



Study on the Path of Enhancing Female Image in Anime and Comics

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Abstract. Longitudinally the image of women in anime has been improving on the whole, but there are still strong limitations. A analysis of the anime popularly broadcast on Bilibili from 2019 to 2023 reveals that women, as the objectified second sex, are portrayed from a theoretical perspective as presenting an image bias of stereotyping, male gaze, and lack of discourse. This pattern is the result of the multi-dimensional game and intertwining of the overall social consciousness, industrial ecology, and individual creative pressure. It is necessary to manage the introduction of Japanese comics in the balance of quality control and channel diversion, and also to revitalise the national comics based on the foundation wall of cultural heritage and development environment, to grasp the cultural dominance.

Keywords: anime; youth subculture; female image; stereotype; gaze theory.

1 Introduction

"Anime" is a collective term for animation and comics, animation is a process of continuous playback of many still frames; comics mainly refers to modern comics, i.e., multi-frame paintings with a delicate realistic style and broad content, which use the technique of split-screen to express a complete story^[1]. In recent years, with the development of online anime and the popularisation of otaku culture, anime, as an important form of subculture, has been deeply integrated into the lives of audiences, especially teenagers. Feminism is an important paradigm in the study of film and television works, and existing research shows that, vertically speaking, the image of women in anime has been improving on the whole^[2], but there are still strong limitations. This paper is based on the media criticism point of view to examine the text content in the hot anime, explore how the current popular anime by young people represent women, and explore the social factors affecting the image of women in anime and the ideas and methods to improve the image of women. Bilibili video pop-up website (B station for short) is the largest gathering place of secondary yuan culture in China, with a wide range and large number of representative animations^[3], so this study analyses the anime based on the B station platform extracted from the broadcast time of 2019 to 2023 and the annual ranking of the number of followers is relatively high.

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2 Distortion of Female Image Presentation in Popular Anime

the alienation and distortion of women's image in anime are essentially the embodiment of the objectified status, which is summarized from the theoretical level and is specifically manifested in three dimensions:

2.1 Stereotype: Traditional Female Image on the Assembly Line

Stereotypes are a series of generalised, universal and relatively stable views of a group of people ^[4], often projected in the characterisation of literary works, and are an important paradigm of media criticism. This paper analyses the anime that has been popularly broadcast on the Bilibili in recent years and finds that the female characters are dominated by the traditional image of youth, long hair, skirts, and slimness, and domestic workers are mostly female characters, while professional women are mostly engaged in auxiliary work, which is in line with the female characters of anime as summarised in the previous studies. Compared with the "non-woman", "vase", "good wife", "queen" or "loli" classified by Yang Li et al in 2009, the image of women in Japanese anime has become more diversified. Compared with the typed female character images of "non-female", "vase", "virtuous wife", "queen", or "loli" ^[5], female character design in anime to this day still has not substantially broken through the already solidified character types. The stereotypical portrayal hides the diversity and vividness of the characters, and the gender labelling brings about the flattening of female characters.

2.2 Male Gaze: Welfare Hime as an Object of Erotic Consumption

Viewing female characters as objects of erotic gaze is the most intuitive manifestation of the male gaze. Compared to live actors, anime producers have complete control over the bodies of film and television characters, and the images with erotic connotations are often more explicit than in other types of film and television, and even the female characters in anime who often take on such a "task" have a special name - Welfare Girls, about which they are called. The close-ups of their bodies are usually meaningless to the overall narrative, which is not only misleading to the teenage group, but also not conducive to the non-subject oriented anime to get rid of the stereotypical label of "anti-mainstream".

In addition, the stereotypical female image of the hero saving the day and falling in love is a more implicit male gaze. Laura Mulvey points out that the male characters appearing on screen tend to have "a more perfect, complete, and powerful ideal self", while the female characters, on the contrary, are passive, powerless, and distorted ^[6]. If the erotic gaze reflects physiological desires, the vulnerability of the female characters reflects psychological desires to gain self-esteem from female attachment and admiration. The female group also becomes the subject of the male gaze in the act of watching, in order to avoid keeping one with the female object on the screen to keep in line with the female object on the screen, the female viewer produces cross-gender identification with the male position, so as to enjoy the pleasure that the male gets from the screen's ^[7].

2.3 Absence of Discourse: Silent and Invisible Images of Marginalised Women

French philosopher Michel Foucault published an article "The Order of Discourse" in the 1970s, in which he wrote: Discourse is the means and the end of people's struggle. Discourse is power, and people empower themselves through discourse [8]. Foucault's discourse theory contributed to the development of feminist theory, a school of feminists who believe that femininity and even a woman's gender are not innate, but are socially or historically constructed through discursive practices (epistemic practices or acts of representation) [9]. The traditional image of a woman is the discursive domestication of the dominant male subject of consciousness in patriarchal societies to the disadvantaged female subject of consciousness.

And the first protagonist of anime works is mostly a male. Women as the "other" lack deep psychological depiction. Although silencing the female characters seems to avoid direct gender domestication, the marginalised position of the characters also implies a lack of discursive power, essentially reflecting fear, avoidance and submission to traditional sovereignty.

3 The Causes of Female Image in Hot Anime

The final image presented by female characters in anime is a combination of history and reality, culture and economy, ideals and survival and other factors.

3.1 Social Consciousness: Cultural Infiltration under the Patriarchal System

Literary works are born in the soil of reality, not only incorporating the creator's own ideas but also reflecting the ideology of society. The social pressure faced by women, as opposed to specific male subjects, stems more from the general social rules and order of patriarchal societies, and from a long-established ideology that interrogates the individual, what Jacques Lacan calls "the Big Other"^[10]. The male-oriented ideology is widely penetrated in film and television, music, theatre, literature and other fields of art and literature, and the stereotypes, male gaze, and lack of discursive power portrayed in the female image of hot anime are fundamentally a projection of the social discipline that women in patriarchal societies face in real life. The development of feminist movement has gone through three waves, which has contributed to the change of social trend and the innovation of the real system to a different extent in the world, but the change of the traditional patriarchal society is not overnight, and the interweaving of the two is embodied in the animation, that is, the coexistence of relative progress in the portrayal of female image and the continuation of tradition.

3.2 Industrial Ecology: Institutionalisation under Business Objectives

The combination of animation and industry is also the combination of economy and art ^[11]. As a mass-produced popular cultural product that combines spirituality and

materiality, the production and management of anime has a mature business model. Japanese animation entered a stage of rapid development in the middle of the 20th century, when the employment rate and education level of women were limited, and the participants in each link of the animation industry chain were mostly men; the most representative manga artists before the 1990s, such as Osamu Tezuka, Akira Toriyama, and Hayao Miyazaki, were all men, and the only female manga artists with high reputation at that time were Rumiko Takahashi and Sakurako. Their anime works mostly feature male protagonists and have attracted a large number of male readers. As a result, the animation industry has gradually formed an efficient business model dominated by passionate anime that tells young adventure stories. The solid production model is the safety guarantee for the operation of the animation industry, but at the same time, it is also the constraint for the innovation and change of the animation industry. Although the female group of anime audience is getting bigger and bigger, but the traditional model with deep roots is still hard to shake.

3.3 Creative Pressure: Audience Catering under the Competition Mechanism

Manga artists and animation directors do not create in a vacuum of artistic ideals, but have to compete for the survival of their works in the fierce market competition. The mode of production of Japanese anime is "to anime brake", i.e. to animate the more popular manga serialised in publications. The national anime craze and the concentration of publishing channels have resulted in a far greater supply of manuscripts than demand, so anime magazines have developed a strict selection mechanism. In the case of JUMP, for example, magazines identify less popular manga through reader questionnaires and stop publishing them outright, commonly known as "cutting them off". China's animation is mostly original, less adapted from comics, and the main distribution channel of China's comics is online serials, and the author's income is closely related to the flow of comics. Animation in China and Japan have adopted a seasonal production model, that is, more than ten episodes for a "season" for broadcasting, you need to rely on the previous season's episodes to attract funds and other support, which will be invested in the production of the next season. Both in Japan and in China, the long production cycle and high investment risks of anime require a sufficient audience base for the work to survive. Whether for the survival of their works or for commercial gain, cartoonists and animation directors cannot ignore the audience's aesthetic taste, and even use inappropriate methods to stimulate the audience's senses.

4 Countermeasures to Optimise the Image of Women in Hot Anime

Under the complex background of multiple pulls intertwined, changing the image of women in anime is a long term endeavour. At present, based on the reality that Japanese animation has been widely spread in China and domestic animation has been booming in recent years, we can start from the two aspects of Japanese animation and domestic animation respectively.

4.1 Introduction of Japanese Comics: Finding a Balance between Quality Control and Channel Diversification

China's radio and television departments have paid attention to the management of the introduction of film and television works, as far as Japanese anime is concerned, the domestic regular platforms do not introduce anime with excessive gore, pornography and other problems, and will do post-processing technical processing of the inappropriate plot and images of the imported anime. The above measures have achieved remarkable results, but it takes time for the platforms to carry out post-processing. In contrast, unregulated pirate websites are not only richer in resources but also faster in updating, which has led to some teenagers flocking to pirate platforms.

Users of B-site who are dissatisfied with similar situations often jokingly refer to themselves as "genuine victims", which behind the banter reflects the contradiction between the audience's demand for access to diversified anime works and the lack of smooth channels for the introduction of anime dissemination. Instead of blocking some pirate video websites, the relevant departments and film platforms should consider how to find a balance between quality control and channels. Investing more manpower and resources to improve the efficiency of post-processing, and fighting for more film and TV copyrights and simultaneous broadcasting rights from the Japanese side are not only the requirements for grasping the dominant broadcasting rights of imported cartoons, but also the necessary means for platforms to maintain their own profitability.

4.2 Revitalisation of National Cartoons: Building the Foundation Wall of Cultural Heritage and Development Environment

Supporting the development of domestic animation is conducive to fighting for dominance in the animation market, strengthening the audience's exposure to and identification with Chinese culture, especially among domestic youth, and at the same time coinciding with the need to change the image of women that young people are exposed to in animation. On the one hand, domestic anime that has experienced a low valley period urgently needs reform and innovation; on the other hand, there are more women participating in the creation and consumption of animation, and the subjective consciousness and social status of women have also been greatly improved.

Domestic animation relies on national culture to obtain nutrients, and national culture is further disseminated through domestic animation as a medium. Chinese anime has drawn a lot of nutrients from traditional Chinese cultural resources in its development. In recent years, many phenomenal domestic anime works have been drawn from classical Chinese mythology, fully reflecting the unique attraction of works with Chinese cultural connotations to Chinese audiences. In addition, many anime works with supernatural, martial arts, historical, and folk themes also have high fan base and high evaluation scores. The stories of Chinese bizarre stories and ink wash style visuals are unique and exclusive to the development of domestic animation. However, while using them as a platform, we also need to explore more themes and focus on diversity in development.

The development of national comics not only needs to solidify the cultural heritage of the "foundation", but also to build a good development environment of the "wall". First of all, a good market environment is to attract investment, retain talent necessary premise, although the current stage of the national comic has gone through the "for the love of power generation" of the money-losing business of the winter, but want to support the national comics to reproduce glory, still need to make the industry's economic scale bigger. To this end, not only to further expand the audience, improve the acceptance of adult groups of animation, but also to innovate animation profit model, undertake popular character advertising endorsement, relying on well-known IP development of cultural and creative peripheral, online games, etc., to form an industrial chain. In addition, creative work needs a good creative environment, and animation creators not only need a reasonable division of labour to reduce the burden of drawing work, but also need effective management to give them time flexibility.

5 Conclusion

This article focuses on the critical perspective and only addresses the shortcomings in the portrayal of female characters in popular anime. However, there is no lack of female characters with great autonomy and vitality in the history of anime, especially the classics and masterpieces, which are often not confined to the traditional gender constraints, whether they are "men" or "women", and the works highlight their role as "human beings". Whether they are "men" or "women", the works highlight their emotions and beliefs as "human beings", which is perhaps one of the reasons why the classics can be loved by different groups of audiences in different times. Although the sample observed in this study is only five short years old, the subjectivity of female characters in anime popular in the last two years has significantly increased, and the situation of the future development can be optimistic.

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