

AI sparks new filter trend of 'ugly-cute' claylike portraits

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Beauty standards are constantly morphing, especially in the age of artificial intelligence. While retouching photos, particularly selfies, has become commonplace, a new cultural wave is sweeping China — the “clay filter” portrait. These AI-powered apps generate unexpectedly charming and “ugly-cute” results, sparking a recent social media frenzy.

Remini, the star of the AI photo app scene, not only offers old photo restoration, but also boasts a trendy “clay style” image generation feature. It skyrocketed to the top of China’s free app rankings on Apple’s App Store last Wednesday.

It becomes a trending topic on social media such as Weibo (China’s Twitter) and many “clay” style pictures are being posted on WeChat, especially by people traveling over the Labor Day holiday in China.

“I spent my entire afternoon playing with the clay filter,” confessed Call Me A Zhai, a Weibo user with over 200,000 followers, on May 3. Their post showcased 11 unique clay-filtered versions of everyday objects, including cups, food, flowers, coffee and bridges.

More people used the filter to transform their self portraits, or pictures of film stars and their pets in Weibo and WeChat, while guides teaching how to make better clay filters are spread throughout Xiaohongshu or Red (China’s equivalent of Instagram).

“Surprising and lovely,” remarked WeChat user Keli when sharing his family photos transformed into clay figures.

The filters offer a fun, accessible way to explore personal narratives, connect with the past, and experiment with different facets of identity, people said on social media.

AI-powered photo apps

Remini was initially developed by Beijing-based startup Caldron, then acquired by Italy-based Bending Spoons in 2021. It has been used for millions of times globally.

Remini boasts the abilities to sharpen blurry faces, reinvigorate faded colors to regain their vibrancy, and even restore



Keli shares his family photos transformed into clay figures on WeChat, calling it surprising and lovely. — Keli

damaged photos, as well as generating “clay filter” images.

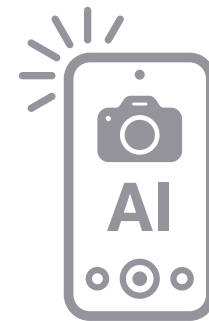
After a complimentary seven-day trial period, Remini transitions to a paid subscription service. Users must pay 68 yuan (US\$9.41) per week to continue to access the advanced features. This pricing strategy stands in contrast to Chinese competitors like Meitu, a prominent photo editing app in China.

Meitu, one of the major photo enhancer apps in China, soon launched a similar “clay effect” feature on its app for free during the past May Day holiday. It claims to better suit faces with Asian features, and it has already drawn 8 million users since its debut.

Douyin, owned by TikTok’s parent company ByteDance, has also joined the fray, offering a free one-click “clay effect” feature.

Until now, China has had many AI-powered phone enhancer apps, allowing users to transform themselves into historical figures or movie stars — all with a simple click. The options include a valiant warrior from the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-AD 907) or a star from the golden age of Hong Kong cinema.

Industry insiders caution against the fleeting popularity of some apps. They cite examples like ZAO, the face-swapping app; and Miaoya, a service that used algorithms to generate portraits within seconds. These apps enjoyed a



Editor’s note:

Businesses have made a remarkable step forward to make artificial intelligence impact further into people’s daily lives this year. It starts from AI-generated photo, AI-generated video to the creation of digital avatar and even movies. Let’s track the changes of people’s perception toward AI in this series, whether it be love, fear or nonchalance.



Film stars are transformed using the clay filter on Weibo. — Ti Gong



A plate of food with clay filter is posted on Weibo by Call Me A Zhai, who spent a whole afternoon playing with the app. — Ti Gong

meteoric rise in China only to fade from user attention over time.

Interestingly, nobody interviewed by Shanghai Daily expressed a willingness to pay a recurring fee for Remini’s continued use.