



Contribution Title A Comprehensive Study on the Aesthetic Evolution and Artistic Expression of Ink Animation in the Era of Generative AI

Yanni Luo

Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, China

1353359795@qq.com

Abstract. Generative AI has opened up new avenues for the contemporary transformation of traditional ink-wash animation, reshaping its aesthetic orientation, artistic language, and creative methods. Traditional ink-wash animation has long centered on freehand brushwork, artistic conception, and ink-wash techniques; however, due to high production costs and limited avenues for innovation, it has struggled to achieve digital transformation. While today's generative AI boasts features such as efficient generation and style transfer, it has also given rise to issues such as a lack of artistic depth and a weakening of cultural substance. This paper focuses on a comparison of aesthetic characteristics to examine the aesthetic system of traditional ink-wash animation. By analyzing examples from both older and newer works to identify aesthetic similarities and differences, it clarifies the impact of AI technology on the aesthetic essence and expressive forms of ink-wash animation, summarizes existing aesthetic challenges, and proposes feasible directions for development, thereby providing practical guidance for related theoretical research and creative practice.

Keywords: Generative AI; Ink-wash animation; Aesthetic characteristics; Aesthetic evolution; Artistic heritage; Digital art

1 Introduction

Chinese ink-wash animation is a genre within the global animation art form that possesses a strong sense of national identity. It blends the aesthetic spirit of traditional Chinese painting with the form of animation to form a unique Eastern artistic paradigm [6]. From classic films such as *The Little Tadpole Looks for Its Mother* and *Landscape Affection*, to later works like *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio: The Temple of Lanruo* and *Little Monsters of Langlang Mountain*, and on to the 2025 release *Spirit of the Mountain*, these works have consistently embodied profound characteristics of Eastern aesthetics. In the past, the production process for traditional ink-wash animation was complex, time-consuming, and labor-intensive. Today, the rapid development of generative AI has significantly transformed artistic creation methods and aesthetic habits [2], thereby opening new avenues for the intelligent creation of ink-wash ani-

© The Author(s) 2026

C. F. Peng et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2026 5th International Conference on Humanities, Wisdom Education and Service Management (HWESM 2026)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 1024,

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-593-5_31

mation and sparking a new round of more conscious reflection within academic circles regarding the creation models of national aesthetic imagery. Consequently, examining the aesthetic evolution and artistic expression of ink-wash animation in the AI era holds immense theoretical value.

2 Artistic Characteristics and Aesthetic Foundations of Traditional Ink-and-Wash Animation

2.1 The Core of the Aesthetics of Yijing

Yijing is the fundamental aesthetic pursuit of traditional ink-wash animation. Through simple visuals and the use of negative space that blends the tangible with the intangible, it conveys emotions that are both profound and subtle. The foundation lies in the lively and natural charm of the imagery, which makes the overall composition appear fluid and comfortable, imbued with a sense of freehand brushwork [5]. By de-emphasizing form and emphasizing spiritual resonance, creators highlight the unique ethnic characteristics of the art form. *The Little Tadpole Looks for Its Mother* captures the vitality of the Jiangnan water towns with minimalist brushstrokes; *Landscape Sentiments* takes the concept of yijing to its pinnacle, exuding the detached and refined demeanor of a literati. It truly embodies the principle of "concept before brushstroke," leaving a lingering resonance long after the artwork is completed.

2.2 The Construction of Visual Language

Its visual beauty stems from the brush-and-ink tradition, where lines serve both sculptural and lyrical functions. By using layered filming to simulate the blending of ink and water, a unique visual texture is achieved [3]. The clear gradation of ink tones and the hazy atmosphere created by the natural fusion of brushwork and ink serve as a visual embodiment of the Eastern aesthetic principle of "unity between heaven and humanity" [8].

2.3 Expression of Narrative Characteristics

Traditional ink-wash animation typically employs a subtle, unhurried, poetic narrative rhythm that downplays dramatic conflict. It cultivates a serene and detached aesthetic character through the natural expression of sentiment and the gradual unfolding of artistic conception. Consequently, as traditional ink-wash animation typically employs a subtle, unhurried, poetic narrative rhythm that downplays dramatic conflict, fostering a serene and detached aesthetic through the natural expression of sentiment and the gradual unfolding of artistic conception, *Liaozhai: The Temple of Lanruo* inherits these characteristics while adopting a "1+5" narrative structure that ingeniously blends ancient mystical arts with cyberpunk aesthetics. Consequently, British scholar Epex, in his research on the aesthetics of AI animation, affirmed the reference value of its "emotion-first, conflict-minimized" narrative model for contemporary animation crea-

tion [12]. Traditional ink-wash animation, with artistic conception as its soul and brushwork as its framework, serves as an excellent foundation for inheritance and innovation in the AI era.

3 The Reconstruction and Transformation of Aesthetic Expression in Ink-wash Animation through Generative AI

3.1 Visual Aesthetics

Traditional ink-wash animation relies primarily on hand-drawn techniques, emphasizing the artistic quality of brushstrokes and unique textures; however, its visual effects are largely confined to the realm of traditional ink-wash art. Today's AI technology, on the other hand, can not only precisely mimic ink-wash brushstrokes but also break through traditional visual boundaries through style transfer techniques, serving as the core foundation for the fusion of ink-wash and modern styles [4]. *Liaozhai: Lanruo Temple* blends ink wash with cyberpunk to create modern visual effects, while *Youshanling* combines ink wash with elements from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* to evoke a fantastical aesthetic. With AI, creators can focus more on creative concepts, making their works better aligned with the preferences of modern audiences. Furthermore, the AIGC (AI-Generated Content) collaborative creation model incorporates numerous ink-wash elements, achieving new forms of aesthetic expression [1] and driving the transformation of visual aesthetics from traditional handcrafted textures to digital intelligent textures.

3.2 Narrative Aesthetics

Traditional ink-wash animation emphasizes emotional expression and poetic storytelling, featuring a leisurely pace that requires viewers to calmly savor the work to grasp its deeper meaning. In the AI era, ink-wash animation continues to prioritize emotion. Works such as *Little Monsters of Langlang Mountain* and *Liaozhai: Lanruo Temple* still focus on conveying emotional resonance. At the same time, to adapt to short-form videos and fast-paced viewing habits, the narratives incorporate light-hearted conflicts, adopt modern structures, and simplify the unfolding of artistic atmosphere, resulting in a tighter pace that better aligns with contemporary viewing contexts.

3.3 Aesthetic Accessibility

In the past, traditional ink-wash animation was constrained by production and distribution limitations, with audiences primarily consisting of professionals. The high aesthetic threshold made it a niche, highbrow, and deeply immersive experience. Today, AI technology has lowered production barriers and increased efficiency. Short, concise, and fast-paced ink-wash shorts are better suited for new media distribution, expanding the audience to include younger demographics and driving the populariza-

tion and rejuvenation of ink-wash aesthetics [7]. Works such as *Little Monsters of Langlang Mountain* and *Spirit of the Mountain* have gained widespread popularity through short videos. Ordinary viewers can appreciate the charm of ink wash animation without requiring deep aesthetic knowledge, creating a closed loop of creation, dissemination, and feedback that brings this artistic form closer to the public's tastes.

4 Current Aesthetic Issues and Challenges in AI-Generated Ink-and-Wash Animation

4.1 Lack of Artistic Conceptualization and Cultural Depth

The value of traditional ink-and-wash animation lies primarily in the cultural charm and emotional resonance conveyed by hand-drawn brushwork. However, most AI-generated ink-and-wash effects merely imitate the surface style and struggle to convey deeper cultural significance. Even the elements from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* in *Spirit of the Mountains* remain at the level of symbolic application and have not been truly brought to life. As the German scholar Weber once noted, technological replication struggles to convey the core spirit of art. This confirms that AI-generated works lack warmth and are unable to achieve the creative philosophy of "intention preceding the brushstroke, and meaning remaining after the painting is complete" [11].

4.2 The Dilemma of Formulaic Aesthetic Expression

Traditional ink-wash animation possesses highly individualized aesthetic characteristics due to the diverse techniques and aesthetic sensibilities of its creators. However, with generative AI based on big data models, creators often face issues of stylistic homogenization and formulaic content during the creative process. This causes ink-wash animation to lose its individualistic traits, making it difficult to achieve personalized expression and effective innovation, thereby contradicting the aesthetic pursuits of traditional ink-wash art. The limitations of algorithms are one of the fundamental causes of this stylistic homogenization.

5 Future Development and Outlook

5.1 Upholding the Technological Role

Since AI should be positioned as a creative tool rather than a replacement for the artist's central role, the future development of ink-wash animation must uphold the artist's leading role in creativity and aesthetics. AI should be used to free artists from repetitive labor, thereby balancing the relationship between technological rationality and artistic sensibility and avoiding technological alienation. The creative practice of *The Spirit of the Mountain* illustrates this point: by making AI serve artistic creativity, we can better promote the deep integration of technology and art.

5.2 Continuation of Cultural Heritage

The essence of heritage preservation lies in sustaining the spirit of freehand brushwork and the cultural core. Therefore, future AI ink-wash animation should systematically and systematically study the aesthetic system and brushwork logic of traditional ink-wash painting, integrating Eastern aesthetics into AI algorithm training so that AI can not only capture the form but also grasp the spirit [9]. Drawing inspiration from the approach taken in *Liaozhai: Lanruo Temple*, we can combine traditional literary IP with contemporary narrative techniques. Furthermore, by referencing the experience of Japanese scholars in the digital preservation of Eastern aesthetics, we can achieve a truly creative transformation of traditional ink-wash culture. [13]

5.3 Exploring Innovative Pathways

In the future, human-machine collaborative creation will become the mainstream model for ink-wash animation. Artists will primarily be responsible for creative and aesthetic aspects, while AI handles technical tasks. Through mutual cooperation and leveraging each other's strengths, we can draw on the successful experience of American scholars in digital ink-wash technology to explore new pathways for integrating ink-wash animation with interactive art and virtual reality.[10]

6 Conclusion and Outlook

Generative AI has opened up new opportunities for the digital transformation of traditional ink-wash animation, comprehensively transforming its aesthetic style—from visual presentation and storytelling rhythm to audience reception. It addresses the issues of high production costs, cumbersome processes, and limited reach associated with traditional ink-wash animation. By leveraging its ability to mimic the ink-wash style and rapidly generate visuals, it transforms the texture of purely handcrafted work into a digital one. It also adapts to the speed of new media dissemination, allowing ink-wash art to break out of its niche professional circles, reach a broader general audience, and be revitalized. However, AI-generated ink-wash animation also has obvious drawbacks: most works merely mimic the superficial style of ink-wash painting, lacking cultural depth and failing to evoke profound artistic resonance. They are also prone to becoming formulaic and monotonous. Algorithms can only replicate the outward appearance of ink-wash art; they cannot capture its inner essence—the traditional principle that "the artistic intent precedes the brushstroke, and the artistic resonance endures long after the painting is complete." Ultimately, AI is merely a tool to assist in creation; it cannot replace the artist themselves.

In the future, AI-generated ink-wash animation must adhere to the principle that "art is the core, and technology is the tool." It must firmly uphold the artist's creative leadership, deeply explore the expressive spirit and cultural significance of traditional ink-wash painting, and pursue a path of collaboration between humans and AI to create masterpieces. This approach should preserve the charm of traditional ink-wash art

while aligning with modern aesthetics, thereby truly innovating national ink-wash art and ensuring its enduring legacy. At the same time, we must draw upon advanced international research findings and integrate the practical approaches to the digital development of ink-wash animation from overseas [10]. This will help align the aesthetic expression of ink-wash animation with the international context, bring Chinese aesthetics to the global stage, and achieve high-quality transmission and innovative development of ink-wash animation.

References

1. Huang Qiaozi, Ye Youtian. Integration and Innovation of AIGC Intelligent Co-creation Mode in Ink Animation Aesthetics [J]. *Film Review*, 2025, (7): 92-99
2. Xia Zhenkai. The New Changes in Film Industry and Technological Aesthetics in the AIGC Era [J]. *Film Literature*, 2024, (14): 58-62
3. Ye Youtian, Jiang Jinzhen. New Thoughts on Artificial Intelligence Empowering Animation Creation Methods [J]. *Film Review*, 2024, (3): 7-13
4. Dong Sun, Ding Youdong, Qian Yun. Application of Style Transfer Algorithm Based on Artificial Intelligence in Animation Special Effects Design [J]. *Decoration*, 2018, (1): 104-107
5. He Xi, Hou Zhi. Research on the Application of Ink Animation Based on Artificial Neural Network Style Transfer [J]. *Northwest Art (Journal of Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts)*, 2022, (3): 90-95
6. Li Ning, He Luoshan. Technological Innovation and Aesthetic Evolution of Contemporary Digital Ink Animation in China [J]. *Art Panorama*, 2024, (8): 112-115
7. Wang Ziyang. On the Inheritance and Innovation of Chinese Ink Animation Art [J]. *Art Criticism*, 2024, (12): 168-171
8. Yang Gang. The Development of Ink Animation Art from the Perspective of Technology and Audience [J]. *Audio-Visual*, 2024, (6): 108-110
9. Jia Huoran. The Impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence AIGC on Animation Creation [J]. *Journal of Suihua University*, 2024, 44(11): 48-50
10. Han Yuqi, Gao Weihua. Empty Symbols, Halo, and Spatial Narration: Creative Transformation of Ink Animation in the Digital Age [J]. *Contemporary Animation*, 2024, (3): 87-91
11. Yang Yu. Inheritance and Innovation of Chinese Ancient Architectural Culture Based on NPR Ink Style Animation [J]. *Journal of Art Education Research*, 2024, (12): 91-93
12. Miller L, Zhang H. Developing Digital Chinese Water-Ink Animation: Renaissance of Chinese Water-Ink Animation[R]. Drexel University, USA, 2014.[13] Weber F. Abstract Animation and Oriental Aesthetic: A Study on Visual Expression of Chinese Ink Animation[J]. *Journal of Animation Studies*, Germany, 2023, 8(2): 45-62.
13. Apex. The Rise of AI Anime Generators: Enlightenment for AI Ink Animation Creation[J]. *London Daily News*, UK, 2025, (42): 38-43.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

