

The Construction of Female Roles and Reconstruction of Values: An Analysis of Characters in the TV Series Blossoms Shanghai

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Abstract. In the 21st century, the media portrayal of women has become a critical social topic. The previously stereotyped, one-dimensional female representations in film and television have gradually disappeared, replaced by multidimensional female characters and a reconstructed gender value system. This paper takes the TV series Blossoms Shanghai as a case study, utilizing the semiotic theories of Saussure and Roland Barthes to analyze the characterization of women represented by Miss Wang, Li Li, and Lingzi. Furthermore, it delves into the series' impact on society's perception of "She Power" and explores the pathways through which this influence is realized.

Keywords: Female Media Image, Female Value, Semiotic Theory, Blossoms Shanghai.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the portrayal of women in media has increasingly become a significant topic of social concern. Since the Fourth World Conference on Women held by the United Nations in 1995, scholars in the field of journalism and communication have also given considerable importance to research on "women and media". With the rise of women's liberation movements worldwide, the status of women in society and their personal development have become prominent global discussion topics. Society is divided into two realms: the real society and the simulated society. Modern society is a media-driven one, and television series, as products of this mediated world, serve as essential carriers of information in the age of mass media, subtly imparting ideological messages to viewers. The characters, values, and attitudes depicted in television dramas reflect contemporary socio-economic developments and dominant societal values. Consequently, the representation of female characters on screen and the values associated with them have drawn considerable attention.

Among the popular television series of 2024, *Blossoms Shanghai* has captured widespread public discussion due to its vivid, realistic portrayals of female characters. Directed by Wong Kar-wai and starring Hu Ge, Ma Yili, Tiffany Tang, and Xin Zhilei, the series are adapted from the novel of the same name by author Jin Yucheng. Set in the 1990s, it tells the story of A'bao, who, seizing the opportunities of China's reform and opening-up period, rising to become the business legend Boss Bao through his own efforts. Shortly after its premiere, the series achieved a viewership rating exceeding 2% within just ten minutes of airing on CCTV-8 [1], while the Weibo topic #TVSeries *Blossoms Shanghai*# amassed over 5.05 billion views, receiving high praise from numerous mainstream media outlets. Based on these factors, this paper will conduct an in-depth analysis of why *Blossoms Shanghai* emerged as a "dark horse" in the 2024 TV market and whether this success is related to its unique female character construction and the reconstruction of values.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Domestic and Overseas Literature Review

This paper will focus on several key issues, including exploring the portrayal of female characters in film and television, summarizing and analyzing the values these characters embody, reviewing current academic research on the TV series *Blossoms Shanghai*, and finally, proposing innovative research directions to bring new insights and perspectives to this field of study.

2.1.1 Overview of Female Character Portrayal and Media Representation

The evolving trends in the portrayal of female characters in film and television have been a prominent topic of scholarly inquiry. The study of women in media originated in Western society in the 1960s, while related research in China developed later, gaining momentum in the lead-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, when “women and media” was formally recognized as a research area in journalism. Since then, gender and media studies have grown into a distinct sub-discipline within communication studies [2].

In early cinematic productions, female characters were often portrayed as traditional, submissive, and dependent, with a primary focus on family, husband, and children, frequently disregarding their social status and career aspirations. In the silent film era of the 1920s, women’s voices were virtually absent, and female representation was limited to serving as narrative props with minimal personality depth and lacking significant cultural context [3]. Clearly, during these periods, women’s independent consciousness was severely overlooked. Entering the 21st century—and particularly in works produced after 2010—female roles have become more multidimensional, diverse, and dynamic. Female characters are no longer confined to domestic roles; rather, they explore broader possibilities, with their main role extending beyond family care to encompass personal growth arcs. No longer passive, these characters have strong self-awareness and resist being relegated to mere appendages of their husbands. They possess social circles of their own, succeed in professional settings, and emphasize self-worth.

This topic has been widely researched across various fields and genres, highlighting the portrayal of “female characters” as a significant research focus both domestically and internationally. In the media sector, studies in China began relatively late, but as the media industry has developed, media has increasingly been seen as a “mirror” reflecting social culture and trends. Consequently, the portrayal of women in media and the transmission of gender models have become central areas of focus in the study of women and media. Studies span diverse genres and settings, including but not limited to historical dramas, urban settings, rural contexts, and period pieces, each offering unique perspectives on female characters. Recently, two types of dramas have attracted significant scholarly attention. The first includes historical palace dramas like *Empresses in the Palace*, characterized by “multiple women with one man” narratives, where a main female character navigates revenge in a complex social hierarchy. The second includes contemporary dramas such as *Nothing but Thirty* and *My Best Friend’s Story*, which focus entirely on female protagonists. Both categories are marketed as “strong female lead” dramas, aiming to appeal to female audiences by promising empowerment. However, each approach presents issues in representing genuine “gender harmony”. In *Empresses in the Palace*, although the protagonist Zhen Huan is portrayed as talented and capable, her ultimate desire is to “marry the best man in the world”. Furthermore, when faced with conflict from a fellow concubine, she once stated that “a woman’s purpose is to carry on the family line”. These characters, constrained by traditional expectations, lack a truly independent gender identity. Palace dramas largely reflect male-centric perspectives in constructing female characters, with projections of patriarchal culture and consumerist ideals onto female figures [4]. Conversely, in some female-centric dramas focused on personal growth, traditional romance subplots have been replaced by portrayals of friendships between female leads, often downplaying or overlooking male roles to emphasize female independence [5]. In these narratives, men may appear in unflattering or problematic roles, diverging significantly from real-world dynamics and sometimes hindering the balanced development of gender relations. This selective representation, while portraying female independence, may not ultimately support the ideal of harmonious inter-gender relationships.

2.1.2 Literature on Female Values in Modern TV Series

In the past decade, portrayals of women in Chinese television dramas have undergone a marked shift. Originally intended to represent healthy, positive, and progressive images, female characters have sometimes instead become tools of commercial gain, with messages of women’s freedom and equality, once promoted by feminist ideals, at times reduced to mere rhetoric in the eyes of some

creators [6]. Past dramas often “dollified” or “instrumentalized” female characters, presenting them not as autonomous beings but as puppets controlled by male-centric narratives. A striking example appeared in the 2017 drama *The First Half of My Life*, where a storyline involves the male lead developing a romantic tension with a coworker and abandoning his long-term wife. Such narratives highlight the necessity for the genuine independence of female characters.

Today, the push for gender equality has gained traction in China, with more voices advocating for female independence, leading to the rise of influential portrayals of “She Power” in media. However, research suggests that even in dramas centered on “She Power”, challenges remain in how female characters are crafted. One major issue is the tendency to overly dramatize these characters, making it difficult for viewers to fully empathize. As television is a commercial product, character development and storytelling often lean towards dramatic embellishment to capture audiences’ attention, at times resulting in unrealistic portrayals. For instance, in *Nothing But Thirty*, characters like the all-capable Gu Jia and the glamorous Wang Manni might resonate less with viewers than Zhong Xiaoqin, who represents a more relatable, everyday woman. Overly idealized female characters can detract from authenticity, as audiences often crave narratives where “ugly ducklings” transform into “swans” rather than tales of “swans” born with inherent privilege that only sets them further apart from others.

2.1.3 Literature on Blossoms Shanghai

Research on *Blossoms Shanghai* has predominantly concentrated on the adaptation of Wong Kar-wai’s cinematic style for television and the show’s nostalgic portrayal of a bygone era. The series employs a non-linear narrative, intertwining an emotional storyline and a business storyline to chronicle the period from 1978’s reform and opening-up to 1995. Wong Kar-wai brings his signature interplay of light and shadow to create a distinctly cinematic feel, adding depth to both characters and plot. This atmospheric approach, filled with ambiguous emotions and a dreamy visual aesthetic, immerses viewers in a world that feels both intimate and elusive. The visual space of *Blossoms Shanghai* is crafted through surreal urban lights, swaying camera angles, and complex flashback editing, alongside vintage-inspired styling, intricate compositions, and a carefully curated palette. Adding to this layered visual experience is a rich soundtrack of classic Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop songs from the era, which reinforces the show’s nostalgic atmosphere. These elements, embodying Wong Kar-wai’s unique directorial touch, construct a multi-dimensional audiovisual space that is deeply evocative [7]. The drama subtly weaves in elements of nostalgia for Shanghai’s unique culture and reflects on the transformative period of China’s economic reforms.

2.2. Innovative Research Direction

In summary, the deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset of “male superiority” in early media significantly shaped the portrayal of women, creating stereotypical, dependent characters who often reflected outdated values. Over time, however, these representations have evolved. Today, an increasing number of independent and professional female characters in media possess clear career paths and social roles. Although these characters may occasionally be dramatized or lack depth, the overall trend is positive, moving toward more authentic and diverse depictions. In *Blossoms Shanghai*, character depth and a balanced portrayal of values align well with this study’s focus. While much academic research has explored the visual and narrative styles of *Blossoms Shanghai*, there has been limited examination of the show’s female characters or how the narrative redefines traditional values from a male-centric viewpoint. Despite its male-centered storyline, *Blossoms Shanghai* has succeeded in creating standout female characters who resonate with audiences, which presents a unique phenomenon worth exploring. This study will focus on two main research areas. First, it will investigate female images in a patriarchal context. Second, it will analyze reflection and impact of female values in modern television on “She Power” in contemporary society.

3. Research Method

This study adopts content analysis as the primary research method, grounded in Saussure's semiotic theory. At the core of semiotics is the notion that language is a symbolic system, where each symbol comprises an arbitrary "signifier" and "signified". Simply put, the signifier is the surface meaning, while the signified represents the deeper meaning conveyed by an image. Roland Barthes later expanded on Saussure's theory by introducing the concept of "signification", differentiating between denotative and connotative levels. Signification enables symbols to reference objects, thereby fulfilling their expressive function. Signification operates on two levels: denotative, which refers to the literal meaning, and connotative, which implies deeper cultural meanings [8]. Connotative signification transforms from the denotative level, often shaped by social context and interacting with ideology, culture, and values.

The symbolic system of character portrayal can be broadly divided into verbal symbols, primarily focused on dialogue, and non-verbal symbols, encompassing appearance, costume, expressions, and gestures. The implicit symbolic information conveyed in the construction of female values reflects the redefinition of female values on screen and its reciprocal impact on societal reality. Based on these theoretical foundations, this paper will explore the portrayal of female perspectives in the television series *Blossoms Shanghai*.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Analysis of the Construction of Symbolic Systems in Female Media Representations

4.1.1 Literary and Profound Language Symbolism

In *Blossoms Shanghai*, key female characters such as Miss Wang, Lingzi, and Li Li are each crafted with distinct, layered linguistic symbols. Miss Wang's language is straightforward and forthright, while Li Li's language is reserved and conflicted, and Lingzi's character revolves around the notion of "taking losses gracefully". This unique language symbolism serves two functions in Wong Kar-wai's style. First, it endows each character with individuality. Second, it creates multi-layered meanings within their words, encouraging viewers to interpret the subtext. As Wong's first television series, *Blossoms Shanghai* maintains his iconic visual language style.

Miss Wang's language is particularly candid. Early in the series, her dedication to her work is conveyed through her language, reflecting her adherence to principles as an employee of a state-owned enterprise. When she first meets A'bao, she's still "Little Wang", known as a "crybaby" who once cried over a postage error. She firmly states, "The Foreign Trade Corporation is a state-owned enterprise; aside from work, we must keep boundaries with clients—this is the red line." In the middle stages of the story, Miss Wang becomes part of a highly admired partnership with A'bao, and her straightforward, endearing language draws her closer to the image of a typical Shanghai woman. Her line, "Do you dare to sell tea eggs with me?" reflects her willingness to openly express affection. Her love is bold and evident, as shown when she drives a newly purchased Cadillac to save A'bao, worried for his safety as he travels alone for business, declaring, "I came to save you. I was terrified you'd get hurt. I was ready to crash with this car if it meant not losing you." In the later stages, Miss Wang's character undergoes significant transformation after being demoted due to Meiping's sabotage. Her language becomes resolute and self-assured, showing newfound autonomy. Whereas earlier she might have sacrificed her career for love, she now asserts, "I am my own harbor". She maintains an unwavering loyalty to love without losing herself in it. The title "Miss Wang" not only recognizes her professional competence but also signifies her societal role, embodying a shift toward female liberation. In this portrayal, her value is acknowledged through her social contributions rather than being assessed solely on her familial role, marking a positive shift in character depiction [9].

As the only "outsider" in the series, Li Li embodies an intrinsic "otherness" coupled with a complex, ambiguous longing for her homeland. Her character is marked by numerous inherent contradictions: between Chen Zhen and Li Li, between A'bao and Mr. A, and within her own views

on love. This internal conflict is symbolized by her reserved and ambivalent language. One of the most evident contradictions in Li Li's character is the dual identity conflict between Li Li and her alias, Chen Zhen. In the stock market struggle, Li Li deftly maneuvers to benefit from both sides, further emphasizing her inner conflict. She appears to "split" into two personas — "Chen Zhen does what Mr. A instructed her to do, while Li Li confides in A'bao", this line encapsulates the paradox within Li Li's language symbolism. She respects and admires A'bao, wishing to protect him from self-destruction in the stock market, yet as Chen Zhen, she must support Mr. A, whom she refers to as a "memorial and a belief". This dual allegiance brings forth her second conflict—between Li Li and her mission. Li Li's role is akin to that of a wandering knight: she appears from nowhere, leaving no trace behind [10]. She arrives with a mission, enigmatic and decisive, booking the most expensive restaurant on Huanghe Road. "In this market, so-called information always comes with an agenda," she remarks, hinting at her ulterior motive in approaching A'bao—to expedite money laundering and ultimately, to take down A'bao in a vengeful move for Mr. A. Her verbal exchanges with A'bao are subtle and layered with ambiguity and innuendo. In the hotpot restaurant scene at Xinlanju, she probes with the line, "You don't like eating catfish? Foreigners raise salmon with one catfish in the tank; because catfish are aggressive, the salmon have to swim vigorously to avoid them." This phrase carries a double meaning—catfish symbolizes the capital market, and by drawing this analogy, Li Li subtly alludes to its dangers while simultaneously inviting A'bao to join her in the stock game. To A'bao, Li Li herself is the "catfish" on Huanghe Road, mysterious and perilous. On the surface, this scene is about the stock market, yet underneath, it's a moment of flirtation. Although mutual affection blossoms between Li Li and A'bao, fate ultimately prevents any lasting union. Li Li's final contradiction lies in her conflicting views on love. Wong Kar-wai revisits the philosophy on love he established three decades earlier in *Chungking Express*: love is lonely, with no outcome, no future, no hope—only regret and helplessness [11]. This melancholic view intertwines with Li Li's own perspective on love, embodying yet another of her contradictions. In the moment of the stairway kiss, she deeply longs for an enduring bond with A'bao, yet her internal Chen Zhen does not allow it. Li Li's reserved and conflicted nature forms the core of her character, as if predestining countless unspoken regrets between her and A'bao.

The director endows Lingzi's language with a brave and unrestrained tone, with her character defined by a single line: "The key is to be able to take a loss." Lingzi is the most resilient female character in the entire series, embodying the ability to "take a loss" through her self-awareness, independence, and courage. She is clear-headed, fully aware that her ambiguous relationship with A'bao will ultimately come to nothing, so she chooses to study abroad, decisively distancing herself from him and her past with the phrase, "From now on, Night Tokyo and A'bao are separate." Lingzi is "able to take a loss" because she is carefree, leaving behind her established career without hesitation and starting anew: "I want a completely new kitchen; all the old stuff must go." Her courage is seen in her pioneering choice to blend Japanese cuisine with Shanghai-style cooking: "Lingzi will start from scratch, and so will Night Tokyo." "Being able to take a loss" is not only Lingzi's life motto but also the embodiment of the modern female charm that the director conveys through her language.

4.1.2 Subtle and Nuanced Expression of Non-Verbal Symbols

In *Blossoms Shanghai*, non-verbal symbols are understated; if language symbolizes the "audible" in the series, then non-verbal cues represent the "silent." This silence creates a space for reflection—a form of artistic blank space that often mirrors characters' emotions. It externalizes their inner worlds, inviting the audience to infer their thoughts and feelings. Clothing, as a non-verbal symbol, serves as an expression of gender awareness, with different styles reflecting each female character's psychological state.

Li Li's clothing is one of the most notable examples. She frequently wears garments in black or brown silk, symbolizing her character in two distinct ways. On one hand, her attire as a businesswoman resembles a form of armor, exuding an enigmatic sophistication that allows her to navigate the high-society circles of Zhizhen Garden, making her akin to the "catfish" of Huanghe Road (see Figure 1). On the other hand, a unique piece in her wardrobe—a plain black dress—appears

only in a memory from 1992, when she says goodbye to Mr. A by the seaside. With disheveled hair and a makeup-free face, she is not “Li Li” here but “Chen Zhen,” her original, unguarded self. Chen Zhen is pure, embodying a simplicity that Li Li, despite her layers of armor, still longs for. This lingering yearning ultimately leads her to turn herself in.



Figure 1. Episode02, Blossom Shanghai, the opening of Zhizhenyuan

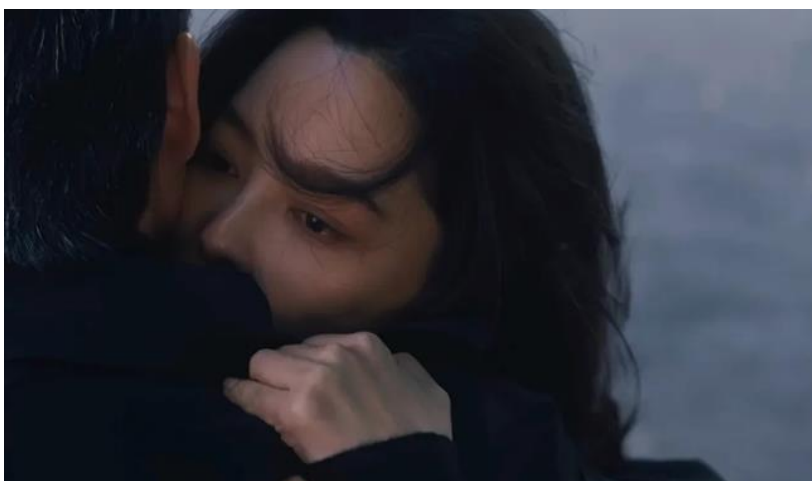


Figure 2. Episode11, Blossom Shanghai, Li Li saying goodbye with Mr. A

In terms of facial expressions and physical gestures, actress Xin Zhilei brings a sense of aggression and dominance to the character of Li Li. Her wild wardrobe—leopard prints, stockings, and backless dresses—typically symbolizes a seductive allure in the language of gender dynamics, an image crafted for the male gaze as the “object of attention”. Yet, Li Li reinterprets these symbols without catering to male approval, instead exuding defiance and an intense life force [12]. This tension is conveyed primarily through her deliberate slowness. When confronted with Lu Meiling, Du Honggen, and the other women from Huanghe Road who attempt to disrupt her business, Li Li remains composed, using a slow, almost explosive restraint in her expression that reveals her inner confidence. This calmness allows her to quickly gain control of the tense situation. Her gaze, resolute and commanding, delivers a decisive, almost lethal blow to her opponents. Li Li’s allure lies not only in her outward appearance but is deeply rooted in her inner strength and unwavering confidence.

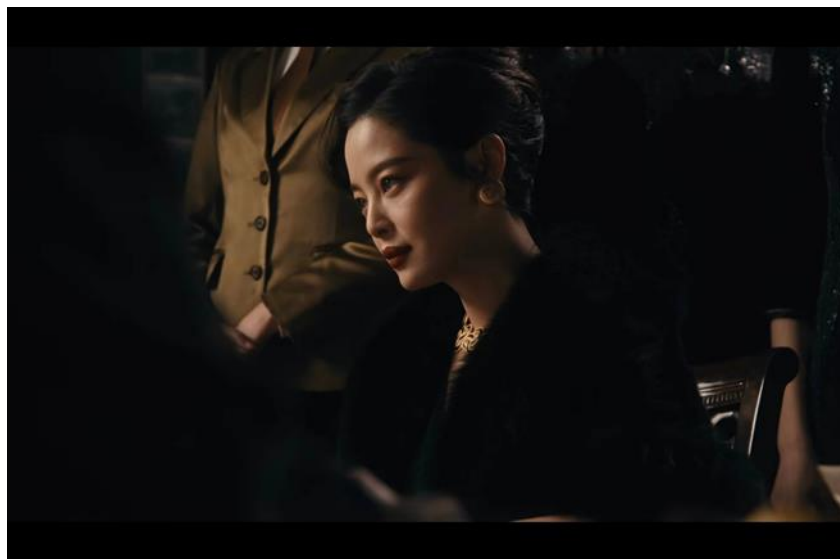


Figure 3. Episode10, Blossom Shanghai, Negotiation between Li Li and other owners on Huanghe Road

Through the symbolic portrayal of various female characters in both language and non-verbal cues, the director constructs a symbolic space of signifiers, extending to explore the shared and unique qualities of these female characters. The symbolism within these expressions subtly reflects the self-growth arcs of Miss Wang, Li Li, and Lingzi as they seek personal development within a male-dominated view. Miss Wang's passionate candor, Li Li's reserved intensity, and Lingzi's brave nonchalance each illustrate their powerful ways of loving—yet without being defined or constrained by love. Though each has an emotional entanglement with A'bao, they do not see male approval as their sole purpose for existence. Instead, they admire, learn from, and support one another. The director also hopes that viewers will notice how *Blossoms Shanghai* diverges from other male-centered narratives in its portrayal of female characters, inviting recognition and appreciation of the underlying meanings conveyed through these symbolic representations.

4.2. The Implications and Pathways of “She Power” in the Film and Television Industry

In the previous discussion on the signifier and signified in *Blossoms Shanghai*, the richly developed female characters serve as a model for contemporary portrayals of women in television dramas. Entering the realm of connotation, these portrayals often align with socially driven ideologies, and in *Blossoms Shanghai*, this symbolic expression emphasizes a value system centered on “She Power”—the depiction of female self-awareness and awakening in modern media.

On one hand, the reshaping of female values in *Blossoms Shanghai* has significant implications for transforming narratives in television dramas. Traditional depictions often emphasized women's value through a male-gaze perspective, sometimes fostering “female competition”—the portrayal of women competing against each other over physical attributes or other values to attract men. However, from the 21st century onward, more female-centered series like *Ode to Joy* have emerged, highlighting women's growth and mutual support. These fresh portrayals respond to an audience that increasingly seeks more depth and complexity. As a groundbreaking drama of 2024, *Blossoms Shanghai*, though narrated primarily from A'bao's perspective, avoids the pitfalls of stereotypical female characterizations. Although each woman has an emotional link with A'bao, their stories go beyond traditional romance, focusing instead on individual growth and psychological development [13]. Both the director and screenwriter emphasize giving each character a unique growth arc, allowing for a nuanced expression of “She Power”. Screenwriter Qin Wen mentioned the constant shift in narrative perspectives throughout production to ensure that each relationship remains dynamic and each storyline fully explored. As an exemplary work, *Blossoms Shanghai* not only promotes healthy gender relations in media but also rejects outdated values, carefully crafting a portrait of powerful women of the times.

On the other hand, how can exceptional works like *Blossoms Shanghai* achieve lasting influence? First, by resonating with the times. Each era produces its unique female figures, and the resilience of the women in *Blossoms Shanghai* reflects their integral role in the nation's economic development. Although the series explores personal and social dynamics, it remains rooted in the era's context. The environment of each period influences media production, and Wang Kar-Wai, through his cinematography, captures the reform era's optimistic spirit, a global trend toward gender equality, and the awakening of female self-awareness and strength. Secondly, cultural export plays a key role. As countries worldwide compete in cultural influence, *Blossoms Shanghai* has attracted international attention with its high ratings on platforms like IMDB (8.2) and MyDramaList (8.0), showcasing a broader and deeper perspective of Chinese culture. Unlike earlier globally popular dramas centered on historical palace intrigues (*Empresses in the Palace*, *My Fair Princess*, *Story of Yanxi Palace*), *Blossoms Shanghai* has introduced global audiences to a contemporary and multifaceted China. Its multi-dimensional characters, intertwined narrative pacing, distinct visual style, and modern female values have made it a shining example of Chinese television overseas, elevating cultural recognition into national identity and advancing the social relevance of television as a medium of cultural communication.

5. Summary

Blossoms Shanghai stands out for its symbolic representations, crafting multidimensional and vivid female characters through both linguistic and non-linguistic symbols, while redefining women's values within media at a connotative level. This reimagining has profound implications not only for China but also for the global media industry. President Xi Jinping has emphasized that "literature and art workers must nourish the people's aesthetic and value systems with profound, pure, and powerful works, enriching their spiritual lives" [14]. This principle has been a guiding force for the creators of *Blossoms Shanghai*, even though its materialistic and secular narrative style has faced criticism for not fully aligning with contemporary realities. However, art inherently involves a subjective process of creation that transcends reality, and *Blossoms Shanghai* has demonstrated significant achievement in its nuanced and positive portrayal of female characters and values. The insights and reflections *Blossoms Shanghai* offers will leave a lasting impact on the development of the media industry.

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