

## The Politics of Fantasy: A Reflection of Chinese Society through *Né Zhā*

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The ICS is an interdisciplinary research institution, which has a leadership role in the promotion of Chinese and East Asian Studies in India. The *ICS Analysis* aims to encourage debate and provide informed and balanced inputs for policy formulation and is based on extensive research and interactions with a wide community of scholars, experts, diplomats and military personnel in India and abroad.

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# **The Politics of Fantasy: A Reflection of Chinese Society through *Né Zhā***

## **Abstract**

*The paper looks at two recently released fantasy films: Né Zhā (2019) and Né Zhā 2: The Demon Child Churns the Sea (2025) which have reached great success within China as well as internationally. The paper closely observes the main character Né Zhā as well as the circumstances of the film, uncovering the close connections between Né Zhā and the Chinese youth. As a result, the paper unveils the socio-political scenario in China, especially amidst Generation Z. Unlike Western articles which often adopt a West-centric approach, comparing the Né Zhā films to the recently released Captain America film and the impact that Né Zhā's popularity may have on the American film industry, this paper seeks to delve into Chinese perspectives through a study of Chinese opinions on social media as well as in articles published on China-based websites. Through this study, the paper argues that the genre of fantasy, often overlooked as detached from reality, in fact allows for political dissent and expression. The fantasy genre's capacity for socio-political representation in turn allows for the Né Zhā films to act as a powerful political text which can express the discontent of the Chinese people.*

**Keywords:** Né Zhā, Fantasy, Film, Gen Z, Chinese dissent

Né Zhā, the Chinese mythical figure, has transformed over the years as a shape shifter, adapting to the changing creases in society. Every passing glance reveals a new layer or persona with an emerging metaphor attached to his hip. Recently a movie series consisting of two films adapted Né Zhā, i.e. *Né Zhā* (2019) and *Né Zhā 2: The Demon Child Churns the Sea* (2025).<sup>1</sup> They host Né Zhā as a child who is terribly mischievous, tantalisingly evil, slightly misunderstood and most of all stubbornly true to himself. The question remains, why does the youth in China resonate with this so called “Demon Child” and in what ways is the fate of the fantastical Né Zhā entangled with that of the young Chinese audience? This paper seeks answers to the questions above and discusses the Né Zhā movies in the current sociopolitical scenario in China. The paper further argues that the genre of fantasy which seems to exist in a vacuum, entirely separate and disconnected from society, is often borne of real people, places and true experiences.

In an incredible feat of Chinese pride, the animated fantasy Né Zhā movies have hit new records. *Né Zhā* (2019) was the highest grossing animated film in China while *Né Zhā 2: The Demon Child Churns the Sea* (2025) broke box office records and became the first film to cross one billion US dollars in a single market.<sup>2</sup> *Né Zhā 1* (2019) follows the child form of Né Zhā, tracing his origins, beginning with his birth in the town of Chentang Pass and his eventual battle with the Dragon King’s son, Ao Bing, which ends in their physical bodies being destroyed. *Né Zhā 2* (2025) then continues to follow Né Zhā and Ao Bing on their quest to regenerate their bodies. The films explore the retelling of the myth of Né Zhā that redefine the fated ending of Né Zhā and remould his mythical persona, pushing against the traditional bounds permitted to him.

In several western media articles, the success of the Né Zhā movies can be chalked up to their ‘recognizable styles and story-telling techniques’ which appeals to the larger audience.<sup>3</sup> Many such articles also discuss the impact of popularity at such a grand scale on the American audience, comparing it to American top hits such as the recently released film *Captain America: Brave New World*. However, to counter these often inadequate arguments which are largely based in western media and scholarship, this paper will look into Chinese perspectives and discussions to come to a conclusion about how the two Né Zhā movies are able to engage the Chinese population, especially the youth. This study mainly refers to articles written by the Chinese working population to bring to light specific sociopolitical aspects that have played a part in boosting the Né Zhā films to the top of the charts.

The careful marriage of tradition and modernity took place through the character of Né Zhā himself who was set free of his original persona. These changes in Né Zhā’s character on the surface seem to

have come about as a result of links between the world of Né Zhā and the popular culture of the youth. The movie is animated and often resembles a video game with its style of animation, the ‘dizzily kinetic fight moves’ as well as the character introductions during fight scenes where ‘new fighters pop into frame with only a title card explaining who they are’.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the character design itself is integral to the production of a film appealing to the youth. The 1979 *NeZha* movie, Li Zhuying asserts, adopts a Chinese style of animation which derives inspiration from Chinese style folk art and murals in terms of the ‘clothing, hairstyle and facial features’. In stark contrast, *Né Zhā* (2019) and *Né Zhā 2: The Demon Child Churns the Sea* (2025) utilises ‘three-dimensional aesthetics’ which boasts of a development in technology.<sup>5</sup>

However, Né Zhā’s animation style is only the beginning of its companionship with the youth of China who have taken not only to the movie’s art style but also to the personality of the short and stubby Né Zhā. Not only does Né Zhā break the normative image of a heroic figure, he also unravels any expectations from him as the hero of the film. Much like Né Zhā, the youth of present-day China find themselves shouldering the heavy weight of expectations.

As President Xi Jinping asserts in his speech at the ceremony marking centenary of Communist Youth League of China, the youth of China should ‘be patriotic and innovative, while not being misguided or intimidated by difficulties’. President Xi further added during his speech at a conference marking the centenary of the May Fourth Movement on 30 April 2019, ‘high ambitions can stimulate your potential to forge ahead, so that you will not drift aimlessly like a boat without a rudder’.<sup>6</sup>

These heavy expectations of ambition and passion from the youth of China who hold the responsibility of the future, fall flat in face of the current situation of high unemployment rates in China. Generation Z grew up between 1990s to 2020s seeing ‘dramatic changes in the Shanghai’s cityscape’.<sup>7</sup> Not only did they adjust to the change, they also revelled in the belief that ‘that economic growth will continually generate opportunities’ for them to achieve success. Yet in a terrible turn of events, ‘China’s economy slowed amid months of COVID lockdowns’ and unemployment rates hit 20 percent with a huge number of workers being fired. For the youth the situation became increasingly frustrating as their hard work and dedication to their jobs did not keep them from being laid off.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, the concepts of *tang ping* (lie flat) and *liu lang* (drifting) gained popularity amidst the youth of China. Chinese youth frustrated with their hopeless situation began to drop out of their jobs to ‘lie flat’.<sup>10</sup> The process of lying flat for many manifested in the form of travelling through the country or even abroad with no strict plans (drifting), surviving on small amounts of money and often

relying on acts of kindness to survive. There was a shift in mind set away from one that sought financial stability even at the cost of happiness. However, the changing patterns of the youth is looked down upon by the elder of China who often see the younger generation as ‘selfish, irresponsible, vacuous, and spoiled—“the stupid generation”’.<sup>11</sup> The government too, as is evident in the earlier quote by Xi Jinping, urges the youth to be ambitious rather than aimless.

*Né Zhā* (2019), depicted a young Né Zhā who is despised by the people of Shen Teng Pass by virtue of his birth. While initially the village has great expectations from the child, thinking he would be the ‘blue pill’ (a saviour of the people) when he turns out to be the ‘red pill’ (a chaotic demonic entity) they isolate Né Zhā. The people of Shen Teng Pass ostracise him and often treat him with horror, disgust and fear, calling him a ‘demon.’ Parallely the heavens too curse Né Zhā, based solely on his birth as the red pill, to be struck to death by lightning within the span of three years. In addition, Né Zhā’s parents who are demon fighting warriors, hope to reform Né Zhā into a saviour for the people of Chen Teng Pass so that he fights demons just like they do in order to prove himself. Despite the mistreatment of Né Zhā by the villagers as well as the greater power of heaven, he is still required to serve his parents as well as the larger community that he is born into.

Né Zhā openly expresses his discontent often, either by terrorising the villagers or through his words of dissatisfaction with his confinement: ‘These dumb walls crush my soul, even prisoners get parole. No fun no friends, hopefully boredom will get me first’.<sup>12</sup> Yet, Né Zhā still hopes to be accepted by his fellow villagers and even cries to his mother saying that he had always wanted ‘to be their [his parent’s] pride’.<sup>13</sup> As the film progresses Né Zhā uncovers that his parents have lied to him about him being born of the blue pill to convince him to protect the village and its people.<sup>14</sup> Né Zhā is heavily disillusioned and removes himself entirely from his parents, similar to the Chinese youth who feel betrayed and resort to *liu lang* (drifting) and *tang ping* (lie flat) due to their disillusionment.

Under the weight of high expectations, it is easy to lose sight of identity. Both the films, *Né Zhā* (2019) and *Né Zhā 2: The Demon Child Churns the Sea* (2025), deal with the theme of identity. In the first film, *Né Zhā* (2019), Né Zhā almost succumbs to his fate, leaving behind his loved ones to sacrifice himself. However, at the very end he decides to fight even if he fails and in this moment of hope he asserts to Ao Bing that he is ‘the master of [his] own fate’ and in turn chooses to find his own path rather than following the path set out by society, his parents or even divine fate. Similarly, *Né Zhā 2: The Demon Child Churns the Sea* (2025) portrays an adult Né Zhā (a transition from his child form) who fights for the right to have power over his own identity. He asserts that ‘if heaven and earth cannot tolerate it, I will turn the world upside down.’ During his conversation with Ao Guang (Ao

Bing's father), he even proclaims that though the system of control was stubbornly and unfairly established, he would try to change it. Identity, in this context becomes bendable and the power returns to the hands of the individual rather than external factors. As Yuan Yuan explains 'Né Zhā is always loyal to himself and uses his own feelings as the basis for the correct choice of action in different situations'.<sup>15</sup>

Various Chinese online forums discuss Né Zhā and the empowerment that it allows, especially for the Chinese youth. Yu Mao brings to light the fact that Né Zhā resonates with people since they can relate: 'some people reflect on the shortcomings of traditional education, some think of the sadness of taking the civil service exam, some question the cruelty of the workplace, and some see the challenge to the world order dominated by power'.<sup>16</sup> Hence, for the viewers the Yuxu Palace from *Né Zhā 2* (2025) has become symbolic of a system that is keeping them confined, providing certain benefits but largely only draining them of life and energy.

As the username "Positive Energy Starts" explains, the youth have 'become their robots, tools for making money, dedicating [their] youth, working overtime, and giving [their] all'.<sup>17</sup> The system that these usernames describe is uncannily similar to the Yuxu Palace. In *Né Zhā* (2019) the heavens unjustly imprison the dragons despite their service to the Gods and in *Né Zhā 2: The Demon Child Churns the Sea* (2025) immortal angels of the heavenly army feed on the energy of so called "monsters" who are captured against their will under the guise of reform. Wuliang Xiangweng, the main antagonist who was the leader of the Taoist Clan, ensures that privileged angels continue to retain their strength while those at the bottom rungs of society suffer regardless of their efforts. After all, 'there are always only a few bosses, and everyone else is just a worker'.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of these confining systems, the Chinese youth yearn for Né Zhā's ability to surpass the heavy expectations that form a web to entrap many in present day China. However, the Né Zhā movies are not only addressing identity at a single level, rather they go on to explore the specific roles assigned within a family which also form a systemic identity. Né Zhā's family members, consisting of Lady Yin (mother) and Li Jing (father), uphold certain roles in the family. In accordance with the Confucian philosophies, 'The Three Fundamental Bonds deal with traditional society's most fundamental social relationships: father and son, lord and retainer, and husband and wife' (Sāngāng Wǔcháng 2252). Therefore, according to the Confucian philosophies there is a hierarchy within the family that should be upheld in order to ascertain stability not just in the family but the larger society as well.

The hierarchy entails that the son must be dutiful towards the parents and most importantly towards the father, while the woman must be a dutiful wife towards her husband. With the dawn of modernity, a different model of family began to take shape which adopted a more welcoming stance towards individual interests. Yet, the current structure of the family continues to strike a balancing act between the Confucian ideologies and relatively modern socialist family.<sup>19</sup> The *Né Zhā* movies too strike this balance within *Né Zhā*'s family. Lady Yin breaks the normative understanding of a housewife as she can be seen to be working at an almost equal level as her husband, Li Jing, as she fights alongside him to slay demons. When Li Jing travels to heaven in hopes of saving *Né Zhā*, Lady Yin stays back and handles the safety of Chen Teng Pass all on her own.

However, Lady Yin's transcension of the traditional norms does not excuse her of her role as a mother. 'Women are perceived to be carrying an innate ability to fulfil caretaking roles which extend from home to society and personal to public'<sup>20</sup>, hence Lady Yin's approach towards *Né Zhā* even when he is being mischievous is that of gentle care rather than strict reprimand. This is most evident in the first scene between *Né Zhā* and Lady Yin when he bites her as an infant and she continues to hold him close even as she is bleeding. In contrast, Li Jing, adopts the role of a strict father who takes extreme measures such as locking up *Né Zhā* in his room as punishment and commanding him to train to become a hero.<sup>21</sup>

In the original myth *Né Zhā* and Li Jing fight one another multiple times and *Né Zhā* almost killed his father before he was stopped by 'two Buddhas, Wenshu Guangfa Tianzun and Randeng Daoren' who felt that 'killing one's parents was a grave sin'.<sup>22</sup> The adapted *Né Zhā* films greatly improve the relationship between father and son, hence Li Jing cares for his son and even stakes his own life to save *Né Zhā* reiterating the concept of loyalty to family. Yet, Li Jing still assumes a strict personality that demands to be respected. Similarly, *Né Zhā* himself is meant to fulfil the role of a devoted son who listens to his parents. Yet, *Né Zhā* breaks this expectation as he is the problem child. He often wreaks havoc in the village and plays pranks on his master Tai Yi Zhenren.<sup>23</sup> However, a balance is struck in *Né Zhā*'s personality in *Né Zhā 2 (2025)*, when he goes on a quest to save Chen Teng Pass and takes responsibility at the very end for his own actions.

*Né Zhā*'s personality holds complexity as he desires support from his loved ones, yet he refuses to conform entirely even to their expectations from him. He seeks to be the 'master of his own destiny'.<sup>24</sup> However, for the youth in China, expression is difficult. The username "Positive Energy Starts" on Sohu explains that 'Nezha's refusal to accept is also our refusal to accept' yet since the average

Chinese working individual cannot rebel in the way that Né Zhā does, ‘Nezha exists in the cinema and becomes a spiritual sustenance for us during the rare holidays’.<sup>25</sup>

Generally, outside of China scholars and experts generally believe that the Chinese youth are apolitical and disinterested in politics. According to Alec Ash, there are four major reasons that the Chinese youth avoid politics. Firstly, politics is boring and the media reports solely ‘results of politics but not the process’ creating a disconnect. Secondly, politics can be dangerous and many have developed ‘an inbuilt barometer about what you can say and do.’ Thirdly, there are many other expectations to meet and work towards such as ‘much competition—for school places, for jobs, for spouses’ or ‘financial pressure—to buy an apartment, a car, to provide for your aging parents.’ Finally, politics is hopeless given that any kind of political expression might result in ‘big trouble but won’t make the slightest ripple on the ocean’.<sup>26</sup>

However, despite these reasons for hesitation, Alec Ash uncovers that Chinese youth have found ways to be political that do not fit the normative understanding of protest and rebellion in democratic societies. Therefore, in China ‘demonstrations tend to begin as a particular or parochial issue—bad factory conditions, corrupt local officials’<sup>27</sup>, which then turn into larger political movements. Ash also notes that even if ‘the initial troublemakers aren’t young, the crowd largely is,’ hence the youth are in fact extremely politically proactive and have found powerful ways to dissent and protest even if not in the conventional ways.

Heidi I. Hartmann explains in the context of gender that ‘the personal is political,’ hence women who are discontent are not ‘neurotic’ rather they are responding to a ‘social structure in which women are systematically dominated, exploited and oppressed’.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the youth in China who are entirely overlooked by the government and left to fend for themselves express discontent on a personal level through the politically charged actions of *tang ping* or *liu lang* which become representations of protest.

During the social media controversy on Kong Yiji wherein an unemployed youth compared himself to Kong Yiji asserting that he was stuck ‘on a scholarly pedestal like Lu Xun’s fictional character Kong Yiji’ due to his education. In response, the CPC propaganda organs ‘started telling young graduates to not feel shy to roll-up sleeves’ of their long gowns which Kong Yiji wore as a symbol of ‘a scholar’s identity’.<sup>29</sup> Even the China Central Television (CCTV) and Youth League joined in, arguing that Kong Yiji had problems as he stubbornly refused to improve his situation through labour.<sup>30</sup> The resulting backlash from the youth was immense and boosted the issue further. Following this thought,

given that the Né Zhā movies can be approached as politics through media, it is evident that engagement with it and its jump to fame can be observed as political dissent as it captures the discontent amongst the youth of China (the main audience of the Né Zhā films).

Experimental fiction such as the surreal or the fantastical are considered so separate from reality that the genre is often not approached as a serious imitation of life. Yet, in spite of and perhaps even because of this disregard, the genre of fantasy creates spaces where politics and society are discussed without severe consequences, much like the two Né Zhā films do. As Can Xue, one of China's fictional avant-garde writers, states in an interview: 'the main duty of an artist is to change the souls and bodies of common people' and she continues on to say that 'our work is very important to politics in the world'.<sup>31</sup>

The Né Zhā films function in the genre of the fantastical and the mythical, however this does not restrict them from providing a peep hole into reality. The strong dialogues and plot lines delve into themes of identity, family and community which are borne of real experiences, in turn creating a strong tether between the youth and the protagonist, Né Zhā. The popularity of the Né Zhā films, brings forth with great clarity the dissatisfaction amidst the Chinese youth. The films, *Né Zhā* (2019) and *Né Zhā 2: The Demon Child Churns the Sea* (2025), act as political texts which in a practical sense provide the youth with strength and a non-normative hero. Simultaneously the Né Zhā films receive strength from the youth and their support, allowing them to climb to success and send a powerful message.

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## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank Dr. Hemant Adlakha for mentoring me through the course of this paper, guiding me gently while providing me the space to explore and find my own way. Though my field of study is within literature, with Dr. Adlakha's guidance I was able to traverse the terrains of politics, which in turn has made my research much more impactful and relevant. His insightful comments on my research ideas encouraged me to dig deeper and look past surface level appearances into the core impact of my chosen piece of media. I believe that my learnings from him during the course of this research study will continue to inform my approach towards research projects in the future.

## About the Author

Sneha Chandran Sinha is a fourth-year student at Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, Delhi-NCR, pursuing BA (Research) in English with a minor in Dance. Her core research interests lie in literature and film, especially within the fantasy and magical realism genre and its potential to comment on socio-political aspects of life. Having lived in China and been a part of its culture, she is interested in recently released Chinese fantasy media, such as *Né Zhā*, which can act as a window into present day Chinese society and politics. She is also passionate about creative writing and seeks to approach literary research with the aid of her base in creative expression. Additionally, she has carried out oral history research in the field of dance which continues to inform her approach to methodology.

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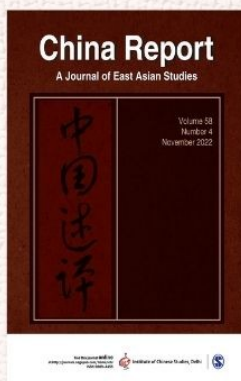


Draft paper of ongoing research



Authored by the faculty, also emerging from research projects & international conferences

## ICS JOURNAL



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