

Article

Mediatization of Religion and Its Impact on Youth Identity Formation in Contemporary China

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Abstract: In response to the trend of information technology development, religions in China are undergoing a process of mediatization. This study takes the popular Chinese animated films *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* (哪吒之魔童降世) (2019) and *New Gods: Yang Jian* (新神榜: 杨戬) (2022) as research cases of mediatization of religion and conducts a focused study of the respective protagonists Ne Zha (哪吒) and Yang Jian (杨戬), both prominent figures in Chinese religious and folk traditions. Through text analysis and empirical research on the two movies and their fans, this study examines how religion is being mediatized in contemporary China in the transformation to Religion 2.0 or a type of amalgamation of real- and virtual-world practices that enact a relationship with the divine, and how this shapes identity formation for fans, who are mostly young individuals in their teens and twenties. This research argues that to obtain permission for dissemination in mainstream media and thrive in the cultural context of China, religion chooses to assume the form of media products that can bypass scrutiny that forbids “supernatural phenomena” and aligns with the mainstream ideology. It has to be a “contributory religion” that contributes to the “revitalization” of national spirit and inherited Chinese culture, not a potential “superstitious” threat to the Marxist orthodoxy. In the context of official promotion of atheism and the regulation of public discourse, animated films with themes adapted from traditional mythological and religious stories, such as *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*, have become a major cultural form through which people in China engage with religious symbols and narratives. The enormous success of the two movies resulted in a large population of young fans. Influenced by these films, their fans have developed an egoistic religious perspective rather than assimilating the religious or cultural messages contained in the movies. These fans may experience solace and a call to faith to some extent in their consumption of the movies, but they selectively enhance religious literacy that only meets their personal needs. Interest in divine individuals far outweighs interest in or loyalty to the religious doctrine or sect itself. Pilgrimages are undertaken to fulfill personal fantasies, and the promotion of the divine is aimed at vying for influence within fan communities. The second part of this study examines the activities of the fans that I argue are characteristic of the age of Religion 2.0.

Keywords: mediatization of religion; modern religion; animated movies; fan community; youth identity



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1. Introduction

China boasts a rich religious history. As early as the Paleolithic era, concepts of the soul and the desire for an afterlife were formed, and witchcraft rituals began to be depicted in Rock Art (Zhuo 2024). During the spring and autumn (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States Periods (475–221 BCE), primitive religions evolved to become specialized knowledge and started to separate from common social and cultural life. Religions, such as Taoism (道教), Yin–Yang (阴阳家), and believers in immortals (神仙家), which advocated beliefs of nature and spirits, emerged. During the subsequent Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE) and the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), Buddhism and Islam were introduced to China, enriching the religious landscape. By the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), religion

was deeply intertwined with the daily life of the Chinese people, forming a religious ecology characterized by a blend of Buddhism and Taoism and the worship of many gods (Li 2023), and its richness was described by a contemporary as “the most complicated religion of the gods” (中国之宗教实最复杂之神教也) (Critique of Religious Issues in China 1907).

However, since the late 1950s, with the onset of the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957) and the Great Leap Forward Movement (1958–1960), religions in China came under hostile scrutiny. Religions were perceived as a system of exploitation that should be abolished because they have lost the “basis for survival in a socialist society” (Luo 1991, p. 14). During the subsequent Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), religions were further categorized as the “four olds” (四旧) (old beliefs, customs, traditions, and thought) that needed to be eradicated for the sake of communism. During this period, religious sites were vandalized, religious activities were halted, and clergy were disbanded (Ashiwa and Wank 2009).

Although the Communist Party of China (CPC) re-acknowledged the legitimacy of religion after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and established new religious institutions in the central government while rebuilding and restoring religious sites, they also imposed stricter restrictions on religion in China (Ashiwa and Wank 2009; Leung 2018). Only when approved by and registered with the government are religions considered officially recognized. Even recognized religions must submit a report every time they hold a religious activity, change their religious sites, or interact with other religions, or they risk punishment and even elimination. Religion must be practiced with caution so as not to be deemed superstition. Historian Vincent Goossaert (2005) notes that Chinese authorities grant religious status selectively. First, religions must be placed under the control of the Chinese government and must not interfere in politics. Second, religious teachings must align with socialist ideology. Finally, religions must serve the interests of the party. If any of these three criteria are not met, religion tends to be viewed as heresy and targeted for elimination.

Strong government control of religion has shaped academic research on religion, resulting in a lack of attention to present-day religious changes in China and the social impact these changes generated. Despite a recent increase in research papers on Chinese religions, most studies have either confined their scope to the period before the 21st century (Goossaert 2006; Ter Haar 2021), focused on China’s religious policies (Yang 2011), or concentrated on regional folk religions (Dean 2003; Lipman 2011). This study explores the mediatization of religion as one of the most recent religious transformations in contemporary China and investigates its impact on young people’s self-perceptions. The term “mediatization of religion” refers to the process whereby religious practices, beliefs, and institutions are increasingly influenced, shaped, or transformed by media technologies and communication processes (Plate 2003; Schultze 2003). In the Western context, starting in the 1990s, the mediatization of religion has been a prominent topic for academic research. This trend coincided with the emergence of fantasy television series, such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1964) and *The Outer Limits* (1963–1965), as well as fantasy TV shows like *Ghost Whisperer* (2005–) and *Fringe* (2008–). In this context, Stig Hjarvard (2008), a professor of media studies in Denmark, proposed the concept “banal religion”, suggesting that media makes religion this-worldly and mundane, quietly integrating it into secular life. Hjarvard’s concept, which references the situation in the five Nordic countries, has been widely cited as an appropriate response to the complex relationship between religion and contemporary society.

It is questionable, however, if the concept of “banal religion” is directly applicable to modern China, which has a very different political environment. Since China’s reform and opening up started in the 1980s, any media symbols directly or indirectly associated with religion (e.g., Taoist priests, temples, monks, crosses, ghosts, and prayers) are subject to censorship, and most do not pass. Since 2014, China’s mainstream media has banned films and dramas with more explicit religious content, such as ghost movies and time travel dramas (Min.news 2023).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that religion in China cannot be mediatized. Similar to the Nordic countries, China has (1) a mainstream media that has a non-faith-based orientation, and media having a strong faith-based orientation is rarely used; (2) a mainstream public media which functions as a means of engagement with religious symbols and narratives when direct interaction between the population and religious institutions has been low; (3) the presence of explicitly identifiable religious institutions (e.g., Protestant churches); and (4) a high degree of secularization at societal, organizational, and individual levels (Lynch 2011, p. 205). Indeed, in China, as in the Nordic countries, the media can serve as “conduits” for disseminating religious texts, expressing religious ideas and sentiments, and assisting in the formation of connections between religion and society, thereby contributing to the creation and transformation of cultural communities (Hjarvard 2012). However, in the unique cultural context of China, the mediatization of religion requires greater caution and discretion on the part of religion.

The animated films *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019) and *New Gods: Yang Jian* (2022) are the most recent exemplary works in the mediatization of religion in China. On one hand, the protagonists of these two animated films, Ne Zha and Yang Jian, have profound religious backgrounds. Ne Zha, a deity originating from the Buddhist sectarian tradition of Tantrayana (密宗), has the Sanskrit name Nalakuvara or Nalakubala. It is believed to have a direct connection with Vaisravana (毗沙门天王). As cultural the inter-fertilization of Buddhism and Taoism proceeded, Taoism adopted the Ne Zha character from Buddhism as part of its deity-making process. Consequently, Ne Zha entered the Taoist system, bearing such titles as the “Prince Ne Zha of the Central Altar” (中坛元帅太子爷) and the “Great Heavenly Lord of the Central Altar” (中坛元帅大天尊). His divine birthday is settled and celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. A “Ne Zha worship” (Bai 2021; Shahr 2015) has been passed down from generations in the southeastern coastal regions of China, such as Fujian.

Yang Jian, also known as Erlang Shen (二郎神) or Guankou Erlang (灌口二郎), is a deity in ancient Chinese folk beliefs and also a Taoist deity with the title “Qingyuan Miao Dao Zhen Jun” (清源妙道真君). According to research by Chinese scholars, the worship of Yang Jian originated in the Tang Dynasty and underwent significant development during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) through a series of promotions by Taoists and the Song imperial government. The scale of worship expanded from being primarily concentrated in the Sichuan region to the entire country. Furthermore, his power evolved from a singular prevention of floods to a more general blessing to drive away disasters and protect the land (Cheng 2013). Both characters, Ne Zha and Yang Jian, belong to religious figures who “possess a special status, authority and divine power in a certain religious system, and play an important role in guiding religious practices”.

On the other hand, these two animated films received acclaim and praise from People’s Daily and Guangming Daily, mainstream media functioning as mouthpieces of the CPC. Having grossed USD 742.7 million and USD 82 million at the box office, they have aroused curiosity among Chinese young people about religious tradition and knowledge, initiating a trend of pilgrimage to three sites related to the two deities: the Ne Zha Temple (哪吒庙), a temple in Macau which is dedicated to the deity and has long been a major tourist attraction in China, the Jinguangdong Cave on Qianyuan Mountain (乾元山金光洞) in Jiangyou City, Sichuan Province (the cave being a Taoist holy site where reputedly Ne Zha’s teacher Taiyi Zhenren (太乙真人) had practiced cultivation), and the Erlang Temple (二郎庙), a Taoist temple located in Pingyao, China, and dedicated to Erlang Shen, i.e., Yang Jian.

As such, this study aims to address the lacuna in the existing literature on the mediatization of religion in China by examining these two animated films and the impact on their fan communities. It focuses on exploring the following questions: Why could *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian* gain recognition from official media and the general public, particularly at a time when official cultural institutions have been stringent in their scrutiny of media of religious content? How do Chinese literary and artistic

creators navigate censorship and handle religious texts and representation? Lastly, in the context of mainstream ideological engineering of public media, what types of religiously informed views and identities have these films helped to generate in contemporary Chinese youth?

2. Methodology

This study employs a dual-pronged research methodology. Firstly, it conducts a textual analysis of two animated films, *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*. This analysis encompasses not only elements directly pertinent to the works, such as titles, theme songs, character settings, and narrative techniques, but also “extra-textual” components such as promotion methods and director interviews. Secondly, this study undertakes a six-month online ethnography of the two movies. In recent years, the method of online ethnography has gained recognition among religious scholars, who believe it can help transcend temporal and spatial barriers in research and aid in discerning the distinctions between online religion, cyberspace activities, and traditional religious life and practice (Shmushko 2023, p. 68). And, as suggested by Hine (2013, p. 8), our knowledge of the Internet as a cultural context is intrinsically tied up with the application of ethnography. This methodology is particularly relevant to the audience that enjoyed these two animated films and is eager to discuss their interests and experiences on Internet social platforms. The initial observation period spans from July 2019 to March 2020, followed by a second phase from August 2022 to February 2023. Throughout these periods, the author conducted participant observation as an academic fan (aca-fan) and actively participated in the fan community. An aca-fan is a hybrid entity that integrates both fan and scholarly aspects, thereby bridging the gap between these two fields (Jenkins 2023). The method of participant observation includes analysis of fan statements and discussions on personal accounts, the content on the anime movies’ official Weibo account (Weibo, also known as Sina Weibo, is the largest online social platform in China analogous to Facebook or Twitter), and super topics on Weibo. The “Super Topics” feature on Sina Weibo allows users to congregate under a shared topic for communication, discussion, and content sharing. Weibo Super Topics serve as the primary online meeting place for fans.

3. Films Analyzed: *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*

While *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian* were directed by different directors and were made by different film companies, their protagonists are closely connected with archetypal characters in Chinese religious traditions. They also share the media form and modes of articulation of ideas that helped them avoid being caught in censorship.

3.1. Animation as Medium: An Effective Way to Circumvent Censorship

As I explained in the Introduction, literary and artistic works containing supernatural elements have encountered stringent censorship and restriction in recent years in China. Between March and October 2019, China’s State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) (广电总局) issued a directive “restricting ancient costumes”, effectively prohibiting all films and TV dramas set in ancient times, regardless of genres, whether it is wuxia (武侠), fantasy (玄幻), history (历史), or myths (神话), time-travel (穿越), and biographies (传记) (Sohu 2019). Significantly, however, animation in China has enjoyed a type of special treatment by the government, which sees it as a unique medium for education and propaganda. In the 1950s, when the nascent Shanghai Animation Film Studio (上海美术电影制片厂) was just beginning to develop, its staff adhered to the Communist Party’s directive that “animation should serve our children”, and underscored “imagination” and “hypotheticality” (Chen 2021) as the artistic bedrock of Chinese animation, so as to assist the Communist Party’s rule by shaping a population obedient to the prevailing ideology from an early age. From the 1950s to the 1980s, when the Shanghai Animation Film Studio monopolized Chinese animation production, the emphasis was on fairy tales,

myths, and other fantastical themes. Te (1984), the film studio head, made it clear that the studio would prioritize well-known and popular myths and folklore in its selection of animation script stories.

Even in the aftermath of the decline of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio in the 1990s resulting from China’s economic reforms and social changes, the foundational concept that animation should encourage imagination liberated from the constraints of reality and pursue romantic fantasies continued to dominate Chinese animation creation. According to SARFT’s animation records from 2008 to 2022, realistic themes, on average, comprise only about 10% of all production, while mythological and fairy tale themes—openly expressing supernatural phenomena—constitute a significant proportion (Table 1). Given that “myths are potentially religious from the very beginning” (Cassirer 2023, p. 24), the particular Chinese animation production style has provided a solid basis for the successful inspection and widespread dissemination of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of themes registered with the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television in Chinese animation from 2008 to 2022.

Years	Fairy Tales	Educational Themes	Realistic Themes	Historical Themes	Mythological Themes	Science Fiction	Specialized Themes (Encompass Cultural and Adventure Themes)	Other Themes
2008	24	26	11	7	14	11	0	8
2009	32	28	11	7	7	7	0	9
2010	35	24	6	9	6	12	0	9
2011	43	20	9	9	6	12	0	10
2012	45	23	7	10	2	3	0	10
2013	49	24	8	31	2	3	0	5
2014	53	16	10	8	1	5	0	8
2015	45	19	6	8	3	3	0	9
2016	50	16	6	9	0	7	0	12
2017	50	12	10	9	6	6	1	6
2018	49	16	8	5	5	11	0	6
2019	46	22	6	4	3	11	0	8
2020	36	32	7	3	1	11	0	10
2021	40	24	5	4	1	12	2	12
2022	49	14	9	5	0	8	12	2

Moreover, owing to its entertainment nature and “the ability to present information in a unique and captivating manner” (Jailani et al. 2023), animation possesses a distinct advantage in expressing religious culture and disseminating doctrinal teachings, as affirmed by the studies of Jailani et al. (2023) and Thomas (2012). This explains why in the history of Chinese film and television, there have been live-action television series and movies adapted from *Investiture of the Gods*, yet they have failed to cultivate a fan base with religious fervor and a trend of “pilgrimage” akin to that created by *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*.

3.2. Cultural Significance: Contributing to the Promotion of Chinese Culture

Apart from the animation form, both *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*, while centering on native religions that embody Chinese spiritual values, align themselves strongly with the principle of giving without expecting returns. This commitment is not confined to textual creations but is also evident in their promotional efforts, leaving no room for doubt regarding their dedication to promoting mainstream ideology in China. Yang Yu, the director of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child*, highlighted in an interview that the paramount goal of artistic works lies in serving the current audience and promoting the values of the times (Guangming Daily 2019). Similarly, Zhao Ji, the director

of *New Gods: Yang Jian*, has consistently underscored in public statements that his creative work serves as a means of “telling Chinese stories in the style of Chinese culture” (Qianjiang Evening News 2022). Their unified stance has received acknowledgment and support from mainstream Chinese media, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Excerpts from headlines of Chinese mainstream media reports on *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*.

Name of Newspaper	Type	Headlines and Dates of Coverage
Guangming Daily	Sponsored by the Communist Party of China	Summer Film and Television Lineup: Traditional Culture Takes the Spotlight (暑期档影视: 传统文化唱主角) (23 August 2019)
		Epic Chinese Films Boost National Spirit (“中国式大片”提振民族精神) (18 October 2019)
		Crafting Cinematic Masterpieces with Chinese Stories (用中国故事构筑电影精品) (21 November 2019)
		Traditional Culture Infuses Animated Films with Unique Charm (传统文化赋予动画电影独特魅力) (1 September 2021)
		The Rise of New Chinese Style Animation Films Ignites Fad of Traditional Culture (新国潮电影带火传统文化) (30 August 2023)
People’s Daily	The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China’s Organizational Newspaper	Domestic Animated Films with a Stronger Chinese Flavor (国产动画片更有中国味) (15 August 2019)
		Innovative Animated Films Showcasing Chinese Culture (动画电影创新展示中华文化) (22 September 2023)

In fact, the principle of giving without expecting returns is not only a virtue consistently promoted by mainstream ideology in China but also a crucial factor that has sustained religions. During the Republican era (1911–1949), China initiated reforms in religious policies, with guidelines that have been adhered to by both the Nationalist Party (KMT) and the CPC. These policies explicitly stipulate that any religion seeking state recognition—whether it be Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, or Taoism—must meet three basic criteria: religion must provide ethical and spiritual principles to the society, possess a well-organized administrative structure under the format of national association, and be “patriotic and contributing to social welfare and progress” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p. 58). This means the existence of religion in China is predicated on its demonstrated contribution to the nation and people, while not expecting returns from the state. In other words, only religions perceived as beneficial to the ruling party have a chance for sustained development.

Taoism was undoubtedly one of the ethnic religions that quickly understood the need to reinvent itself to fit in with China’s modernization process under the CPC rule. In 2011, the China Taoist Association produced a text entitled *Taoism Patriotic Tutorial* (道教爱国主义教程) and was inspected by Taoist scholars and the State Administration for Religious Affairs for use as a textbook in political thought and theory courses in religious colleges and universities across the country. This text shows what the state, the government, and the academic community demand from Taoism and how Taoism has responded to this demand. One chapter of this text is specifically named “Taoism’s Contribution to Chinese Culture” (道教对中国文化的贡献). In this chapter, the Taoist Association deftly employs a discursive technique by defining religious practices, such as rituals, meditations, runes, and incantations, as “art”, thereby moving religious activities from the realm of the sacred to the secular realm of literature and art. It, furthermore, classifies literature, music, art, and architecture related to Taoism as cultural resources of the entire Chinese nation, so as to prove Taoism’s patriotic contribution to strengthening Chinese culture. Through this process of secularization, Taoism has successfully transformed what was previously vilified as “superstition” into the “cultural heritage” (文化遗产) and “intangible heritage”

(非物质文化遗产) of the Chinese nation (Hsieh 2017). Buddhism also caters to the Chinese government's definition of "Buddhism as culture" (Shmushko 2022, p. 120). Various large Buddhist websites provide coverage of Chinese Buddhist temples and cultural events, as well as carrying articles on "Buddhism as culture" (focusing on architecture, music, and the tea ceremony) (Ashiwa and Wank 2020).

Like their predecessors, by subtly integrating religious concepts and values into broader "Chinese culture", *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian* achieved the implicit mediatization of religion, with religious elements transformed into benign embellishments of the media form (i.e., film). Under their efforts, even China's official government media no longer avoids discussing the religious elements in these two films. For instance, the People's Daily specifically queried the English translation of the Taoist mantra "fast biu" (急急如律令) on its official Weibo account (Figure 1).



People's Daily:

Let's brainstorm together: How to translate "Fast biu"? After 20 days in theaters, "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" has surpassed 4 billion yuan at the box office, ranking fourth in Chinese film history! Next, the film will be released successively in North America and Australia. How can various plot elements in the movie be translated to make sense to foreign audiences? Participate in the #Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child Dialogue Translation Contest# by sharing and forwarding!

Figure 1. Screenshot of the People's Daily's Weibo statement inviting followers to participate in the English translation of Chinese lines from *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child*. Source: Sina Weibo.

To some extent, this case of religious mediatization can be viewed as an expansion of the concept "banal religion" discussed by Hjarvard. In China, only by changing itself into a "dedicated religion" that is aligned with mainstream Chinese ideology can it navigate censorship smoothly and enter market and social circulation.

4. Religion 2.0: Ne Zha, Yang Jian, and Their Fans

In the context of the intersection of modernity and religion, contemporary studies on religion have undergone a transformation. Scholars of modern religion, as exemplified by Yves Lambert (1999), no longer perceive religion merely as practices associated with tradition or belief. Instead, they increasingly regard it as a specific type of reason, a type of experience, and a framework that exists both visibly and invisibly in diverse cultural backgrounds. Within this framework, "fans" are considered illustrative examples, demonstrating how popular culture influences individuals' belief structures. For instance, Jindra (1994) discovered, through ethnographic exploration of *Star Trek* fans, that the global fan

communities and networks created by the *Star Trek* franchise can serve a “sect-like function”. The organization of “*Star Trek* conventions” allows fans to deeply immerse themselves in the *Star Trek* experience, which resembles that of religious rituals. Consequently, *Star Trek* fans resemble the definition of a religion, characterized by an organized, dogmatic structure, a low-key recruitment system, and a canonical work. Fellow *Star Trek* scholars, Jennifer Porter (2004) and Laura Ammon (2014), corroborated this perspective with their respective research.

In addition to *Star Trek*, research on fan communities of popular cultural phenomena, such as *Star Wars* (Lyden 2012), *Harry Potter* (Neumann 2006), and *My Little Pony* (Crome 2014), has uncovered similarities between the loyalty, devotion, love, and prayer-like expressions that these fans show to their beloved works, on the one hand, and religious believers’ love for God on the other. Fan communities fulfill functions analogous to those associated with religion. As argued by Cusack and Pavol (2016, pp. 91–92), fan communities are “implicitly religious”, capable of providing the same psychological, communal, and ritualistic services as religions to their members. Furthermore, fan practices can effectively promote religious literacy. Through a shared set of symbols, contexts, and roles, fan communities equip fans with tools to enhance religious literacy, engage in theological speculation, and explore teaching in scriptures (Crome 2014, p. 413).

Ess and Cheong (2012), Mercer and Trothen (2021), and other scholars summarize the religious practices of media fans as “religion 2.0”. They argue that unlike the “religion 1.0” generation, which relied on offline churches to spread doctrine and grow followers, “religion 2.0” refers to how religious traditions interact with “the multiple affordances and possibilities of computer-mediated communication, most especially those affiliated with Web 2.0” (Ess and Cheong 2012, p. 2). Web 2.0 includes social media, such as social networking sites (Facebook), blogs and microblogs (X), sites featuring user-generated content (YouTube and Wikipedia), and virtual worlds and online games (*Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*) (Ess and Cheong 2012, p. 2). Religion 2.0 by and large represents an amalgamation and assemblage of real- and virtual-world practices. To some extent, religion 2.0 has ostensibly ushered in a new age of radical individualism (Ess and Cheong 2012, p. 2).

This definition of Religion 2.0 fits with the behavior of fans of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*. Although *Ne Zha* and *Yang Jian* in *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian* were adaptations, they can still be seen as religious characters, despite undergoing certain secularization, rather than fictional characters that fans need to conjure up. Crucially, they retain their names and key story settings. Hence, fans’ fervent adoration of these two characters involves both an emotional investment in the fictional characters and a veneration of them as religious symbols. This dual nature of worship is interwoven in their behaviors and perceptions, elevating their following beyond a mere love for the characters to an in-depth religious experience.

According to a 2017 survey conducted by the Chinese research organization “iResearch” (iResearch 2017), the main audience for Chinese animation predominantly comprises individuals born between 1990 and 2000, representing China’s younger generation. Consequently, in the observation of the fan bases of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*, these audiences could also serve as samples that reveal the distinctive characteristics of contemporary Chinese young people in terms of their religious beliefs.

Chinese scholars Lu and Sheng (2023) conducted a survey on contemporary Chinese beliefs using a religious measurement approach. In their Chinese household-tracking survey, they employed two sets of measurement schemes simultaneously. One scheme focused on inquiring about religious sects, while the other inquired about specific deities worshipped. The study found that the deity-based measurement scheme was superior to the sect-based one. In other words, the majority of contemporary Chinese people are primarily concerned with the specific deities they believe in while showing less interest in their religious affiliation and rarely joining any religious organization.

This religious practice, based on deities rather than sectarian affiliation, is also seen in the fans’ online activities about the two movies. Although a large number of posts exam-

ining and popularizing religious culture related to the two movies appeared on Chinese social media platforms such as Sina Weibo and LOFTER (a Chinese fanfiction publishing and communication platform developed by NetEase Corporation), when the two animated films were on show, these posts are concerned mostly with the content of the films rather than the systematic explanation of religious doctrine or culture (Figure 2). Furthermore, fans identify themselves only in relation to individual religious figures, such as “female believer of the deity Qingyuan MiaoDao Zhen Jun” (清源妙道真君信女) and “female believer of the Prince Ne Zha of the Central Altar’s” (中坛元帅信女). They are not interested in exploring the values and doctrines represented by these figures.



User:

Many people have asked me about the inscription on Yang Jian's teacher Yu Ding's sword. Let me zoom in for everyone. It is written in Taoism as "Blessed Life Infinite Heavenly Sovereign," arranged in accordance with the order of hexagrams.

Figure 2. Screenshot of a fan's post on the Super Topic for *New Gods: Yang Jian*. In this post, the fan utilizes Taoist knowledge to interpret the meaning of the words and lines on the sword of Yang Jian (Yang Jian's teacher). Source: Sina Weibo.

An exploration of the Chinese term *xinnü* 信女, used by fans to refer to themselves as believers, shows the fans' interests do not go beyond the religious figures themselves. The use of the term *xinnü* 信女 by the fans is actually inaccurate. *xinnü* primarily refers to women who follow Buddhism. This term is not used in Taoism. In Taoism, ordinary believers are commonly referred to as “virtuous believers” (善信), those who have taken refuge are called “Taoist citizens” (道民), and those formally initiated into practice are known as “Taoist disciples” (道童). There is no specific designation equivalent to *xinnü* 信女 in Taoism. This confusion in terminology indicates fans' selective cultivation of religious literacy and lack of interest in sectarian distinction and doctrinal knowledge. To a certain extent, this tendency in venerating individual deities can be understood as an egoistic religious attitude, in contrast to the altruism religions often promote (Grant 2000). That is, when it comes to religion, Chinese young people tend to use it to express individualistic attitudes (Taylor 2007, p. 299), where they pick and choose only the elements that suit their personal interests rather than seeking to improve their religious understanding. This tendency is

also evident in fans' pilgrimage, their reshaping of divine figures, and their views of divine power.

4.1. Pilgrimage Journey: Dating with My Idol Deity

Pilgrimage has long been an essential component of religion, playing a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of individual and group religious identities (Olsen 2012a). Studies of Western religions have traditionally recognized pilgrimage as a practice that revitalizes religious devotion and affiliation (Frijhoff 2002). During a pilgrimage, believers can satisfy their curiosity, worship, purify, heal, educate themselves, and affirm their religious identity (Morinis 1992). In the Chinese context, traditional pilgrimage tends to involve "Chao Shan" (朝山), which refers to an audience with the sacred, and "Jin Xiang" (进香), often referring to pilgrimage processions, in which an effigy of a deity is carried on a circular route among temples (Bingenheimer 2016, p. 30). The motivations of pilgrims in China are relatively diverse, but there are similarities between Chinese and Western pilgrims (Naquin and Yü 1992).

With the advent of postmodern culture, the boundaries between the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane, and the private and the public have become increasingly blurred (Knoblauch 2008). This shift has also redefined the concept and practice of pilgrimage. Fans now commonly refer to their visits to celebrity birthplaces, tombstones, home addresses, landmarks depicted in popular works, and specific filming locations as pilgrimages. Many researchers argue that, akin to traditional religious pilgrimages, fans reaffirm their identities by traveling to these sacred places, thereby eliciting an emotional response (Olsen 2012b). Consequently, fan pilgrimages based on popular texts or celebrities are often categorized as part of "secular pilgrimage" (Bickerdike 2015).

While fan pilgrimage sites are typically distinct from traditional religious sites, there is an overlap in the case of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*. This overlap results in a unique form of fan pilgrimage, distinct from both traditional religious pilgrimages and ordinary fan pilgrimages. According to Doss (2008), the primary difference between fan pilgrimages and traditional religious pilgrimages lies in the selection of sacred sites. Unlike religious institutions, fans create their own sacred sites by attributing meaning produced in media works to a particular site or place, thereby authenticating it. For instance, fans may consider a subway entrance where a work advertisement was once displayed to be a shrine (Jang 2020), or they may, based on their own extent of accessibility and emotional needs, deem the location of a celebrity's statue to be more qualified as a shrine than the site of his grave (Margry 2008). However, in the case of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*, because of the established associations of the archetypal figures with particular sites and places, fans have to forfeit their choice in "authentication" and forgo the opportunity to "create their personally authenticated site of pilgrimage" by performing physical acts, such as cosplay, dance, role-playing, and special actions, at those sites (Jang 2020). Religious institutions in China have established strict rules for access to religious sites, and any visitor deemed to be behaving unusually or not conforming to mainstream values will be banned from accessing them.

In this context, the pilgrimage of the fans of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian* becomes a complex practice. To avoid suspicion from the clergy and potential expulsion for irreverence, these fans disguise themselves as devout believers, abiding by traditional religious norms during their pilgrimage. However, upon returning to their social media platforms and when interacting with fellow pilgrims, they start to freely express their intentions and feelings.

In the fan community of *New Gods: Yang Jian*, there is a female fan who is deeply committed to pilgrimage. Since the film's release in August 2022, she has embarked on many pilgrimage journeys, which is continuing as of November 2023. The sacred places she has visited include Erlangshen Cultural Relics Park in Guannan County of Jiangsu province in Eastern China (连云港灌南县二郎神文化遗迹公园), Dujiangyan Ancestral Hall in Chengdu of Sichuan province (成都都江堰正祠), Leshan Ancestral Temple (乐山祖庙), Shenmu Er-

lang Mountain (神木二郎山), Pingyao Erlang Temple in Baoji Taoshan (平遥二郎庙), Erlang Cave in Xi'an, Shaanxi province (西安二郎洞), as well as some relatively obscure sites (Figure 3). By conventional standards, she could be identified as a devout follower.



Figure 3. Screenshot illustration of a fan of *New Gods: Yang Jian* documenting the locations she visited in her “dating” journeys.

As shown in Figure 3, this female fan deliberately and explicitly used the term “date” to describe her pilgrimage experiences. Actually, this fan consistently refers to these activities as “dating” with “Erlang” (Yang Jian’s nickname). The use of the term “dating” shows that, although she has some religious literacy because she explained the features and cultural significance of the religious sites she visited and partook in offerings during pilgrimages, her motivation for undertaking pilgrimages is not out of a typical religious quest, such as that for redemption, healing, comfort, or protection (Margry 2008). Instead, she is driven by a quest for personal gratification, which ironically runs counter to the principles of religion (Cusack and Robertson 2019, p. 3).

By framing her pilgrimage as a date, thereby associating it with personal, sensual desires, this female fan diminishes the sacred nature of her pilgrimage experience and creates what Horton and Wohl call a “parasocial interaction relationship” between herself (a mortal) and the deity (Horton and Wohl 1956). This relationship redefines the traditional religious context, moving away from the conventional approach of seeking divine meaning and guidance for personal existence. Instead, she actively imposes a new definition of an “anthropomorphic being to date with” onto the deity, essentially making it serve her secular desires. This kind of parasocial relationship did not exist in traditional Chinese pilgrimages, nor does it exist in the increasingly popular “red tourism” of the younger generation (Li et al. 2010, p. 101), which is meant to develop new forms of support for the communist ideology as well as encourage tourism to prop up the country’s economic growth.

Let us take a look at a photograph taken by a fan during her pilgrimage journey (my use here has been authorized by the fan owners), which could provide further insight into their perspective on “pilgrimage” (Figure 4). In this image, a doll, representing material goods associated with the movie *New Gods: Yang Jian*, takes center stage, with the traditional sacred site, the “Erlangshen Main Hall”, in the background. This composition suggests that the younger Chinese generation such as the fans of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon*

Child and New Gods: Yang Jian recognizes the sacred nature of the pilgrimage sites. However, unlike traditional pilgrimage journeys, which lead to a temporary “other-worldly” experience (Cusack et al. 2019), this sacredness only serves as a necessary element for constructing an imagined intimate relationship, which helps fulfill fans’ secular desires. Deities once confined in temples and shrines as cold stone statues are now transformed by popular culture into adorable plush toys that fans can hold in their hands.



Figure 4. A photograph taken at the “pilgrimage” site, generously shared by fans of *New Gods: Yang Jian* (image: Imadcr).

Similar characteristics can be observed among other fans of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*. Although they may not explicitly use the term “dating” to describe their pilgrimage journeys, their expressions within community conversations reveal an intimate relationship. For instance, comments like “Today, I visited our baby’s [Ne Zha’s] hometown” (今天去看了宝宝 (哪吒) 的老家) (Accessed on 18 March 2020) and “Today, I donated some pocket money to the prince [Ne Zha]” (今天去给三太子捐了点零花钱) (Accessed on 28 June 2020) depict their experience of a close relationship. Essentially, these comments express their intimate fantasies that are enhanced by their act of pilgrimage. For these fans, Yang Jian and Ne Zha are both influential spiritual figures and idols with whom they can establish a virtual intimate relationship. Their actions not only conform to the Religion 2.0 framework, also called digital religion, which emphasizes emotive experiences and individualistic tendencies under the influence of the Web 2.0 (Ess and Cheong 2012,

p. 11), but also contribute to enhancing the ability of Chinese religions to stage a revival of spirituality, known as the nova effect (Taylor 2007, p. 302).

4.2. Reshaping Divine Figures: Ne Zha as “Domineering CEO” (霸道总裁) and Yang Jian as “Goddess” (神女) and “Male Prostitute” (男妓) and “Male Mother” (男妈妈)

Apart from deconstructing the traditional significance of “pilgrimage”, the fans of the movies further reshaped the traditional religious images of Ne Zha and Yang Jian through reinterpretation and re-creation. In traditional religious studies, the image of religious figures is understood as an “iconic presence” (Belting 2016, p. 235). Secularizing changes made by some artists to the representations of these figures can sometimes shock audiences and invite criticism (Mallia 2009). Therefore, despite Chinese creators continuing to produce stories related to Yang Jian and Ne Zha, overall, they have not departed from the representational conventions of the classical text *Investiture of the Gods* (封神演义) and the *Three Religions’ Origins and the Complete Collection of Deities Sought* (三教搜神大全 *San-jiao souchen daquan*), an official Taoist literary text of the Ming dynasty with illustrations of popular deities and immortals.

In these classics, Ne Zha is portrayed as a cruel and bloodthirsty youth.

Born on the fifth day, incarnated and bathed in the East Sea, stepping on the Crystal Palace, flipping over to ascend the Treasure Pagoda, the Dragon King, angered by the intrusion, demanded a battle. Leading for seven days, with immediate prowess, Ne Zha defeated nine dragons. As the old dragon lay, helpless and mourning the emperor, the leader understood and intervened below the Heavenly Gate, where the dragon met its demise. Unexpectedly, at that moment, on the emperor’s altar, wielding the bow and arrow of the Tathagata, he shot and killed the son of the Shiji Goddess, sparking the wrath of the Goddess. The leader took up his father’s altar, brandished the demon-subduing club, marched westward to engage in battle, and executed his mission.

生五日化身浴于东海，脚踏水晶殿，翻身直上宝塔宫。龙王以踏殿故，怒而索战。帅时七日，即能战杀九龙。老龙无奈何而哀帝，帅知之，截战于天门之下而龙死焉。不意时上帝坛，手搭如来弓箭，射死石记娘娘之子，而石记兴兵。帅取父坛降魔杵，西战而戮之。 (Wang and Li 1989, pp. 325–27)

..... Ne Zha stood naked, and he saw the Yaksha charging at him aggressively. Ne Zha swiftly dodged the attack, simultaneously raising the Qiankun Hoop in his right hand. The Qiankun Hoop was a treasure bestowed upon Ne Zha by his master Taiyi Zhenren, and the Yaksha was no match for its power. After Ne Zha struck the Yaksha with the Qiankun Hoop, the opponent’s brain matter immediately splattered, and he died on the shore..... Ne Zha extracted and took away the tendons of the Dragon King’s Third Prince.

.....哪吒正赤身站立，见夜叉来得勇猛，将身躲过，把右手套的乾坤圈望空中一举。此宝原系昆仑山玉虚宫所赐太乙真人镇金光洞之物，夜叉那里经得起？那宝打将下来，正落在夜叉头上，只打的脑浆迸流，即死于岸上.....哪吒把三太子的筋抽了，径带进关来。 (Xu 2019, pp. 69–70)

What about Yang Jian? In folklore and religious texts, Yang Jian, also known as “Erlang Shen”, has similarly been portrayed as a formidable and powerful leader overseeing two hundred immortals, without ever experiencing a downfall:

The divine being referred to is the Emperor’s nephew, ‘Xiangsheng Erlang Zhenjun’, currently residing at the mouth of the Guan River in Guan Zhou, enjoying the incense and worship from below. In the past, he had once vanquished the Six Monsters and also had the support of the Meishan Brothers and twelve hundred grass-head gods in front of his tent, showcasing his vast, profound and extraordinary divine powers.

乃陛下令甥显圣二郎真君，现居灌洲灌江口，享受下方香火。他昔日曾力诛六怪，又有梅山兄弟与帐前一千二百草头神，神通广大。 (Wu 1992, p. 38)

Yang Jian also asked Yuding Zhenren: ‘What course of action should this disciple pursue?’ Yuding Zhenren responded, ‘You are unique; upon refining your divine power, liberation will be attained.’

杨戬也问玉鼎真人:‘弟子此去如何?’真人曰:‘你比别人不同:修成八九玄中妙,任尔纵横在世间’. (Xu 2019, p. 394)

However, in order to attract more audiences and align with contemporary aesthetic preferences and values of young people (Zhao et al. 2022), the directors of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian* made significant alterations to the images of these two deities. Here, Ne Zha is depicted as a mischievous yet lonely child, longing for friendship, while Yang Jian is portrayed as a hunter who, having lost his sky-eye, the source of his divine power, can earn a living only by finding missing people or capturing small demons.

The bold approach of the directors and their animation creation teams in these officially endorsed adaptations encouraged fans’ creative works and interpretations, allowing them to disregard not only traditional religious images but also values intended by the movie directors. Instead, as Henry Jenkins (2012) suggests, they treat the officially endorsed movie texts as mere materials for free poaching and appropriation. For instance, while fans of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* may still portray Ne Zha’s mischievous side in their re-adaptive fictional writings, this “mischievousness” is no longer depicted through brutal killings but rather through playful pranks on Ao Bing, Ne Zha’s only friend in the film, who is often creatively portrayed as Ne Zha’s lover in the fanfiction works. Of the top-ten Ne Zha fanfiction works on AO3 and LOFTER in Archive of Our Own, a nonprofit open-source repository for fanfiction and other fan works, all involve scenes of Ne Zha inflicting physical violence or verbal insults on Ao Bing. However, these acts of violence or insults are depicted as within limits and redeemable.

...As Ao Bing emerged from the sea today, he saw Ne Zha with his back to the ocean, sitting on a large rock with his legs crossed. Ao Bing intended to greet him, but before he could say a word, Ne Zha raised his hand and delivered a palm strike. The Qiankun Hoop struck Ao Bing squarely in the chest, knocking him down by the seashore. It didn’t hurt much, but it was truly bewildering... After rubbing his chest for a while, Ne Zha clumsily apologized, ‘Just now... just now... I’m sorry, when you came out of the sea, I didn’t realize I had already emerged from hallucination. I thought I was still in my hallucination, just like before, so I thought... I thought you were fake’. (Excerpt from a Ne Zha fanfiction, source: AO3, Author: Jessica_tian)¹

...敖丙今日一出海面, 就看见哪吒背对着大海, 一个人弓腿坐在大石上, 便想过去打个招呼, 却不料还没来得及张嘴, 哪吒抬手就是一掌, 乾坤圈直直撞到他的胸口, 把他撞倒在海边, 疼倒是不疼, 但是实在莫名其妙.....哪吒揉了一会, 吭吭哧哧的道歉: ‘刚才.....刚才.....对不住, 你从海里出来的时候, 我不知道自己已经从幻境中出来了, 我以为我还在幻境里, 和我之前的幻境一样, 所以我认为.....我以为你是假的。’ (哪吒同人文片段摘录, 来源AO3, 作者Jessica_tian)

Although Ne Zha ended up inflicting verbal and physical harm on Ao Bing, he did not intend to do so. Instead, it was a result of his incessant emotional movement of “longing, desire, restraint, love-hate entanglement, and suppression” that was happening beneath his mischievous appearance (Gu 2019, p. 117). This portrayal actually resembles the image of the “domineering CEO” popular in recent Chinese films and television programs. Despite not having a likable personality and resorting to money and power to coerce a lover into submission, the “bossy president” is unwaveringly loyal in love, just lacking the ability to express their emotions correctly.

This also confirms the analysis of religion 2.0. Religion 2.0 posits that popular media has a profound influence on people in their thinking about religious images and values. After all, in the traditional religious context, Ne Zha is often portrayed as a teenage delinquent or revolutionary martyr (Shahar 2015, p. 59), and because Ne Zha becomes a deity

as a young child, researchers also frequently refer to him as the “child god” (Jin and Wang 2021; Shen et al. 2020). However, despite Ne Zha appearing mostly as a child in *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child*, he briefly transforms into an adult form when battling against Ao Bing for saving the people of Chentangguan at the end of the movie. This Ne Zha as-adult scene lasts just about 30 s before reverting back to the child form, yet out of their love for this scene, the movie’s fans in their fanfiction works portrayed Ne Zha as a mature and hormonally charged “domineering CEO”.

And *New Gods: Yang Jian*, due to its exquisite animation modeling, not only garnered enthusiastic fan support but also received a more diverse range of emotional reflections from fans. In fanfiction creations and character interpretations, Yang Jian appears in the following three main types of images: “goddess” (神女), “male prostitute” (男妓), and “male mother” (男妈妈).

The first type is Yang Jian as a goddess. He is portrayed in fanfiction as follows,

Yang Jian is a stunning beauty when he’s not making funny faces, truly worthy of being the Goddess of Mount Mei.

杨戬不做颜艺表情的时候就是大美女一枚呀 不愧是梅山神女。(Accessed on 30 September 2022)

Why is it only the Goddess of Mount Wu (character ‘Wanluo’婉罗 in the film) who dances??? If the officials want to boost ticket sales, they should hurry up and have the Goddess of Mount Mei (Yang Jian) to do so!

为什么只有巫山神女 (剧中角色‘婉罗’) 跳舞??? 官方想卖的话赶紧让梅山神女 (杨戬) 也来一个! (Accessed on 22 September 2022)

The second type is Yang Jian as a male prostitute.

What’s Yang Jian’s style as a streetwalker?

“Anything is fine, as long as you pay”. Yang Jian said himself.

“We have no other advantages besides being cheap”, his underlings said.

Can you believe it? Such a stunningly handsome and majestic god, and the only advantage he has is being inexpensive.

“Watching the movie, it feels like Yang Jian’s loss of his sky-eye have closed off his other senses too. He shows no joy, anger, sorrow, or happiness; he seems indifferent to everything. Even when others insult him, he shows no emotional fluctuations. He stands on the street, not calling out or trying to seduce anyone, but because he’s so good-looking, there are still plenty of customers asking about his price”.

“杨戬站街是个什么风格呢

「怎样都行，只要给钱」杨戬自己亲口说的

「我们除了便宜没有别的优点」杨戬手下亲口说的

就是说这么一个帅炸天穹的大美神为什么除了便宜没有别的优点

看电影就感觉，杨戬天眼瞎了好像五感也封闭了，他没有喜怒哀乐，对什么都无所谓，别人羞辱他他也没什么情绪起伏。他站街，往那儿一杵，也不吆喝，也不勾搭人，但因为长得太好看问价的顾客也是不少”。(Accessed on 27 August 2022)

The third type is Yang Jian as a male mother.

In *New Gods: Yang Jian*, Yang Jian exudes male maternal qualities.

新神榜里的杨戬充满了男妈妈的气质。(Accessed on 9 December 2023)

I have a question while watching film: Is it possible that Chen Xiang’s little uncle is not his little uncle, but mother?

看杨戬的时候一直在疑惑的一个问题，有没有一种可能，你(沉香)小舅舅并不是你小舅舅，而是你妈妈? (Accessed on 28 August 2022)

Fans' fictional creations and interpretations have impacted their audiences to such an extent that even Weibo users who have not seen *New Gods: Yang Jian* gave the following comments after reading the discussions among Yang Jian fans on social media:

I haven't watched *New Gods: Yang Jian*, but based on my observation of the Weibo, my impression of Yang Jian is: he is six feet tall, with fair skin and thin lips, broad shoulders, narrow waist, and long legs, with well-developed chest muscles. He gives off an aura of a youth who however is forced to act as an elder, not very good at taking care of children but having to do. He seems to be prone to fostering rebellious children but at the same time tends to soften when it comes to disciplining them... A male mother, a charming widow, having female genitals, seemingly with a history of promiscuity...

没去看新神榜，但我目前通过观察首页对杨戬的印象：一米九，白皮薄嘴唇，宽肩窄腰大长腿，胸肌很大。气质上是那种年纪轻轻被迫当长辈的，不怎么会带小孩还得被迫带孩子，感觉很容易惯出那种叛逆小孩，但是到揍孩子的时候又容易心软.....男妈妈，俏寡妇，有批，疑似风流史一堆..... (Accessed on 27 August 2022).

Regardless of which type of image is portrayed in fanfiction, they diverge significantly from Yang Jian's traditional image, even completely subverting and deconstructing his divinity. In the traditional religious context, such a deconstruction of the divinity of a deity would be considered sacrilege, an evil and heterodox behavior (Bias 2018). However, in the context of religion 2.0, where fans attempt to resist both authority and tradition while pursuing individualistic tastes and values, these occurrences are understandable (Ess and Cheong 2012, p. 2). Moreover, rather than being sacrilegious, Ne Zha and Yang Jian's fans tend to perceive their actions as alternative, legitimate interpretations of religious doctrines. For example, a fan of Yang Jian once attempted to justify Yang Jian's prostitution with the concept of "God loves all".

Why can't Yang Jian go soliciting customers??? Are prostitutes dirty??? He's a god!!! Do you think a god cares about your sense of propriety, purity, and morality??? No! God! Doesn't! Care! God loves all! This world is already a big brothel! So why can't I fuck Yang Jian?"

杨戬怎么就不能去站街了??? 妓女就很肮脏吗??? 他可是神!!! 神会care你们这些礼义廉耻贞洁道德吗??? 神! 不! 会! 神! 爱! 世! 人! 这个世界本来就是个大妓院! 杨戬站街让我草草怎么啦??? (Accessed on 29 October 2022).

Although her statements are emotionally charged, they also indicate that even in extremely unconventional and personalized fanfiction creations and interpretations, the divine and religious nature of Ne Zha and Yang Jian is recognized and actually plays a vital role in the fans' fictional creation and interpretation. Therefore, the reimagining of Ne Zha and Yang Jian by their fans can also be seen as an alternative religious practice, a practice characteristic of religion 2.0. In this practice, they no longer venerate the divinity of the deities as traditional religious adherents do but shape them into different forms according to their own interests and hobbies. However, it should be emphasized that even though the fans construct their particular images of the deities in anti-traditional styles or as a subculture, they never deny the deities' divinity. On the contrary, it is precisely their recognition of the existence of divinity that enabled the fans to adopt certain radical and difficult-to-understand methods to deconstruct the traditional images of the gods. For instance, the reason why Ne Zha's fans unscrupulously and unabashedly depict scenes of Ne Zha harming Ao Bing is precisely because they are attracted to his divine nature described in the myth, where 'Ne Zha relies on lotus roots to reconstruct his body thereby returning to life.' Although fans infuse various this-worldly or secular emotions into their Ne Zha fanfiction stories, they primarily utilize a narrative framework predicated on Ne Zha's divine nature of being able to gain rebirth. The narrative runs as follows: Ne Zha out of his violent temperament is prone to commit uncontrollable harm to loved ones and friends; as a result, his friends and loved ones want to leave Ne Zha because they cannot

endure his maltreatment; Ne Zha then chooses to harm or sacrifice himself to escape from reality or seek forgiveness from loved ones and friends; his lover or friends help Ne Zha reconstruct his body, and Ne Zha is resurrected. One example narrative created by Ne Zha fans is as follows.

...Rumors circulated that Ne Zha had perished. Struck by celestial thunder, his mortal form proved unable to endure, turning to ash and dispersing into oblivion. Ao Bing was nowhere to be found as well. Not amidst the wreckage, nor within the depths of the sea's Dragon Palace, he remained elusive... On a modest hillock, hundreds of kilometers distant from Chentang Pass, resided a recluse. Towering in stature, with eyes as profound as the ocean, and a temperament as gentle as jade. Local children all like listening to his talk of defying destiny. When they became excited by the stories, they couldn't help standing up and announcing their aspirations to emulate the Third Prince of the Li family [i.e., Ne Zha], vowing to treasure their friends as dearly as life itself. The recluse possessed a most cherished item, a lotus flower, by his bedside. Rootless and stemless, it floated on the water's surface—a large, crimson lotus, always closed... (Excerpt from a Ne Zha fanfiction, source: AO3, Author: Air7)²

.....传言都说哪吒死了。被天雷轰顶，肉体承受不住，化为灰烬消散了。敖丙也不见了。不在废墟中，不在海底龙宫，哪儿都找不到了.....在距离陈塘关几百千米远的一座小土丘上，居住着一位隐士。隐士生的高挑，双眼像海底一样幽邃，性情温和如玉，周围的孩子喜欢听他讲抗击命运的东西，听到兴奋时，便忍不住站起来嚷嚷着自己也要成为那位李府三太子，要把朋友视作生命一般珍重。隐士有一个最钟爱的宝贝，是他榻旁的一朵莲花，无根无茎，一朵大红色的莲花漂浮在水面上，始终闭合着..... (哪吒同人文片段摘录，来源AO3，作者Air7)

This narrative framework aligns entirely with the traditional story of Ne Zha, where Ne Zha kills himself and gives his flesh and bones to his father, and, subsequently, the immortal Taiyi Zhenren (Ne Zha's father) resurrects Ne Zha in a new body made of lotus roots, resulting in Ne Zha's resurrection (You 2022). Here, Ne Zha's rejection of anthropocentric biologism (Wang 2023, p. 180) is fundamental to the establishment of the entire traditional narrative of Ne Zha. It is just that in fanfiction stories, Ne Zha's divinity allows him to solve the emotional dilemma of harming his lover and friends with a solution unavailable to mortal humans, i.e., by resurrecting after death. This makes Ne Zha the most indomitable and fearless "domineering CEO" in the hearts of modern young people.

The portrayal of Yang Jian by his fans is also significant. Fans of *New Gods: Yang Jian* have portrayed Yang Jian as a goddess, male prostitute, or male mother, leaning towards femininity or a marginalized identity. Apart from fans' own aesthetic preferences, this portrayal is primarily influenced by a film review posted on Douban (豆瓣), a major Chinese film review website similar to Rotten Tomatoes, when the movie was first released. In this review, the author claims that after viewing the film from a feminist perspective, he/she discovered that if Yang Jian is viewed as a hermaphroditic entity, it could clarify the logical inconsistencies obviously marking the story of the movie. The reviewer suggests that Yang Jian's source of divine power, the "sky-eye", is actually a metaphor for female reproductive organs:

...Outside, Yang Jian cannot casually reveal his sky-eye. That's why even minor demons would openly mock the closed sky-eye on his forehead, humiliating him for losing his divine power and no longer being complete after leaving Mount Lianhua. Moreover, in the film's opening chase scene, Yang Jian's airship shape is very Freudian, and his inability to perform at crucial moments also seems to mock his incomplete masculine traits... When Yang Jian helps Chen Xiang split the mountain, it not only helps Chen Xiang fulfill the obligations of a Yang family man but also signifies his acceptance of his own feminine traits he had refused to acknowledge for many years. (Excerpt from a Douban film review, author: Wei Zi Qian Yan)³

.....而在外杨戬是不能随便露出天眼的，甚至连小喽啰都会当众嘲讽他脑门上紧闭的天眼，来羞辱他在莲花山之后就失去神力不再完整。而且，电影一开始的追逐戏，杨戬的飞艇形状就非常的弗洛伊德，在关键时刻的哑火，也仿佛是讽刺他雄性特质的不完整.....杨戬帮助沉香劈山，除了帮助沉香履行作为杨家男人的义务，同时也是终于接纳了，多年来自己拒绝接受的女性特质..... (豆瓣影评摘录，作者：魏紫千妍)

Although this review seems absurd, it has garnered widespread attention since its publication because it not only provides a modern interpretation of divine symbols but also resonates with the increasing awakening about gender among Chinese women since the Me Too movement (Feng 2023, p. 30). The review received nearly a thousand likes on Douban and was widely shared on social media platforms such as Weibo and Tiktok. It had a profound impact on the audience of *New God: Yang Jian* and made them realize that those divine symbols they previously thought were distant and untouchable could be interpreted in terms of such avant-garde and socially relevant concepts as gender and sex. This interpretation started to break down the habitual thinking of Chinese youth that they do not believe in religion or gods, thinking shaped by persistent, long-term Marxist–Leninist education, prompting them to explore more possibilities beyond the conventional knowledge. They began to reevaluate the religious figure Yang Jian from a gender-critical perspective, taking into account faith as one of their options.

In this process, the gender-neutral temperament and qualities created by the specific animation modeling of Yang Jian helped the animated character pass the scrutiny of female audiences, making them believe that this character is attuned to *Ni Su* 泥塑, or gender reversal fantasizing, which is an imaginative, highly creative, desire-fulfilling aesthetic interest of the fans (Chen et al. 2021, p. 152). For the younger female generation in China, not all male characters are suitable for gender-reversal imagination. Only carefully selected males with diverse aesthetic values are qualified to receive the aesthetic gaze of these women. Yang Jian is the perfect one. As a divine figure, Yang Jian provided them with greater freedom for fantasy and emotional release. When encountering real male celebrities and idols, even though female audiences might also scrutinize them with the gaze of *Ni Su*, they are hesitant to use insulting terms like prostitute because these celebrities are real human beings and the fans fear that doing so could cause them harm. However, when facing Yang Jian who is a deity, female audiences can unleash all their darkest emotions and most hidden fantasies onto him without causing any actual harm, “because the divine body was not fleshly” (Newsom 2020, p. 107) and not subject to actual harm. This is why streetwalker fictional creations of Yang Jian dominate the entire fan community. This unique literary treatment of Yang Jian is a cultural phenomenon not yet seen or replicated in other fields of creative cultural production in China.

After all, the honing of the body is an important part of traditional religious culture, where both human believers and deities cultivate wisdom, endurance, and strength through this honing process. For instance, in Taoism, it is believed that ascetic practices could bring about access to heavenly and earthly gods, understanding of the universe, and the attainment of immortality (Xu 2011, p. 135). Similarly, Jesus is revered in Christianity because of his experience of suffering and death (Roy 2002). British theologian Richard John Bauckham (1984) has also stated, “Only the suffering God can help people”. Likewise, Yang Jian fans do not see the hardships they impose on Yang Jian as insults but, rather, as a necessary journey of spiritual practice that would benefit Yang Jian himself. Strong evidence for this approach can be found in the descriptions and comments on fanfiction and artistic creations, where Yang Jian’s fans repeatedly refer to the imagery of the Collarbone Bodhisattva (锁骨菩萨), like the following.

It’s not the fans’ fault for being interested in Yang Jian’s prostitution activities. I haven’t watched the movie, but just a few scenes made me feel Yang Jian’s compassion. He’s like the Collarbone Bodhisattva, indiscriminately saving human beings with his body. (Accessed on 30 August 2022)

杨戬这事真的不怪铜仁女……甚至没有看正片，几个镜头就GET到了……过于慈悲了二舅……像锁骨菩萨，站街，无差别渡人……

‘You! Are you Malangfu?!’ Molihong asked, pointing at him. Yang Jian nodded, ‘Yes, I am actually the Collarbone Bodhisattva. I took on a female form in the mortal world out of karmic affinity. We had a connection, so I stayed for half a year. Now that the affinity has ended, I will depart’. (Excerpt from a Yang Jian fanfiction on Lofter, author: Wild Hong Shixian)⁴

‘你！你是马郎妇？！’魔礼红指着问。杨戬点头‘是，其实我本是锁骨菩萨，于凡间化女身行俗缘，你们与我有缘，故逗留半年，如今缘分已尽，我自然离去’。(摘自Lofter的杨戬同人文片段，作者：野生洪世贤)

The Buddhist story of the Collarbone Bodhisattva became popular in the mid-Tang dynasty from 766 to 835. It first appeared in Li Fuyan’s *Xuxuaiguailu* (续玄怪录) as the story of “Yanzhou Woman” (延州妇人), which tells about a beautiful woman from Yanzhou wandering about without a fixed residence, never refusing requests from men for engaging in sexual relations. After her death, a Buddhist from the Western Region felt the presence of a holy person when passing her tomb. The villagers opened the coffin and were amazed to see her entire body’s bones intertwined in a chain-like shape. This legend has been passed down and become a classic tale of bodhisattva using his/her physical bodies to enlighten sentient beings (He 2012, p. 44).

Fans repeatedly refer to this imagery in relation to Yang Jian in their fanfiction and comments in an attempt to reinforce the legitimacy of their own logic in recreating Yang Jian as a streetwalker. That is, describing Yang Jian as a male prostitute is not an insult to him. Rather, “because I have sensed his divinity, I hope he can offer his body as alms to the public and practice cultivation through it”.

In summary, in the age of religion 2.0, the images of Ne Zha and Yang Jian have undergone fundamental changes. This, however, does not mean that the younger generation in China, represented by fans of Ne Zha and Yang Jian, do not understand or appreciate their divinity. In fact, the divine nature of these two movie characters is the primary consideration of fans in their examination, contemplation, and re-creation of these divine characters. For fans, the divinity possessed by Ne Zha and Yang Jian, meaning they are not bound by this-worldly norms or concerns, is both the core element that calls for their adoration of these characters and a vital discursive condition that allows for unrestricted creativity and mutual exchange of ideas in their creative activities. These aspects of Yang Jian and Ne Zha are what real-life idols cannot provide. For the younger generation, who prioritize sensual pleasure and individualistic experience, divinity is no longer the supreme existence to be admired from afar as in traditional religious settings. Rather, divinity flows with their this-worldly needs and emotional reflections.

As depicted in the Yang Jian fan work I purchased (see Figure 5), despite being traditionally regarded as a “war god”, Yang Jian sheds tears of compassion and gently holds his nephew, Chenxiang. Both his facial expressions and actions bear a striking resemblance to Michelangelo’s sculpture *Pietà* (1497). This indicates that even though Yang Jian has been molded into a Chinese version of the “Virgin Mary” to meet the demands of fans, his identity and nature as a divine being have not fundamentally changed.



Figure 5. A fan-made poster for “New Gods: Yang Jian” purchased by me. Creator: Rouyang (肉羊Royan).

4.3. Contesting Discursive Authority in the Name of Divine Power: Do You Dare to Swear in the Temple?

In the context of traditional religions, divine power is considered inviolable and unquestionable. For instance, the [Divine Command Theory](#) (2023) posits that morality stems from the commands or character of God, and the morally right action is the one that God mandates. Obedience to divine power constitutes the mode in which believers express their loyalty to and love for God ([Dodsworth 2011](#)). Moreover, it is only when one individual holds authority over another that their commands can influence and control others ([Murphy 2001](#)). In essence, divine power underscores the transcendent status of God and distinguishes Him from mortals.

Generally, divine power is rooted in a deity’s omnipotence and omniscience, coupled with the potent ability to control cause and effect. The Old Testament provides various examples of divine punishment for disobedience to a deity’s commands. One such example is the story of Lot’s wife in Genesis 19. She disobeyed the deity’s command not to look back during the angel’s warning about the impending judgment day, resulting in her transformation into a pillar of salt. Similar instances abound in Chinese religious stories. However, since the introduction of Western democracy and science into China during the Republican era, descriptions of supernatural phenomena and the power of divine power in religion have been labeled as “superstition” and suppressed ([Ni 2020](#)). With the CPC’s declaration of church–state separation and restriction of beliefs to the officially sanctioned Marxism, socialism, and communism, divine power is further curtailed. Any promotion of theism or dissemination of religious ideas in public places is considered illegal. Moreover, religious activities representing and foregrounding strong divine power risk being accused of being evil cults that seek to “mind control and brainwash believers”. In China, strict religious regulations are outlined in various legal documents, including the Constitution, Education Law, and Internet Information Service Management Measures. The Regulations on Sino-Foreign Cooperation in Education, likewise, stipulate,

...strictly prohibiting the dissemination and promotion of theism in educational activities, and firmly prohibiting the spread of doubts and dissatisfaction about the socialist system, the Party's and the state's religious policies.... Even officially approved religions are strictly prohibited to establish any religious organizations, hold any religious activities, preach or proselytize, promote theism, distribute religious pamphlets, or publish and distribute religious books and periodicals not approved by government authorities on school campuses.

In the cultural context of contemporary China, even the power of deities must be channeled to serve the people and promote societal well-being, resulting in watered-down representations of the divine and sacred nature of the deities and the values embodied by them. In works like *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*, deities often appear as ordinary humans. Their divine power is only occasionally used, and when put in use, it is only when necessary, and the use tends not to be exhaustive. The divine power of Ne Zha is expressed by his true form of having “three heads and six arms” (三头六臂), wielding six weapons to attack multiple enemies simultaneously. Yang Jian invokes the spell “Fa Tian Xiang Di” (法天象地) to manifest his divine power. When this supernatural ability is activated, Yang Jian can transform into the embodiment of heaven and earth. Their power is invoked only when Ne Zha and Yang Jian are involved in ultimate struggles to save human life. These deities, of divine potency notwithstanding, are more like ordinary human beings when not confronting world-threatening problems. For their fans, they take both human and divine qualities.

The two movies' fans emphasize the divine power of Ne Zha and Yang Jian, but their focus on the deities' power serves not to establish a believer's relationship with the deities or proclaim loyalty or submission to them but rather to satisfy their own personal desires. They invoke the divine power of Ne Zha and Yang Jian mostly in fanfiction writing and in their communal discussions.

In fan-created fictional works, the divine power of Ne Zha and Yang Jian is mobilized to construct or remove obstacles in their romantic relationships with other characters in the movies, and this emplotment serves to satisfy the fan author's own desires. Textual analyses of the top-10 fanfiction works for *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian* on platforms LOFTER and AO3 reveal that, except for a few, every fanfiction piece emphasizes the existence of divine power, albeit to varying degrees. In fanfiction writing, the divine power of Ne Zha/Yang Jian can catalyze the deity's transformation into “saints who have transcended human affection and love” (太上忘情), causing pain and torment to the character who loves them. As such, divine power becomes the “culprit” that obstructs the building of a romantic relationship between them. Alternatively, divine power is harnessed to resist external threats, serving as a potent force to protect their romantic bond. In certain fanfiction narratives, the double aspects of divine power are made to coexist, only to consolidate the romantic relationship projected onto the fictional characters by fan authors.

The discussions of the fans also show that the divine power of the deities is used to fulfill fans' desires that are projected onto the deities and other characters in the movies. Some of the comments in the discussions are as follows,

His (Yang Jian's) divine power appeared so endearingly damaged and shattered in battles, causing one to want to violate him.

他(杨戬)的神威表现好有战损感和破碎感, 让人好想亵渎. (Accessed on 12 November 2022)

The more powerful this beautiful deity is, the more I am tempted to see his pride shattered and fall into mundane disgrace.

越强大的美人越想让他被折断傲骨, 跌落凡尘. (Accessed on 24 October 2019)

Nevertheless, the psychological experiences, similar to that of the death of Jesus, do not prevent fans from subsequently reshaping the experience into spiritual nourishment

for their personal aesthetic and emotional desires. Such a personalization of experience is actually conditioned by the official religious policy of the government and the politicized cultural milieu of contemporary China. The government consistently upholds Marxism and atheism as its official ideologies and regards religious belief and activities as a threat to its rule. Political control created the difficulty in contemporary Chinese youth's cultivation of reverence and religious belief. To mitigate the risks of censorship and suppression, young Chinese people feel compelled to center their attention on individual daily lives, consumer experiences, and recreational activities. Out of their self-protection mechanism, a habit developed of the consumption of what may be called "religious egoism", that is, to consume the divine power of the idol deities of Ne Zha and Yang Jian for satisfying the personal desires of the fans rather than bringing the divine power to bear upon thinking about the society in general.

Divine power undergoes a process of deconstruction and inward redirection to meet secular demands before its existence is deemed innocuous and safe for the state in China. Whether manifested in the form of secularized emotions of the deity or the audience's projections of secular desires, the essence of both types of representations is the same: personalization. When fans create various kinds of fictional narratives that weave intricate emotional entanglements around their loved deity, the underlying objective is to gratify their own fantasies and desires rather than experiencing a sense of awe or devotion toward the divine. This apolitical and asocial personalization process explains why an array of fan creations, focusing on *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*, can successfully navigate censorship and be disseminated safely on various social platforms such as Sina Weibo and LOFTER.

The accentuation of divine power for personal consumption is also conspicuous in fan communications, in addition to fan fiction works. Here, divine power is evoked to satisfy personal desires for discursive authority vis-à-vis other fans. For instance, fans talk to each other about imaginatively recoupling the protagonist Yang Jian with another character in *New Gods: Yang Jian* in creating a new coterie partner relationship. The most popular character is Chenxiang (沉香), Yang Jian's 12-year-old nephew. Pairing Chenxiang with Yang Jian, however, contains taboo elements, such as kinship and the age gap, so it triggered disagreements among three fan groups: those who like the movie as a whole, those who primarily love Yang Jian, and those who like character pairing. In these disputes, Yang Jian's divine power is frequently invoked, but it is not for deepening belief or strengthening conviction but rather to strategically vie for discourse authority and, ultimately, for fulfilling their personal desires. The following quotes show how the fans satisfy their romantic/erotic fantasy while invoking the divine power to wage an argument to establish their discursive authority. The first two quotes are from fans who oppose character pairing.

Do you dare to visit the Erlang Temple and accuse Erlang Shen of engaging in inappropriate relation with a minor?

你敢去二郎庙告诉二郎神说他恋童吗? (Accessed on 7 November 2022)

Do you have the courage to go to the Erlang Temple and tell him he is engaging in incest with his nephew?

你敢不敢去二郎庙跟他 (杨戬)说他跟自己外甥乱伦? (Accessed on 3 November 2022)

Fans who support character pairing would then respond:

Have You, anti-CP people, visited the temple to ask if the deity agrees to accept you as his lover which you fantasize about?

解们妄想做同妻前有没有进庙里问问人神仙同不同意呀? (Accessed on 12 November 2022)

In the fans' arguments, the "Erlang Temple", the place where the divine power of Yang Jian descends, is repeatedly mentioned. However, in these specific contexts, their

references to the temple are not intended to emphasize the efficacy of Yang Jian's divine power. If that were the case, it would become a promotion of superstition and could be subject to censorship in socialist China. Instead, they use the concept of "divine power" to legitimize and rationalize their own viewpoints. Throughout the process, the Erlang Temple acts as a Catholic Confessional, where a believer confesses sins before a priest. That is, the temple as a place in itself does not qualify as a judge, but it points to the presence of divine power. In other words, the reference to the temple means the recognition of Yang Jian's divine power. This recognition is vital. If the concept of divine power was removed from these fans' arguments, their discussions would become simply an outlet for private emotions. The repeated emphasis on the concept of divine power complicates the secular debate of supporting or not supporting character pairings, imbuing it with religious significance.

Similar debates often take place between Ne Zha fans and between Yang Jian fans, in which they borrow the authority of the concept of divine power to embellish their private emotional outbursts. For example, similar debates arise between two subgroups of fans of the same movie, such as between the "CP fans", supporting romantic pairings of the film characters, and the "Yang Jian solo fans", who solely admire Yang Jian and reject any love relationship between Yang Jian and another character. These two groups are admirers of the same movie but bring in different perspectives to interpret it. This is akin to Protestantism and Catholicism. Although they are major denominations of Christianity, both acknowledging Jesus Christ as the savior, regarding the Bible as the word of God, and believing in the doctrine of Trinity, they disagree with each other in sacraments, rituals, and the structure of the clergy (Torgler and Schaltegger 2014).

The difference between CP fans and Yang Jian solo fans lies in their attitudes and perceptions towards the character Chen Xiang. In fact, Chen Xiang first appeared in the dramas *Prince Chen Xiang* (刘锡沉香太子) and *Prince Chen Xiang Splits Mount Hua* (沉香太子劈华山) of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). It happens that the story of Chen Xiang splitting Mount Hua to rescue his mother overlaps with Yang Jian's story of splitting the mountain to save his mother, a story recounted in the novel *Journey to the West* (西游记) as well as *Er Lang's Treasure Scroll* (二郎宝卷), a narrative of the life of Erlang Shen (i.e., Yang Jian) written during the Jiaqing reign of the Ming Dynasty (1561–1566). This overlap prompted a Qing Dynasty (1616–1912) Daoist priest "Wugou Daoist of Mount Emei" (峨眉无垢道人) to bring the two figures into a relationship so that Chen Xiang became the nephew of Yang Jian in the supernatural legend novel *The Eight Immortals Attaining Dao* (八仙得道传) this Daoist priest authored. Subsequently, the relationship of Chen Xiang as Yang Jian's nephew settled and was expanded and enriched in such works as the Qing Dynasty drama *The Complete Biography of Prince Chen Xiang*, the 1999 Chinese animated film *Lotus Lantern*, and a Chinese TV series *Lotus Lantern* in 2005. This history of representations of the character of Chen Xiang itself illustrates a history of religion as pop culture.

However, for fans who staunchly defend the uniqueness of Yang Jian's divine power, the existence of Chen Xiang is unforgivable. Therefore, they vehemently hurl insults at Chen Xiang, accusing him of being a thief who disgraces the divine power of Yang Jian:

You Chen Xiang's CP fans are really hilarious. You set Chen Xiang as playing a dominant role in their love relationship? He has nothing. He can only steal from Yang Jian. You cannot show Yang Jian's face because once shown people will know he is much more handsome than Chen Xiang. You'll even steal Yang Jian's good brother (Li Yunxiang). Even if the scene of the Easter egg shows Yang Jian meeting his friend Li Yunxiang in the future, it doesn't stop "Chen Xiang mom" (referring to the CP fans who like the pairing and emphasize Chen Xiang over Yang Jian) from stealing this relationship (of Li Yunxiang and Yang Jian) and giving it to Chen Xiang!

感觉乃们沉戡攻控真的搞笑 你说你搞刘沉香这个攻 一无所有就只能ban杨戬人设 杨戬的脸好看所以千万不能露不能被发现杨戬比沉香好看 杨戬的好兄弟我也要偷

就算预告彩蛋是杨戬遇到李云祥 但我香包妈 (在杨戬和沉香这两个角色中更偏向于沉香的‘CP粉’)可以偷人际关系啊! (Accessed on 18 January 2023)

Damn it, did “Chen Xiang mom” ever feel a moment of pain due to Chen Xiang’s tasteless, when they stole Yang Jian’s divine power and sky-eye?

尼玛 沉戩香包妈偷杨戬法天象地和天眼的时候有没有一瞬间为刘沉香的low感觉痛苦啊啊啊 (Accessed on 27 February 2023)

To some extent, the fans’ altercations are not unlike the struggle between Protestants and Catholics during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), when they fought to uphold their own version of the correct doctrine (Gutmann 1988). However, compared to the bloodshed of the Thirty Years’ War, fans of Yang Jian have more modern methods to defend him, and the battleground has changed to the Cyberchurch of Sina Weibo (Cheong 2014, p. 101). Unlike the “battle for faith” between Protestants and Catholics, the fundamental reason for the fans’ fight stems from differences in personal aesthetic values. That is, in contrast to the fans who like to pair Yang Jian with Chen Xiang and even prefer Chen Xiang over Yangjian as the dominant party in the pairing, the Yang Jian solo fans just do not like the animation artistic modeling of Chen Xiang and believe that the character is ugly and unimportant. This dissatisfaction is obvious in a fan’s Weibo posts:

I think Chen Xiang is simply not worthy to be Yang Jian’s lover. Neither a Chen Xiang-Yang Jian relationship (where Chen Xiang being dominant while Yang Jian being submissive and passive) nor a Yang Jian-Chen Xiang relationship (where Yang Jian takes the initiative and Chen Xiang becomes passive) will work. Chen Xiang just can’t match Yang Jian. The character-design model for Chen Xiang of the movie is too ugly and shallow. He’s just an accessory to the movie story of *New Gods: Yang Jian*. If Chen Xiang is gone, I wouldn’t mind and will not give a thought to his future.

我觉得刘沉香根本就不配当杨戬相方啊 沉戩或者戩沉都不行 首先刘沉香就不配 建模太丑了 人设太浅了 只是个新神榜杨戬故事的挂件 丢了就丢了甚至不会考虑他未来的那种. (Accessed on 18 January 2023)

Yang Jian is indeed very beautiful. On the other hand, Chen Xiang is so ugly that he deserves to be tormented in the Jin Xia Cave. Who would like an ugly child? Maybe it’s because Chen Xiang was too ugly when young, Yang Jian (gave up and) threw him to his master.

杨戬确实很美 但刘沉香丑得活该在金霞洞被折磨呀 谁喜欢丑小孩十二年不闻不问 可能真的是小时候的刘沉香太丑了 杨戬看了就把他丢给师傅. (Accessed on 4 February 2023)

Perhaps in the age of religion 2.0, for the new generation of young Chinese people who possess strong individual consciousness and feel compelled to assert themselves, this difference in aesthetic preferences can be compared to differences in doctrines in traditional religious contexts, both of which are worth defending and arguing for. However, fans themselves also recognize that the beauty or ugliness of animation modeling is mostly a matter of subjective perception. Using this as evidence for arguments lacks persuasiveness. In order to increase the persuasiveness and legitimacy of their own viewpoints, they imbue a religious significance to this topic, elevating issues of personal preference to questions about the orthodoxy of Chenxiang’s divinity:

Hey, fans who support character pairings, are you bothered by the fact that there’s no temple dedicated to Chenxiang? You all know that Yang Jian is a traditional deity with temples and believers, while Chenxiang is just a mortal with a limited lifespan. You can’t even find his existence in orthodox religious stories. He’s not qualified to stand beside Erlang Shen.

呜呜 你们沉戡是不是看不起刘沉香没有庙啊你们也知道杨戡是中国传统神 有庙有香火 有无限的未来 而刘沉香只是个凡人 注定早④ 你甚至找不到这种辣鸡存在的痕迹只能去蹭二郎神 (Accessed on 13 February 2023)

Debates do not happen only between CP fans and Yang Jian solo fans. Debates can happen within either of these two groups. For instance, in the Chen Xiang-Yang Jian CP fan community, fans who prioritize Yang Jian over Chen Xiang would portray the former in a particular way to justify the deity's dominant position over Chen Xiang. In depicting Yang Jian as the dominant figure, some CP fans emphasize Yang Jian as a deity of indifference and aloofness. So, his relationship with Chen Xiang with emotional entanglements between the two is merely a means for him to cultivate and demonstrate his divine power. A CP fan titled her fanfiction *Seeking Enlightenment through Killing the Lover's Heart* (杀心求道). In this fanfiction, Chen Xiang falls deeply in love with Yang Jian, and seeks a mortal, possessive love relationship with the latter. But what Yang Jian offers is universal compassion and egalitarian godly love. As a result, Chen Xiang chooses to end his infatuation by killing himself, allowing Yang Jian to transcend worldly attachments and attain enlightenment.

Now, as if a thousand years have passed in the blink of an eye, the boundary between Chen Xiang and Yang Jian is clear, an irreversible divide. Yet, Chen Xiang still looks at Yang Jian with those ethereal eyes, gently saying, 'Yang Jian, I can't go back anymore. I know you can't give me genuine affection, not to me, nor to anyone else. I don't need that. To a wandering soul like me, love is nothing but a frivolous token. Imprisoned in this cycle of life and death, I know I owe you. But I want you to hate me as you love me, so that you remember me for eternity. I have tasted your blood, and since I can't go back anymore, unable to become your only love, then...' Chen Xiang seems to struggle, his voice soft, fragile, yet still as sincere as when he sought love as a child: '...I'll give you my flesh. Take away what little remains of me, let me reside in your indelible memory'. (Excerpt from "Seeking Enlightenment through Killing the Lover's Heart" on Ao3, author: CheeseCake0811)⁵

如今恍然千年，沉香与他已是回不去的界限分明，却仍然用这对灵气潮润的眼睛望他一眼，轻轻地、冷冷地道：‘杨戡，我已回不去了。我知道你给不了我拳拳真心，你也给不了其他人，我不需要这个，此物对身无长物的亡魂来说，不过是说笑用的筹码。我生生世世轮转囚困于此，我自知是我亏欠你，却要你以疼我生出的恨我，好生生世世记住我。我曾饮过你的血，既然我已回不去，做不成你天下无二的至亲，便……’

沉香似乎很艰难地顿了顿，声音呢喃，细弱而小心，仍旧与稚子求爱那时一般真诚：‘……我还给你我的肉。你衔走我仅剩的这点血肉，叫我驻扎在你不会消去的记忆里吧’。(摘自Lofter的杨戡同人文《杀心求道》片段，作者CheeseCake0811)

This fanfiction has gained significant popularity among Chen Jian CP fans and has influenced the entire fan community's fanfiction writing. In these fanfictions, authors often persistently portray the profound differences between mortals and deities and attempt to impart a philosophical quality to their works through religious rituals such as "heart dissection" and "bloodletting". This reflects a reevaluation and new exploration of traditional religious concepts in the age of religion 2.0.

However, such creations are detested by CP fans who want Yang Jian to use his divine power to protect his lover (Chen Xiang). These fans mobilize the ideas of divinity, Buddhism, and Daoism to protest and argue against the group of fans who depict Yang Jian as divine and no longer having the mortal heart of love:

I tremble at the sight of 'divinity' now. Yang Jian is a war god, not a Buddha, right? I always feel he's trying to enlighten me.

现在看到‘神性’就打颤。杨戡是战神不是佛啊?总感觉要把我度了. (Accessed on 9 October 2022)

Yang Jian has seen through the world, but he has not become a monk. Please behold this fact.

杨戬是看淡了，不是出家了，望周知。 (Accessed on 9 October 2022)

Get it straight. Yang Jian attained divinity in his corporeal body!!! Don't connect our Taoist immortals to the damn Buddhist ideas of no desire, no attachment, and renunciation of love, OK???

搞清楚，杨戬是肉身成圣！！咱道教神仙扯尼玛佛教的无欲无求断情绝爱啊？？？ (Accessed on 16 October 2022)

Similar to the types of arguments discussed above, fans of Ne Zha and Yang Jian elevate debates over the differences between Buddhism and Taoism to the level of sectarian conflicts, imbuing personal aesthetic preferences with religious significance. This illustrates that the young generation in China, represented by Ne Zha and Yang Jian fans, actually possesses high sensitivity towards religious elements such as divinity and sanctity. However, their defense of divine authority or power is not rooted in steadfast religious belief but serves as a means to assert their discursive power, ultimately fulfilling their personal desires. Nevertheless, regardless of their motivations, exchanges and arguments among fans contributed to the enrichment and supplementation of traditional religious topics with regard to doctrinal difference, definition of orthodoxy of divinity, and sectarian conflicts in modern society.

In fact, if we juxtapose the two aforementioned types of fans' behavior, their vying for discursive power and reconstruction of divine images, we will find an interesting contrast: the former primarily imbues mundane topics with religious significance by emphasizing the presence of divinity, elevating their disputes as mere personal emotional venting to a defense of divinity. This can be described as a case of successful "sacralization of the secular" through what Prasenjit Duara calls the "dialogical transcendence" (Duara 2015, p. 142). The latter, on the other hand, interprets traditional divine images through a modern lens, reconstructing them according to the fans' own aesthetic preferences and personal interpretations, thereby enacting a diversified and mediatized definition of the divine in modern Chinese society and achieving a "secularization of the sacred". These two kinds of behaviors are indeed crucial for the existence and transmission of religion in modern life. After all, "sacral does not exist without secular, and it is expressed only through secular (water, fire, holy oil, bread, wine, meal, and so forth)" (Zhukovsky and Pivovarov 2014, p. 1217). Therefore, although, as explained in section "4.1 Pilgrimage Journey: Dating with My Idol Deity", the fundamental motivation behind all the debates, defenses, and pilgrimage behaviors crowned with the name "sacred" by fans is to satisfy their secular desires, in terms of outcomes, they have successfully helped reshape and revive religion in popular cultural forms through a relatively safe and harmless manner, while avoiding scrutiny by official Chinese cultural institutions, thus reinforcing, continuing, and transforming traditional religion 1.0 into religion 2.0.

5. Conclusions

This study conducted analysis on the two animation movies *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian* to illuminate how artistic works based on religious stories navigate censorship from the Chinese government and how these works shaped the identity formation of young individual fans. By exploring the religious views of Chinese youth, this study filled a gap in the literature on the mediatization of religion in China. By so doing, this study contributes insights about media and religion to the development of a Chinese religious diversity theory (Parker 2019).

This study argues that, influenced by the stringent censorship mechanisms of the ruling party, Chinese religions are compelled to adopt a survival strategy of "contributing to the nation and society without expecting returns". Religions underscore their commitment to supporting the development of socialism, nurturing patriotic youth, and preserving traditional culture. They make sure not to spread faith among the populace, undermining the

exclusive Marxist ideology endorsed by the ruling party. They rebrand ancient Chinese cultural values and practices embedded in symbols like talismans and spells as cultural heritage and intangible cultural assets so as to neutralize potentially harmful connotations associated with these religious ideas and instruments, elements that could be easily classified as “superstition” from a scientific point of view. The typical process of belief and worship prevalent in religions in the West has been dissolved in modern China through its mediatization. As such, this study offers a crucial non-Western case study to enrich the theory of banal religion proposed by Stig Hjarvard.

Amidst the Chinese government’s insistent advocacy of atheism as well as the restrictions and censorship of religious activities, contemporary Chinese youth, as exemplified by fans of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *New Gods: Yang Jian*, have cultivated a form of egoism in their religious experience. While they may have, to some extent, experienced a sense of comfort and appeal that religion offers to their soul and heart, they selectively embraced religious beliefs based on their individual needs. Their fascination with individual deities far surpasses their interest in religious doctrine or institutions. Pilgrimages are undertaken to fulfill personal fantasies, reshaping divine figures is for venting personal desires, and the promotion of divine power is used to contend for discursive authority in the fan community. Under their efforts, religion in contemporary China undergoes a self-transformation from traditional religion (religion 1.0) to a modernized form (religion 2.0).

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Notes

- ¹ Ne Zha’s fanfiction, author: Jessica_tian. Source Link: https://archiveofourown.org/works/19976635?view_adult=true. Accessed on 25 July 2019.
- ² Ne Zha’s fanfiction, author: Air7. Source Link: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/22650172>. Accessed on 10 February 2020.
- ³ *New Gods: Yang Jian* Douban film review, author: Wei Zi Qian Yan. Source Link: <https://movie.douban.com/review/14596043/>. Accessed on 21 August 2022.
- ⁴ Yang Jian’s fanfiction, author: Wild Hong Shixian. Source Link: https://yejunxianjing.lofter.com/post/1e767ea7_2b740deb9. Accessed on 10 November 2022.
- ⁵ Yang Jian’s fanfiction, author: CheeseCake0811. Source Link: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/41539560>. Accessed on 6 September 2022.

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