is because I'm Chinese – I don't pay attention to them [Chinese elements].

Y: How about the music in the film? Do you still remember?

D: I'm sorry I don't have a deep memory of the music. I just remember that there is suona horn when Ne Zha fights with Ao Bing. Suona horn might be the most common musical instrument in the film. It has a typical Chinese mark.

Y: Don't worry. How do you view the combination of Chinese mythologies and the genre of animated films?

D: I think we have a rich cultural heritage in our Chinese culture, and it would be a shame if we don't make good use of it. There is a 'marvel series' in America and they create their own heroes. We have a great number of good IPs. It is beneficial for both the production and the reception if we can make use of these IPs. It can also help to export our Chinese culture to the rest of the world. Director Yang also said that he hoped to create our own 'Legend of Deification'. I feel optimistic about this.

Y: Are you excited for the next animated film 'Jiang Ziya'?

D: Very, I will definitely go to the cinema to support it if it has positive reviews.

Y: How do you perceive the special effects in the film?

D: I think the special effects are excellent. For me the special effects in Chinese animation are already very well-done, and can compete with, or even surpass, a lot of excellent Japanese animation. This can be seen in previous domestic animated films, such as *White Snake*, *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, etc. One impressive scene in *Ne Zha* is when four of them [Ne Zha, Ao Bing, Taiyi Zhenren and Shengongbao] fall into the Landscape with Mountains and

Rivers, and have a fight. The scenes are so vivid and the effects are amazing. After watching the film I also had a search online, and knew that Director Yang paid a lot of attention to the special effects. There is a story of the designer who had quit the company and joined another [note: this is because the designer could not stand the strict requirements of the director], but was still found to cooperate with Ne Zha's production team in the end. It shows how rigid Director Yang is, and he really pays attention to the details of the film.

Y: Are you a fan of Director Yang?

D: Not really, I just trust him. I think he's not one of those types of people that produce animation for the purpose of earning profit. I will support his work in the future as long as it's not too bad.

Y: Have you changed your attitude towards Chinese animation after watching *Ne Zha*?

D: I think *Ne Zha* changes Chinese animation a lot, maybe I should say Chinese animation will be changed because of it. Although Chinese animation didn't achieve public praise previously, it has created good works in recent years. I think the distinction between Chinese animation and Japanese animation is in the market, or the target groups. They don't think animation is only for kids – they have broader target groups. Chinese animation is considered a kid's thing in the domestic context. If people start to realise Chinese animation is better than it was in previous years, there will be more capital investment joining in. This can become a virtuous circle. Take my own experience as an example: I used to introduce Chinese animation to my family, and I could not argue if they criticised it; now I recommend them to watch Chinese animation and give reasons in relation to its high box office, and they are willing to give it a try. I think it will have a positive effect on the development of Chinese animation once it has a wider audience.

Y: Did you have different feelings when you watched *Ne Zha*, compared to *Monkey King: Hero is Back*?

D: I think *Ne Zha* is more funny, and its storytelling is more complete; the plot of *Monkey King* is a bit chaotic. *Ne Zha* is more progressive.

Y: How do you consider the opinion of 'the rise of Chinese animation'? Do you agree with it?

D: For me Chinese animation is rising – it is getting better, although there is still a gap between Chinese animation and Japanese animation. This situation is similar to the game industry. I remember we were left behind in the League of Legends Championship by Korea – it was not easy to win. But we eventually surpassed them in the end. This was largely because there was a lot of investment and willingness to participate and a lot of people willing to pay attention to it. So I think Chinese animation will get better eventually, and even surpass Japanese animation. We have such a big market. If the audience is willing to accept it [Chinese animation] and the investment can join in, I think Chinese animation will surpass Japanese animation in the end. I don't think Chinese animation has risen now, as I can feel the large gap in between. But it is getting better and will surpass Japanese animation in one day.

Y: How do you view 'Chinese animation' within the opinion of 'the rise of Chinese animation'? Do you think it only refers to adult-oriented Chinese animation? Or does it include child-oriented Chinese animation?

D: I think this is regarding the discursive power. Children do not participate in the online discussion of Chinese animation. We, the young people, are the ones discussing this, so we are of course the ones who wield the power. The 'Chinese animation' we are discussing are mainly *Ne Zha*, *Monkey King*, etc., therefore this does not include child-oriented Chinese animation such as *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* and *Boonie Bears*.

Y: How do you define 'Chinese animation' today? And what kind of development do you expect it to have in the future?

D: I hope it can achieve the final goal: all flowers blossom together – it can have various themes and types. However, in the process of developing towards this goal, I also hope that it can combine traditional culture and animation, and create our own 'Legend of Deification'. I hope it [Chinese animation] can attract more audiences in the short term, and can include various sub-genres, as Japanese animation does, in the long term. For now it can try to explore xianxia and wuxia styles and mythologies.

Y: Thank you for sharing your opinions! Do you have anything else to add?

D: Now the young generation accept animation more easily than the old generation, because it is the stuff that our generation likes. The young generation has their economic foundation and their own discursive power, which is also an important reason for the opinion 'the rise of

Chinese animation'. For example, the popularity of *Ne Zha* in the beginning was due to some fan videos posted on Weibo or Bilibili. This brought a lot of positive impressions towards *Ne Zha*, and a lot of people went to the cinema to watch it. I think during this process the Internet played an important role in motivating the audience. Also, we, the young generation, are the active ones on the Internet. We use our own way and our own strength to promote the film and attract more audiences. 'The rise of Chinese animation' is a certain event, and *Ne Zha* is an accidental event. I still think Chinese animation should make good use of its traditional IPs, because using new IPs may cost a lot as it needs to build a fan base.
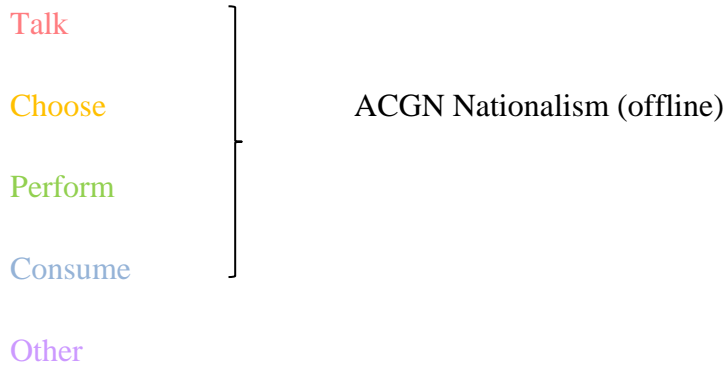
Y: Do you think Chinese animation will shift from subculture to main culture?

D: It is entirely possible. We used to think that playing basketball was not promising, whilst more people were involved after the market became standardised. Now the game industry is the same – it holds competitions, creates champions, and is eventually stepping into the public's life. So I think animation is entirely possible. Chinese animation is lacking high-quality works, but it will get better once more people get involved. So it has the possibility to become main culture rather than subculture or low culture. We used to have stereotypes towards Chinese animation because we thought it was just for kids – it indeed told stories for kids at that time. But there will be more thoughtful, high-quality works produced in the future. With the support of the young generation, I think it will develop as a national industry. For me this genre has no difference to live action films. It will grow better and become the main culture after the market is standardised. It would also be easier than the game industry, I think.

Y: Thank you so much for your participation!

Appendix 8: Coding Table 3 of one-to-one semi-structured interviews

Colour Coding Scheme:

Talk

Choose

Perform ⎤ ACGN Nationalism (offline)

Consume ⎦

Other

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories	Sub-subcategories	Descriptive codes (examples)
ACGN Nationalism (offline)	Talk	Chinese animation		Now I can introduce Chinese animation to other people (2); As a Chinese I am more tolerant (2); Children-oriented animated films are also becoming better (9); It's for our generation that we must go to cinema to watch it (11)
			'The rise of Chinese animation'	'Rise' should be a verb（1, 3, 6）; 'Rise' doesn't include children-oriented animation（1, 2, 4, 6）; It is 'rising' instead of 'has risen' (2, 5, 11); *Ne Zha* is a good beginning of Chinese animated films (3); *Monkey King* is the beginner of 'the rise of Chinese

				animation' (7, 13); High quality Chinese animation is needed (10); Discursive power from the youth (4); Internet (4); The 'rise' is from the era of Shanghai Fine Art Film Studio (9)
			Japanese/American animation	Hope Chinese animation can be successful as Japanese animation (2, 4); Hope they can compete in a benign way (2); Their [Japanese] values are good (5); Japanese animation brings reflexivity, while Chinese animation is still considered simply for children (8)
		Chineseness	Myth	Three heads and six arms (4,5); Remember the story of Ne Zha – spear, wheels, belt (6)
			Family roles/relations	Li Jing is a traditional Chinese father (3,8, 12); Li Jing is a Chinese parent (7, 11); Cried when watching the scene of Ne Zha and his dad (5); It reflects the issue of companion (3,5,9); Ao Bing and his clan are in a very Chinese style (7,13)
			Religious philosophy	Reverence, filial piety (5)

			Gender	Lady Yin is very cool and like a modern woman（7,11）; CP (11)
			Visual and aural elements	Shuttlecock kicking （4）; Dragon （5）; Red belly band （11）
		A sense of 'we'		Hope to see our animation (1); We have a rich cultural heritage (4); Japanese animation is the best but still support ours (6); They have marvel and we should have ours (5); They are better than us in terms of animation (13)
	Choose	Habit		It's a habit (1)
		Taste		Prefer Japanese anime, but still hope Chinese animation can get better (8)
		Childhood		I spent my childhood watching Japanese animation (5); Liked watching animation in childhood (2)
	Perform	Fandom	'The rise of Chinese animation' online group	No place to discuss the animation (2); Will always support Chinese animation and animators (2) ; Hope to help to support the production of Chinese animation (2)
			Profile photo	Use Ne Zha as their profile photos (4,13)

				The 11th year of supporting Chinese animation (14)
Consume	Cinema			Watched it with friends in a pre-screening (2); Always support Chinese animation in cinemas (10); Support it because it is domestic (4)
		Re-watch		Watched it twice (5, 13); Wanted to contribute to the box office (13)
	Home			Invited the elders to watch *Ne Zha* (4)
Other	Animation			It's utopian (1)
	Details of *Ne Zha*			Ao Bing is handsome (2,5,7); CP fans (13); Trust the director(4); Look forward to 'The Legend of Deification' (5); The production team has a spirit of craftsmanship (5,12)
	Career			Wanted to be an animator be can't meet the requirement (10)

Appendix 9: Consent form

Consent Form

Research Project: The Myth of ACGN Nationalism in China

Researcher: Yunyi Liao

This research is conducted under the module of master's thesis in MSc Media and Communication at Lund University, Sweden. It aims to investigate nationalistic elements embedded in, and national sensibilities surrounding, Chinese animated films. This interview hopes to explore the latter: audiences' viewing contexts, experiences, and perspectives of Chinese animated films, through using *Ne Zha* as a case.

The interview will last for around one hour. The researcher would like to record the interview and use the dialogue in the thesis. The interview will be recorded only with your written consent. Please feel free to say as much or as little as you want. You can decide not to answer any question, or to stop the interview any time you want.

Your identity will always be protected and a pseudonym will be given to guarantee the confidentiality. The data will only be used for research purposes. If you agree to participate in this interview, please fill in your information and sign your name below.

(□ If you agree with the use of your information posted on social media, please tick the box.)
(□ If you want your real name to be used instead and realise that this may be identified, please tick the box.)

Name _____   Age _____

Gender _____   Job _____

City _____ Email Address _____

Signature _____   Date _____