Marshal Nezha ‘transformed’: Techno Nezha in Taiwan

Leo Yuan

Marshal Nezha 'transformed': Techno Nezha in Taiwan

Leo Yuan
Assistant Professor, Department of Fashion Imaging, Mingdao University

ABSTRACT

A Taiwanese folk god – Marshal Nezha - has been recreated as 'Techno Nezha' for various religious ceremonies in Taiwan and some other parts of the world and has become very popular with the public. Techno Nezha is especially well-liked by the younger generation and serves as a very good example of cultural continuation. He has provided us with a new concept for the way ICH can develop and survive.

Keywords

Marshal Nezha (哪吒), Techno Nezha (哪吒), Chinese folklore, Taiwan, *Din Tao*, Dragon Lord of the Eastern Sea, Sinying Taizih Temple

Marshal Nezha in Taiwanese folklore

Nezha (哪吒) is one of the most important gods in Taiwanese folklore and he is known by many different names but 'Marshal Nezha' is the most well known. According to Chinese folklore, Nezha is the reincarnation of a spiritual pearl and he is said to have been born in the form of a ball of flesh after his mother had been pregnant for three years. His father dissected the ball and Nezha popped out with red lights glowing from his body and cheeks and golden rays shooting from his eyes. Nezha is said to have been born wearing a golden bangle and a band of scarlet silk around his belly.

One day when Nezha was seven, he was washing his magical scarlet silk in the Eastern Sea when his actions alarmed the army of the Dragon Palace. The Dragon Lord commanded Yaksha and the third Prince to confront Nezha, but they were defeated by Nezha's golden bangle in the blink of an eye. The death of the Prince angered the Dragon Lord and the news was delivered to the Jade Emperor. The Jade Emperor ordered the capture of Nezha's family, but rebellious Nezha refused to comply and committed suicide on the spot. Taiyi Zhenren then used a lotus flower to revive him and at that point Nezha is said to have become a god.

The story of Nezha's battle with the Dragon Lord of the Eastern Sea is very popular among the Chinese, and furthermore Nezha is also known as the Marshal of the Taoist gods because of his courage and unparalleled skills. Nezha is therefore worshipped by the people as 'Marshal Nezha' to commemorate his heroic acts. Marshal Nezha's worshippers are mainly warriors, but Nezha is also regarded as the guardian of infants

(Nezha's child image), and worshipped by the logistics industry (in the image of Nezha riding a hot wheel) for protection in modern Chinese culture. Transportation companies have erected shrines to Nezha in their offices and officials have them in their homes to pray for success and good fortune. There are also mystics in the temples who are said to be possessed by Nezha, and in these cases the mystic (乩童) speaks like a child. Jhang-Yu Wu (2003) wrote that after the 1980s, folk belief in Taiwan centred on Ji-Gong Buddha and Nezha, with Nezha being the most popular among the mystics. Their role, in the days when Taiwan was an agrarian society, was to provide a form of social service, to arbitrate in disputes and to invoke the gods to solve the villagers' problems.

The *Din Tao* culture in Taiwan

According to a research study (Xu and Chen; 2004) by the Population Association of Taiwan, 70% of Taiwanese people are Hoklo, 15% are Hakka, 10% were mainlanders (who emigrated to Taiwan after 1949) and approximately 6% were aboriginal. Many of the Hoklo and Hakka people had also emigrated from mainland China both before and after 1949.

This meant that most of the people in Taiwan were immigrants from China and they usually brought their gods with them to protect them from harm and danger on the journey. These gods were then settled in their new homes upon their arrival in the new land, and some of the wealthy built temples to worship their gods. After some years, these temple gods came to be regarded as the guardians of the region (Teng-Da Wu; 1996).

The local temples would encourage the people of the town to farm during the day and to practise martial arts at dusk in order to be able to defend the town and, during special festivals, to show the gods what they could do. The people would display their skills during the annual 'Welcoming God' festival in which they would escort the gods on a parade through the town. This practice was later known as the *Din Tao* (陣頭), literally 'leaders of the parade'. The cultural expression of the *Din Tao* was thus passed on from generation to generation

The performances in early Taiwan (from the 1920s to the 1950s) came in different forms, including the lion dance, the dragon dance, the *Song Jian* formation dance, the drum formation dance, the stilts formation dance and the battle drum formation dance. The dances included man-made images of the gods dressed to represent, for



Plate 1
Followers have given Nezha white gloves to wear which look very cute. Photo: Sinying Taizih Temple, 2010.



Plate 2
Nezha dressed in children's clothes. Photo: Sinying Taizih Temple, 2010.



Plate 3
Techno Nezha patrolling the street wearing modern dress. Photo: Sinying Taizih Temple, 2010.



Plate 4
Techno Nezhas riding motorcycles through the streets. Photo: Sinying Taizih Temple, 2010.

example, the baby-god, the fairy god, the Prince god, Ji Gong, and the monkey god.

The Beigang Yen Shan God Dance Group was established by Mr Zhai-Ju Wu of Beigang Township, Yunlin County, in 1961 in order to increase the number of new people in the *Matsu* Parade. Zhai-Ju Wu created different costumes based on the appearance of the gods, and local elementary schoolchildren were taught the dances by their teacher, Qing-Bing Hong. Drums, cymbals, a gong, and other musical instruments accompanied the dance which had such a huge cast that it attracted the attention of the public and influenced people in other towns to copy the parade (Zhao-Di, Ting et al.; 2002).

Techno and the Nezha parade

When the people turned Nezha into the Marshal of the Gods, his appearance in the form of a child (Plates 1 and 2) was used during the different parade dances to reconnoitre the route of the march.

'Techno' was introduced into the Yanshui firework parade in 2005 and since then has gained great popularity in the country and been used at many large events in modern Taiwan. The *Din Tao* performance was made known to the world in 2009 at the World Games organised in Kaohsiung. Forty different Nezha costumes appeared during the opening ceremony of the World Games, with the 'gods' wearing sun glasses and white gloves and riding motorcycles. The parade was accompanied by the Chinese pop song *You're my flower* by Wu Bai, rewritten by Zhong-Yao Kuang for a local orchestra. The audience welcomed the parade with loud and stunning applause and it captured the attention of audiences everywhere (Plates 3 and 4) (Jhong-Qing, Zhu; 2009).

Techno, which is a style of fast heavy electronic dance music, is dynamic and also incorporates the music of some Taiwanese pop singers' best-selling songs, such as Wu Bai's *You are my flower* and Tsai-Hua Wang's *Bo Peep Bo Peep*. That is another reason why Techno Nezha immediately appealed to people; the performances are relevant to peoples' modern lifestyles.

The combination of techno and folklore can be described in various ways - using Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridism, or Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'field operations', as well as the forces of domestic globalisation, etc. We can therefore conclude that as techno music, which represents modernity, is blended with traditional folklore, Techno Nezha is actually a means of communication for both the traditional religion and modern society; it is an 'invented tradition' which as Hobsbawn writes:

'... is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritualistic or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.... However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely fictitious. (Hobsbawm; 1983).

The goal of keeping traditional culture alive, or revitalising it, is a crucial one; this is especially true with ICH. If you take a careful look at human culture in the last five thousand years, you will find cultural forms have survived best where they have adapted to their actual environments. You would not want to fix or fossilise a 'traditional culture' in a museum when it has actually only been around for a couple hundred years, would you?

We have to create a new way to promote Nezha, said Wen-Zhen Zeng, the secretary of the Sinying Taizih Temple committee. Obviously techno music is a good way to attract people. How are techno and Marshal Nezha able to integrate so perfectly? Nezha is a god, but his appearance is marked by his child-like behaviour, dancing with the seven stars, stepping out with his golden bangle. The 'seven stars' step is light and quick, but in its way it is also dignified. The beats and rhythm of techno in combination with Nezha's dance steps create an innovative cultural product that is favoured by modern audiences (Plates 5 and 6). In addition, this form of dance highlights the characteristics of Nezha, while making the dance something that can be passed down from one generation to the next as it is used at various events and occasions as a form of celebration.

Recognition is the driving force behind cultural continuity

We can therefore expect to see Marshal Nezha dancing to the beat of techno music in the future as 'Techno Nezha' has gained incredible popularity amongst the younger members of the population. Nezha's original appearance as described in folklore is totally different from his appearance when he wears the costumes created using modern technology, but the bravery of his divine acts remains the same. The god is still worshipped and idolised by young people, and this continuity of rituals is the ultimate aim of what we call intangible cultural heritage.

How does one define tradition? And how is culture produced? The development of a culture is closely associated with the environment and technology of a society at a particular point in time. As a result, cultural expressions must adapt alongside technological and social change. Cultural forms have always adapted to take account of changes in society without necessarily losing their intrinsic qualities.

Drums, cymbals, and a gong accompanied the Nezha *Din Tao* in early Taiwan. Before iron was available, the



Plate 5
Techno Nezha dancing to heavy electronic dance music.
Photo: Sinying Taizih Temple, 2011.



Plate 6
Sometimes followers invite Techno Nezha to join in their celebrations.
Photo: Sinying Taizih Temple, 2011.



Plate 7
Children like having their photos taken with Nezha. Photo: Sinying Taizih Temple, 2011.



Plate 8
Crowds gather at Sinying Taizih Temple for the ceremony. Photo: Sinying Taizih Temple, 2012.

instruments were probably made of wood. Why is it necessary to use only drums, cymbals and gong for the performance? Why is it necessary to retain the form of display used in early Taiwan when now techno music is more popular? Why is change not acceptable? If we were to examine the development of many cultural arts we would see that they have been modified according to taste, technology and political and economic circumstances at particular points in time. So why is it that adaptation is not accepted in our modern society? In addition, which cultural form of a particular era is deemed to be 'traditional'? How do we define this 'historical collectivism'?

Changing the form of a ritual is sometimes necessary in order to earn the acceptance of the younger generation and this form of change takes place very naturally. [Plate 7] In the contemporary pop music industry, for example, we can see that many old songs are sung in new ways but the lyrics and meanings remain constant. With respect to the continuity of the intangible cultural heritage, the key lies in the retention of cultural content, and its expression in a new form is only a means of survival at a particular time. Techno Nezha is therefore a very good example of the survival of a form of intangible cultural heritage which has adapted to modern taste while at the same time retaining its core features and values.

According to the research done by Li-Hui Wang (2011), Techno Nezha has gained considerable cultural recognition with the public. The following responses were received and evaluated:

I know that Techno Nezha is an integration of tradition and innovative performance. This obtained the highest score in terms of cultural recognition (Mean: 4.04).

I like Taiwan's Din Tao culture obtained the highest score in terms of emotional identity (Mean: 3.97).

I feel that participating in the local festivals has allowed me to understand the culture of Techno Nezha better obtained the highest score in terms of cultural participation (Mean: 3.50)

Techno Nezha is an integration of tradition and innovation. The culture should therefore be retained obtained the highest score of all (Mean: 3.81) for cultural identity.

We can therefore conclude from these results that Techno Nezha has successfully obtained high recognition by the younger generation and that this particular form of religious culture has managed to survive and live on. One of the sets of results for this research is shown below:

Table 1.
Matrix showing values for Cultural recognition, Emotional identity, Cultural participation and Cultural identity (N=420) (Li-Hui Wang; 2011).

		Cultural cognisance		Emotional Identity		Cultural participation	Cultural Identity		
		Cultural evolution	Cultural origins	Favourite	Psychological feelings		Cultural introduction	Cultural promotion	Cultural inheritance
Cultural Recognition	Cultural evolution								
	Cultural origins								
Emotional identity	Favourite	.337(**)	.583(**)						
	Psychological feelings	.537(**)	.445(**)						
Cultural participation		.312(**)	.531(**)	.873(**)	.665(**)				
Cultural identity	Cultural introduction	.369(**)	.405(**)	.651(**)	.707(**)	.706(**)			
	Cultural promotion	.332(**)	.476(**)	.742(**)	.686(**)	.806(**)			
	Cultural inheritance	.494(**)	.390(**)	.572(**)	.772(**)	.660(**)			

The economy and the consumer are the key factors that contribute cultural flexibility

Culture comes with a flexibility of its own and the way it is expressed changes as people introduce innovations. The economic conditions and the attitudes of consumers are therefore the driving forces for culture in modern society.

Marshal Nezha is a god but one may still ask, is s(he) necessary to present day society and the continuity of its culture? The religious system relies for its survival on donations from worshippers and the temples' residents believe that they will be able to increase the number of worshippers if they are able to display the spiritual power of the god.

The 'spiritual power' is shown by the size of the audiences that come to the various events organised by the temple, like the parade dances or operatic performances. [Plate 8] This has promoted cultural arts performing groups and drives them to create innovative new shows using new sound and lighting effects and intriguing plots. This creates an economic pressure which in turn sustains cultural expressions.

The same concept applies to Techno Nezha. When the number of worshippers begins to increase, it signifies that the spiritual power of the god has also increased. The number of Nezha worshippers in Singapore has increased significantly since the introduction of Techno Nezha in that country. Around 74% of the Hoklo people in Singapore share the same folk beliefs as the Taiwanese and the residents of mainland China. The increase in the number of worshippers means an increase in the amount of donations too as this is the temples' primary source of income. Some temples in Taiwan have started to make money after the modification of Nezha - which goes to show that the new image of the Marshal has already been accepted by the public.

In Taiwan, Marshal Nezha is portrayed as a guardian of children and appears as naughty yet kind. Nezha leads a carefree life and is especially close to his worshippers. The appearance of the god has been modified by the public using different techniques, music and dance. These innovative modifications have changed the appearance of the god, but the beliefs at the tradition's very core remain holy and pure. It is almost as if Nezha has again been revived by a lotus flower and has taken on a modern form. The culture surrounding Marshal Nezha shines with new life in the modern environment.

Intangible cultural heritage and its need to 'transform' itself

The movie *Transformers* showed alien robots who could disguise themselves by transforming into everyday machinery, but their extra-terrestrial origin remained

unaffected. Likewise, Nezha can take on his form in accordance with the taste of the public, but his holiness remains the same, just as the religion does.

This can therefore provide cultural continuity by incorporating a new concept, and it also demonstrates the need for intangible cultural heritage to adapt to the needs of modern day society by encouraging younger people to participate in their religion - and also to attract young believers. Together, these elements are crucial in creating a new outlook for the culture that belongs to the younger generation.

Cultural differences should be embraced rather than homogenised so that people and societies can regain their self-esteem, gain confidence on their own terms, strengthen their autonomy and define their own needs and expectations. Most post-development writers do not call for an unthinking return to traditional societies and pre-modern ways of life. They demand the freedom to define their values, beliefs and traditions autonomously. This way, hybrid cultures which combine positive elements of the past and the present can come into existence (Escobar; 1995, p. 219).

The creation of hybrid cultures can happen in any period; we call it cultural exchange. This is also a better means of cultural survival and is something that needs to be maintained in order to keep the core values of what we call culture. Therefore, the core value of this change lies in the people's attitudes and mindset. Some traditional art performers are unwilling to change their ways while they believe that what was once accepted by society remains the defining tradition of their own art. Some of the older generation despise the Techno Nezha modification - but the new form of the deity remains popular among the young. The clothes and appearance of Nezha in Chinese history are very different to the present day ones, but does the god change with a new outfit?

What is the definition of 'genuine tradition'? If such 'genuine traditions' do exist, but their disappearance is constantly awaited, shouldn't their survival lie in their ability to adapt? Adaptation, which is a behaviour that is somewhat at odds with the 'truth' of something's origin, occurs with technological change and changes in ritual performances made by modern society, although still retaining the core values of the culture. This means that people still believe in the godly power of Nezha which can be seen and felt through modern techno music (Plates 9 and 10). The change in appearance does not mean a change in the content or meaning - but we must take extra precautions to be sure we do retain the cultural content.

ICH is invaluable to mankind while being a unique way for human beings to communicate with Mother Nature. Is this philosophy and concept able to continue using the 'transformers' method - with adequate modifications – to ensure the survival of forms of cultural heritage which are on the brink of extinction? This is a question for all mankind, and one that is worth our in-depth consideration and analysis.



Plate 9
Nezhas wearing big modern triangular glasses. Photo: Sinying Taizih Temple, 2010.



Plate 10
Nezha's style is very diverse as his followers are very creative in dressing him. Photo: Sinying Taizih Temple, 2011.

REFERENCES

- Escobar, A., 1995. *Encountering Development. The Making and Unmaking of the Third World. Princeton,* NJ, Princeton University Press.
- Hobsbawm, E., 1983. 'Introduction, inventing traditions' in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Ting, Zhao-Di et al., 2002. *From past to recent time in the Beigang Township.* Yunlin, Yunlin County Government.
- Wang, Li-Hui, 2011. 'A Study of Taike-Dance Culture Identity – Taking Yunlin County as an Example' in Wang, Li-Hui, *A Study of Taike-Dance Culture Identity – Taking Yunlin County as an Example* (Unpublished master's thesis), Department of Information Communication, University of Kang Ning, Taiwan, ROC.
- Wu, Jhang-Yu, 2003. *Nezha in folk beliefs in Taiwan*, a paper given at the First Nezha Academic Conference, Taiwan, Tainan, Sinying Taizih Temple, pp. 401-435.
- Wu, Teng-Da, 1996. *The Folk Din Tao Skill in Taiwan.* Taipei, Taiwan Dong Hua Publishing House Ltd.
- Xu, Fu-Zhen, Chen, Xin-Mu, 2004. *Yam+Taros=Taiwan Potato? Comparative analysis of Taiwan's current situation of ethnic identity,* paper read at the 2004 Population Association of Taiwan Annual Conference.
- Zhu, Jhong-Qing, 2009. 'Techno Nezha Fashionise Taiwanese' in *United News*, July 28, 2009.