

# ***Masculinity Repackaged: Gender Performance and Emotional Power in Contemporary Chinese Animations***

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the construction of masculine traits in the Chinese short-form animation A-Si and Xiao-Lingdang, focusing on how dominant masculinity is embedded within seemingly gender-reversed narratives. Drawing on R.W. Connell's theory of masculinity and analyzing dimensions of power structures, emotional engagement, and gendered labor division, this paper explores how the animation negotiates traditional gender hierarchies through visual framing, emotional interaction, and discourse patterns. Despite its surface-level depiction of female dominance and softened male figures, the animation maintains and recodes hegemonic masculinity through strategies such as emotional control, economic superiority, and narrative closure. The male protagonist, portrayed as a "gentle protector," retains dominant status by managing relational outcomes and symbolic authority, even in scenarios featuring female violence or initiative. This study sheds light on how contemporary media texts sustain gender power through subtle and emotionalized forms of masculine dominance, offering insights into gender dynamics in the digital media era.

## **1. Introduction**

Gender research in both Chinese and Western academic spheres has long demonstrated a disproportionate focus on women, often sidelining the study of men and masculinity. This gendered imbalance has resulted in the marginalization and voicelessness of men as subjects of scholarly inquiry. While academic discourse on masculinity in the West only began to take shape with theoretical depth in the 1980s, Fang (2006)[1] has pointed out that China's engagement with this field developed even later. Since the early 21st century, Chinese scholars have introduced and adapted Western theories to explore the practices of masculinity within the local sociocultural context, as Pi and Wang (2017)[2] have suggested.

Among the most influential frameworks is R.W. Connell's theory of multiple masculinities, which redefines gender not merely as a personal identity but as a relational social structure. Connell (2003) [3] points out that masculinity is not a fixed essence but a set of practices embedded within dynamic power structures. These structures can be categorized into three primary domains: (1) power relations; (2) emotional investment; (3) production. Masculinity manifests through one's embodied position within these relational fields—whether dominant or subordinate. Thus, the study

of masculinity must account for both gendered practices and the structural configurations in which they operate, to fully reflect its multidimensional and performative nature.

Existing literature on masculinity in Chinese media has predominantly analyzed popular cultural forms such as literature, film, advertisements, and fashion magazines. However, the realm of animation—particularly short-form digital animation—remains largely underexplored.

In recent years, with state policy support and technological advancement, Chinese domestic animation has experienced rapid growth on short video platforms such as Douyin(TikTok China). This surge has given rise to numerous successful IPs, including A-Si and Xiao-Lingdang, a romantic urban fantasy mini-series produced by Changsha Mihe Animation under the “Light Comic Initiative.” The series portrays the daily interactions and imaginative adventures of a young couple—A-Si (male) and Xiao-Lingdang (female)—and has gained massive popularity, amassing over ten million followers and 110 million likes. As of June 8, 2025, the account has released 169 short videos ranging from a few seconds to several minutes in length. These episodes primarily depict everyday emotional exchanges, minor conflicts, and fantasy elements centered on the two protagonists.

Unlike traditional serialized narratives, short-form animations on Douyin prioritize character interactions and emotional moments over cohesive plots. These works often function as “collections of emotional fragments” rather than structured stories, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the characters rather than follow a fixed narrative arc. This fragmented, emotion-driven format fosters audience engagement through character-centered interpretation and identification, shaping viewers’ perceptions of gender roles and relational dynamics—particularly masculinity.

Within this sociocultural context, the male characters constructed in short video animations deserve closer scrutiny. As these works reach billions of online viewers, they reflect and reproduce collective imaginaries of idealized masculinity, making them a significant new domain for gender analysis. Against this backdrop, this study investigates the construction of masculinity in the Douyin animation series A-Si and Xiao-Lingdang, with particular attention to power structures, emotional performance, and gendered labor in everyday interactions.

## 2. Literature review

A search on CNKI using the keyword “masculinity” reveals that the earliest related publication appeared in 2002. As of 2025, there are a total of 1,036 documents on this topic, including 310 graduate theses. However, when refined by adding the keywords “animation” and “comics”, only 20 relevant studies remain. A review of this body of literature indicates several distinct phases and characteristics in Chinese scholarship on masculinity.

Initially, most research focused on the introduction of Western theoretical frameworks. A large portion of early studies centered on the translation and interpretation of Western theories, particularly R. W. Connell’s concept of “multiple masculinities.” [4] These works emphasized understanding gender not as a biological essence, but as a social structure, highlighting the dominance of “hegemonic masculinity” and its manifestations across power relations, production, and emotional investment. At this stage, masculinity was primarily explored through literary texts, with scholars analyzing how novels, essays, and poetry encode specific masculine ideals within cultural discourse.

Later, the scope of analysis extended to popular culture, with increasing attention to youth gender education[5]. As Connell’s theory gained wider academic recognition in China, scholars began to explore masculinities in mass media—films, TV dramas, variety shows, advertisements, and other forms of popular culture[6]. These studies observed a notable cultural shift in the portrayal of male figures, from traditional masculinity to forms such as “soft masculinity” or “new

masculinity.” These representations often served as entry points for scholars to critique the limitations of conventional gender education in China.

Some scholars turned toward the lived experiences of specific male groups. With the deepening of gender studies, researchers expanded their focus to the everyday practices of men in various social strata—including male teachers, corporate executives, and migrant workers—utilizing ethnographic methods, interviews, or social constructivist perspectives to examine how masculinity is enacted and reshaped in different contexts[7]. During this phase, the intersection of masculinity studies with feminism, gender theory, and body politics became increasingly apparent.

Despite these developments, limitations remain. Most existing studies rely heavily on theoretical discussion and focus on traditional or mainstream media forms. Particularly in the current landscape, where short video platforms are becoming dominant, there is a lack of attention to how masculinity is constructed in new media environments[8]. Animated short series, which blend popular culture, emotional expression, and gender performance, provide a fertile site for such inquiry. This study, therefore, selects the Chinese short video animation *Ah Si* and *Xiao-Lingdang* as its case, employing Connell’s theory of multiple masculinities and content analysis to explore the construction of male images and gender relations in this specific media context.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study adopts R. W. Connell’s theory of multiple masculinities as its theoretical framework, drawing on three analytical dimensions: power structures, emotional investment, and relations of production. Employing a qualitative content analysis approach, the research investigates the logic of masculinity representation in the Chinese short animation series *Ah Si* and *Xiao-Lingdang*. Through systematic coding of the video content, the study categorizes gender interactions and interprets them in relation to broader structural dynamics, aiming to identify the distinctive modes through which masculinity is performed within this specific animated media form.

In terms of sample selection, the dataset includes all 169 videos uploaded to the official *Ah Si* and *Xiao-Lingdang* Douyin account as of June 8, 2025. After excluding duplicate uploads and non-narrative clips such as costume transformation sequences, a total of 112 valid video samples were selected for detailed coding and analysis, each containing clear character dialogue and gender-based interaction scenes.

During the coding process, the researcher developed specific criteria and coding guidelines based on the three analytical dimensions to ensure both reliability and validity of the results. Examples of coding indicators include: “Is the male character the dominant speaker in the dialogue?”, “Does the male character initiate or display emotional investment?”, and “Is the male character shown as the initiator of tasks or creative actions?” Each video was categorized based on its representative scenes and narrative function, and then recorded for preliminary descriptive statistics.

This study combines descriptive and interpretive analysis, focusing not only on the visible portrayal of male characters but also on their symbolic roles within gendered interaction structures. Ultimately, it aims to reveal how contemporary mainstream Chinese cultural texts construct and reproduce masculinity within the context of short-form digital animation.

### 4. Findings and Analysis

#### 4.1 Constructing Visual Power through Height Difference in Daily Interactions

When formulating her theory of masculinity, Connell not only analyzed gender orders at a macro-sociological level, but also emphasized the concept of gender projects, i.e., the life-history processes through which individuals acquire and perform gendered identities in specific social

contexts. There exists a dynamic interaction between macro-level structures and micro-level practices. As the intersection of gender performance, the body is not only the object of gender discipline but also the medium through which power relations are visually manifested.

In the Chinese short video animation A-Si and Xiaolingdang, such visual power is subtly embedded in the characters’ height difference and pose arrangement, forming an unspoken logic of gender domination within everyday interactions.

4.1.1 Spatial Dominance through Visual Framing

In A-Si and Xiaolingdang, the male and female protagonists are designed with a height difference of approximately 5 centimeters (see Table 1). Although seemingly minor, this gap is frequently exaggerated in conversational scenes to serve as a symbolic metaphor for power relations. Whether standing face-to-face or walking side-by-side, the male character is often positioned higher in the frame, engaging in downward gazes, while the female character responds from a lower position, frequently looking up. This framing creates a sense of subtle pressure and symbolic subordination, constituting a “visual subjectivity” that operates as a spatial mechanism of control.

Table 1 Character Overview

Character	Description	Visual Identity
A-Si (male lead)	A blue-haired serpent spirit dressed in cyan robes. Gentle, powerful, witty, and loyal. He possesses magical abilities such as time travel, telekinesis, and weather control.	
Xiao-Lingdang (female lead)	A whimsical and occasionally spoiled human girl, half a head shorter than A-Si. Known for her brute strength—can lift 3000 stone. Playful and impulsive, yet kind-hearted.	

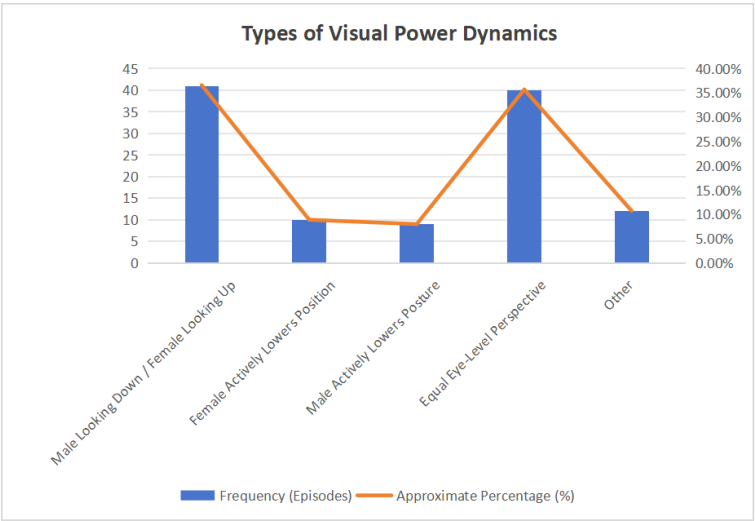


Figure 1 Statistical Chart of Visual Power Structures

As shown in Figure 1, out of all video samples, 41 clips clearly depict the male in a high-angle

gaze and the female in a low-angle posture—accounting for 36.6% of the total. This suggests that the visual asymmetry is neither coincidental nor marginal. Even within the stylized 3D Q-version animation, this subtle power gap is reinforced visually. Notably, although the female protagonist Xiaolingdang is described as a “super-strong girl,” her body model remains slender, delicate, and visually compliant with traditional notions of feminine vulnerability—thus maintaining rather than challenging gender norms.

#### 4.1.2 Body Posture as a Site of Power Reversal

In emotionally charged or tension-filled scenes, changes in characters’ physical postures become key strategies for adjusting the visual power dynamic. In 10 of the sampled videos, the female protagonist voluntarily lowers her physical stance—by sitting, kneeling, or lying on her side—thereby emphasizing her vulnerability, intimacy, or dependence. These actions often occur when she is acting coquettishly, avoiding responsibility, or seeking comfort from the male lead. This “self-diminishing” bodily strategy visually enlarges the height difference between the characters, further reinforcing the male’s dominant visual position.

In contrast, 5 videos depict the male lead lowering his body—through kneeling, bowing, or lowering his head—typically in scenarios of apology, commitment, or confession. These moments do suggest a more “gentle” expression of masculinity. However, this softening of posture does not signify a true shift in power; rather, it reflects the emotional regulation function of the dominant party. The male character maintains initiative by voluntarily yielding power, and therefore still occupies the controlling role within the gender structure.

#### 4.1.3 The Limited Presence of Visually Egalitarian Scenes

Although the overall “high angle–low angle” structure dominates visual interactions between characters, approximately 35% of the videos still present relatively level shot compositions. These types of scenes typically appear in segments with a relaxed atmosphere and balanced character interactions, reflecting the creators’ intent to construct a more equitable gender dynamic. However, both in terms of quantity and structural weight, such level perspectives do not constitute a dominant trend.

Overall, the spatial visual design in A-Si and Xiao Lingdang reveals a gendered power structure. While on the surface it avoids overt dominance-submission oppositions, it continues to maintain male visual dominance in daily interactions through a “soft packaging” approach. This “soft dominance” is subtler and more easily accepted and internalized by the audience than the hypermasculine tropes found in traditional animation, thereby forming a more moderate yet stable cultural continuity of gendered power.

### 4.2 The Illusion of Reversed Power: Gendered Violence and the Persistence of Male Dominance

Power relations, in simple terms, involve who dominates whom and the attitudes of those in subordinate positions. Connell argues that men’s dominance and women’s subordination are concrete manifestations of patriarchal legitimization, often upheld through violence or institutional mechanisms. Jeff Hearn further suggests that violence is closely linked with power, control, and sustained domination. However, in short video animations, it is difficult to present political or institutional biases directly through the text, making it more feasible to analyze explicit violent behaviors and how male characters wield power in dialogue. Specifically, the analysis can be conducted from the following two perspectives: (1) the role of male characters in violent scenes (as perpetrators or recipients); (2) the control of discourse during verbal exchanges.



#### 4.2.1 Female as Aggressor, Male as Passive Recipient of Violence

Although in A-Si and Xiao-Lingdang, the male protagonist A-Si is clearly portrayed as having superior social status and abilities compared to the female lead, Xiao-Lingdang, he is often depicted as being "at a disadvantage" in their direct interactions. The female lead frequently assumes the role of the aggressor, while the male character becomes the target of her outbursts. On the surface, this narrative structure suggests a reversal of traditional gendered power dynamics in favor of female dominance. However, in essence, it is A-Si's tolerance and emotional warmth that underscore his "generosity" and "grace," thereby constructing a form of dominant masculinity under the guise of "soft power."

As detailed in Table 2, a total of 40 out of 112 valid video samples contain scenes involving physical aggression. Among these, 87.5% (35 videos) depict the female protagonist as the aggressor and the male protagonist as the recipient, thereby reversing conventional gendered representations of violence. However, rather than showing the act of violence directly, the majority of these videos employ elliptical narrative strategies—the violence is implied rather than visually presented. Physical consequences such as slap marks, bruises, or torn clothing on the male character function as indirect signifiers of prior aggression. In the eight videos where the violent act is explicitly visualized, all portray unilateral attacks initiated by the female protagonist, with the male character consistently assuming a non-retaliatory and passive position.

Table 2 Typology of Violence in Gendered Interactions

Type of Violent Scenario	Number of Videos	Proportion of Total Violent Scenes
Female protagonist as aggressor	35	87.50%
Male protagonist as recipient of violence	33	82.50%
Mutual confrontation between both characters	3	7.50%
Violence explicitly depicted on screen	5	12.50%
Violence implied through injuries or dialogue	37	92.50%

Across the narrative, all male characters—including the male lead—are portrayed as subordinate when confronted by the female protagonist. This setting seems intended to express gender equality, yet it unconsciously anchors the female character's violent behavior in the unconditional affection and tolerance granted by male characters. For example, in Video No. 111, during a dispute between the leads, all male characters—whether elders or friends—side entirely with the female lead and punish the male protagonist without question. In Video No. 10, all male characters are punished by the female lead (e.g., forced to kneel on washboards) for disobeying her will. In Video No. 77, when the male lead is defeated in a duel with a powerful elder (who also spoils the female lead), she steps in to avenge him and triumphs. Within this narrative structure, the female character remains the primary enforcer of violence, supported by the indulgence of all male figures.




The core logic of this narrative configuration lies in the fact that, although the female character engages in violent behavior, such violence is legitimized by the male protagonist's love and forbearance. The creator seemingly intends to portray a form of "gentle guardian masculinity"—a male figure who possesses strength but chooses restraint, responding to aggression with patience and care. In this way, the male character maintains a dominant position within the gendered power dynamic. This seemingly reversed gender narrative is, in essence, a rhetorical strategy of power continuity through the avoidance of overt violence, ultimately serving to reaffirm and extend hegemonic masculinity under the guise of emotional tolerance.

#### 4.2.2 The Displacement of Power Structures and the Underlying Sociocultural Anxiety

The configuration of “female perpetrator–male recipient” in violent interactions is not only left unchallenged in the animation but is often rendered in a playful or romanticized tone. For example, male characters are shown smiling in forgiveness after being struck or silently enduring humiliation in public without resistance. This narrative approach reframes male tolerance as a form of emotional capital, thereby reinforcing their dominance in gender relations—not only through superior social status and competence but also via a newly acquired moral superiority.

Moreover, as illustrated in Table 3, several episodes depict the female protagonist exerting violent control over other male characters. In video A10, all male characters are collectively punished with kneeling on washboards for disobeying her wishes; in A78, the female protagonist defeats all male opponents, including those in senior positions; in A111, all male characters unconditionally side with her to discipline the male lead. While such collective deference ostensibly aims to establish female agency and decision-making power, its foundation still relies on the male characters’ voluntary concession. In essence, this narrative legitimizes female violence through the symbolic authorization of male power, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies under the guise of role reversal.

Table 3 Depictions of Female Violence in Key Video Scenes

Video No.	Screenshot	Plot Summary
A10		During a dispute between the male and female protagonists, all male characters who attempt to support the male lead are punished by the female protagonist and forced to kneel on washboards.
A78		The female protagonist participates in a sports competition and, empowered by her supernatural abilities, easily defeats all male competitors.
A111		Other characters “judge” the male protagonist for secretly hiding money. All male characters side with the female lead to punish him.

Despite its seemingly humorous tone in short video contexts, this narrative setting implicitly embeds the notion that power lies in the capacity to exercise violence. This framing risks conflating gender equality with mere role reversal, thus obscuring the pursuit of truly balanced, rational, and non-violent gender dynamics.

#### 4.3 The Continuity of Dominance through Emotional and Linguistic Control

Although the female protagonist in A-Si and Xiaolingdang often assumes the role of initiating conversations—frequently posing questions and seemingly directing the communicative rhythm—a deeper analysis of the dialogic structure reveals that the ultimate control over conversational outcomes, emotional tone, and decisional power lies predominantly with the male protagonist. This

receiver-oriented linguistic logic effectively reflects a hidden continuation of hegemonic masculinity, wherein the power to conclude and define the dialogue rests with the male character.

For instance, in video A21, Xiaolingdang initiates the exchange by asking, “How long will you love me?”, which on the surface appears to assert agency, as shown in Table 4. However, A-Si’s response—“Until the end of time”—not only soothes the female character’s anxiety but also reclaims the emotional initiative. By offering a calm and assertive answer, the male character subtly exerts psychological control. This pattern suggests that the exchange is not a manifestation of equitable communication, but rather a combination of emotional reassurance and discursive authority, reinforcing the male’s dominant role within the interaction.

Table 4 Dialogues Exhibiting Dominance in Verbal Exchanges

Video No.	Female Character’s Question	Male Character’s Response	Analysis of Speech Authority Attribution
A01	"How long will you love me?"	"Until the end of time."	Provides emotional reassurance, concludes the conversation, and controls the rhythm
A14	"A-Si, with such strength, can you travel through time?"	"No, I can't."	Male character holds the right to conclude the conversation
A52	"I haven’t been out to play for so long. I’m not happy."	"Come on, don’t be mad..."	Emotionally appeases and ends the exchange, seizing psychological initiative

Although the animation appears to grant the female character greater verbal initiative, a closer analysis of the dialogue structure reveals that this initiative does not translate into actual conversational dominance. On the contrary, the male character continues to function as a rational authority figure through his responses—providing reassurance, offering promises, and guiding emotional resolution. Behind this seemingly gentle and emotionally expressive male discourse lies a cultural mechanism that perpetuates traditional hegemonic masculinity within gendered interactions.

#### 4.3.1 Emotional Investment: Constructing Dominant Positions through Mutual Consent

In studies on masculinity, the emotional dimension is often marginalized. However, emotional practices deeply reflect the subtle mechanisms underpinning gendered power structures. Connell argues that power is not only constructed through violence and coercion, but also legitimized through ongoing interaction, complicity, and self-regulation. Within this framework, heterosexual emotional relationships become a key metaphorical space in which hegemonic masculinity is constructed. In the short video animation A-Si and Xiaolingdang, the male protagonist’s dominant position is not enforced through overt coercion, but rather sustained through his gentle and reassuring responses in emotional interactions, ultimately legitimizing his control in a soft, relational form.

#### 4.3.2 The Active Responder to Emotional Demands

Among the 112 videos in A-Si and Xiaolingdang, 61 begin with the female protagonist raising an emotionally charged question, to which the male protagonist responds gently, offering comfort and emotional promises. For example:

“How long will you love me?”  
“Forever.”



“And how long is forever?”

“Even if I vanish from this world, I will still love you.”

In what appears to be a "woman-pursues-man" dynamic, the female character initiates emotional requests, while the male protagonist guides the emotional rhythm and offers reassurance. This interaction seems to reverse traditional gender dynamics but in fact consolidates male dominance by positioning the male as the emotional regulator and the provider of reassurance.

Notably, the emotional climax of many such scenes is often marked by physical gestures (e.g., hugs, kisses), almost always initiated by the male protagonist. In contrast, the female character typically participates passively, reinforcing a gendered logic of active/passive roles.

### 4.3.3 Self-Regulation of Gender Roles

A-Si and Xiaolingdang does not depict an overtly one-sided dominance in emotional relationships. Instead, its complexity lies in how the female protagonist, through gender socialization, internalizes a subordinate position and actively partakes in maintaining hegemonic masculinity. In Video A06, the protagonists are role-playing:

“If I kiss you, what would you do?”

“Resist!”

“If I...”

“Oh, you’re so annoying. A girl’s strength is limited, after all...”

Here, the female protagonist adopts the role of the “weaker party” through half-hearted resistance, ultimately aligning with the male protagonist’s advances through both speech and body language. Her passivity becomes a “natural extension” of femininity.

Such character constructions are common in contemporary media and reflect longstanding norms about ideal gender traits—gentle, submissive women and decisive, protective men. Video A33 further illustrates this internalized logic:

“Are you okay?”

“Hmph~ that rock hurt my foot.”

“Can you walk?”

“It hurts... carry me...”

When the male protagonist is present, the female character reverts to a delicate, dependent persona, whereas in his absence, she appears more self-reliant. This duality is not contradictory but rather a strategic response to situational expectations of gender performance.

### 4.3.4 Legitimizing Dominance through Mutual Consent

Connell emphasizes that dominance is not a unilateral imposition but a form of “power through consent” established in continued interaction. Paul Ricoeur also asserts that stable power relations are founded on a “shared willingness to live together.” In A-Si and Xiaolingdang, the male protagonist’s image as a “gentle guardian” is not constructed through authoritarian control but through the female character’s emotional dependence, her acceptance of a subordinate role, and her repeated affirmations of reliance throughout the relationship.

This dominance is not presented through “hypermasculine” displays, but rather through a “soft masculinity” that is easily accepted by both the female character and the audience. It aligns with contemporary aesthetics that idealize the “new man.” However, even within such seemingly egalitarian interactions, the fundamental power logic remains unchanged: the male character controls emotional pacing and relational direction, while the female character is framed as deriving her identity and satisfaction from the emotional supply provided by the male.

## 4.4 Gender Role Construction in Production Relations

### 4.4.1 Gendered Division of Domestic Labor

In the distribution of labor in both work and daily life, gender-based divisions remain a prevalent cultural logic. One of the most typical manifestations of this is the structural role arrangement of “men in charge of the outside, women in charge of the home.” This model not only contributes to gender inequality in the process of economic accumulation, but also serves as a core pathway through which hegemonic masculinity is socially constructed. Over time, it has become internalized as a universal cognitive schema of gender, exerting deep influence on individual behavior. As one theorist notes, “When suppression reaches a certain threshold, the role becomes an internal constraint placed upon the self”—a statement that vividly captures the disciplining power of gender roles.

### 4.4.2 Naturalized Dominance through Supernatural Ability

Demetriou distinguishes two dimensions of masculinity: external dominance, which emerges in the power dynamics between men and women, and internal dominance, which manifests in the competition among men. Within this framework, Chinese short-form animation provides a particularly clear example of how hegemonic masculinity is constructed.

Taking A-Si and Xiao-Lingdang as a case in point, although the male protagonist A-Si is portrayed as gentle and caring, the structural setup of the series still reinforces highly gendered divisions of labor and dominant masculine traits. In terms of domestic responsibilities, the female character is more frequently shown performing “inner” duties such as cooking and cleaning, while the male character is often depicted as incapable of handling basic household tasks. For instance, in several episodes, Xiao-Lingdang is busy in the kitchen while A-Si merely observes from the sidelines—thus reinforcing normative expectations of “women in the home.”

At the same time, A-Si exhibits an almost idealized model of masculine competence in his interactions with the outside world. He is portrayed as powerful and capable—sometimes even possessing supernatural abilities such as controlling time and space. This “external” role assignment contrasts sharply with the domestic responsibilities of the female character and reinforces the male protagonist’s dominance in the production sphere.

### 4.4.3 Economic Strength Remains a Key Marker of Masculinity

Furthermore, this hegemonic masculinity is also symbolized through economic performance, especially purchasing power. The male character is frequently shown as the one footing the bill, and such emphasis on consumption reinforces a narrative framework in which masculinity is equated with financial capacity. In contrast to the female character’s unpaid emotional labor and household management, the male character’s value is measured by his control and possession of material resources—thereby embedding his dominance within the broader discourse of gendered production relations.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The multi-dimensional analysis of A-Si and Xiao-Lingdang reveals that Chinese short-form animated videos do not reaffirm male dominance through overt or aggressive expressions, but rather embed power relations within everyday interactions such as spatial arrangements, dialogic structures, and emotional responses. Through a strategy of “softened masculinity” and “de-violent representation,” the dominant position of male characters is naturalized and rendered more

approachable. This construction pathway carries several layers of cultural and gender significance.

### 5.1 From “Hegemonic Masculinity” to “Soft Domination”

While traditional visual media often associate masculinity with a rigid combination of strength, authority, and rationality, male characters in short-form videos increasingly exhibit traits such as restraint, empathy, and emotional responsiveness. On the surface, this may seem to challenge hegemonic masculinity. In reality, it merely repackages dominance into a more palatable form—recoding the male figure as a gentle “emotional leader” and “relationship regulator.”

Even when the female character initiates physical aggression or expresses emotional needs, the male character ultimately retains control over the emotional rhythm, the direction of the interaction, and the narrative outcome. Compared to traditional hegemonic expressions, this “soft domination” is more covert and thus more easily accepted and internalized by viewers, constituting a new paradigm of media-driven gender discipline.

### 5.2 The De-violencing of Power Does Not Diminish Its Dominance

The frequent depiction of female characters enacting violence while male characters tolerate or absorb it appears to endow women with greater agency—even the “right to act out.” However, such portrayals are typically framed as expressions of male patience, protectiveness, or affection, thereby re-legitimizing the foundation of power asymmetry.

In other words, simply inverting the agent of violence does not fundamentally challenge the underlying gender hierarchy. Rather, it reinforces the “male dominance—female compliance” dynamic by embedding it within emotional and affective exchanges. This structural logic—stripped of overt institutions or violence but retaining its outcome—is the narrative compromise that Chinese short-form animation employs to balance “sensitivity avoidance” with the continuation of power.

### 5.3 “Collaborative Dominance” Through Gender Role Negotiation

Female characters are not depicted as powerless victims; on the contrary, they display a degree of agency through questioning, emotional expression, and affectionate demands. However, this agency is often framed within a relational logic where women depend on male responses to fulfill emotional needs.

Thus, the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity is not solely a product of the male character's behavior but is co-constructed through the emotional cooperation and performative alignment of the female character. This “collaborative dominance” turns gender power from a one-directional imposition into a negotiated, tacitly understood, and cyclically reproduced process.

### 5.4 The Deferred Gender Consciousness in Media Texts

Although gender role reversals are superficially present in these animations—such as superpowered women, female-initiated conflicts, or emotionally assertive female characters—these elements often serve as visual or comedic devices rather than meaningful challenges to structural gender inequality.

Whether in the distribution of domestic labor, displays of consumer behavior, spatial representations, or dialogic authority, male characters consistently remain the central agents. This suggests that while Chinese short-form animation may experiment with new forms of gender interaction, it has not fundamentally broken away from a male-centric cultural logic. On the contrary, it may be complicit in further beautifying and naturalizing hegemonic masculinity under

the guise of innovation.

*\*Source Attribution: All screenshots and quoted dialogue texts in this paper are sourced from the Douyin short-form animation series A-Si and Xiao-Lingdang, published by the official Douyin account @A-Si and Xiao-Lingdang. Both images and dialogues are used solely for academic research and illustrative purposes under fair use. Original content is publicly available on the Douyin platform.*

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