

08 - 10 August 2025  
Berlin, Germany

# **Framing Femininity: Audience Reception of Gender Representation in Chinese Mythological Cinema on Xiaohongshu**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates how Chinese millennials and Gen Z users respond to contrasting portrayals of female characters in *Ne Zha 2* and *Creation of the Gods 2*, two blockbuster mythological films released during the 2025 Spring Festival. While the former presents women as passive and ornamental, the latter centers a powerful female general who challenges traditional gender norms. Drawing on digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis, this study analyzes user-generated posts ( $n = 100$ ) from Xiaohongshu, a popular social media platform among Chinese youth. The analysis focuses on two dimensions: how users interpret female portrayals and the discursive strategies they employ to justify their perspectives. Findings reveal an unexpected double standard: ornamental female characters are celebrated for their beauty and emotional resonance, while assertive women provoke discomfort, backlash, and accusations of disrupting the narrative. Users draw on various discursive strategies to justify their evaluations, including legitimization (e.g., invoking sacrifice or narrative logic to excuse disempowerment), emotional appeals (e.g., referencing sympathy or discomfort), and framing or othering, where empowered women are cast as unnatural or excessive. These discursive patterns reflect persistent gendered expectations about who is allowed to lead, speak, or be heroic in mainstream storytelling. By shifting the analytical lens from media production to audience reception, the study highlights how everyday digital commentary both reflects and reproduces dominant gender ideologies in contemporary Chinese culture. It also positions Xiaohongshu as a space of informal gender learning, where young users encounter and navigate understandings of gender, power, and cultural belonging.

**Keywords:** audience reception; chinese cinema; digital discourse; feminist media studies; gender ideology