Blossoms Shanghai as a Carrier of Memory: The "Construction" and "Function" of Collective Memory

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Abstract

Blossoms Shanghai meticulously depicts Shanghai in the 1990s, illustrating the construction and function of collective memory, revealing how memory is activated and reproduced in media. The series not only recreates the lifestyle details and social changes in Shanghai post-reform and opening-up but also constructs the audience's collective imagination of the past through specific narrative techniques and visual styles, merging individual memory with collective memory to form a widely shared social framework. This process introduces the concepts of "memory glimmer" and "prosthetic memory," deepening the understanding of the interaction between individual and collective memory. These concepts show how the triggering of details and the recreation of historical contexts enhance emotional resonance and memory activation among viewers. Simultaneously, *Blossoms Shanghai* demonstrates the function of collective memory in maintaining social stability and integration, reinforcing social identity and cultural empathy among viewers by presenting shared cultural heritage and regional characteristics. This is crucial for understanding the role of collective memory in shaping social identity and cultural continuity.

Keywords: collective memory, *Blossoms Shanghai*, social identity

1. Introduction

The humanistic and sociological shift in memory studies can be traced back to Maurice Halbwachs' research on collective memory, influenced by Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence. Halbwachs overcame the "vacuum period" of ritual daily life, defining collective memory as "the process and result of shared past among members of a specific social group, ensured by the continuity of social interaction and group consciousness." Indeed, memory is not an independent fragment of personal recollection, but a social product influenced by shared frameworks accumulated by social members, continuously reshaping personal memory. Based on this foundation, two research paradigms — constructivism and functionalism — have formed. The former views the formation of collective memory as a process of liquefaction, continuity, and institutionalization, while the latter emphasizes its role in maintaining social stability and integrity. Meanwhile, how memory fragments are recalled and reconstructed becomes an essential factor in linking the past and present,

with the use of media content (images, dramas, memorial websites, etc.) being intrinsic to this endeavor. As David Williams stated, media usage forms public memory about what and how to remember. As a media product, images also perform "selection" and "obscuration," merging individual memory into a macro-social framework while acting as a bridge to historical contexts, forming a collective ideology in a unified context. As a research object, the TV series *Blossoms Shanghai* offers a unique perspective to observe and analyze how individual memory is constructed under collective memory. Through its depiction of life in 1990s Shanghai, *Blossoms Shanghai* not only outlines a simple retrospect of individual memory but also conveys the spiritual content of a specific era's collective consciousness. It stimulates the audience's memories and emotional resonance of that era by recreating life details, customs, and social changes of a particular period. This collective memory re-presented through media differs in construction for both those who experienced it and younger viewers.

2. Fluid Impressions: The Recall and Construction of Memory in *Blossoms Shanghai*

The characteristics of collective memory are "non-historical" and even "anti-historical"; the memories that occurred are not concluded but continuously constructed in fluidity. "Collective memory" is a process constantly being institutionalized, and media memory is a crucial means for the continuation and reconstruction of collective memory. Through the exhibition of television media, *Blossoms Shanghai* re-liquefies the solidified memory of some audience members long buried. This fluidity of memory is not only reflected in Wong Kar-wai's narrative and visual style but also profoundly affects the audience's cognition. The series does not simply and solidly replicate history but dynamically constructs the audience's collective imagination of post-reform and opening-up Shanghai through innovative narrative techniques and visual elements, bringing viewers into a familiar yet unfamiliar Shanghai under the combined force of visual and narrative language. In the series, *Blossoms Shanghai* exhibits the emotional depth and cultural richness of 1990s Shanghai through Wong Kar-wai's signature narrative techniques and visual style. The story begins with the car accident involving the protagonist Bao and unfolds his past, revealing his complex relationships with characters like Tao Tao, Uncle, Lingzi, and Miss Wang, and his entrepreneurial journey. Bao's rise, especially through the guidance and tests from Uncle, depicts his transition from stock investment to foreign trade, showcasing personal growth and social transformation. His relationships with three female characters, Lingzi, Miss Wang, and Li Li, are particularly notable. Lingzi is not only Bao's emotional support but also his economic pillar; Miss Wang represents Bao's social credit and network; while Li Li initially tries to leverage Bao to boost Zhen Garden's popularity, ultimately developing a deeper connection with him. *Blossoms Shanghai* uses a multi-line narrative approach to add layers to the plot, allowing the audience to comprehensively understand each character's personality and background. Bao's success story reflects the rapid changes in 1990s China, revealing individual struggles and growth during social transformation. Wong Kar-wai's work not only tells a youthful love story set in 1990s Shanghai but also profoundly reflects the social background and cultural atmosphere of that era.

In terms of imagery, Wong Kar-wai collaborates closely with cinematographer Christopher Doyle to create a cinematic visual quality for *Blossoms Shanghai*. They decided not to shoot it as a traditional TV series but as a feature film, unconstrained by visual tone settings. The crew used digital cameras to simulate the visual style of the film era, intentionally creating the grain and soft visual effects unique to film, aiming for artistic depth rather than mere beauty. To address the challenge of shooting in confined spaces, the crew extensively used telephoto lenses above 70mm to maintain image texture while avoiding lens distortion. They chose the Z Cam 6K camera with high ISO performance to suit small space shooting needs, ensuring image stability even when using telephoto lenses. Additionally, high-integrated photographic equipment provided by domestic manufacturers Tietou and Weigu, as well as the Hummingbird stabilizing gimbal, further enhanced shooting flexibility and image stability. In lens selection, the crew particularly favored the Zeiss Compact Zoom and Laowa 25-100mm T2.9 lenses to meet the director's specific sharpness requirements. They used mobile devices like the Chapman COBRA DOLLY and DJI Ronin 4D camera to add visual richness and dynamic beauty, overcoming the limitations of shooting in small

spaces. When creating the visual space of *Blossoms Shanghai*, the crew skillfully used mirrors and foregrounds, creating rich multi-layered visual effects through complex reflections and perspectives. These techniques not only added depth and dimensionality to the images but also introduced mystery and emotional depth to the story. In terms of lighting, the series' light design closely followed the content and actors' performances, precisely arranging key and auxiliary lights to give each scene and character a unique atmosphere and emotion. Especially in night scenes, they used strong base light and carefully selected neon lights to create a gorgeous yet clean nightscape while maintaining harmony between the characters and background.

Through clever use of photography, lighting, and art, the scenes and characters in the series present a sense of the era's ambiguity and ethereality. This approach makes history no longer a dull, linear narrative but a space full of possibilities and multidimensionality, where the audience can freely explore and imagine, constructing a collective imagination of the past. Under Wong Kar-wai's artistic treatment, the audience is not only brought into a visually and emotionally rich world but also guided to reflect on the relationship between ontology and history, memory, and reality. This deep reflection and feeling give the audience a deeper understanding and emotional connection to Shanghai as a city and even the entire era. Therefore, *Blossoms Shanghai* is not just a TV series but a cultural phenomenon, influencing the audience's understanding and perception of the past and present. The series not only recreates historical events but also endows them with new meanings. Through the stories of the protagonist Ah Bao and other characters, the audience witnesses the lifestyle, social relationships, and cultural characteristics of Shanghai during a specific historical period. This reinterpretation allows the audience not just to review history but to recognize and reconstruct the past of Shanghai through the lens of *Blossoms Shanghai*, as well as its position and significance in a broader historical context.

Blossoms Shanghai successfully reconstructs Shanghai's historical memory through Wong Kar-wai's unique narrative and visual style, allowing the audience to profoundly experience the social landscape and cultural atmosphere of 20th-century Shanghai. This artistic expression not only enhances the dramatic tension of the story but also provides the audience with a unique cultural and historical experience, making *Blossoms Shanghai* an important work in collective memory studies. In this process, *Blossoms Shanghai* demonstrates the fluidity of memory. The term "fluidity" originates from Zygmunt Bauman's description of "modernity," characterizing it as capable of easily controlling and maintaining its external form. Fluids cannot retain any shape for long; their forms are easily changed or often unstable. The fluidity of memory emphasizes "multilateral negotiation" between individual memory and collective memory, the formation of individuals and groups, and the frameworks of folk narrative and macro-social narrative, jointly creating new collective memory. Or rather, the formation of final collective memory is more about the fusion of numerous individual memories than the mere obscuration of individual memory.

2.1 Cinematic Connection: The Reproduction of "Memory Glimmer" for the Experienced

Scholar Liu Yaqiu refers to the area between individual and collective memory as "Memory Glimmer," the residues and residues in structural frameworks that cannot be incorporated into mainstream discourse, representing an invisible and unspeakable gray area. People's memories are often triggered by small, symbolic details that may be overlooked in daily life but can evoke deep-seated memories and emotions at a particular moment. In the TV series *Blossoms Shanghai*, the application of this theory is evident, especially in the depiction of specific details of a particular period in Shanghai, which become the "Memory Glimmer" that triggers individual memories for those who experienced it. Through the detailed portrayal of 1990s Shanghai, such as street scenes, dialects in character dialogues, and popular cultural symbols of the time, *Blossoms Shanghai* successfully triggers the personal memories of those who lived through that era. These details, although small, are highly symbolic, capable of evoking deep emotional resonance and memory recollection among the audience. This awakening of memory allows viewers to relive the past visually and aurally and establish a profound emotional connection with the scenes, characters, and stories in the series. For instance, the protagonist Ah Bao's name closely matches the naming conventions of the 1990s, allowing every viewer to find one

or more "Ah Bao" in their memories, making the character more vivid and relatable. The term "Uncle" accurately captures the Shanghai region's term of respect for elders, reflecting the show's meticulous attention to detail. The locations chosen in the series, such as Huanghe Road, Nanjing Road, The Bund, Peace Hotel, Huashang Department Store (called Hulianshang Department Store in the series), and Zhongbai Department Store, are not only iconic landmarks of Shanghai but also reflect the life of Shanghai residents in the 1990s. Particularly, Ah Bao and Lingzi's restaurant "Tokyo Night" on Jinxian Road and the foreign trade company at No. 27 The Bund showcase the vibrant life of the city and reflect the image of female white-collar workers in Shanghai in the 1990s from different perspectives. The use of props, such as pagers, big cell phones, Montague shirts, Bao's Crown car, and Miss Wang's second-hand Xiali and Cadillac, not only accurately recreate the life scenes of the 1990s but also serve as "Memory Glimmer" that triggers the audience's memories. These props are not just symbols of technology and fashion of the time but also reflect the characters' social status and personality traits. Culinary details like pork chop rice cakes, king snakes, rice porridge, and Kaisiling cakes enrich the series' life atmosphere and evoke the audience's memories of the culinary culture of that era. Through these vivid and detailed depictions, *Blossoms Shanghai* successfully transports the audience back to the 1990s, allowing them to experience the local customs and culture of that time. Additionally, the economic events depicted in the series, such as the speculation in subscription warrants, the acquisition of treasury bonds, and the old eight stocks of the Shanghai Stock Exchange, not only showcase an aspect of China's economic reform in the 1990s but also reflect people's pursuit of wealth and success in that era. These economic activities serve as a significant window for the audience to understand the 1990s Shanghai.

Moreover, *Blossoms Shanghai* has put significant effort into character creation. The characters in the series are unique, and their personalities, destinies, and emotional entanglements deeply attract the audience. When discussing the characters Bao, Lingzi, Miss Wang, Li Li, and Uncle in *Blossoms Shanghai*, placing them in the specific social and cultural context of Shanghai in the 1990s can deepen our understanding of

their roles. This analytical approach makes the characters not only drivers of the plot but also carriers of the era's memory and cultural characteristics.

Bao's story is a typical representation of Shanghai men during the economic transition of the 1990s. His experiences reflect the opportunities and challenges faced by Shanghai people in that era, and his persistence and determination symbolize the resilience and indomitable spirit of Shanghai as a city. Bao's story shows how individuals seek self-positioning in the societal tide and realize their value through personal effort. Lingzi represents the Shanghai women who returned from abroad in the 1990s, emphasizing the values of independence and autonomy. Her role showcases the process of women balancing traditional and modern values, reflecting Shanghai's openness to new ideas and cultures. Lingzi's collective memory is not just personal history but the shared experiences and challenges of women in that era. Miss Wang's story, transitioning from a state-owned company to starting her own business, reflects the spirit of personal struggle and the independence and self-improvement of women during the economic transition period under the backdrop of reform and opening up. Her first pot of gold, earned with Wei, symbolizes the pursuit and grasp of opportunities in that era, showcasing how ordinary people realized their dreams and value through their efforts amidst the turbulent waves of reform. Li Li's character is more complex and multifaceted. Her journey from Shenzhen to Shanghai is not just a geographical shift but a transformation of culture and identity. Through her collaboration with Bao, evolving from initial opposition to deep cooperation and emotional entanglement, Li Li's life trajectory reflects the struggles and adaptation of individuals during significant social changes, continuously exploring and reshaping personal identity and path. Finally, Uncle, as an older generation who has experienced different social changes, his life story and wisdom aggregate the important memories of modern and contemporary Chinese history. Uncle's character not only provides guidance for the younger generation but also serves as a bridge connecting the past and the present, allowing the new generation to understand and inherit the cultural heritage of that era. Overall, through these characters'

stories, we can see individuals' growth and changes under the societal background and feel the unique style and atmosphere of Shanghai in the 1990s. These characters' life stories are full of retrospection and tribute to that era, while also being a hymn to the spirit of Shanghai.

Of course, *Blossoms Shanghai* has its unique "tone." This "tone" reflects the unique cultural atmosphere and social style of Shanghai. In the series, whether it is the characters' language, behavior, or way of thinking, it is full of Shanghai characteristics. This "tone" not only allows the audience to deeply understand Shanghai's culture and society, feel the life attitude and spirit of Shanghai people but also demonstrates the precise restoration of details and profound excavation of emotional aspects of 1990s Shanghai. This unique "tone" blends historical sediment with modern vibes, reflecting the unique historical background and diverse cultural integration of Shanghai. Through the realistic depiction of life details in 1990s Shanghai, the series not only recreates the material environment of that era, such as clothing, architecture, and street scenes but also deeply captures people's lifestyles, values, and social relationships of that time.

More importantly, through the characters' life experiences, emotional entanglements, and social interactions, *Blossoms Shanghai* shows how Shanghainese maintained their individuality, pursued dreams, and faced challenges in a rapidly changing society. This "tone" is not just the use of Shanghai dialect but an interpretation of the Shanghai spirit: traditional reservation and modern openness. Through this "tone," *Blossoms Shanghai* allows the audience to see not only the prosperity and complexity of Shanghai but also feel the deep cultural heritage and humanistic feelings of this city. This affectionate recollection of 1990s Shanghai is not just nostalgia for the past but a tribute and inheritance to the spirit of that era, prompting the audience to reflect on the present and future in emotional resonance.

As an era's memory characterized by regional features, it should have been an obscured part under the mainstream social framework, lying between memory and oblivion, not incorporated into the macro discourse system. However, through the director's cinematic representation, this whispered memory part is re-examined, re-incorporated into the macro discourse system, forming the collection from "Memory Glimmer" to "Memory Spotlight."

2.2 Construction: Presentation of "Prosthetic Memory" for Young Audiences

"Prosthetic memory" refers to an individual's "body" not being on site, yet generating empathy with past events they have not experienced, thus obtaining a more personal, profound feeling. It is a type of memory where individuals not only receive a historical narrative but also feel deeply personal memories about events they have not personally experienced. Unlike the linear thinking mode of written texts, cinematic representation focuses more on experiential experience. This experience "makes it increasingly possible for people to physically experience things that we have not actually experienced." David Bordwell discussed how audiences understand and feel film content through cognitive processes in his work "Narration in the Fiction Film." Bordwell believes that the viewing process is one where audiences actively use cognitive abilities to construct the story world through clues provided by the film, achieving emotional resonance and cognitive understanding. In *Blossoms Shanghai*, this cognitive theory is embodied in how the series allows young audiences to achieve emotional resonance with past events they have not experienced through visual and auditory stimuli and the accurate recreation of the historical and cultural details of 1990s Shanghai, obtaining more personalized "prosthetic memory." The series is not just a historical narrative but uses narrative techniques and visual language to let the audience's "body" generate empathy with past events in a non-on-site context, deepening their personal understanding and memory of that era.

From the perspective of constructivist cognitive psychology, Bordwell emphasizes that sensory stimulation itself does not directly determine perception results, but the audience must construct an understanding of the film through unconscious inference. In the case of *Blossoms Shanghai*, this means the audience does not passively receive historical information but actively interprets and connects the film's information through visual symbols, character interactions, and plot developments, combined with their knowledge and experience, achieving a profound feeling and cognitive understanding of the living atmosphere of 1990s Shanghai. For instance, in the story arc of Ah Bao and the restaurant owner Li Li, from business

competition to cooperation and emotional entanglement, the audience needs to use their reasoning and emotional resonance to understand the relationship changes between them, involving not only plot understanding but also experiencing and empathizing with the characters' emotions. Additionally, the "schema" mentioned by Bordwell plays a crucial role in helping the audience interpret information in the film. Based on their prior knowledge and experience, the audience forms preconceived notions about 1990s Shanghai, guiding them on how to interpret the visual and auditory cues in the film, thereby constructing individualized memories and emotional experiences of that era. Audiences of *Blossoms Shanghai* might have some prior knowledge and experience of 1990s Shanghai from their parents' descriptions, forming a series of preconceived notions about that era. These preconceived notions guide them on how to interpret various social phenomena and cultural features depicted in the series, like the description of Huanghe Road food street and the development of the Pudong area, allowing the audience to feel the vitality and diversity of Shanghai as the forefront of economic development, thereby constructing individualized memories and emotional experiences of that era. Furthermore, the historical events and social backgrounds in *Blossoms Shanghai* significantly influence young audiences' worldview and values. Through the series' recreation of that era, they start reflecting on current social issues and personal identity, thus establishing connections between personal experiences and collective history. This cinematic representation of prosthetic memory not only becomes part of their personal experience but also becomes a crucial element in their understanding of the world and constructing identity. For the new generation who has never experienced that era, this detailed recreation not only allows them to feel the atmosphere of that era but also constructs a memory of Shanghai's past in their minds. Although these memories are not their natural memories, through the narrative and cinematic presentation of the series, they can experience the life and emotions of that era in a near-experiential way.

3. The Group Integration of *Blossoms Shanghai* Under the Functionalist Paradigm of Collective Memory

Blossoms Shanghai, in showcasing Shanghai culture, significantly impacts the social identity of the audience, especially Shanghai viewers. Tajfel (1972) introduced the concept of "social identity," suggesting that individuals generate a sense of identity through social classification of their group, resulting in internal group preference and bias against non-internal groups. Members' self-identity within a group intensifies the distinction between "us" and "them," releasing positive emotions towards one's group to seek positive social identity. The group reconciliation in *Blossoms Shanghai* for local Shanghai viewers is achieved through the dissemination of geographical emotions and culture. Emotionally, the localized gene of the creative team in *Blossoms Shanghai* brings local viewers more emotional closeness. British cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams used "structures of feeling" to describe "a shared experience between artists and audiences of a particular period." Whether local actors or viewers, their emotional structures share certain commonalities and similar values and social experiences. Moreover, the pioneering, striving, and professional Shanghai spirit in the forefront of reform and opening up is what director Wong Kar-wai aims to convey. This transmission is not one-dimensional but breaks the "fourth wall" through familiar stories and scenes, achieving emotional integration and interaction with the audience. Culturally, Shanghai's unique regional culture forms its "circle," creating cultural proximity for viewers with a cultural affinity for the region, making it easier to achieve cultural empathy while watching. The use of Shanghai dialect in the series, especially in the Shanghai dialect version, deepens viewers' sense of cultural identity with Shanghai. Shanghai dialect in the series is not just a communication tool but an essential element in creating the era and city atmosphere. This authentic dialect use generates a strong sense of belonging and identity among Shanghai viewers, creating a profound cultural connection. Additionally, the setting and detail depiction in the series impact viewers' cultural identity. The reproduction of Huanghe Road, typical Shanghai cuisine, and popular music of the time allow viewers not only to feel Shanghai's historical charm but also to deeply understand and recognize Shanghai's culture and history, experiencing a sense of identity and belonging. This distinction between "us" and "them" among geographically grounded groups. In "Imagined Communities:

Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism," Anderson attributes the possibility of imagined communities to the advent of "print capitalism," enabling normal communication among originally dialect-speaking or hard-to-communicate individuals. The development of modern media technology has spawned more "visual" and "immersive" imagery, coupled with the spatial integration of network technology. Shanghai natives or those identifying with Shanghai's regional culture overcome time and space barriers in cyberspace, completing the "consensus aggregation of imagined communities" based on regional culture and identity recognition through topics derived from *Blossoms Shanghai*.

The functionalist paradigm of collective memory is a top-down macro perspective that regards society as an independent structure and organized complete system. Each part of society is interconnected, maintaining structure and functioning to address overall societal issues, with collective integration being its most crucial function. In this, media technology and its disseminated media cultural content play a key catalytic role. As previously described, the popularity of the TV series *Blossoms Shanghai* resonates with numerous viewers with local sentiments, generating a sense of belonging to the Shanghai group in terms of identity, emotional resonance with the era's background, character plots, and the mirrored experiences of group members in reality, culturally following the linear heritage of Shanghai culture, gradually forming specific social values. With this collective effort, as *Blossoms Shanghai* gained popularity, official discourse reincorporated individual memories previously in an obscured state into the macro discourse. At this point, collective memory has removed parts of individual memory that might alienate people and impede group cohesion. This part would cause tension between diverse individual memories and the consistency requirement of collective memory. Thus, collective memory constructed through imagery can connect the "past" and "present" and integrate different cultural values within the same group, achieving basic consensus within the group, collectively serving the stable operation of the societal machine.

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