

Aesthetic Evolution of Male Characters in Chinese Web Animations in the Digital Age (2011–2024)

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese network animation with male as the protagonist from 2011 to 2024 is the research object. From the perspective of technical media, this paper systematically discusses the aesthetic construction and evolution of male character image under three main technical forms of 2D, 3D and cel-shading. This paper uses Stuart Hall's 'encoding and decoding' model to analyze the text of male characters, and combines technical logic and market audience to explore the meaning of its visual elements. The study found that the technical form has a profound impact on the aesthetic expression of male characters. 2D animation shapes a symbolic body from borrowing Japanese style to integrate local aesthetic elements through line generalization and proportional reorganization. Relying on the continuous iteration of technology, 3D animation has realized the transformation of male character from early rough symbolic image to the type differentiation of masculinity aesthetics and femininity aesthetics, and finally towards the highly realistic bodies; Cel-shading animation seeks the balance between 3D structure and 2D style, forming a unique harmonious aesthetic form.

Keywords: Chinese network animation, Technical media, Male character, Evolution of aesthetics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Male animation characters are the visual projection of the aesthetic taste, gender perception and cultural ideal of the times. The male animation characters gradually form an aesthetic development pattern dominated by 2D, 3D and cel-shading. Under the control of different technical logics, the construction methods of character images show significant differences and reveal phased changes in body proportion, structural shaping and visual texture. At present, the research of animation characters takes the visual model and character development as the main research object. There are two research paths. One is to analyze the social and cultural significance of animation characters combined with narrative. The other is to analyze the visual elements of characters. The former usually uses case analysis method, comparative analysis method combined with social and cultural context, narrative strategy to analyze the shaping process of single or type of character image. The latter introduces research methods such as statistical analysis and coding analysis or semiotics to analyze the feature of type of character. This study uses the

'encoding and decoding' model to analyze the visual model and props of male characters. Therefore, the investigation of the aesthetic evolution of male characters in Chinese network animation is not limited to the simple analysis of visual style, but also the key to insight into the technical logic, market orientation and cultural consciousness of digital content production in a period.

2. SYMBOLIC AESTHETICS OF 2D CHARACTERS

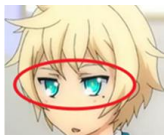
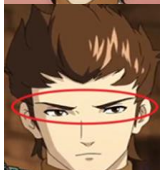
The early Chinese animation has created a distinctive 'Chinese School of Animation' style, but it has not been effectively inherited in the tide of marketization. With the strong entry of Japanese animation with perfect industrial production capacity, its visual style and genre-based narrative are constantly copied and strengthened in media communication, shaping the audience's expectation with Japanese animation aesthetics as the reference system (Half Month Talk Magazine, 2025). Under the influence of 'economic vicious cycle' and 'cultural cycle' (Su & Liu, 2014), domestic 2D

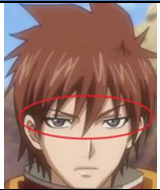
character design gradually form aesthetic inertia for the Japanese character design, especially in the field of network animation before 2015. The most representative feature is the enhanced depiction of the eyes, commonly expressed with typical Japanese styles such as large round eyes or slender eyes.

Among them, one group of male show obvious 'Baby schema' characteristics which strengthen emotional expression and affinity by enlarging the proportion of eyes and refining expression changes; The other group of male commonly use slender eyes to shape melancholy, mild or mysterious temperament types, so that the male characters show a mature and introverted personality. The two types of facial configurations tend to be concise and balanced in the line processing, and the visual focus formed by exaggerating the eyes, therefore

enhancing the emotional readability of the characters and the attraction to the audience. This reference to the aesthetic paradigm of Japanese 'limited animation' reflects the dual dependence of the early industry on technology and style (Ren, 2015). At the same time, in the ACGN subcultural sphere of this period, attribute labels such as 'otaku' 'fuhei' 'dai' and 'moe', which originated from the Japanese animation context, were widely introduced to refer to the character's personality characteristics or behavior patterns, and gradually solidified into recognizable type symbols in barrage culture and social media communication. To a certain extent, such labels concentrate and externalize the aesthetic expectations of the audience, so that the character can be identified and disseminated through a simplified and efficient symbol system. ("Table 1")

Table 1. Visual representation of male characters' eyes

Visual Features of the Eyes	Works	Release Date	Main Character	The Eyes Presentation
Round Eyes	<i>General practitioner</i>	2014	ZhangDabao(张大宝)	
Round Eyes	<i>Cupid's Chocolate</i>	2015	JiangHaoyi(江浩一)	
Round Eyes	<i>Ace Royal History</i>	2015	YeYan(叶言)	
Round Eyes	<i>List of Monsters</i>	2014/2017	FengXi(封夕)	
Slender Eyes	<i>I Am Bai Xiaofei</i>	2013	BaiYaofei(白小飞)	
Slender Eyes	<i>SON OF EDEN</i>	2015	SunHaoxuan(孙浩轩)	
Slender Eyes	<i>The Heroic Age</i>	2015	JiNing(纪宁)	

Visual Features of the Eyes	Works	Release Date	Main Character	The Eyes Presentation
Slender Eyes	<i>Spiritual realm</i>	2015	QinLie(秦烈)	

For example, the signifier of the ahoge¹ on the head refers to the dorky attribute of the character, or implies its potential special ability. Male characters in works such as *One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes*, *Fox Spirit Matchmaker* and *List of Monsters*, use such visual symbols to shape the personality traits of slow response but maintain pure temperament, so as to strengthen the affinity and dramatic effect of the characters. (“Figure 1”, “Figure 2”)

The alternative aesthetic orientation characterized by playful satire and exaggerated humor is also the dominant trait of this period. In the initial stage, Chinese network animation is driven by the logic of traffic and the demand of mass entertainment. The creation tends to quickly attract the audience’s attention by emphasizing the entertainment elements, which leads to the image design characterized by exaggerated modeling and unconventional clothing. *The Courier Hero and Is there a God* so it is. In terms of identity setting, male characters in this stage are mostly shaped by ‘ordinary people’ as a prototype. From the perspective of the audience, this daily orientation helps to shorten the psychological distance between the character and male audience, strengthen the sense of immersion and promote identification; From the perspective of production, early production resources of network animation are limited, and character design often serves narrative advancement rather than fine design, showing that the function have priority over aesthetic accuracy.

Since 2015, the proportion of female audiences in domestic animation tended to be balanced with men and showed a trend of surpassing (Zhejiang Online, 2016; Qianzhan Industrial Research Institute, 2018; iResearch, 2019; Pan, 2026), the aesthetic preference of female audiences began to influence the design of male characters and became an important pole of the market. The viewing

experience and aesthetic expectation of female audiences have put forward higher requirements for the appearance standards and ability setting of male characters, which has led to a shift in their type positioning. The most typical manifestation is that the beautified male characters become the mainstream.(“Figure 3”)

The face of the character is mostly oval or a ‘V’ shape. The eyes tend to be slender such as phoenix eyes or almond-shaped eyes. The nose and mouth are summarized by simplified lines. The hairstyle is often guided by the ‘M’ shape bangs. The proportion of the body is mostly 7.5 to 9 heads heights. The muscle tends to be moderate, and the leg lines are intentionally elongated to strengthen the sense of slender, showing an elegant and upright posture as a whole. This kind of character has both good look and powerful ability, reflecting the ideal and functional male image construction.(“Figure 4”, “Figure 5”)

1. ahoge: ACG cultural term, refers to a pinch (or multiple pinches) of prominent and raised hair on the head of anime characters, which is often used to express the character’s dull personality.



Figure 1 Hairstyle characteristics of male characters.



Figure 2 Unconventional attire for male characters.

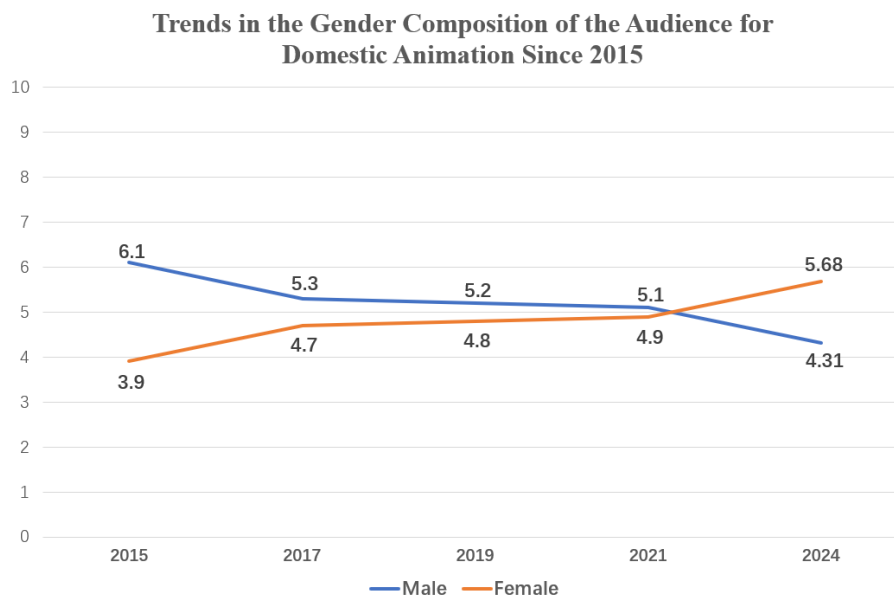


Figure 3 Trends in audience gender distribution.



Figure 4 Hairstyle characteristics of beautified male characters.



Figure 5 Beautified male characters.

Props are the visual extension of the character's personality and identity, which can promote the growth of the character in the narrative. Under the background of the audience's demand for national animation, Chinese network animation uses props to strengthen the multi-dimensionality of male characters and combines them with traditional cultural elements. In the whole narrative structure, the interaction between the male character and props are deepened. For example, in *Rakshasa Street*, Cao Yanbing's weapon 'ShiDianYanLuo' borrows the image of the dragon to design, visually strengthens the authority and mystery, and narratively serve as a reflection of personality and a test of his will. The brush in *Spirits in Chinese*

Brushes is personalized, and the body of the brush is visually translated according to historical documents, making it a symbolic carrier of the talent and spirit of ancient literati. It reflects the growth arc of the male character by showing the evolving relationship of the character and brush from conflict to reconciliation. In *Fog Hill of Five Element*, the weapons such as spears, battle axes, swords and darts that constitute the essence of Oriental martial arts, serve the play performance of male characters through brush strokes and color expressions. Both the characters and props are indexed by historical texts, and explore a creative path that integrates fantasy narratives with traditional cultural resources. ("Figure 6")



Figure 6 Male character prop design.

It is particularly noteworthy that the character visual system at this stage began to get rid of the single influence of the Japanese modeling paradigm, and turned to explore the modeling language and artistic style with local aesthetic features. The typical case is the *Scissor Seve* with the aesthetic feature of ugliness. The protagonist Wu Liuqi, with hedgehog hairstyle and black eye circles as representative symbols, and intentionally subverts the traditional beauty standards in facial expression, body proportion and costume design. The configuration lines are simple and smooth, remove

redundant decoration and form a highly recognizable visual image. In contrast, *Fog Hill of Five Element* transforms the line into an aesthetic object, draws on the brush strokes to form a hand-painted texture with uneven thickness, and effectively reconciles the visual relationship between the character and environment through a unified style of line language, creating an oriental aesthetic atmosphere of 'the interplay between the virtual and the real' (Liu & Qian, 2024). ("Figure 7")



Figure 7 Stylized exploration of male animation characters.

3. THE REALISTIC AESTHETICS OF 3D CHARACTERS

In the context of 3D animation, the phased changes in the aesthetic form of male characters are essentially the visual mapping of 3D technology iteration and mature industrial production system (Tang, 2022). Compared with the stylized construction of 2D animation relying on lines and proportions, 3D animation is based on spatial modeling and physical simulation, and its aesthetic pursuit points to immersive and image-based simulation effects. The progress of core technologies such as modeling, binding and rendering directly determines the accuracy of the body structure, the fluidity of movement and the authenticity of material performance. Therefore, in addition to factors such as audience targeting and platform mechanism, the aesthetic practice of 3D animation reflects a stronger dependence on technology, and its male character image is always in the dynamic tension between aesthetic demand and technology realization.

The period from 2011 to 2016 can be regarded as the enlightenment and exploration stage of Chinese 3D network animation. At that time, the aesthetic paradigm of 'Internet celebrity face' such as big eyes, high nose bridge and sharp chin was prevalent in the Internet, and the relevant features were transplanted into the male character modeling. However, due to the immature production process, limited computing power and software conditions, and creators' lack of proficiency in 3D technology, there is a significant gap between aesthetic ideals and technical capabilities, and the modeling shows a certain degree of roughness. For example, the high-precision hair system is difficult to achieve, and the hair style is mostly presented in a patchy way, which lack of real layer and volume. At the same time, the limited number of bone binding levels and key frames makes the character movement appear mechanical, especially in facial expressions. Due to the lack of technical support for

muscle subdivision and morphological mixing, emotional expression is prone to distortion or rigidity. The male characters in the works such as *Lalala Demacia*, *The Outlaws of the Gravel*, *Brave Adventure*, reflect the structural imbalance of aesthetic intention ahead of technological realization. Although the 3D character in this stage has completed the transition from 2D to 3D, it has not yet established a stable image-level realism.

From 2016 to 2019, Chinese 3D animation market entered a stage of rapid expansion, and the production process gradually moved towards an industrial system of standardization and a refined division of labor. The continuous upgrading of the technical level provides a solid foundation for the aesthetic deepening of the male character. In the modeling process, the details of clothing wrinkles, metal and prop texture are obviously enhanced; The facial structure tends to be refined in terms of skin texture, sub-surface scattering and eye highlight treatment, which makes the character more realistic and tactile in vision. The binding system introduces morphological mixing and motion capture technology to significantly improve the coherence of facial micro-expressions and body movements, and the character performance changes from early mechanized movement to more smooth and natural dynamic presentation. The 3D male body thus obtains the double support of structural reality and time reality. The improvement of technical ability does not lead to a single aesthetic standard, but to two representative types of male images. One is the aesthetics of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) represented by works such as *INCARNATION*, *The Black Troop*, *The Invasion of Awakening*. In terms of facial structure, this kind of character emphasizes bone angles and distinct contours with prominent eyebrows and cheekbones, clear jawlines, and overall muscular, powerful appearance. The improvement of modeling accuracy enhances the sense of muscle volume and skin texture, so that the male body presents a visual effect of strength, oppression and

realism. To a certain extent, this type of character draws on the male body paradigm in Hollywood science fiction and military films, emphasizing the functionality and combat capabilities. The other is the aesthetics of subordinate masculinity (Connell, 1995) represented by *The Blood of Youth*, *Battle Through the Heavens*, *Soul Land*. The facial contours of this type are softer, the skin texture is smooth, the eye portrayal is exquisite, the eyelashes are dense and the eyebrows are slender; the overall temperament tends to be refined and elegant. Different from the early 2D Japanese style, the 3D

beautiful body of this period is based on the real modeling structure, and realizes the idealization based on realism through high-precision rendering and light and shadow shaping. The strength of male characters are internalized into temperament and ability, rather than relying solely on externalization of muscle mass. The rise of such aesthetic forms is closely related to the increasing proportion of female audiences and their heightened aesthetic expectations, reflecting the reverse shaping of male body by the change of audience market structure. (“Figure 8” “Table 2”)

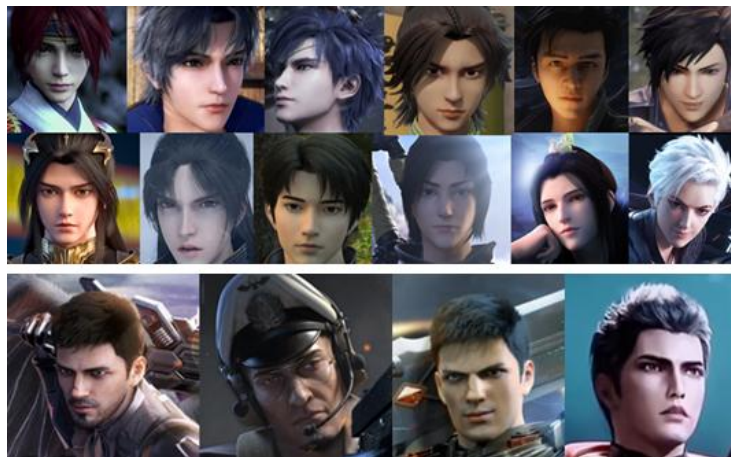


Figure 8 Facial Features of two types of male characters.

Table 2. A Comparison of the aesthetic characteristics of two male characters

Visual Feature	Masculine Aesthetics	Feminine Aesthetics
Facial Contours	Hard, straight lines Square face shape Prominent cheekbones	Smooth lines Oval face Less prominent cheekbones
Facial Features	High brow ridges Elongated eyes Thin lips	Narrow alar of the nose Large eyes Full lips
Skeletal Structure	Distinct facial bone structure Strong contrast	Soft facial bone structure Weak contrast
General Characteristics	Emphasizes secondary sexual characteristics	Minimizes secondary sexual characteristics

At the same time, the improvement of computing power and rendering ability also promotes the design of character props into the stage of refinement and culturalization. Weapons and artefacts are no longer merely functional narrative tools, but gradually become visual carriers of identity symbols and cultural meanings. The design based on traditional weapons or ritual vessels—such as swords, knives, spears, halberds, furnaces and tripods—is based on the addition of patterns, the reconstruction of the shape, and the strengthening of the material, so that the props can

convey clearer historical and cultural references on a visual level. Some works embed traditional cultural semantics in naming and design of weapons, making props an important part of characters’ personality and the construction of worldview. Based on this, the visual symbol analysis of related weapon names, semantic structures and visual elements is helpful to reveal how the 3D male characters expand the cultural depth of their aesthetic expression through material details with the support of industrial technology. (“Table 3”)

Table 3. Analysis of visual symbols in weapons and items

Figure	Name	Description	Analysis of Design Elements	Semantic Analysis
	YuanZhongChi	A massive black ruler forged from Meteor Flame Mystic Iron	The edges are jagged, the surface is uneven, and the entire piece is covered with irregular patterns.	Based on the ancient bludgeons or whips, this weapon emphasizes a bludgeoning attack style.
	WanShouDing	A dark red triple cauldron capable of refining elixirs	The entire piece is engraved with golden reliefs depicting various mythical beasts, such as tigers, eagles, and dragons.	Drawing inspiration from ancient three-legged, two-handled bronze tripod, this design borrows its cultural symbolism of power and status to represent the alchemist's identity.
	YanChiDuanJian	A crimson-red short sword forged from fire-attribute ore	The hilt and guard are covered with dragon scales; the blade is engraved with celestial runes.	Using the dragon as a central motif to highlight the weapon's power
	YanChiLun & WangXiuLun	Combined wheel blades cast from mystic iron and metal	The body of the Cold Chi wheel is inlaid with Mystic Ice Spirit Pearls and carved throughout with Chi Dragon patterns; The surface of the Zhangxiu wheel insets with purple Spirit Pearls and engraved with auspicious cloud patterns.	Drawing inspiration from the ancient mythical beasts Chi and Pixiu, the weapon's attributes — both fierce and majestic, as well as sinister and cunning — are derived from the characteristics of these creatures.
	YouXue	An ancient qin made of wood and jade	The body of the Guqin is inlaid with metal pieces featuring lotus motifs at both ends, complemented by designs such as auspicious clouds and scrollwork.	Based on the ancient seven-string Guqin, this instrument has been transformed from a musical instrument into a weapon capable of area-of-effect attacks.
	HaoTianChui	Octahedral Warhammer	The entire piece is jet black, and the surface of the hammerhead and handle is symmetrically adorned with diamond and cloud patterns.	Drawing inspiration from the design features of the ancient cold weapon known as the "Jian," the weapon's power is emphasized by its faceted blade.

Since 2019, 3D animation has introduced core technologies such as digital scanning, game engines, and material simulation to achieve multiple breakthroughs in key processes such as modeling, rigging and rendering. At that time, 3D production technology was entering the period of breakthrough and innovation at a critical juncture. During the modeling phase, the data was directly converted into digital models through digital scanning, with a level of detail and precision compared to that of real people, achieving a realistic 'digital avatar' effect. The accuracy of character modeling is significantly improved, and the subtle changes of skin texture, surface contours and skeletal structure are completely preserved, so that the male characters present the visual features close to real individuals. For example, the design of male characters in *The Island of Siliang* and *A Record of a Mortal's Journey to Immortality* can clearly see the subtle texture of skin pores, the detailed simulation of the eyelids and pupils, and the

realistic rendering of the fingernails and skin folds on the hands. The upgrade of the rigging system has further enhanced the dynamic reality of the body. Through in-depth muscular level driving mechanism and high-precision motion capture technology, the character face can present more nuanced emotional fluctuations and micro-expression changes, the shift in center of gravity and inertial feedback more closely align with the law of human movement. In the rendering process, the application of real-time rendering system represented by Unreal Engine 5 greatly improves the accuracy of geometric volume density and global illumination calculations. The feedback of hair, fabric and skin textures in the dynamic lighting environment is more natural, and the real-time response of characters to changes in lighting as they move enhances the sense of spatial immersion. This extreme emphasis on detail makes the character no longer mere narrative symbol, but also an image body that can be closely examined.

Thus, the 3D male character completes the leap from modeling realism to perceptual realism. This evolution profoundly demonstrates how the technological media constantly reshapes the sense

of presence and realism of the virtual body through the ‘compensatory’ logic (Wang, 2024). (“Figure 9”, “Figure 10”)



Figure 9 Highly realistic male character faces.



Figure 10 Comparison of lighting and shading effects on character faces across different time periods.

4. THE HARMONIOUS AESTHETICS OF CEL-SHADING CHARACTERS

Cel-shading is a form of animation based on 3D modeling, through employing technologies such as non-photorealistic rendering to simulate 2D painting effect. Its core is not a simple technical combination, but rather the establishment of an adjustable expressive mechanism between the 3D spatial structure and the 2D visual style. Through the collaborative control of model structure, outline algorithms and material processing, the character not only retains the 3D volume and movement logic, but also presents a flat visual texture, thus forming

a harmonious aesthetic form between 2D and 3D. At the level of visual perception, cel-shading characters have distinct dual attributes. When the character is in static composition, its outline and color blocks strengthen the 2D effect, bringing it closer to a 2D conceptual expression; when the character begins to move, changes of light and shadow along with shifts in space expose its 3D structure, making the audience aware of its physical presence. Therefore, the character swings between the conceptual plane and the perceptual space, showing the mixed and eclectic aesthetic taste. (“Figure 11”)



Figure 11 Stylized rendering of male characters in cel-shading.

In the early stage of technology integration, some works such as *The Legend of Kuiba Demon Warrior*, *No Doubt In Us*, *Jiang Xiaobai*, often exhibit a stylistic disconnect between 2D faces and 3D bodies. The face relies on flat depiction and simplified color blocks, while the body still retains a strong sense of volume and realistic lighting and shading feedback, resulting in the lack of visual consistency. This inconsistency essentially reflects the fact that the control mechanism have not yet matured during the transition from 3D technology to 2D style. With the accumulation of production experience, male character has gradually formed two stable and harmonious paths. First, by thickening the outlines and simulating the uneven brushstrokes drawn by hand, the presence of the contour lines is emphasized, so that the lines become the core elements which can define the visual structure, and contributing to the expression of emotion and the rhythm of movement. For example, in *Song of the Broadsword*, variations in the thickness and intensity of the characters' outlines enhance the visual effect, making the line itself a medium for conveying emotion, thus reconstructing the expressive power of 2D painting in 3D space. Secondly, in the modeling and rendering process, the realistic lighting and shading feedback is intentionally weakened, the models have geometrical and exaggerated treatments, and the 2D effect is strengthened through manual post-processing. Works such as *TO BE HERO X* retain traces of artificial intervention on the basis of 3D rendering, and even actively amplify the unrealistic texture, allowing the characters to releases the expressive power of 2D art within the 3D structure. This deliberate control over realism reinforces the role of 3D as a tool in the service of 2D style.

From the perspective of production, the aesthetic integration of cel-shading is a derivative approach with 3D as the underlying framework and 2D style as the surface expression. After the maturity of the technology, the domestic animation gradually turned to build a more expressive visual system by adjusting the level of realism, replacing the previous one-way pursuit of image-level realism. From the audience's perspective, the rise of cel-shading animation has responded to the viewers' emotional expectations regarding the aesthetic tradition of Chinese 2D animation. Under the background that 3D technology has become the mainstream of the industry, cel-shading provides a workaround strategy, which not only conforms to the efficiency demands of industrial production, but also retains the genre memories and aesthetic

conventions carried by 2D style. Consequently, its harmonious aesthetic stems from the negotiation between technology and cultural expectations, which reflects creative integration rather than a simple compromise.

5. CONCLUSION

Male characters are important visual subjects in Chinese network animation. The aesthetic representation of male animated characters is the dynamic balance shaped by the interplay of technical, market, and culture. From the perspective of technological media, the parallel development and mutual influence of technical approaches such as 2D, 3D and cel-shading, have formed a complementary and symbiotic content production landscape. They jointly expand the dimension and depth of male animated character design through their respective technical aesthetics logic. Among them, the 2D animation is characterized by its symbolic nature and guided by ethnic aesthetics, it realizes the breakthrough of Japanese style and turns to the exploration of community aesthetics. Under the support of computing power, 3D animation strives to create realistic male characters, providing the audiences with an immersive image-level aesthetic experience. As an aesthetic attempt to integrate 2D and 3D production technology, the cel-shading animation has not yet formed a distinct visual aesthetic system. The male character is not only an aesthetic object, but also an identity anchor for the audience to see themselves. Therefore, in the wave of technological inclusion, the ultimate value of technology may not be to infinitely close to the illusion of reality, but to help creators more freely and accurately shape the 'ideal body' that embodies the spirit of the times, arouses emotional resonance and shows cultural uniqueness.

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