

# ***“Life-Exchange Talisman” and “Unconditional Blessing”: Animated Reflections on Chinese and Western Family Education Values***

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**Abstract.** In the process of the booming of the world's animation film industry, animation has evolved from being a media of entertainment reception into a significant tool providing expression of transmission of cultural values and social ideologies. Animation products of other nations tend to incorporate profound cultural logics and educational ethical principles into character setting, plot design, and depiction of kinship between family members. This research adopts *Ne Zha* and *Coco* as first-class subjects of analysis and comments on the discrepancy between the expression of “love” in the field of family education within Chinese and Western cultures respectively. This research holds that the educational model of *Ne Zha* that parents devote all for children with family pride as the central concept stems from Confucian notions of “filial piety” and the concept of “a shared destiny of the family.” While *Coco* exhibits the strength of Western civilization of pursuing individualism and placing importance on respecting personal freedom and development of interest and highlights the function of the family in terms of “guidance,” rather than “regulation.” A single educational model fails to adapt itself fully to diverse requirements of civilization subjects' development. Respect and activation of Chinese and western philosophies of family education as complementarity shall be acknowledged: East Asia shall allow more veneration of one's independence and the West shall absorb the ancient Chinese civilization's cultural feeding of co-responsibility and kinship bonds and so on.

**Keywords:** animation, family education, East Asian education, comparative cultural analysis

## **1. Introduction**

Amid the rapid development of the global animated film industry, animation has not only become a primary form of entertainment for children but also gradually taken on the role of transmitting family educational concepts and cultural values. Current research on educational ethics in animation primarily focuses on aspects such as the presentation of educational content and character development, with less attention given to the underlying family cultural logic and the modes of expressing love. There is, in particular, a lack of systematic comparative analysis between Chinese and Western family education ethics. This paper analyzes the Chinese animated film *Ne Zha* and the American Pixar film *Coco*, focusing on the two-family education models of “sacrificial love” and

“supportive love” portrayed within. It explores the cultural mechanisms and value systems that these models rely upon. This study will employ close textual reading and cultural comparative analysis to examine the interactions, emotional expressions, and educational orientations between parents and children in the two films, revealing the differences in family education ethics within different cultural contexts. The research aims to address how Chinese and western families understand “love” and “responsibility” in education, and how they balance individual growth and social values within family relationships. Through comparative analysis, this paper seeks to offer new perspectives for cross-cultural understanding of contemporary family education and propose potential pathways and recommendations for integrating educational concepts in the context of globalization, thereby providing insights for the future development of educational ethics.

## **2. Theoretical framework: the cultural foundation of family education ethics**

### **2.1. East Asian “sacrificial education”: confucian ethics and collective family responsibility**

Confucian thought, as the core of traditional Chinese culture, has profoundly shaped the family structure and educational model in east Asia since the Han dynasty’s policy of “suppressing the hundred schools of thought and venerating Confucianism.” It emphasizes the ethical concepts of “filial piety” and “ritual propriety,” establishing a family-centered educational value system that glorifies self-sacrifice as a virtue. In ancient China, stories like that of Mencius’ mother moving three times to provide a better environment for her son’s growth in *The Biographies of Exemplary Women* showcase the mother’s sacrifice of personal comfort for the benefit of her child’s future. The *Records of the Grand Historian* documents the story of Ti Ying rescuing her father, reflecting the emotional and responsibility bonds between family members. The *History of the Later Han* [1] accounts that during famines, parents gave up their lives so that their offspring could survive, thereby verifying the learning morality of “sacrificial affection” [2]. These Confucian prototypes continue as widely renowned and accepted moral exemplars among the youths of East Asia, and the concept of “filial piety” has been passed on through the generations. On the strength of such a culturally logical inheritance and sacrifice, east Asian family-centered education emphasizes “transmission of inheritance” and “sacrifice.” Parents tend to invest great amounts of time, money, and emotional resources into children’s schooling, up to a point of compromising their quality of lifestyle and happiness. Intergenerational passing on of family resources such as landed property and savings happens as an expression of an intense feeling of “shared family destiny.” This family prototype, where sacrifice is understood as the act of love, creates a conventional “sacrificial education” cultural mechanism.

### **2.2. Western “supportive education”: individualism and the tradition of freedom**

In contrast to east Asian culture, western family education is rooted in the tradition of individualism, emphasizing the independence and autonomous development of the individual. In western societal views, children are seen as independent individuals with their own personalities, rather than mere extensions of family interests. Parents in western contexts typically play the roles of guides and companions, rather than authoritative figures who command and control. They are more inclined to respect their children’s wishes and support their pursuit of unique personal values. This educational philosophy is notably embodied in the Montessori method, which advocates that children should have the freedom to choose and explore, with the adult’s role being to “observe” and “guide,” rather than to intervene or shape [3]. Rooted in nurturing intrinsic motivation and forging an independent

self, this approach powerfully cultivates children's self-awareness, self-discipline, and distinct individuality. In this cultural framework, the core objective of family education is not to achieve family honor or to elicit a return from children, but rather to help children build a complete self-awareness and pursue a developmental path aligned with their nature and interests. Thus, the "supportive love" advocated by the Western education model reflects a deep respect for freedom, equality, and individual value within the context of individualistic culture.

### **3. Comparative analysis of film texts: different educational models under family relationship conflicts**

#### **3.1. Reflection of East Asian family education model in *Ne Zha* (2019)**

##### **3.1.1. Li Jing's "life-exchange talisman": patriarchy and sacrifice in the family model of living for one's children**

In *Ne Zha*, the film character of Li Jing defies the conventional stereotype of the "stern father" and instead represents an average East Asian father figure living for his children and demonstrating an unspoken, tolerating, and sacrificial personality [4]. When learning of the reincarnation of his child as a demonic being and being sentenced to a calamity of thunderbolt punishment, Li Jing does not abandon his child. Instead, he privately replaces the "Life-Exchange Talisman," intending to exchange his own life so that his child might live on. This unsaid sacrifice forms one of the emotional focuses of the film and represents the ideal father figure of Confucian virtues of behavioral standards of conduct where "fatherly love is unspoken" and "sacrificing oneself for righteousness." It also represents the Chinese family cultural logic of "collectivism" and "blood-based kinship tie." Li Jing's action not only involves material and practical forms of sacrifice but also forms a "compensatory responsibility" for his child's fortune and represents an intense expression of the "sacrificial love" inherent in East Asian cultures [5].

##### **3.1.2. *Ne Zha*'s growth narrative: the binding of individual value and family collective honor**

From childhood on, *Ne Zha* is referred to as the "demonic child," growing up in the misunderstanding and dread of Chen Tang Guan people. At first, he defies fate with an obstinate and choleric personality, standing far away from others and spurning kinship bonds, and then falls into an alien and incapacitated condition. Yet through repeated misunderstandings, gradually, he absorbs the constant protection and faith his parents possess toward him. Particularly upon learning of his father's sacrifice of an entire lifetime to save him at a pivotal moment of crisis, *Ne Zha* gains an enlightenment and definitively charges into the maelstrom of peril, stepping forward for the benefit of Chen Tang Guan people [6]. In this process of transformation, he does not exist anymore only for himself but takes on an active role of undertaking the task of "defending the group." This is the realization of the worth of the individual within the concept of "family as a shared destiny," and meanwhile also exemplifies the educational ethical mentality of "loyalty and filial piety as one" and "sacrificing oneself for the group" in East Asian civilization [7]. This process of transition not just enriches the character of *Ne Zha* but also concordantly satisfies the Chinese audience's emotional desire for plot elements like "rising up in adversity" and "unspoken great love." Through *Ne Zha*'s character developmental plot, the movie develops a heroic character who internally yearns for others' understanding but resolutely ends up choosing sacrifice and represents the deep structure of "love as sacrifice" within East Asian social educational civilization [8].

## **3.2. Reflection of the western education model in Coco**

### **3.2.1. Miguel's musical dream: individual freedom**

Coco is a Pixar-animated film set against the backdrop of the Mexican Day of the Dead celebration. The central plot revolves around the protagonist Miguel's dedication to his musical dream and the conflict with his family's traditions [9]. At the beginning of the film, it is revealed that Miguel's family has forbidden music for generations due to his great-great-grandfather "abandoning his family to pursue music." This "family ban" becomes the greatest obstacle in the protagonist's path to growth. However, Miguel chooses not to suppress his passion and repeatedly tries to secretly practice playing music and enter music competitions, showing a strong "self-actualization" motivation [10]. This growth trajectory, guided by individual aspirations, is a clear representation of western educational philosophy's "individualism," which posits that every child has the right to explore their own interests and values, free from the constraints of family destiny or traditional rules. Miguel in the film embodies this educational perspective, and his struggle is not only a fight to uphold his dream but also a quest for and affirmation of his own identity.

### **3.2.2. The family's "unconditional blessing": support for individual freedom**

As the plot progresses, Miguel accidentally enters the Land of the Dead. With the help of his deceased family and a renowned musician, he uncovers the truth behind the family's misunderstanding and the history of music. The most touching moment occurs when his great-grandmother Coco, upon hearing the song Remember Me sung by her father, tearfully recalls memories, leading the entire family to understand the connection between music and family ties. This transformation enables the family members to accept Miguel's dream, and ultimately, they celebrate the Day of the Dead with music, symbolizing the family's return to the path of "unconditional love." This "guidance rather than enforcement" family education philosophy reflects Western educational ethics, wherein the primary task of the family is to help the child achieve the meaning of life. For Miguel, the shift in his family's attitude allows him to attain a "free and complete" individual identity. This transition from "authority" to "support" in family relationships reveals the Western educational concepts of respect, acceptance, and inclusiveness [11].

## **4. Comparison of cultural mechanisms in different educational models**

### **4.1. East Asia: the "family as a shared destiny" under collectivism**

In Ne Zha, the protagonist's destiny is inseparable from his family, his community, and the very survival of Chen Tang Guan, embodying the belief that a family's fate is forged—and faced—together. Traditional Confucian thought emphasizes realizing personal value through the fulfillment of family responsibilities and a sense of national loyalty, which in family education manifests as parents' investment in their children's future and control over their behavior. Even when love involves sacrifice or repression, it is still seen as "unconditional devotion." For instance, Li Jing's act of using the "Life-Exchange Talisman" to save Ne Zha is both an expression of fatherly love and a continuation of "family honor." In this model, individual will give way to collective interests, and children are taught to "bring honor to the family." The family structure is hierarchical and ethical, with parents acting as "educators," while children are tasked with "obedience and success." Although Ne Zha initially rebels, he eventually returns to the family ethic, transforming from a "demonic child" into a national hero. From a cultural perspective, east Asian family education is

influenced by Confucian “filial piety” culture, which prioritizes family interests and intergenerational continuity, often at the cost of individual freedom. Across East Asia, society prizes a finely graded hierarchy, unwavering obedience, and collective harmony; education functions as a sieve, selecting those who will ultimately bring honor to family and nation. The individual’s success is a symbol of the family’s “rise.” However, this educational logic presents modern dilemmas, as east Asian youth seek independent self-expression, leading to an “educational cognitive gap” between parents and children. Respecting tradition while achieving individual liberation remains a key issue in the reform of East Asian family education.

#### **4.2. Western: self-actualization under individualism**

In contrast to the “collectivist sacrifice logic” found in East Asian family education, Western family education places a greater emphasis on individual independence and the realization of personal value. In *Coco*, Miguel’s pursuit of his musical dream, despite the “family ban on music” and his “running away from home,” reflects the normal path of “self-identity construction” in the Western context, underpinned by the “individualism” educational ethics. Individualism is a value belief centered around the “individual,” and Western educational systems regard children as independent entities. Parents’ role is to guide and support, not to control and shape, respecting children’s interests and will. The goal is “to help children become who they are.” In the film, Miguel’s family ultimately understands and accepts his choice, which exemplifies the supportive education model. On an institutional level, Western educational systems prioritize “differentiated development,” focusing on the cultivation of student diversity and personal talents [12], as seen in the project-based learning approach in the U.S. K-12 education system. In family education, children’s ideas are treated as equal in dialogue with their parents, who provide children with space and a sense of boundaries. This educational ethic believes that respecting a child’s choices enables them to become competent members of society. However, the individualistic educational model comes at a cost. Emphasizing individual autonomy can weaken family emotional bonds, and the lack of shared societal values can lead to a loss of social cohesion. In the extreme condition of individualism, teenagers will have the predicament of “value hollowing.” Therefore, in recent years, Western cultures have emphasized more “emotional education” and “restoring family relations,” trying to achieve a new equilibrium between freedom of the individual and emotional belonging [13]. There is a clear cultural contrast between the educational models of East and West: East Asian education is family-centered, emphasizing collective responsibility and the spirit of sacrifice, while Western education is individual-centered, promoting freedom of choice and self-actualization. The former focuses on tradition and ethics, while the latter emphasizes expression and creativity. Both are deeply rooted in their respective cultural contexts but face challenges amid contemporary societal transformations. Understanding these differences is essential to the foundation of cross-cultural studies of educational ethics.

### **5. Insights on family education in the context of globalization**

#### **5.1. Challenges of East Asian family education and limitations of western family education**

Against the backdrop of globalization and the growing interpenetration of multiculturalism, both Eastern Asian and Western models of family education disclose their intrinsic shortcomings. Eastern Asian family education, centered on the concept of “sacrificial love,” attaches equal importance to the whole family’s collective honor and intergenerational responsibility. Yet it tends to subtly repress

the child's autonomy and lead to common problems of "high-pressure education," "exam nervousness," and emotional alienation between parents and children. Children tend to bear great pressures, fail to adequately express themselves in the early years of their lives, and tend to lack independent judgments in career and life choices. While placing an emphasis on "supportive love" and individual liberation, Western education calls for an orientation of guidance centered on the child's interests and established standards of responsibility. While enabling sound development of an individual identity, the model tends to generate problems of "loneliness," "identity confusion," and "lack of responsibility" during adolescence through undermined family roles and emotional support. While pursuing the process of self-actualization, family unity and transmission of culture tend to be ignored and exert negative influences on the person's sense of identity and belonging within society.

## 5.2. Integration and rebirth of Chinese and Western educational concepts

In the process of cultural globalization, all nations' shared problem lies in how to escape from being confined within the scope of a single ideology of education, learn from the strengths of others, and renovate indigenous models of education. East Asia has learning points from Western education in embracing ideas, valuing individual independence and espousing freedom of exploration while also tempering the instrumental perspective of "success equals talent," thereby affording more room for children for choice and room for emotional release. Meanwhile western nations will be able to learn from east Asian education in valuing family ethics, responsibility, and family awareness and enhancing personality development and social responsibility teaching through the role of family. Eastern and Western cultures of education are not polar opposites but complement and interpenetrate one another. Take *Ne Zha* as an example: it realizes the personality of east Asian family affability and responsibility and meanwhile leaves the child free in choosing his fate, while *Coco* reconstructs the symbiotic coexistence of "freedom" and "family love" through accepting and understanding on the part of the family. These pictorial works give us the inspiration that building a system of family education more humane and inclusive and integrating traditional and new and eastern and western educational ethics will become a future orientation of compulsory educational reform.

## 6. Conclusion

This study takes Chinese animation's *Ne Zha* and America's Pixar *Coco* as illustrations and compares between them the relationships of family education so as to study the cultural logic and ethical fundamentals of the east Asian "sacrificial love" and western "supportive love". East Asia, where Confucian "filial piety" and collectivism lead and control cultures and beliefs of those places, emphasizes intergenerational responsibility and family honor and has a dedication spirit towards family education. But the west-based civilization built on individualism emphasizes children's autonomous will and interest development and places an emphasis on parents' guidance with children being fully respected. These two modes of education come into being in animation and reveal the window of watching through different regions' cultures' educational ethics.

The contrast brings out the virtues and shortcomings of both models of learning. "Sacrificial love" builds up family cohesion and intergenerational continuity but might stifle personal expression of oneself. "Supportive love," though fruitful in personal growth, might result in frayed family emotional bonds and irresponsibility unless it is well framed. Hence, in the era of globalization, it is mandated that Eastern and Western learning ideologies be integrated and absorb each other's strengths in constructing an educational paradigm where the poles of individual development and family responsibility are balanced.



This study has its limitations. First, it examines only two animated films, which are limited in number and may not fully represent the diversity of family education across cultures. Second, the study primarily relies on textual analysis and does not incorporate empirical research or audience feedback, making it somewhat subjective. Future research could expand the sample by incorporating animations from multiple countries, using interdisciplinary methods to broaden the understanding of cross-cultural educational ethics. Additionally, research could explore conflicts and negotiations in educational values within multicultural families, providing more practical theoretical support for educational practices. Through a comparative analysis of cultural elements in animation texts, this study highlights the importance of cross-cultural understanding and offers insights into the collaborative development of global family education.

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