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From “Fan-Oriented” to “Mass Appeal”: The Breakout Code of *The Legend of Luoxiaohei 2* — An Analysis of the Animated Film

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Abstract

As a rising and influential original Chinese animation IP, *The Legend of Luoxiaohei 2* achieved a phenomenal breakout in the summer 2025 box office, transitioning from a fan-centric niche to a mainstream cultural phenomenon. This paper takes the film as its research subject, analyzing the synergistic effects of transmedia storytelling to explore how the Luoxiaohei IP—comprising series, comics, and films—constructs an intertextual narrative network that expands its worldbuilding in a multidimensional way. It then examines participatory culture and how fan co-creation mechanisms transform audiences from passive content receivers into active narrative collaborators. Finally, it discusses how the introduction of anti-war themes and the artisanal spirit of 2D hand-drawn animation break through subcultural barriers. By analyzing these strategies systematically, the paper reveals the IP’s innovative operation and boundary expansion, and proposes a three-dimensional ecosystem of ‘content cultivation—media synergy—user co-creation’ as a reference model for sustainable development of domestic animation IPs that balance artistic integrity with commercial viability.

Keywords: Summer box office; animated film; IP operation

In the summer of 2025, *The Legend of Luoxiaohei 2* premiered. This sequel, released six years after the original film, not only preserved the healing essence of its predecessor but also achieved a comprehensive upgrade in narrative structure, production quality, and IP management. Originally launched online in 2011 as a TV-format animation series, the franchise has gradually evolved into a widely influential animation IP. As a representative of original Chinese animation, *The Legend of Luoxiaohei 2*’s successful transition from a fan-oriented niche to a mainstream cultural phenomenon offers valuable insights for the industry—especially in an era dominated by fast-consumption media. It raises a key question: how can deep content cultivation and fan co-creation be leveraged to build a culturally enduring IP with lasting vitality?

I. IP Construction Path: Transmedia Storytelling Synergy and Participatory Co-Creation

1.1 Synergistic Effects of Transmedia Storytelling

The Legend of Luoxiaohei first debuted online in 2011 as an animated series, quickly connecting with audiences through its heartwarming narrative and “cute” visual style. Centered on the daily life of the black cat Luoxiaohei and the human girl Luoxiaobai, the series gradually built a fantasy world where humans and spirits coexist. Its high-quality content made it a benchmark for domestic animated series and laid a solid fanbase for future development. The IP expanded across media platforms: in 2015, a comic adaptation was published; in 2019, the first film premiered as a prequel, focusing on Luoxiaohei’s journey with his mentor Wuxian, deepening the IP’s influence. In 2021, a spin-off comic *Blue Creek Town* was released, filling in character backstories and worldbuilding gaps, available in both digital and print formats. In summer 2025, *The Legend of Luoxiaohei 2* premiered, continuing the established universe and introducing dual narrative threads to explore war themes, marking a thematic evolution.

This multi-platform layout exemplifies transmedia storytelling. The Luoxiaohei IP presents a rich and

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multidimensional narrative through a matrix of series, comics, and films, forming a “super universe.” Henry Jenkins, in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, defines transmedia storytelling as a narrative that spans multiple media platforms, with each contributing uniquely and valuably to the overall story. Ideally, each medium performs its role excellently¹.

In such transmedia works, content across platforms belongs to a shared narrative origin. These contents echo each other in character development, plot progression, and worldbuilding. Jenkins’ principles—expansion and depth, continuity and diversity, immersion and extractability, worldbuilding, seriality, subjectivity, and user performance—form a complete intertextual system and network, offering a broader and richer narrative than single-medium works.

Luoxiaohei’s IP uses the “cute” black cat as its core text, adapting content for different platforms and audiences. The series provides character and worldbuilding foundations; comics and spin-offs fill in backstories and side plots; films deepen themes and expand audiences. Together, they form a tightly interwoven narrative network that transcends any single medium. This content-centered, media-carried operational model offers a theoretically sound and practically effective reference for domestic animation IPs seeking cross-demographic reach and stable audience engagement.

1.2 Participatory Co-Creation in IP Practice

The creative team behind *The Legend of Luoxiaohei 2* fosters an open creative ecosystem, encouraging fan participation and embracing fan-made content. This transforms audiences from passive consumers into narrative co-creators and dissemination nodes, aligning with the logic of contemporary participatory culture. Doujin culture, a core aspect of youth subculture, originates from the Japanese term “Doujin”(どうじん) and refers to fan-made creations based on existing works. In online communities, it has evolved into a productive and community-driven cultural practice. Jenkins notes in *Convergence Culture* that amateur productions are highly public and challenge the historical marginalization of grassroots media, showing how participatory culture gains more narrative power in dissemination.

The Luoxiaohei team strengthens audience identification through consistent IP image-building and fan community engagement. Loyal fan groups provide a foundation for future content and product commercialization. On platforms like LOFTER, Luoxiaohei consistently ranks at the top of trending searches and fan creation charts. The official Weibo account has praised fan creations, stating “the charm of doujin lies in personal interpretation,” and frequently shares fan works.

These fan creations reflect Michel de Certeau’s concept of users creatively “appropriating” texts in everyday life, highlighting shifts in individual power structures within mass culture. In the series arc *Gate of All Beings*, in-show game forum IDs and avatars are based on real fans, allowing audiences to become part of the story and creating a nested narrative effect for immersive engagement².

The flourishing of doujin culture directly supports the IP’s market presence. Fan works and long-tail effects fill gaps between official releases, maintaining IP popularity and extending its cultural lifecycle. These self-organized creations not only sustain interest through fan art and videos but also expand the narrative boundaries into niche cultural domains, elevating symbolic consumption into meaningful co-creation. This user-driven content production and interaction model aligns with Manuel Castells’ theory of cultural production in the network society, offering a replicable operational paradigm for domestic animation IPs.

II. Expanding IP Boundaries: Thematic Depth and 2D Aesthetics

2.1 Thematic Deepening Through Anti-War Narratives

Compared to the TV series’ focus on warm daily life, the film version of Luoxiaohei adopts a distinct narrative strategy and theme selection. It abandons anthropocentrism and uses a spirit-centric perspective to build a world of human-spirit coexistence, aligning with Shklovsky’s theory of defamiliarization—art as a

method of making things strange and complex³. Themes of war ethics, civilizational conflict, and techno-alienation drive the IP's transition from fan-centric to mainstream appeal. These deepen the core worldbuilding by exploring contradictions, offering audiences more complex narratives and interpretive space: the macro conflict of human-developed weapons threatening spirits, Wuxian's identity crisis due to his human origins, and Luoxiaohei and his mentor Luye's personal choices amid conflict.

The character Luye symbolizes the anti-war theme. Her personal memories and choices explore hatred and forgiveness. Her reflective narrative arc, especially the ending where she observes the mentor-student bond and imagines a lost childhood, creates emotional tension across time and space. This Bakhtinian "chronotope" avoids moral preaching and uses artistic silence to provoke deeper reflection on peace. Luoxiaohei's childlike perspective adds warmth to heavy themes. His naive questioning of justice deconstructs adult binary thinking, giving the anti-war theme philosophical depth. "Luo Xiaohei's perspective in the film is not only conveyed through low-angle subjective shots, but also serves as the observational viewpoint within the entire narrative framework."⁴ The dual perspectives of Luye and Luoxiaohei form a polyphonic structure, enriching the narrative's complexity.

Overall, the thematic expansion enables cross-demographic dissemination. The film's core conflict evolves from coexistence to war and technology, resonating with contemporary concerns about tech hegemony and cultural discourse. This attracts broader audiences, including non-animation fans, who find emotional and intellectual engagement. Complex characters like Luye offer empathy anchors for adult viewers, while Luoxiaohei's innocence keeps the IP's "cute" tone, preserving entertainment value. Through broader emotional and value expression, *The Legend of Luoxiaohei 2* expands its target audience and achieves a successful breakout, offering a model for domestic animation IPs.

2.2 Artisanal Spirit in 2D Presentation

In an era dominated by efficient, mass-producible 3D animation, *The Legend of Luoxiaohei 2*'s choice of full 2D presentation is a bold artistic endeavor. Director Mutou explained in an interview: "We chose 2D because of its 'drawing feel'—we love drawing, and in 3D workflows, that feeling is rare beyond early design stages."⁵ This "drawing feel" refers to animation as dynamic painting. The insistence on painterly aesthetics contrasts with 3D's parameterized motion, echoing McLuhan's "the medium is the message"—2D hand-drawing is not just a technical choice but a carrier of unique aesthetic and creative texture. In the production feature "Let's Adventure Together," the team revealed over 200,000 original frames were drawn. The most challenging "airplane battle" scene took 4–5 months to design with expert consultation and used "one-shot-one-frame" animation—24 frames per second—to ensure fluid and dynamic motion⁶. Character designs use minimalist lines, demanding high skill in expressive simplicity. For example, the flying scenes between Luoxiaohei and Luye require both aesthetic motion and character-specific action language, showcasing the team's pursuit of quality.

This artisanal spirit imbues the film with Eastern aesthetic qualities and distinctive visual-narrative expression. In a market favoring fast production, this "slow craftsmanship" becomes rare and valuable. The irreplicability and tactile quality of 2D animation evoke Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" in art. The film's positive reception and audience growth validate this aesthetic choice—when technical investment translates into perceptible artistic quality, the medium's traits can transcend subcultures and evoke universal emotional resonance.

However, the film's frame-by-frame action scenes also sparked debate over compressed narrative space. High investment in visual spectacle may lead to imbalanced resource allocation, affecting plot pacing and character development. Viewers expect both visual breakthroughs and emotional depth. For instance, Luye's flashback arc, while emotionally resonant, was criticized for its loose integration with the main storyline, leading some viewers to perceive it as redundant. This tension highlights a core challenge in Chinese animation: how to balance visual spectacle with narrative depth, and avoid falling into formulaic

“thrill-first” storytelling. It invites creators to reflect on the equilibrium between commercial appeal and artistic integrity.

III. Conclusion

The developmental trajectory of *The Legend of Luoxiaohei 2* offers both practical and theoretical insights into the systemic construction of domestic animation IPs. Through transmedia storytelling, the creators achieved multidimensional worldbuilding, forming an intertextual narrative network across series, comics, and films. By fostering a participatory cultural environment, they activated fan communities and transformed audiences into co-creators of the narrative. The deepening of themes—particularly the anti-war discourse—enabled the story to engage with broader public issues, while the artisanal spirit of 2D hand-drawn animation provided a case study in balancing technical aesthetics with artistic expression.

Together, these strategies form a three-dimensional ecosystem of “content cultivation—media synergy—user co-creation.” The IP’s successful transition from niche fandom to mainstream recognition offers valuable lessons for Chinese animation creators. Future breakthroughs may lie in anchoring narratives around core themes, leveraging media convergence, and empowering user creativity—while remaining responsive to contemporary social concerns. Only by doing so can a “phenomenal hit” evolve into a culturally enduring symbol.

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The Myth of Generative AI: Empowering Creativity and Exploring New Production Models

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Abstract

Generative AI demonstrates significant enabling potential in mythological reimagining. As humanity's earliest aesthetic creations, myths have developed diverse cultural connotations and narrative traditions across regions. Through pattern recognition, semantic generation, and cross-modal translation, generative AI not only restores ancient mythological imagery but also cross-culturally reconfigures symbolic systems. It expands immersive audiovisual experiences and accesses subconscious dream expression. As a quintessential form of new-quality productive forces, it propels human-machine co-creation and knowledge reproduction while confronting challenges such as content homogenization. Rather than replacing human creators, generative AI as a new-quality productive force heralds a new mythological era of "human-machine synergy".

Keywords: Generative AI; redesign; new-type productive forces.

I. Generative AI's Enabling of Myth

With the rapid development of artificial intelligence technologies, the cultural and creative sector is undergoing a profound structural transformation. Generative AI, with its powerful semantic generation and symbolic recombination capabilities, is shifting from a "tool" toward the role of a "creative subject"¹. Within cultural production systems, it not only reshapes creative methods but also extends the expressive domain of myth, reactivating mythic visual images, narrative logic, and emotional expression and providing new technical contexts and aesthetic pathways for myth dissemination².

1.1 The Cultural and Aesthetic Significance of Traditional Myth

Myth, as humanity's earliest narrative system, manifests rich regionality and cultural differences across civilizations. Greek myth emphasizes conflicts between human and divine; Norse myth foregrounds fate and sacrifice; Chinese myth stresses order and ethics; Maya and Inca myths emphasize natural cycles and agrarian civilization. These myths use symbols and metaphors to embody collective memories about the cosmos, life, and social order, acting as underlying operating systems and psychological codes of civilization.

1.2 The Enabling Functions of Generative AI

Throughout history, mythic expression has relied on technological media. As media evolved—oral tradition with its rhythm and ritual; then writing and painting fixing fleeting images; then printing enabling wider knowledge diffusion—each media revolution altered the dimensions of myth. Digital media introduced interaction and immersion. Generative AI differs from previous media technologies by breaking the dependence of creative production on individual inspiration and manual labor, enabling seemingly infinite extensions of mythic narratives. Myth itself relies on metaphor and symbol to understand the world; generative AI's mechanisms—symbol combination and metaphor extension—are aligned with that core. Trained on large-scale textual and visual corpora, generative models absorb narrative motifs and visual symbols from diverse civilizations and can therefore traverse and recombine elements from Greek, Norse, Chinese, Maya, and Indian mythologies freely. For example, Tencent's game team for *Honor of Kings* used generative AI to produce many concept sketches for hero skins that include innovative designs grounded in Chinese mythic elements; generative AI supplies abundant conceptual options at the ideation stage, freeing

designers from repetitive initial sketches so they can concentrate on optimization and finalization.

II. Generative AI's Reconstruction of Myth

If “enabling” shows generative AI’s technical intervention and expressive extension of traditional myth, then “reconstruction” reveals deeper transformations in narrative logic, aesthetic mechanisms, and cultural dissemination structures. Generative AI not only alters how myths are represented but rewrites narrative rules within its algorithmic logics, activating traditional myth resources by “re-semanticization” and shifting audiences from passive receivers to co-creators of narrative³.

2.1 Reconstruction of Temporal–Spatial Relations

Generative AI breaks the generation logic of temporal–spatial continuity. Through learning probability distributions in large models, it redefines the modes of temporal and spatial existence. Rather than reproducing reality in chronological sequence, generative systems reorganize data in latent spaces. In image generation, time is “folded” so that styles, eras, and memories can be visible simultaneously. In text generation, models can mobilize ancient and modern semantic systems at once, combining archaic mythic language with contemporary technological vocabulary to construct multi-temporal narratives.

In artistic creation, generative AI reconstructs human perception of time and space: artistic generation no longer emphasizes linear creative processes but fuses multiple historical styles and cultural memories at once. For instance, Baidu’s generative-art digital exhibition of *Classic of Mountains and Seas* employed neural-network algorithms to convert abstract mythic beasts into interactive holographic images that viewers can experience, and Alibaba’s “Myth Universe” project used generative algorithms to recreate scenes like Gonggong striking the mountains so audiences can experience the grandeur of the sky-river collapse from multiple perspectives. Generative AI makes myth no longer a distant story but a dynamically simulated and reproducible temporal–spatial reality.

From a narrative-philosophical perspective, generative AI acts as a “co-author of time,” reconstructing and rewriting myths. It does not “remember” history in a conventional sense but recomposes historical corpora to generate new historical contexts. Within generative systems, “time,” “space,” and “subject” become mutually conditional: there is no fixed observer and no fixed timeline, so content recommendation, generated works, and interactive narratives all facilitate “multi-temporal coexistence,” letting past, present, and future images appear together in algorithmic recommendation streams.

2.2 Reconstruction of Narrative Relations

The core of generative AI’s reconstruction of mythic narrative relations lies in algorithms’ ability to decompose and recombine narrative elements, breaking linear-causal narrative frameworks and constructing multidimensional, interactive, personalized networked narrative systems. Tencent’s Generative AI Lab “Myth Graph” visualizes relationships among characters, events, and magical objects in classics such as *Journey to the West* and *Investiture of the Gods*, allowing users to explore narrative pathways freely—for example, tracing the lineage and transmission of the Ruyi Jingu Bang from Great Yu’s flood control to Sun Wukong’s use—turning readers into active explorers rather than passive recipients. Generative-AI short drama productions like “The Monkey King,” presented in first-person narration by Sun Wukong, recombine classical narratives through dialogue, demonstrating generative AI’s creativity in narrative generation. Essentially, generative AI dismantles singular causal-narrative modes and forms an individualized, multi-dimensional story network.

2.3 Reconstruction of Information Dissemination Modes

Generative AI accelerates the concretization and experiential realization of wonder. Traditional mythic spectacle existed in textual descriptions and static visual arts, relying on readers’ imagination. Now, generative

AI can translate any abstract textual description into visually striking images, overcoming limitations in human technical skill and imagination and enabling explosive growth in mythic visual representation. Combined with digital media, generative AI propels myth from symbolic transmission toward immersive dissemination. Mythic wonders are no longer static murals or unidirectional films; they become interactive, changeable dynamic worlds. In the demonstration for the game *Black Myth: Wukong*, VR and other techniques provide immersive experiences allowing players to control Sun Wukong and fight mythic beings, where personal actions become part of myth-making. In metaverse and immersion scenarios, generative AI can create large-scale virtual mythic scenes so audiences can enter and even alter mythic processes—for example, experiencing Pangu’s creation or Nüwa’s mending of heaven in interactive form—expanding both aesthetics and new supply models for cultural tourism, education, and gaming industries. Digital media provide new technical support for the visualization of myths, pushing their symbolic expression toward concrete reproduction. Technologies such as CGI, VR, AR, and real-time rendering engines (e.g., Unreal Engine 5) endow mythic spectacles with unprecedented form and physical texture. Films like the *Avatar* series exemplify a tech-aesthetic construction of modern mythic wonder. Generative AI’s integration of multimodal generation (text, image, sound, video) creates scenes previously impossible; audiences can not only “hear a story” but “enter and change” it.

III. Generative AI as a New-Quality Productive Force for Myth Reproduction

The theme that generative AI becomes a new-quality productive force in myth re-creation sits at the intersection of digital humanities, aesthetics of AI, and art philosophy. It signals a cultural shift from a “narrative civilization” to a “generative civilization.” Roland Barthes described myth as a “second-order semiological system”—a mechanism for social meaning⁴. Today, generative AI performs this function algorithmically: it substitutes traditional religious or poetic structures with algorithmic structures and becomes a modern symbol generator. Thus, generative AI not only produces images and language but generates new mythological interpretations of the world. From “representation” to “rebirth,” from “natural symbolism” to “algorithmic symbolism,” from “human-centered” to “human-machine co-creation”.

3.1 Characteristics of New-Quality Productive Forces

In mythic creative fields, generative AI’s involvement transforms tools from passive instruments into active intelligent collaborators; creators shift from individual-inspired authorship to human-machine co-creation, decentralizing subjectivity and enabling broad participation. As a production factor, data, algorithms, and compute power replace singular human labor and material capital as core inputs. Generative AI participates in producing new cultural supply, spawning novel narrative and experiential forms—this marks the shift from “representation” to “regenerative” cultural production.

In film production, institutions like CCTV and Tsinghua University collaborated to produce an AI full-process micro-short drama project, covering the entire production chain from art storyboards to dubbing and music produced by generative AI, demonstrating deep empowerment of traditional production, shorter cycles, and evidencing AI’s role as a creative agent in full-process production. In digital art and cultural-tourism industries, platforms like JingTan launched “Nezha” digital collectibles and extended metaverse scenes that dynamically present classic mythic characters in virtual worlds with rights confirmation; these blockchain-backed dynamic collectibles and generative models create new digital consumer goods and novel industry chains between cultural IP and tourism experiences—signifying generative AI’s role as a significant supply-side innovation in cultural industries.

3.2 Knowledge and Narrative Reproduction of Myth

Generative AI drives mythic narrative from “natural symbolization” to “algorithmic symbolization.” It not only reproduces traditional myth but also remolds mythic knowledge and narrative structure through its

algorithmic logic and cross-disciplinary foundations. This reproduction is not mere content splicing; under new-quality productive forces, it is cultural generation—AI’s pattern recognition, semantic iteration, and symbolic recombination align with myth’s reliance on metaphor. Aesthetically, style transfer and multimodal generation allow the same myth to be reinterpreted in Dunhuang murals, ukiyo-e, or sci-fi styles, expanding mythic aesthetic possibilities. Philosophically, AI’s intervention breaks human-centric creation, making human–machine co-creation a new cultural paradigm; psychologically and neuroscientifically, AI’s generative mechanisms simulate human association and affective structures, making mythic content resonate widely. Generative AI’s temporal–spatial perception enables myths to surpass experiential limits. Traditional myth narratives often unfold within past temporalities; AI-driven new-quality production can place disparate mythic temporality side by side in virtual generation—for example, allowing audiences within the same environment to see Odin and Nüwa simultaneously, or to traverse images from cosmic genesis to future metaverses within a second. This capability breaks experiential continuity of human perception and extends mythic expression into super-real dimensions.

Generative AI’s psychological and experiential enabling touches human dreams and the subconscious. Myth fundamentally expresses collective unconscious symbols. Generative AI’s logic—pattern recognition and metaphor extension—maps personal dream imagery (e.g., falling, flying) onto mythic motifs such as Icarus or the Feathered Serpent, giving individual experience cultural and collective meaning. This empowerment enlarges and regenerates human spirit beyond technical extension.

Conclusion

As a new-quality productive force for mythic re-creation, generative AI brings risks—authority erosion, imaginative laziness, copyright and ethical uncertainty, and a blurring of myth–history–fiction boundaries—while offering personalized narrative, refined interaction, and full-sensory immersion that, through AR/MR and brain–machine interfaces, might reach the subconscious and reshape mythic experience. Its significance lies not in ending creativity but in reconstructing creative paradigms: as technical thresholds fall, scarcity shifts to depth of thought, affective tension, unique perspectives, and narrative experimentation. Mythic creation moves from “representation” to “reproduction,” making generative AI a contemporary “myth generator” that expands cultural expressive boundaries and resonates with modern spiritual landscapes. On this basis, it remains necessary to build governance frameworks and data lineage oriented toward “explainability—traceability—accountability,” improve copyright definitions, training compliance, and cultural-sensitivity assessments; to calibrate generation quality and contextual fit through interdisciplinary methodologies, preventing algorithmic aesthetic homogenization and passive marginalization of local cultures. Generative AI is not simply reshaping human understanding of creation; it is promoting human creativity into a new stage, enabling us to create a larger, more complex dynamic myth ecology that better aligns with contemporary spiritual imaginaries.

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Balancing Technique and Tao: The Dual Empowerment of Digital Animation and Chinese Mythological IP in a Globalized World

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Abstract

The creation of traditional cultural intellectual property (IP) is both a rich resource and a contested domain within the film industry. The continuous influx of Western cinematic values has produced a crisis of cultural recognition for traditional literature and narratives. In the context of globalization and new media, revitalizing creative practice and cultural expression through digital technologies and design thinking is vital for fostering cultural confidence and enhancing China's soft power. This study argues for mastering advanced technologies and deeply mining Chinese mythological IP resources to construct an Eastern-rooted fantasy universe for the global animation market and thereby export compelling "Chinese stories" that convey Oriental aesthetic appeal.

Keywords: Visual spectacle; Targeted research; Parody; Monster maps; Chinese mythological IP

I. Introduction

Culture is the spiritual lifeblood of a nation, and the arts are the trumpet of the age. "Literature is the vessel that carries the Tao." Without understanding China's continuous historical lineage, one cannot comprehend ancient China, modern China, or China's future. The profundity of Chinese civilization constitutes a distinctive spiritual hallmark of the Chinese people and is a treasure trove for literary and artistic innovation. "Gathering the lost texts of a hundred generations, collecting the lingering charm of ten thousand years"—this ideal has always been central to Chinese cultural aspiration. By integrating Chinese aesthetic spirit with contemporary artistic pursuit and by fusing creative practice with cultural value, advanced technology can activate the vitality of Chinese culture.

As filmmakers, how should we revitalize traditional culture in the age of digital animation? Media technological updates have reshaped modes of information dissemination. Platforms such as internet portals, mobile endpoints, and AI-generated content (AIGC) combine audiovisual, social, and sharing functions, offering audiences convenient channels and providing new perspectives and tools for cultural diversity and innovation. Therefore, in a globalized and new-media context, leveraging new media technologies and design thinking to rejuvenate creative practice and culture is essential not only for bolstering cultural confidence and China's soft power but also for strengthening recognition of Chinese traditional culture.

II. The Mythological Wealth of Traditional Chinese Culture



Figure 1 (Representative Chinese fantasy works: *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*; *Three Words and Two Slaps*; *Journey to the West*; *Classic of Mountains and Seas*; *Portraits of Immortals*)

Traditional cultural narratives are a fertile mine for film and television and a contested arena for cultural soft power. The continual importation of Western cinematic values has caused degradation in the cultural ecosystem and a crisis of identity for traditional culture. China possesses a world-class IP repository: traditional mythic texts such as *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and *Three Words and Two Slaps*, and the Four Great Classical Novels—*Journey to the West*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Water Margin*—contain fantastical elements, with *Journey to the West* being the most emblematic. Characters such as Sun Wukong remain cultural symbols embedded deeply in the collective cultural memory. Over millennia we have accumulated fantastical myths that form our unique Eastern romantic sensibility. Recently, revitalized works based on *Journey to the West*—such as *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*, *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, and *Ne Zha*—have become cultural phenomena.

Compared with fantasy films from other nations, Chinese fantasy cinema manifests its own distinct aesthetic tradition and cultural expression. Stephen Chow's *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* exemplifies this by combining Chow's classic creative approach with Tsui Hark's technical effects, achieving over 1.2 billion yuan at the box office. The film reinterprets the *Journey to the West* narrative in a novel way, employing postmodern visual traits and a striking visual language that opened a new path for Eastern fantasy films. The “real yet fantastical” mode is a distinctive aesthetic of the fantasy genre.

2.1 What Is “Real”? Pastiche and Parody — Reconstructing Contemporary Realist Fantasy

French narratologist Gérard Genette distinguishes between pastiche and parody in *Palimpsests*. Pastiche centers on borrowing and imitation from the original work, whereas parody engages in reversal and play; parody uses deconstruction, collage, play, and inversion of the original's elements to subvert its narrative structure and value orientation, thereby expressing a new spiritual orientation (Genette 117).

From Genette's perspective, the 1964 animated film *Havoc in Heaven* and the 1986 television series *Journey to the West* can be categorized as pastiche, whereas *A Chinese Odyssey* (1995) and later twenty-first-century *Journey to the West*—theme works such as *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*, *The Monkey King*, *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, *Ne Zha*, and *Black Myth: Wukong* are clearly parodic. Mythic re-creation is not merely fairy-tale imagination but also requires engagement with contemporary realities and must be enhanced by the visual spectacle capabilities afforded by digital media.

The *Journey to the West* tradition carries a comprehensive worldview and set of values; to win audience appreciation in adaptation, creators may establish a new worldview or innovate narrative strategies. As Robert McKee argues, “structure is character, and character is structure,” which underscores the centrality of character design to story structure (McKee). Stephen Chow's radical reinterpretations constitute thorough deconstruction of original characters. Yet the transformation of morally ambiguous demons and ordinary people into beings of enlightenment, after trials and growth, intensifies dramatic conflict. This more realistic inner journey effects a distancing of traditional heroism.

2.2 What Is “Fantastical”? Visual Spectacle as the Touchstone of Box Office Quality

With the development of digital technology, visual effects have ceased to be mere ornamentation; they are a critical gatekeeper for market access and a litmus test of a film's box office potential. If a production's “fantastical” dimension cannot reach the level of visual spectacle expected by audiences accustomed to high-end foreign films, it will not be accepted and might be dismissed as low quality. *Ghost Blows Out the Light* exemplifies this: despite the novel's popularity and a massive fanbase, over a dozen screen adaptations faltered because of weak visual effects and poor acting, producing box-office and critical failures. The novel's

domestic cultural resonance—rooted in numerous motifs of Chinese folk and regional spirit myths—could not compensate for inadequate visual realization. The mistake lay in neglecting the “fantastical” dimension: the technical realization of visual spectacle, and a lack of digital-media thinking and competency (e.g., Maya skills) among directors and creative teams. A strong script cannot substitute for poor visual realization; indeed, inadequate visual effects can ruin a good script. If we solve the visual-spectacle problem and the audiovisual adaptation of scripts, *Ghost Blows Out the Light* could still become a major hit, just as *Journey to the West* has repeatedly been revitalized: regardless of past successes or failures, innovation in visual spectacle will refresh legacy IP.

The 2024 interactive entertainment work *Black Myth: Wukong* sought to restore the Chinese aesthetic atmosphere of *Journey to the West*. Much of its virtual assets were created via AI scanning and modeling technology; high-precision 3D models rendered by real-time ray-tracing produce richer light-and-shadow effects and aesthetic atmosphere. This improves the work’s visual presentation and enhances player immersion, enriching the experience of the created world. The technology improves realism and production efficiency and offers robust support for displaying Chinese mythological IP. As technology advances, scanning and modeling tech will play greater roles across creative fields and drive industrial innovation. Games are often called the “ninth art,” uniting painting and film; they represent the fusion of technology and art. The success of *Black Myth: Wukong* is not only technical recognition but also cultural export, spurring overseas players’ interest in Chinese traditional culture. Alongside global phenomena like *The Three-Body Problem* and *The Wandering Earth*, it signals the rise of Chinese cultural export. When Chinese traditional culture meets modern digital media, creators can produce culturally distinctive works that meet international tastes, generating global cultural resonance and aesthetic impact.

2.3 Digital Animation Technologies and the Reconstruction of Motifs

American folklorist Stith Thompson wrote that a motif is “a theme, character, plot element, or stylistic phrase that recurs in literary works, forming a meaningful thread that unifies the whole; it may be an intention or archetype whose recurrence strengthens a work’s coherence and aesthetic appeal” (Thompson). Motifs are transmissible and often originate in collective myth and legend as external products of a people’s collective unconscious, transmitted through literature and art. From pre-Qin mytho-historical writings to pre-industrial folk-story cinematic writing, Chinese cultural works exhibit strong motif identity. For instance, *Legend of a Rabbit* draws on the Beijing folk deity Tu’er Ye (Rabbit God). In recent Chinese fantasy films, “myth” has become a narrative space for imagining modern Chinese Eastern identity. In the new era of rapid political and economic development, iterative innovation in digital effects, digital-media education, and capital investment have collectively advanced the industrial development of mythic-film genres and produced observable commercial success.

With the rapid advancement of digital media technology, fantasy films produce spectacular imagery and shape mythological settings and monsters that quickly become a new kind of film uniting commercial appeal and entertainment. Different countries’ fantasy films reflect national identity and cultural values. The term “fantasy” traces back to the Greek *phantasia*, meaning imagination or daydream; fantasy film represents human imagination rather than objective reality. In recent years, Chinese fantasy cinema has grown and achieved major commercial success globally. China’s traditional fantasy narrative resources provide fertile ground for twenty-first-century fantasy cinema.

Compared with the United States and other countries, Chinese fantasy films tend not to retell an ancient mythic epoch per se but to use extraordinary narrative orders and logic to re-present literary, artistic, and cultural classic texts or symbols. The frequently adapted IPs—*Journey to the West*, *Strange Tales*, and the Great Wall—are retold in exoticized visual spectacle and character design, reconveying a familiar “Chinese story.”

Another case is *Ne Zha*, produced by many subcontractors and roughly 1,600 animators. Despite the

director's near-bankruptcy, the film became a national pride in Chinese animation. Nearly 80% of its shots involved special effects, produced by over twenty visual-effects teams nationwide. To render the film's elaborate depictions of wind, fire, thunder, electricity, water, ice, and smoke, Ne Zha employed extensive CG and motion-capture techniques. Director Jiaozi performed motion capture for several main characters. The film's most expensive shot—featuring Xiao Aobing—lasts only one second yet required a newly created Maya 3D model; this costly yet meticulous decision reflects the production's pursuit of excellence. While the script had shortcomings, Ne Zha's visual effects and modeling attained standards comparable to leading Hollywood productions, earning both industry respect and commercial success.

Journey to the West depicts the conflict between humans and demons and the exploration of good and evil and human nature. It fuses Buddhist narrative, myth, and Daoist philosophy, and has been adapted widely into television, film, theater, and animation, exerting significant domestic and international influence. It functions as both literature and a treasure of traditional Chinese culture, influencing China's cultural image and industrial promotion. Beyond faithful adaptation and derivative works, cultural dissemination relies on digital media technologies; the visual spectacle of Journey to the West benefits from Maya and motion-capture techniques in its modern revivals. Under globalization, national genre filmmaking increasingly aligns with Hollywood's mature production model; myth films are no exception. Yet many non-Western filmmakers do not simply adopt a Western narrative stance; they endeavor to tell stories from their own cultural perspective, producing aesthetic expressions with cultural subjectivity. Contemporary Chinese myth films often present "Chinese historical stories" via spectacular means rather than re-presenting mythological tales under New Historicist cultural logic.

Early Chinese cinematic mythographies often embodied a discourse of "Chinese myth" opposed to "Western science," reflecting an ancient Eastern spirit and satisfying audiences' escapist and imaginative needs. Creators aimed to imbue historical narratives with renewed vigor to explain psychological motivations in contemporary life, which resonated with audiences' search for cultural roots and fostered cultural identity. Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio, a Qing dynasty short-story collection by Pu Songling, exemplifies the blend of realism and fantasy and remains rich in romance. The recent online hit Chinese Tales produced eight independent stories rooted in traditional culture; the second episode, "Goose Goose Goose," adapts the ancient Strange Tale "The Scholar of Yangxian" (also called "The Goose-Caged Scholar") into a surreal depiction of a moral dilemma. "Inside and outside the goose cage, human hearts are trapped" echoes Pu Songling's critical eye: "The world's fickleness has been told; what in life escapes the goose cage?" (Pu).

Although Chinese Tales aroused curiosity in fantasy narratives, its production relied on traditional 2D animation and did not change the broader structural challenge of insufficient digital visual-effect capabilities in China's film industry. In contrast, Legend of a Rabbit (2011), directed by Sun Lijun, vice president of the Beijing Film Academy, represents a more comprehensive digital breakthrough. Released July 11, 2011, the film won the Best Art Film award at the 28th China Golden Rooster Awards and was nominated for the 14th China Huabiao Film Awards' Outstanding Film Technology Award. Drawing on the Tu'er Ye figure from Beijing folklore, the film embodies strong Chinese mythic flavor.



Figure 2 (Poster of Legend of a Rabbit)

Legend of a Rabbit was co-produced by the Beijing Film Academy's Animation School and Tianjin North Film Group with an investment of 120 million yuan and three years of production. The production assembled a large, elite team and integrated resources to complete this 3D animation. The American technical director Kevin Geiger had experience as 3D technical director on *Chicken Little* and as a lead Maya modeler and technical consultant on *Fantasia 2000*, *Dinosaur*, and *Reign of Fire*. What is Maya, and why teach Maya at the Beijing Film Academy? Beyond big-budget productions and star power, visual spectacle is a core component; Maya is one of the key technologies that enable spectacle. Therefore, film students and industry practitioners must understand Maya.

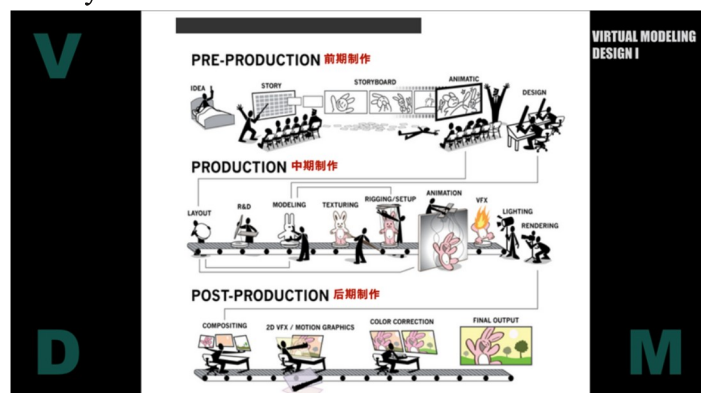


Figure 3 (3D animation and game production workflow)

Figure 3 illustrates the distinction between Maya-generated 3D and traditional 2D drawing: while 2D imagery often requires imaginative interpretation, 3D rendered outputs are universally legible, even to audiences without the same cultural background. Legend of a Rabbit's early-stage preparation and production efforts reflect rigorous planning and investment; according to Sun Lijun, the film's producer and director, the project's three-year lifecycle demonstrates the team's commitment to combining mature 3D production techniques with innovative creativity to establish a new benchmark and cultivate digitally literate creators.

Ultimately, reconstructing mythological motifs with contemporary digital techniques is the path Chinese fantasy cinema must follow. Although difficult, it is the necessary route to success. True breakthroughs require strong fundamentals—solid technology, rigorous craft, and willingness to move beyond 2D approaches. The market has progressed; our technical breakthroughs must follow. Failure to bridge the technology gap will lead to products that cannot compete.

III. Looking Outward: How Global Mythologies Are Developed

3.1 From Myth Film IP to Myth-Themed Parks

In the globalized environment, Western fantasy films have been widely introduced into China. The Harry Potter series grossed \$7.8 billion worldwide across eight films; The Lord of the Rings trilogy grossed \$2.8988 billion. Since the turn of the century, Western fantasy film production has increased significantly, and its market share in China has grown. The success of these fantasy films demonstrates Western cultural export capacity and has alerted the Chinese industry to the genre's appeal.

Harry Potter is not only an omnibus of Greek, Norse, and British folktale elements, but also a technological breakthrough that realized global export of Western magical culture through spectacle. The series' sustained audience excitement across sequels demonstrates that, with digital technology's "real yet fantastical" enhancement, traditional fantasy can maintain market vitality. The production used Maya extensively for character modeling, rigging, animation, lighting, and rendering; Maya's capabilities enable precise control of digital characters and effects to meet directors' and VFX supervisors' requirements. Thus, to achieve real spectacle we must learn the best digital media technologies and develop a digital-media mindset. Without technical understanding and capital investment, domestic creators' efforts will remain unable

to reach Hollywood standards and will stay limited to outsourced, low-tech development.

Moreover, Harry Potter's success extends to merchandise—wands, robes, and other paraphernalia that have proven immensely popular—and to themed zones at Universal Studios. This demonstrates how one fantasy IP can generate a sustained aesthetic demand and become a durable cultural and commercial asset, supporting tourism and themed entertainment industries. When derivative products saturate the market, major platforms like Universal respond by creating larger experiences to meet residual demand. This underscores the need to close the technical gap and refine script development methods.

3.2 From Traditional Culture to Cross-Cultural Communication

Traditional culture's influence is confined to a limited demographic; cross-cultural communication maximizes reach and enables global dissemination. To achieve cross-cultural impact, creators must both root work in local cultural nourishment and understand shared aesthetic expectations across cultures. Hollywood has cultivated expertise in these areas.

Pixar's *Coco*, grounded in Mexican tradition, conducted comprehensive research into Mexican myths, family values, and customs. The film centers on Día de los Muertos and renders its symbolism vividly through colorful celebrations, skeletal iconography, and the “bridge of spirits.” *Coco* emphasizes family and ancestor veneration; the protagonist Miguel's familial relationships foreground the film's emotional core. By extracting “family and memory” as a transnational emotional nucleus, *Coco* achieved global resonance. *Coco*'s success stems from an emotionally affecting narrative core, striking visual spectacle, compelling music, cultural research, and strong word-of-mouth, making it an exemplary cross-cultural film.

IV. East–West Comparison: Gaps and Breakthroughs

4.1 Wonder as Visual Spectacle — Maya as Technology and Mindset

China has increasingly recognized the value of its fantasy heritage, but development has been uneven and marked by detours. A primary reason is creative teams' lack of familiarity with digital-media technologies such as Maya and the digital mindset these tools entail. This ignorance undermines appreciation for the importance of effects and compounds the gap with international productions. Consequently, investment in technology and digital-media aesthetic education is a critical element in film-talent cultivation. The establishment of digital-media programs in art academies has accelerated Guochao creativity and the emergence of new practitioners, indicating an industrial upgrade in China's creative sectors. Recent attempts to revitalize traditional culture have refreshed cultural awareness and yielded market returns. For instance, the viral Cultural Relics Concert combined musical-theater craft with technical animation to animate relics such as Sanxingdui bronze masks. This effect required solid Maya and digital-animation competency to achieve multisensory impact.

4.2 Research: Targeted Inquiry Guides Creative Direction

While Maya is powerful, it cannot guarantee artistic success. Domestic Maya training programs exist, but mastery of the software does not alone produce digital-media masters: creativity is essential. One crucial source of creative insight is targeted research—Research—in which both abstract contemplation and empirical work converge. Cultural soft power rests on a disposition toward inquiry: research as habit and capacity. Maya and research are like two wheels of a cart or the wings of a bird: one embodies unfettered imagination; the other, grounded diligence.

As Xi Jinping emphasized, “Investigation and research are the foundation of planning and the path to success; without investigation there is no right to speak or to make decisions.” This principle applies to artistic creation as well. Film-strong nations excel at research.

Hollywood produces many superhero films; Japan, conversely, is enthralled with various supernatural beings. Japanese folkloric interest in yokai dates to ancient times; yokai feature strongly in folklore and

literary production and have become global cultural IPs because of their rootedness and distinctiveness. Japan conducts thorough targeted research into its myths, as evidenced by local legend collections such as the “umbrella ghost” of Tottori. The so-called Japan Yokai Map, preserved at the Kyoto International Manga Museum, is the product of painstaking ethnographic compilation.

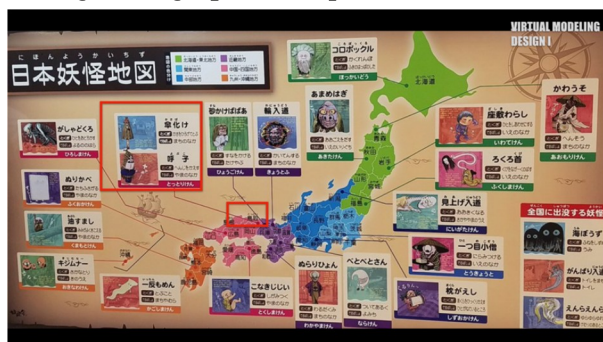


Figure 4: Japan's Yokai Map at the Kyoto International Manga Museum

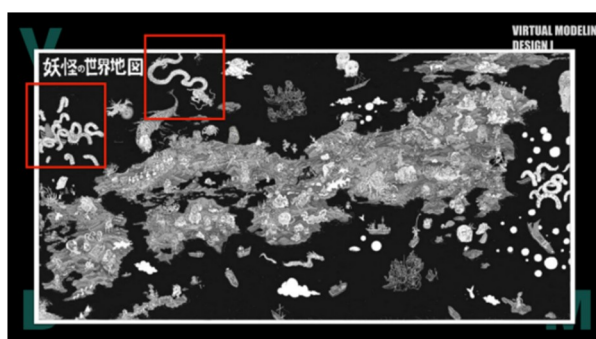


Figure 5: World Yokai Map

Japan's ambition in consolidating folklore and cataloging global myths demonstrates its strategic cultural positioning. By first integrating national folklore, Japan can more readily tap global resources for future creative use. This forward strategy resembles cultural competition between Korea and China over kimchi and Dragon Boat Festival claims: beneath surface disputes lies recognition of cultural capital. Film students must learn technique but should not allow technique to constrain imagination. Myth is a creative ally; even in realist films, mysticism can augment effect.

China's mythic reservoir is vast—Journey to the West, Strange Tales, Three Words and Two Slaps, Classic of Mountains and Seas—yet how many refined works have been produced? How many resonate domestically? How many have global impact? These are the creative challenges before us. Targeted research helps creators quickly gain deep, first-hand knowledge of a specific subject and audience and is as fundamental as technical expertise.

Conclusion

In the context of globalization, cultural exchange and competition among nations grows more intense. Film audiences are more diverse; with the development of internet, 3D, AIGC, and digital virtual technologies, audiences crave audiovisual spectacle and imaginative stimulation, providing market space for fantasy cinema. From a global perspective, Chinese fantasy film's development is tightly linked to the expansion of genre filmmaking and digital-media technology. From a historical perspective, Chinese fantasy film depends on ancient mythology, folk legend, and the zhiguai (tales of the strange) tradition. Thus, creators must pair national motif with contemporary form: myth is not merely children's fable; its revitalization requires creative reconstruction and contemporary relevance.

The future development of Chinese fantasy animation relies on digital animation techniques and tech-

industry advancement, on mass-cultural expansion and new-media dissemination, and on imaginative resources grounded in Chinese civilization. In a globalized field of cultural exchange, national mythic texts and folk traditions are absorbed and reconstructed by a new generation of creators into revitalized cinematic forms.

For filmmaking, we must practice both “dao” and “shu”: without technical craft, the Dao cannot be realized. Fantasy revitalization must marry traditional beauty and lofty spirit within the cinematic vessel. To better integrate digital-media “technique” and traditional aesthetic “Tao,” we must master Maya and cultivate a digital-animated mindset; we must embrace imaginative market thinking while maintaining rigorous scholarly research; we must learn the world’s best technologies and innovate our modes of expression to tell our Chinese stories and enhance cultural soft power. By creating fantasy universes grounded in Eastern contexts, we can export Chinese stories suffused with Oriental allure to the world.

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Collage Aesthetics and Industrial Logic: Anthology Narration and Diversification Paths in Chinese Animation — A Case Study of *Liao Zhai: Lan Ruo Si*

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Abstract

This article analyzes the anthology structure and collage aesthetics of the recent Light Chaser Animation release *Liao Zhai: Lan Ruo Si*, examining the tensions between aesthetic experiment and industrial logic in contemporary Chinese animation. Situating the film within a global history of anthology cinema (for example, *The Animatrix*, *Love, Death & Robots*) and domestic precedents (such as *My People, My Country* and *Chinese Tales*), the paper argues that the film's "5+1" structure and judgment-in-the-well framing create rich intertextuality and visual collage across varied animation techniques, yet a weak unifying theme undermines emotional continuity and produces audience polarization and limited box-office returns. From an industry perspective, the anthology format disperses financial risk, enables audience segmentation, and functions as a possible IP-universe strategy; however, without a robust thematic anchor it risks fragmenting audience engagement. The conclusion proposes strategies for balancing multiplicity and unity so that Chinese animation can achieve sustainable artistic diversification and market competitiveness.

Keywords: Anthology narration; Collage aesthetics; Intertextuality; Industrial logic; Chinese animation

I. Introduction

Anthology films, as a distinct narrative and production form, possess a long and complex history in both live-action and animated cinema. From early multi-director shorts to contemporary streaming-era anthology series, the anthology model functions both as an experimental creative form and as an industrially pragmatic choice. Typically assembled from multiple relatively independent segments, organized loosely by theme, style, or spatial motif, anthology films create overall juxtapositions and collages. Their advantages include stylistic plurality, risk diversification, and broader audience reach; their core difficulty is sustaining overall coherence and unified affect while celebrating difference. This tension between diversity and unity constitutes the internal paradox of anthology narration.

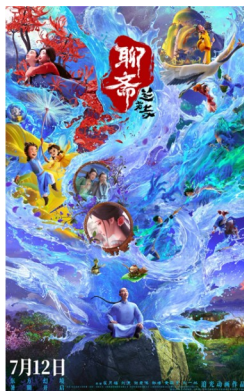


Figure 1. Poster of *Liao Zhai: Lan Ruo Si*

In the contemporary Chinese animation industry, Light Chaser Animation's summer release *Liao Zhai: Lan Ruo Si* performs a form of experimentation. Departing from conventional single-thread feature narratives,

the film adopts a “5+1” anthology structure that stitches six distinct-styled stories together through a judgment-in-the-well framing device, thereby attempting to build a Liao Zhai universe. This narrative strategy is not unprecedented: anthology films and anthology animation have established global precedents — for example, China’s *My People, My Country* (seven segments), the Japan–U.S. co-produced *The Animatrix* (nine shorts, which expand *The Matrix* universe), and recent anthology animation series such as *Chinese Tales* and the American *Love, Death & Robots* (2019–2022). *Light Chaser’s Liao Zhai: Lan Ruo Si* stands as a representative experiment in this anthology mode. Building on Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai zhiyi*, the film uses the well-judgment frame to assemble five short stories — “The Taoist of Laoshan,” “Lu Gong’s Daughter,” “Nie Xiaoqian,” “Painted Skin,” and “The Lotus Princess.” The film pursues two goals: culturally, to reinterpret a classic text and reactivate Liao Zhai as a contemporary Chinese cultural sign via animation; industrially, to explore market strategies through the anthology model’s risk dispersion and audience stratification.

The film’s market and critical performances fell short of expectations. At the box office, *Liao Zhai: Lan Ruo Si* rose initially but failed to replicate the blockbuster success of films like *The Longest Day in Chang’an* (1.82 billion CNY); at the time of writing its take stood around 240 million CNY. Reception was polarized: Douban ratings hovered around 6.7, with some viewers praising stylistic plurality and cultural depth while others criticized fragmentation and patchwork quality. This mixed response demonstrates the double-edged nature of the anthology form as both artistic experiment and market strategy, and reflects the complex tension in Chinese animation between cultural inheritance and industrial logic.

This paper studies *Liao Zhai: Lan Ruo Si* alongside domestic works such as *My People, My Country* and international anthology works such as *The Animatrix*, *Chinese Tales*, and *Love, Death & Robots*, exploring how collage aesthetics and industrial imperatives operate and collide. The analysis examines how the film constructs an intertextual Liao Zhai universe, how stylistic heterogeneity and cultural reproduction produce narrative ruptures and weakened affective tensions, and how anthology strategies present both opportunities and constraints for the development of Chinese animation.

II. Anthology Narration and Collage Aesthetics

Anthology narration emphasizes the juxtaposition of differentiated units under a loose thematic aggregation. From a narratological standpoint, anthology films typically display “multiple strands, weak connective tissue, and thematic unity.” Gérard Genette’s narrative theory reminds us that the organization of narrative governs modes of audience reception. Anthology narration accumulates diversity by horizontal expansion rather than by vertical, causal development; its attraction lies in stylistic difference and the viewer’s continuously renewed experience.



Figure 2. Picasso’s collage artwork *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912)

Collage emerged as a central technique in 20th-century modern art, foregrounding the juxtaposition of different materials and styles. Fredric Jameson identifies collage as a core aesthetic of postmodernism, arguing that it breaks unity and highlights the assembly of fragments and difference. Collage aesthetics thus offer a theoretical basis for understanding anthology narration. Jameson claims that collage is one of

postmodernism's cultural logics: instead of pursuing modernist unity and depth, collage emphasizes juxtaposition and the coexistence of fragments. Animation particularly lends itself to collage because of its plasticity: it can simultaneously accommodate photorealistic CGI, hand-drawn arts, ink-painting approaches, and non-digital materials such as felt, cut-paper, and clay. The collage aesthetics of anthology animation function both as formal experiments and as challenges to audience reception.



Figure 3. Movie Poster of The Animatrix

Internationally, *The Animatrix* stands as a classic example of collage aesthetics. Its nine shorts, directed by different auteurs, include Japanese animation aesthetics and Western sci-fi approaches; despite stylistic disparity, a shared Matrix mythos provides thematic unity, allowing difference to cohere within a common world. In contrast, *Love, Death & Robots* pushes anthology plurality to an extreme: episodes may differ completely in style, narrative, and content while aligning under broad macro-themes to form a radical postmodern collage. Domestically, *My People, My Country* shows how anthology narration can serve national storytelling: seven segments by seven directors vary stylistically yet derive emotional unity from a grand national theme, allowing cumulative audience feeling. *Chinese Tales* succeeds as an anthology model within Chinese animation by presenting eight shorts that reactivate traditional culture while satisfying audiovisual appetite and cultural memory.

Within this context, *Liao Zhai: Lan Ruo Si* attempts to balance collage aesthetics and industrial logic. The film's well-judgment frame: a scholar enters Lan Ruo Monastery and is interrogated by two spirit beings (a toad and a turtle), who judge him through the telling of stories. The frame seeks to stitch the five stories together. Unlike *My People, My Country*, where a grand theme unifies segments, *Liao Zhai*'s frame more closely resembles an oral storyteller's "pingshu" form and lacks dramatic force. While the frame offers the possibility of suturing fragments, it cannot dissolve the strong ruptures among segments; lacking a compelling master motif, the collage reads more as formal juxtaposition than as narrative expansion. This paradox — the inability of the frame to carry audience affect — is the central academic concern.



Figure 4. Movie Poster of My People, My Country

Visually, Liao Zhai presents striking collage work. “The Taoist of Laoshan” adopts felt-like tactile textures to evoke humor; “Nie Xiaoqian” retains Light Chaser’s customary CG lyricism; “Lu Gong’s Daughter” offers delicate visuals and a tightly constructed short-film narrative. My favorite segment, “Painted Skin,” breaks from typical 3-D animation flamboyance and uses a restrained, high-toned yellow-gray palette that lends a distinctive aesthetic depth. The film integrates “scattered perspective” (dispersed vantage) into 3-D scene presentation so that some medium and wide shots recall Song-dynasty blue-and-green landscapes and gongbi color techniques in three-dimensional form, producing striking effect. Sound design and montage also contain memorable sequences.



Figure 5. The “Painted Skin” Segment in Liao Zhai: Lan Ru Si

This collage creates strong novelty but forces audiences to oscillate across modes, producing “affective jumps.” By contrast, The Animatrix, though diverse in style, maintains overall tonal consistency through its sci-fi mother-theme; Liao Zhai lacks such a unifying mother-theme, so its collage often feels abrupt. Compared with Love, Death & Robots, the film neither fully embraces radical difference nor achieves holistic unity, landing awkwardly in an intermediate condition.

III. Anthology Narration and Intertextuality in Liao Zhai: Lan Ru Si

Intertextuality is central to Liao Zhai: Lan Ru Si. The film rewrites several canonical Liao-zhai stories and uses different narrative emphases and visual idioms to reproduce cultural meaning. “Painted Skin” reframes Chen’s awakening to foreground contemporary gender awareness — a significant revision of the original perspective; “Nie Xiaoqian” preserves the tragic love motif but relocates the setting to the modern era and intensifies romanticism through CG aesthetics; “Lu Gong’s Daughter” emphasizes youth and romance while downplaying the moral allegory of the source text. Such intertextual maneuvers enable viewers to enter the narrative through familiar texts, but they also expose ruptures: the allegorical and social-critical dimensions of Liao-zhai are attenuated in favor of romantic and emotionally accessible storytelling. In other words, while intertextuality achieves cultural regeneration, it simultaneously sacrifices some of the original’s depth.

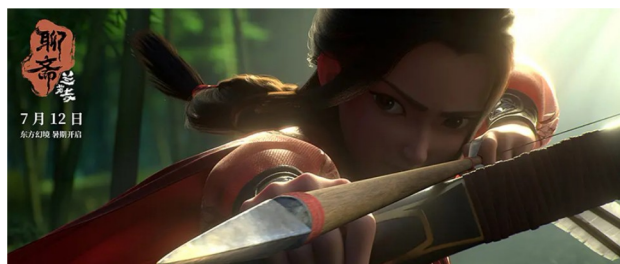


Figure 6. The “Lu Gong’s Daughter” Segment in Liao Zhai: Lan Ru Si

IV. Industrial Logic

From an industrial perspective, Liao Zhai’s anthology structure reflects pragmatic concerns. First, risk diversification: an anthology allows specialized teams to produce individual segments, so the underperformance of one segment does not necessarily doom the whole. This strategy parallels Love, Death &

Robots, which aggregates short films from diverse studios to achieve variety and hedge risk. Second, audience segmentation: different styles target different viewer groups, expanding the film's overall market. "The Taoist of Laoshan" caters to younger audiences; "Nie Xiaoqian" attracts romantically inclined youth; "Painted Skin" resonates with viewers attuned to contemporary gender discourse.

A more strategic aim is brand-building. Liao Zhai: Lan Ruo Si proposes a "Liao Zhai universe," attempting to transform Liaozhai into a serial IP — a logic analogous to Hollywood's universe-building; anthology presentation as a collection can seed future series development. This resembles Chinese Tales' "national style anthology" approach that showcases cultural plurality and pursues brand effect. However, this logic shows limits: the film's declining box-office trend and polarized reception indicate that anthology appeal has boundaries. While anthology formats attract curiosity, fragmentation of viewer reception may undermine sustained brand loyalty. Whether anthologyzation can produce stable brand and long-term audience stickiness thus remains uncertain.



Figure 7. The "Summer of the Little Monster" Segment in Chinese Tales

V. Diversification Paths for Chinese Animation

Liao Zhai's experiment suggests multiple diversification paths for Chinese animation. On the positive side, anthology structures create opportunities for emerging directors and teams to exhibit style and narrative experiments without waiting for rare feature-length chances; akin to Chinese Tales, such a model helps accumulate talent and experience. Anthologies also satisfy audience segmentation and give traditional cultural IPs new vitality by reinterpreting classics such as Liaozhai for contemporary audiences. Yet challenges persist. The fragmentary nature of anthologies makes coherent affective experience difficult and risks being dismissed as patchwork. If anthologyzation becomes a habitual industrial reflex rather than an intentional experiment, Chinese animation may slip into short-termism and fragmentation, failing to produce deeply integrated narratives with sustained cultural resonance. Future diversification should balance anthology plurality and narrative unity. Lessons can be learned from *The Animatrix*: maintain a strong unifying mother-theme amid stylistic diversity to allow heterogeneity to cohere; from *Chinese Tales*: emphasize cultural depth and local expression rather than remaining at the level of surface style. Only by combining multiplicity with integration can Chinese animation present distinct cultural expression and global competitiveness.



Figure 8. Screenshot from The Animatrix

VI. Conclusion

As *Light Chaser Animation*'s anthology experiment, *Liao Zhai: Lan Ruo Si* demonstrates the dual exploration of collage aesthetics and industrial logic in Chinese animation. The film constructs a rich *Liao Zhai* universe through intertextual adaptation and diverse visual collage, but it also reveals the structural paradox of anthology narration: reconciling diversity with unity. Compared with *My People, My Country*'s grand thematic anthology, *The Animatrix*'s mother-theme cohesion, *Chinese Tales*' cultural concentration, and *Love, Death & Robots*' radical plurality, *Liao Zhai* sits between integration and liberation and thus produces polarized reception and underwhelming market performance.

Academically, *Liao Zhai* offers a useful case for analyzing anthology trajectories in Chinese animation. It shows that anthology narration can simultaneously enable stylistic experimentation and market expansion while constraining narrative depth and cultural unity. The future of Chinese animation depends on finding a productive balance between plurality and integration, inheriting tradition while developing narratives capable of engaging globally.

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Materiality of Action Performance

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Abstract

This article, based on Erika Fischer-Lichte's aesthetic theory of performative acts, explores the materiality of action performance art. By analysing the actor's bodily subjectivity, embodied cognition, and the audience's sensory participation, it reveals how materiality functions as a key link connecting role, space, and audience during performance. Comparing Brecht's alienation effect with Schechner's environmental theatre concept and Pina Bausch's dancers' bodies, the paper emphasizes how material elements in performance guide the audience's construction of meaning and points out that, in the context of digital technology, the materiality of performance is being reshaped, offering new perspectives for understanding contemporary performance art.

Keywords: Action performance; Materiality; Body; Subjectivity

A defining feature of contemporary performance art is its materiality — a performance is a living event that depends on the concrete presence of actors' bodies, stage space, sound, and time. In Erika Fischer-Lichte's performance-aesthetic theory, materiality is considered a prerequisite for an "event" to occur. Any performance must possess an external material layer, which is brought to life through the co-present participation of actors and audience. This view stresses that performance should not remain at the level of textual script but focus on the interactive relations established through bodies and senses between actors and audience during the performance. It reveals how materiality, as a crucial link, connects actor and role, stage and space, art and audience, offering a new lens to understand contemporary performance art.

I. Bodily subjectivity and embodied cognition

The body is our primary means of perceiving and participating in the world; subjectivity is rooted in bodily experience. For the actor, the body is not merely an instrument of performance but the embodiment of subjectivity. Through the actor's bodily presence, a role is materialized on stage. The actor's body is both the living individual "here and now" and the symbolic vehicle for shaping the dramatic role. In performance, the actor's present body and the role's body appear simultaneously, forming a dual existence: on one hand, the audience perceives the actor as a living person physically present on stage; on the other hand, the audience interprets the actor's bodily actions and images as the embodiment of a fictional character in the drama. This duality of the body fuses materiality and meaning in performance — material elements such as posture, movement, and voice become carriers of the role's inner life and thought. The actor uses the body as a medium to enter the role's situation, and the audience uses their own bodily senses to perceive and empathize, thereby establishing an intersubjective exchange in the performance.

II. Dramatic materiality

2.1 The poles of alienation and immersion

Across the development of theatre practice, different theoretical schools vary in their stance toward materiality, forming a spectrum from "alienation" to "immersion." Brecht's alienation effect is a typical rationalist strategy: he insisted that the actor should not wholly "become" the role but should retain an

observational and demonstrative stance to disrupt the audience's empathic absorption. Brecht highlighted the artificial, material aspects of performance to emphasize theatre's mediation and materiality; the audience sees both the character's story and the actor as a real person telling that story, thus becoming aware that stage events are artistic constructs rather than spontaneous occurrences. This strategy endows materiality with a critical-rational function, directing audience attention to the symbolic meanings borne by the stage body and props. Conversely, Jerzy Grotowski's "poor theatre" pursued the removal of all nonessential stage elements (sets, costumes, makeup), leaving only actor and audience; the actor's naked body and voice suffice to generate powerful spiritual resonance. In Grotowski's practice, material minimalism highlights the actor's body as a sacred vessel; through the purity of corporeal performance, an almost religious experience is achieved. Whether used to stimulate reason or to move the senses, these approaches both acknowledge that stage material elements are central to guiding audience experience and meaning-making.

2.2 Dialogue among space, body, and objects

Since the mid-20th century, many directors and theatre groups have boldly expanded modes of expressing materiality, creating diverse performance forms. Richard Schechner's environmental theatre breaks the traditional separation between stage and auditorium, treating the entire performance space as a continuous environment where actors and audience coexist. In experimental works such as *Dionysus in 69*, Schechner extended the stage into the audience area with multi-level platforms, ramps, and performance zones surrounding seating, at times inviting audience participation (for example ritual actions like removing shoes upon entry). Environmental theatre intensifies immediacy and participation: the audience's body truly merges into the dramatic situation and is no longer a distant spectator. This reconfiguration foregrounds materiality's role in theatrical experience: performance no longer occurs behind a "fourth wall" isolated from the audience but occupies and reshapes the audience's actual space. Space and body unite; the theatre itself becomes part of the performance. Alongside spatial expansion, materiality is newly interpreted through objects and props on stage.

German choreographer Pina Bausch excavated the materiality of bodily movement in her Wuppertal dance-theatre works, using dancers' bodily texture and energy as principal expressive means. In her *Rite of Spring*, dancers perform on a mud-strewn stage; the mud acts as a material medium within the performance, each leap and fall stirring up earth and giving movements a tangible weight and realism. Dancers' bare feet on mud create direct contact with natural elements; audiences almost "smell" the earth and are visually struck by the collective, primordial struggle in the mud. The body becomes landscape: dancers' corporeal action is itself a material "language" that, together with stage space and objects, weaves emotional and semiotic networks. In contemporary performance works, materiality can be fully expressed through occupying space, animating objects, and extreme use of bodily movement. Different artists, through their distinct methods, expand the boundaries of stage material elements and aesthetic expression, producing unforgettable somatic experiences for audiences.

III. New relations between performance space and body under digital technology

With digital technologies integrated into performance, traditional on-site materiality faces new challenges and opportunities. Forms of digital theatre blur the boundary of actors and audiences sharing the same physical space. Many practitioners still emphasize that performance in the digital era must find ways to retain or remake core material elements. Creators intentionally present live actors on digital stages or invite audiences to engage in physical interactions to provide anchors of "reality." Under digital conditions, the relation between performance space and actor's body becomes more elastic and plural, yet materiality's significance does not vanish; instead it continues via new channels. Technology becomes a new medium: remote bodies leave traces through pixels and data, and audiences—whether offline or online—must mobilize their senses and bodies to complete the performance's experience and interpretation. The digital age expands

materiality's scope — the “material” of performance includes electronic media and digital spaces — but the essence of performance as an art of human body and perception remains unchanged.

Conclusion

Materiality is the foundational attribute of action performance: actors and audience participate through their own bodies, demonstrating that human cognition and experience are rooted in the flesh. A performance can transform each participant because it is a one-off event occurring here and now, jointly completed by actors and audience. The power of such events springs from the energy generated when material elements converge in the instant. Materiality is the lifeblood of contemporary performance art: it makes the stage more than a vessel for story; it becomes the field where meaning is generated and experiences resonate. Regardless of how performance evolves, ongoing inquiry into and application of materiality will continue to shape the theatrical landscape. In an era of rapidly changing technology, better balancing and integrating virtual and real material dimensions may be key to theatre's enduring charm and vitality. Performance, through materiality, gives the world back a kind of enchantment — as Erika Fischer-Lichte suggests, theatre can rekindle people's sense of wonder toward the world in modern society.

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The Role of CG Technology in the Visual Continuity of a Character — A Case Study of “Toothless” in How to Train Your Dragon: The New Era.

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Abstract

As CG technology continues to evolve, the transmedia adaptation of classic animated IPs into live-action films has become an expanding trend — for example, Disney’s recent live-action releases such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Mulan*. As DreamWorks’ live-action attempt, *How to Train Your Dragon: The New Era* reveals the technical integration and aesthetic negotiation between animated stylization and photoreal realism during the conversion of the core CG character Toothless. A successful CG character depends not only on technical precision but on preserving and transferring its animation-derived expressiveness and emotional energy. Centering on Toothless’s character adaptation, this paper examines four levels — modeling logic, emotional expression, motion semantics, and aesthetic choices — to explore how emotional continuity and character credibility are reconstructed within a live-action context. The study aims to offer technical pathways and aesthetic strategies for CG character design in animated-IP adaptations.

Keywords: Summer blockbuster; Animated IP adaptation; Transmedia narration; Emotional continuity.

I. Visual characteristics and emotional encoding of Toothless in the original animation

1.1 Hybridized aesthetics of the original visual design

Toothless, one of the most iconic characters of the *How to Train Your Dragon* series, combines mystery and approachability, becoming the emotional bridge between humans and dragons. The original animation’s visual features and emotional expression form the foundation of the character’s high recognizability and audience resonance.



Figure 1. The character Toothless in *How to Train Your Dragon*

From a design perspective, Toothless’s shape synthesizes multiple animal elements — the agility of a cat, the loyalty of a dog, the wing spread of a bat, and musculature hints of a black panther — creating a cross-species visual experience that feels both fantastical and natural. This blurring of the real and the imaginary grants him an alien-yet-cute familiarity that invites audience emotional projection. Across the trilogy his basic silhouette remains stable, but through nuanced facial acting and dynamic staging his personality deepens: his primordial threat coexists with gradual reveals of gentleness, humor, and shyness.

1.2 Nonverbal strategies for emotional encoding

As a “silent” character (he does not speak), Toothless’s emotional communication relies entirely on a nonverbal system of facial expression and body language. The creators use eye movements, ear flicks, tail

swishes, and posture to convey inner states. Drawing on anthropomorphic-animal animation logic, exaggerated timing and motion rhythms let audiences comprehend his emotional shifts without words. For example, during trust-building with Hiccup, Toothless transitions from alertness and resistance to curiosity and dependence; each subtle eye change and bodily gesture serves as a visual marker of emotional progression.



Figure 2. Toothless's eye performance

Moreover, Toothless's motion design emphasizes animation-style rhythm: broad, expressive trajectories that enhance life and personality while avoiding the expressive limits of strict animal realism. This performative motion system enriches the character and provides a reproducible model for retaining animation qualities in live-action conversion.

1.3 Emotional resonance and the construction of attachment

Toothless's cross-cultural popularity largely stems from his strong capacity for emotional projection. Through the trilogy viewers witness his growth from solitary wildness to group belonging and the deep attachment with Hiccup. His "cute" morphology and precisely designed expressions and motions enable powerful audience empathy in scenes of separation, sacrifice, and reunion. Thus his visual form functions not merely as a tool but as a narrative and thematic driver.

In the original animation, Toothless's highly anthropomorphized CG performance system builds a robust emotional encoding logic. This blend of animation qualities and expressive power becomes a critical benchmark for the character's CG re-creation in the live-action film. The transition from animation to live-action is not simply a medium shift but a deep reconstruction of technical systems and aesthetic language. For the New Era, the challenge is to transplant Toothless's highly stylized, expressive animation into a photoreal environment; CG technology underpins fidelity and evolution through modeling, materials, facial capture, and lighting compositing.



Figure 3. How character bonds are formed in *How to Train Your Dragon*

II. Applications of CG technology in reconstructing a photoreal Toothless

2.1 3D modeling and the process of photoreal treatment

In modeling, the primary task is to establish a stable morphological logic between "recognizability"

and “realism.” The animation Toothless uses cartoon proportions — enlarged head-to-body ratio, rounded limbs, and anatomies that deviate from natural biomechanics — which support animated performance but risk “toy-like” perception in photoreal contexts. The live-action adaptation therefore introduces anatomical and biomechanical references to correct structure and proportion, referencing bat and avian wing skeletons, muscle flows, and skin folds, while preserving high-recognition features like large eyes, short snout, and smooth brow. This two-way constraint of “realistic correction” and “stylized retention” allows the character to have physical plausibility in a real scene yet retain animation-derived emotional memory points and aesthetic orientation.



Figure 4. Toothless rendered realistically in the rebooted How to Train Your Dragon

2.2 Material systems and reconstruction of skin detail

Photoreal filmmaking demands much higher fidelity for light interaction than animation. The animated Toothless often uses simplified highlights and smooth materials to present a soft, cute look. To avoid toy-like effects, the live-action version increases surface layers: microfaceted scales with microreflections, spatial variation in skin roughness, and wing membrane semi-translucency. These choices serve performance and narrative: when surface detail and light response approach reality, emotional signals carried by gaze, touch, and flight are more easily accepted by audiences, sustaining existing emotional memory. Fur, feathers, and surface detail dynamics are optimized using automated solvers such as industry-standard PDB-based groom solvers (e.g., Fibre) to simulate hair and feather motion, enhancing the sense of the character’s physical presence while preserving its affinity and performance power from the classic design.

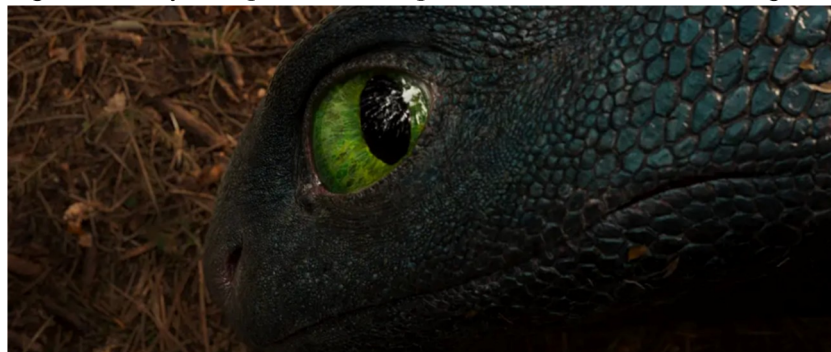


Figure 5. Surface texture details of Toothless’s skin in New How to Train Your Dragon

2.3 Iterative application of facial and motion-capture systems

As a nonverbal character, Toothless’s emotional expression depends on constructing a facial and motion system. The live-action adaptation increases precision by combining facial capture, motion capture, and keyframed animation to extend the character’s performative power in real scenes. Motion references draw on animal behavioral databases while virtual skeletal drivers ensure coherent motion-to-emotion mapping. Compared with the animation version, the live-action version emphasizes micro-levels: pupil reflections, iris dynamics, and subtle gaze focus control are refined so that observation and response convey clear emotional

intent. Tail and ear dynamics are endowed with extra nuance; their tempo and amplitude differentiate states like anxiety, joy, or alertness, making the nonverbal expression system hierarchically readable and preserving the character's expressive tension while achieving photoreal integration.



Figure 6: Toothless's animation performance in the new How to Train Your Dragon

III. Continuity of CG expressiveness in emotional transmission

3.1 Continuation of the nonverbal expression system

Although CG provides strong technical support for reproducing the character, the decisive factor in Toothless's live-action success is emotional continuity, not surface modeling or rendering fidelity alone. Audience recognition of the character derives from behavior, expression, and emotional logic. The animation Toothless's expressive power depends on controllable parameters — eyes, ears, mouth silhouette, posture. The live-action team inherits this nonverbal expressivity and upgrades it: ocular systems receive precise control over corneal reflections, iris micro-movement, and gaze focalization to ensure emotional transitions (e.g., alertness to attachment) are readable. Ear and tail as auxiliary “emotion organs” are animated with dynamic detail; their motion rhythms encode psychological states, enabling complex affective reading without verbal cues.



Figure 7. Toothless and Hiccup reunited in New How to Train Your Dragon

3.2 Behavioral logic and semantic continuation of motion

Emotion appears through action logic and motion semantics beyond static facial cues. In animation, every Toothless gesture carries explicit affective intention (a nuzzle signals trust; wrapping his tail indicates attachment). The live-action film preserves these semantic encodings through high-precision motion capture and keyframed animation to keep iconic memory gestures functioning in the new context, adding physically plausible feedback so emotional actions register tactile realism. For example, when stroked, Toothless may thump his tail, close his eyelids, and emit a purring-like sound to convey pleasure and reliance. These pet-like behavioral details bring the character closer to the emotional response patterns of real animals, increasing credibility and easing audience empathy and identification during viewing.



Figure 8. Toothless's reaction to being petted in New How to Train Your Dragon

3.3 Evoking emotional memory and extending cultural signification

In adapting an animated IP, CG characters carry audience emotional memories and cultural recognition. Toothless's ability to survive cross-medium relies on being more than a single character; he becomes a cultural symbol with temporal imprint. The live-action film intentionally preserves familiar memory markers — a shy smile, a steady gaze during flight with Hiccup, body postures associated with attachment — and strengthens them through CG techniques so the character's animation-derived qualities reproduce in a photoreal image. This amplification is not mere visual replication but a synergy of material, lighting, and dynamics that lets the “animated-ness” be re-produced within a new medium. The character's mnemonic and affective energy thus continues flowing across media, enabling audiences to sense the familiar Toothless in different image forms; technological and aesthetic continuation together secure the character's narrative role, affective function, and prolonged cultural life.



Figure 9. A side-by-side visual comparison of New How to Train Your Dragon and How to Train Your Dragon

IV. Challenges and aesthetic choices during technological translation

Translating the highly stylized Toothless into a photoreal CG character embedded in live-action narrative and visual systems is a complex cross-media practice. Although current CG techniques for modeling, rendering, and motion capture are highly mature, technical advancement does not automatically resolve aesthetic dilemmas. The tension lies in what aesthetic the creators choose to realize. The animation's exaggerated proportions and performance logic naturally conflict with real-world lighting and sets; pursuing pure realism can weaken expressive power and strip the character of its animation charm, while overly preserving animation style risks visual dissonance within live-action scenes. The film adopts an “appropriate hybrid” strategy: forms and materials trend toward realism while expressions and motion preserve rhythm and cadence, so the character integrates into live-action space without losing emotional punch and audience familiarity. Real-world physics also constrain dramatic momentum, forcing motion to be “de-noised” and reducing some visual impact. These trade-offs reflect creators' balancing act between unified style and

emotional transmission. The film selectively allows animation-like exaggeration in key emotional scenes, enabling viewers to feel familiar animation qualities within the photoreal frame. Culturally, this choice sustains the character's symbolic continuity and respects varied audience expectations. In an era of rapid AIGC-driven shifts in creation modes, the industry must continue seeking organic integration between art and technology, understanding compromise and tolerance, and prioritizing artistic depth and emotional resonance over technical spectacle.

V. Conclusion

From animation to live-action, from stylization to photorealism, the transformation of Toothless in *How to Train Your Dragon: The New Era* demonstrates that CG technology is not merely a reproduction tool but a key medium for sustaining a character's vitality and audience emotion. The film searches for equilibrium between technological innovation and aesthetic pursuit, showing that credibility and empathy depend not solely on technique but on the organic fusion of technology and art. As Professor Sun Lijun emphasizes, "imagination, warmth, and sentiment are decisive for an animated work's capacity to reach the heart." Toothless's presentation strengthens physical plausibility through photoreal design while carrying warm emotional micro-details and deep companionship with Hiccup that embody the film's humanistic warmth. With the rapid development of AIGC and other new techniques, future CG character creation must continually explore inclusive space between realism and animation, with emotional transmission and artistry as the ultimate objectives. Only then can CG characters cross media boundaries, extend cultural memory, and demonstrate lasting life across multimodal image environments.

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