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Construction of Collective Memory and Television Economics in Haipai TV Series from the Perspective of Semiotic Consumerism: A Case Study of Blossoms Shanghai

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Abstract

This paper explores the construction mechanism of Shanghai-style collective memory in the TV series Blossoms Shanghai from a semiotic consumerism perspective and its promotion of television economics. Using literature and textual analysis, the study examines memory formation through group interaction, narrative strategies, and power-agency dynamics. Results show that the series constructs a 1990s Shanghai memory framework via network interaction and multimedia symbols, effectively transforming collective memory into cultural symbols that spark emotional consumption and upgrading. The conclusion demonstrates that Blossoms Shanghai establishes a sustainable economic cycle, proving that collective memory can efficiently convert cultural capital into economic capital, offering a paradigm for regional culture dissemination and industry growth.

Keywords

Collective Memory; Shanghai-Style Culture; Semiotic Consumerism; Television Economics

1. Introduction

As a representative work of recent Shanghai-style TV series, Blossoms Shanghai was executive-produced by Wong Kar-wai, directed by Shen Yan, and starred by powerful actors such as Hu Ge and Ma Yili. Set in 1990s Shanghai and based on Jin Yucheng's novel of the same name against the backdrop of the early reform and opening-up period, the series employs cinematic narrative techniques and an extreme pursuit of light, shadow, and color to vividly showcase Shanghai's unique "market culture" and historical charm. As a carrier and important expression of Shanghai-style culture, Shanghai-style television successfully disseminates and sustains this culture through vivid artistic visual expressions. From its foundational stage represented by The Bund to various periods focusing on contemporary social

issues through urban dramas, Shanghai-style TV series have continuously evolved to integrate international horizons with local cultural depth.

Against this backdrop, Blossoms Shanghai creates a field for constructing collective memory through online and offline linkages, guiding viewers into the collective memory to construct a shared historical memory of 1990s Shanghai, while propagating fine traditional Chinese culture and core socialist values. The series has not only forged societal cultural resonance and trans-temporal collective memory, but also generated substantial economic returns and industrial chain growth. Triggering a remarkable "Blossoms effect," it stands as a masterpiece of artistic, social, cultural, and commercial value, setting a new benchmark for domestic television.

2. The Multi-dimensional Construction of Collective Memory in Blossoms Shanghai

2.1. Formation of Collective Memory as a Result of Group Behavior

The formation of collective memory in Blossoms Shanghai is a collaborative process shaped through group communication and social interaction, rather than a mere accumulation of individual memories. Grounded in collective relationships, shared experiences foster group values and identities. Different generational audiences—those who lived through the reform and opening-up era and those who grew up in the new era—converge their memories through shared viewing and discussions, bridging individual experiences into a cohesive memory framework. Furthermore, contemporary online environments and cyberspace interactions (such as digital interpretations, second-creation content, and fandom practices) have materialized collective memory dissemination, facilitating the "communization" and "collectivization" of memory. As Halbwachs notes, social interaction ensures the transmission of collective memory.

Beyond shared recollection, this memory-building process constructs and reinforces relationships among group members. Shared memories carry collective values and emotional identity, enhancing group cohesion and social connection (such as through localized dialects, fan communities, and offline gatherings). Consequently, these collective behaviors triggered by the series function as institutionalized social representations actively produced and shared among members.

2.2. The Construction of Collective Memory as a Result of Television Narrative Strategies

The construction of collective memory in Blossoms Shanghai is primarily achieved through its unique emotional narrative strategies. As scholars note, collective memory can be viewed as either a cumulative or interspersed construction of the past. By employing jumping timelines, multi-perspective narration, and fragmented memory structures, the series breaks away from traditional linear storytelling. It

interweaves stories from different eras, allowing viewers to piece together a comprehensive historical facade through character experiences and Ah Bao's first-person perspective.

Moreover, memory symbols embedded in social experiences—such as Shanghai's traditional lane houses (longtang), old architecture, and vintage objects—act as bridges connecting the past and present. These recurring elements help anchor a stable and solid "memory framework" that links individual and collective experiences. Creators dynamically integrate shared generational memories with fragmented individual recollections into cohesive collective expressions, allowing audiences to find their own positioning within familiar yet novel historical contexts. Ultimately, through the fusion of visual language and emotional resonance, television functions as a vital mass cultural medium that awakens, reconstructs, and transmits collective memory across time and space.

2.3. Reconstruction of Collective Memory as a Combination of Power Manipulation and Individual Agency

The reconstruction of collective memory in Blossoms Shanghai is a dynamic process shaped by the interplay between the power manipulation of creators and the agency of audiences.

On one hand, power dictates collective memory through selective narrative and discourse control, aligning public memory with specific social value orientations. In Blossoms Shanghai, historical representation emphasizes the trajectory of "urban prosperity and individual achievement," while obscuring the social contradictions and anxieties of the reform era. Director Wong Kar-wai's signature visual aesthetics—illuminated neon lights and a dreamlike atmospheric tone—further romanticize the period, constructing a "glossy and painless" golden age. This aestheticization functions as a "decoratively reconstructed" memory, guiding how the public remembers and interprets 1990s Shanghai.

On the other hand, audiences act as active "memory subjects" rather than passive receivers. Viewers reconstruct, re-encode, and negotiate mainstream narratives based on personal experiences and emotional identities. In the new media landscape, user-generated content (UGC)—such as video remixes, commentary, and digital interpretations—demonstrates how individual memories coalesce on social platforms to shape, expand, or even challenge collective memory.

Ultimately, collective memory construction is not a static imposition, but an ongoing negotiation. It emerges from the dynamic interaction between top-down aesthetic framing and bottom-up audience participation, resulting in a shared, multifaceted historical memory of Blossoms Shanghai.

3. The Linkage Between Collective Memory Construction and Television Economics: Semiotic Consumption, Consumption Upgrading, and Capital Accumulation

The TV series Blossoms Shanghai is imbued with rich symbolic signs, which not only serve as the foundation for the construction of collective memory within the show, but also function as bonds for the audience's emotional resonance and cultural identity. Following the widespread popularity of the series, various consumer phenomena have emerged—such as booming cultural tourism at iconic filming sites, as well as surging sales of retro fashion items and local gastronomy featured in the show. These phenomena represent concrete manifestations of semiotic consumption (sign-value consumption). The semiotic consumption triggered by Blossoms Shanghai demonstrates its unique economic potential and commercial viability, powerfully driving the growth and development of contemporary television economics.

3.1. Collective Consumption under the Construction of Collective Memory

The collective memory reconstructed in Blossoms Shanghai awakens emotional consumption demands, giving rise to widespread "collective consumption." As a carrier of shared emotional experiences, collective memory establishes value identity that translates into supportive emotional resonance among audiences. In Blossoms Shanghai, delicate depictions of Shanghainese daily life, dialect, local cuisine, and retro attire trigger nostalgic memories of the era, shifting consumption from passive material absorption to a constructivist practice. Viewers seek character-inspired fashion—such as qipao and retro outfits worn by characters like Li Li and Miss Wang—not merely for practical utility, but to confirm and perpetuate emotional memories and cultural identities associated with nostalgia and Shanghai charm.

Furthermore, the popularity of the series has fostered a dedicated fandom that constitutes a distinct consumption community. By purchasing "Blossoms-style" goods and participating in themed cultural tourism, fans form "new tribes" grounded in shared emotional needs and preferences. Influenced by bandwagon effects and group norms, individual consumption evolves into collective consumption, where purchasing serves to achieve collective identity recognition and shared social value. Driven by emotional narrative framing and targeted marketing, Blossoms Shanghai cultivates a robust brand community, successfully transforming emotional resonance into a market-driven, closed-loop consumption ecosystem.

3.2. Consumption Upgrading Driven by the Blossoms Shanghai Craze Under Narrative Strategies

The collective memory reconstructed in Blossoms Shanghai has propelled a wave of semiotic consumption, further accelerating consumption upgrading. Nostalgia functions not only as a cultural phenomenon, but also as a powerful driver of

economic demand, shifting consumer interest from material utility to sign value. In Baudrillard's terms, commodity fetishism yields to "sign fetishism"—where consumers actively pursue the symbolic meanings embedded in goods and spaces. Iconic backdrops such as Huanghe Road, the Peace Hotel, and Tai Sheng Yuan are transformed into high-value cultural symbols. Experiential offerings—such as Peace Hotel's themed suites and co-branded menus—demonstrate how both older generations (reseeking lived history) and younger audiences (imagining a nostalgic past) consume signs to construct identity and cultural belonging.

Furthermore, television narrative serves as a key catalyst for building consumer consensus. By embedding goods and lifestyle modes into character narratives (e.g., luxury watches, fine dining, elite lounge culture), the series establishes a cultural foundation that elevates consumer expectations. Commercial partnerships, such as the Blossoms-branded watches featured at the China International Consumer Products Expo, demonstrate how narrative-driven cultural capital can be directly monetized into substantial market value. Ultimately, the series' emotional narrative strategy seamlessly bridges symbolic cultural values with contemporary consumer behavior, driving the expansion and transformation of the cultural economy.

3.3. Accelerated Capital Accumulation Through Power-Guided Memory Construction and Emotional Consumption

The reconstruction of collective memory in Blossoms Shanghai accelerates capital accumulation and fuels a continuous cultural-economic circulation through top-down narrative power and bottom-up emotional consumption.

First, power dictates the structural logic of nostalgic memory and market framing. As Foucault posits, memory is a site of struggle; controlling memory dictates human behavior. Through selective narrative framing, media power highlights urban ambition and material success while obscuring historical friction, creating an idealized, aestheticized memory of 1990s Shanghai. When audiences engage with retro attire, local cuisine, or iconic landmarks like the Peace Hotel, they consume both cultural products and an ideology of consumerism framed by top-down narrative power. Memory thus functions as a manageable resource, with consumption serving as its monetization.

Second, emotionalization transforms cultural capital into economic gain. Within Bourdieu’s cultural capital framework, Blossoms Shanghai builds brand identity and cultural capital by articulating Shanghainese heritage. Capital "enchants" commodities with emotional resonance—such as seamlessly embedding Estée Lauder cosmetics as nostalgic symbols of social status and romantic narrative. This emotionalization raises brand value and generates added sign-value, smoothly converting cultural capital into economic capital.

Finally, a self-reinforcing feedback loop drives continuous capital reproduction. As capital feeds on emotional needs, it constantly manufactures new desires and

commercial spaces. Nostalgia shifts from a private emotion to a reproducible resource, turning emotional consumption into an enduring growth engine that powers the circulation and accumulation of media capital.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

As a rising exemplar of Haipai (Shanghai-style) television drama, Blossoms Shanghai—driven by market logic—achieved both critical acclaim and commercial success through its unique narrative strategies, meticulously crafted visual aesthetics, and multi-dimensional characterizations. The series stands as a successful contemporary interpretation of Haipai culture, seamlessly blending tradition with modernity while using cinematic language to endow local culture with novel modes of expression. Beyond demonstrating the vitality of local culture within the media industry, Blossoms Shanghai offers fresh insights for the global dissemination and commercial operation of Haipai culture.

By accurately reconstructing the urban culture, commercial ecosystem, and socio-historical atmosphere of 1980s and 1990s Shanghai, the series successfully shapes a shared collective memory across generations. It evokes profound resonance among those who lived through the era while offering younger audiences a new framework for understanding the past. The production of cultural goods follows not only the intrinsic laws of art, but more importantly, the logic of the market—specifically, aligning with the emotional pulse, shifting needs, and trend dynamics of contemporary consumers. This memory construction functions not merely as an expression of nostalgic culture, but as an effective mechanism of capital operation: initially expanding as cultural capital, it endows commodities with emotional value through affective resonance, thereby stimulating consumer demand. This process accelerates consumption upgrading, fuels a nationwide wave of semiotic consumption, and converts cultural capital into economic capital. Consequently, it establishes a closed-loop economic ecosystem spanning from memory construction and consumption stimulation to television economy growth.

Ultimately, Blossoms Shanghai represents not only a historical reenactment, but also a precise insight into today's consumer landscape. Consumer behavior and emotional life are deeply intertwined, mutually defining and promoting one another; commodities facilitate emotional expression, while emotions are transformed into commodities. By commodifying collective memory, Blossoms Shanghai enables history, culture, and emotion to be reproduced through screen narratives and revitalized within market dynamics. It demonstrates that the integration of collective memory, emotional resonance, and cultural capital can serve as a primary catalyst for emotional consumption and media economy growth, offering a sustainable, circulating model for contemporary cultural economics.

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