

The Awakening of Female Consciousness in TV Series “Blossoms Shanghai” ——A Performance Studies Perspective

Name: TAN Jing

Shanghai Theater Academy, Shanghai

Email: dadahamu@qq.com

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Blossoms Shanghai; Female Consciousness; Performance Studies; Richard Schechner	Wong Kar-wai's TV series “Blossoms Shanghai” portrays numerous female characters undergoing a transformative journey of female consciousness—from its absence to its reconstruction—amidst the currents of their personal development and the broader historical era, blooming like vibrant flowers in abundance. Richard Schechner's theory of Performance Studies posits that any self-referential action constitutes ‘Performance,’ with people living their lives akin to stage performances, constantly assuming diverse roles. From the perspective of Performance Studies Theory, this offers insights into the development of individuals within society. This paper analyses the awakening of female consciousness among the three main female characters in the TV series ‘Blossoms Shanghai’ from the perspective of Performance Studies Theory, aiming to explore the female spiritual world and its developmental significance embedded in the work.
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Wong Kar-wai's TV series "Blossoms Shanghai" (hereinafter referred to as "Blossoms Shanghai") premiered on Chinese mainland TV stations at the end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024, sparking heated discussions. Although there is no doubt that the story centers around the male lead “Mr. Bao”, a series of female characters such as Reiko, Miss Wang, and Lee Lee, who surround Mr. Bao take turns to appear. Just like the neon lights flickering in the ten-mile-long foreign arena along the Yellow River Road Shanghai, they complement each other and shine like stars. Just as the title of the play suggests: Flowers are in full bloom, overwhelming one after another.

The theory of “Performance Studies” created by American theater master Richard Schechner proposes that, from the perspective of Performance Studies, there are five categories: aesthetic performance, social performance, mass performance, ritual performance, and game performance (SCHECHNER, 2008). The theoretical foundation of this theory is the performance of human daily life, namely: “All objective existence is existence, all existence is in action, and any self-referential action is performance.” Therefore, all human activities with a specific purpose can be studied as performance. He further emphasizes: “The premise of Performance Studies is that we

live in a post-colonial 'performative' era, where various cultures collide and interact with one another (SCHECHNER, 2008)."

The female characters portrayed in TV series "Blossoms Shanghai" undergo a transformative journey against the backdrop of historical context, societal trends, and personal destiny. They transition from misinterpreting their own female identities to gradually awakening to independence, living for themselves, and achieving a perfect transformation toward self-realization. This shift in life philosophy reflects the awakening of independent consciousness and the construction of self-identity among the "Blossoms" as women. From the perspective of Performance Studies, examining TV series "Blossoms Shanghai" allows us to trace the evolution of the ideological beliefs and behavioral principles of its female characters, as well as the rich process of female consciousness transitioning from misinterpretation to awakening and ultimately achieving the self-construction of an independent personality. This, in turn, offers us profound reflections and insights into the development of individual women and the realization of their self-worth.

1. Male-centered: misinterpretation of female roles

Social performance theory, derived from Performance Studies theory, proposes that we must start from the social role groups within social structures in order to better explain and study the performances individuals engage in when communicating with other individuals or groups. However, in society, the social roles of each individual are not something that can be freely chosen at will. Marxist philosophy has emphasized: The essence of humanity is not an abstract entity inherent in the individual; in its reality, it is the sum total of all social relations; We must first understand the social relations in which each individual is embedded before discussing individual development. Therefore, how women understand their social roles in society, whether they make erroneous judgments, and how these judgments directly influence their behavioral patterns and life choices are critical issues (SUN, 2005).

In the TV series "Blossoms Shanghai", the female characters revolve around the central male protagonist, with the three most prominent being Reiko, Miss Wang, and Lee Lee. Their sense of female identity is not innate. Although the TV series "Blossoms Shanghai" employs a montage-style editing technique, with stories from different eras intertwined, we can still conclude that the three female characters all experience a misinterpretation of their female subjectivity in the early stages of the story.

Reiko met Mr. Bao when he was still a young man, not yet a boss. He had come to Tokyo, a city he knew little about, for a business deal, and there he first encountered Reiko, who was also from Shanghai. The young and charming Reiko was sincere and pure-hearted. When Mr. Bao was feeling disheartened, she unhesitatingly pulled out her lucky charm and gave it to him, explaining that it was a gift of "luck" (the Shanghai dialect term for fortune). This sincerity and this "luck" left a lasting impression on the future Mr. Bao. Mr. Bao gave Reiko a "Yez Tokyo" restaurant and invited her to return to Shanghai to run it. Due to this unique story between the two, Reiko believed she was absolutely special in Mr. Bao's heart. The image she presented to the neighbors was that of Mr. Bao's "wise and capable wife," and she was playful, outspoken, and unashamed. She often invited Mr. Bao into her bedroom in front of the neighbors; the menu at Yez Tokyo always included a special "Mr. Bao's congee"; When Yez Tokyo held a shareholders' meeting for just the two of them, she specially took Mr. Bao to an ancient town in the suburbs, ostensibly to buy the town's specialty tofu and side dishes,

but in reality to assert her authority in front of neighbors and friends, showcasing the unyielding demeanor of a “wife.”

Ms. Wang, the “ideal partner” for Mr. Bao in his business dealings with the Shanghai Foreign Trade Company, was also someone he had known since their early days. Ms. Wang was more outgoing and assertive, a typical lively young woman from local Shanghai. From completing their first foreign trade deal, to successfully negotiating the entry of the San Yang brand into the Shanghai market, to countering counterfeit manufacturers and turning the tide, as Ms. Wang herself put it, she and Mr. Bao share a “revolutionary friendship.” On the night she impulsively bought a used car and rushed to Zhuji to “rescue Mr. Bao,” Ms. Wang nearly lost her life in a car accident. Through her actions, she passionately expressed her concern and care for Mr. Bao. At that stage, she believed her “revolutionary friendship” could withstand the test, mistakenly interpreting it as a deeper, more intense romantic relationship.

Lee Lee was different from everyone else. She was mysterious, arriving in grand style with her opulent “Zhizhen Garden” restaurant, stirring up a storm and causing a great deal of commotion on Huanghe Road. As a northerner from Shenzhen, she naturally drew the ire of the Shanghai businesswomen who dominated the Huanghe Road food street. It was Mr. Bao who came to her aid, not only helping Lee Lee and “Zhizhen Garden” restaurant navigate the crisis but also elevating the restaurant's cuisine and kitchen operations to a new level. Lee Lee, whose background remains a mystery, now shares a secret connection with Mr. Bao. She knows that her mystery, grace, and allure hold significant weight in Mr. Bao's heart; and she, too, has reserved a place for Mr. Bao in the intricate web of her past and present.

At this stage, the three female characters, emotionally dependent on Mr. Bao, also mistakenly base their social roles on their connection to him: Reiko believes she is the one and only devoted wife, so she quietly runs “Yez Tokyo” restaurant, eagerly awaiting Mr. Bao to settle down and even start a family; Ms Wang believes her revolutionary friendship with Mr. Bao will deepen further, dedicating herself fully to supporting him in his career aspirations; Lee Lee, though a mysterious woman with a story, still reserves a spot for Mr. Bao amidst the decadent indulgence of Huanghe Road.

2. Self-reflection: the initial awakening of female consciousness

Performance Studies posits that any self-referential action constitutes “performance,” and that people live their lives as if on a stage, playing different roles. From this perspective, the three female leads in the TV series ‘Blossoms Shanghai’ often fail to recognize their own misjudgments when playing the social roles they have mistakenly assigned themselves, instead immersing themselves in the roles they have created for themselves. However, when triggered by associated characters or mirror characters, they suddenly see a version of themselves that does not resemble their true selves, leading to self-reflection and the initial awakening of feminist consciousness.

Reiko sold cheap pearl earrings to Miss Wang at a high price, which led to Miss Wang being investigated by the organization. As a result, Mr. Bao had a fierce argument with Reiko. All kinds of misunderstandings were both amusing and ridiculous. However, as it was about Miss Wang's reputation and career development, Mr. Bao's scolding and the mutual shirking of responsibility among neighbors and friends pushed everyone to the peak of their emotions. For the first time, Reiko heard the most unbelievable words from her closest friend: You'll never wait for Mr. Bao to come. She was shocked, she was angry, and she was at a loss. In an instant, all her

waiting lost its meaning, and the “Yez Tokyo” she had painstakingly built lost its significance. At this moment, her mind was filled with countless thoughts but she still couldn't see herself clearly. It wasn't until she calmed down that she re-examined the middle-aged woman, Mrs. Wu, who was her neighbor on the second floor: She had been waiting for a man all along. Often, she would cook a full table of dishes, but after a phone call, he wouldn't come. She waited all her life and wasted all her life. At that moment, it was as if it were a mirror image of Reiko, and Reiko saw her future self. Reiko was feeling sorry for herself in the attic. Mrs Wu appeared by the window and sang the line from the Peking Opera "The Unicorn Purse" in a gentle and melodious way: "What goes around comes around. I regret giving you the peach tree."

Miss Wang, despite being investigated by the organization, was stubborn, angry and firmly believed that the innocent would be cleared up. However, she was still like a headless fly, bumping into things everywhere and getting bruised and bleeding. Mr. Bao was wandering around trying to clear Miss Wang's name, but Miss Wang still kept in mind that she couldn't meet Mr. Bao during this special period and asked him to avoid and protect her. Her stubborn temper also made her fearless to take a desperate gamble. At the last moment, she entrusted “Ye Shu”(Shanghai Dialect: Uncle) to pass on a message to Mr. Bao. With just one word from Mr. Bao, she could even give up No. 27 Bund. But Mr. Bao backed out. Mr. Bao could strive and fight side by side, but he couldn't promise Miss Wang a future where she could take a desperate gamble. That night when she was waiting for a reply, Mr. Bao didn't show up. Miss Wang finally saw through herself. How affectionate and loyal their revolutionary friendship was, but without love!

Amidst the complex human relations and social maneuvering, Lee Lee still reserved a place for Mr. Bao until the appearance of his old friend, Mr. Qiang. Mr. Qiang reminded her not to forget the past and not to take the wrong position in the present. Struggling to survive in the narrow space between the cracks, she clearly and helplessly realized her own helplessness and reminded herself not to forget the old love that had passed away in her heart. Could she preserve herself while also avenging her great loss? The torrent of fate and the scorching heat pounded hard on her face. She began to recognize her place and secretly planned the path that belonged to her.

After realizing the social roles they had wrongly played, the three women finally came to their senses. They realized that they had wrongly placed themselves in the wrong roles. Gradually, they came to understand who they originally were and that they should not have become "someone's someone". The yearning for their own dignity drives their lives towards a more independent and self-centered direction. Such emotional projection and the transformation of their attitude towards life lay the foundation for their subsequent thorough awakening and reconstruction.

3. Returning to Rationality: Women's Self-Construction of Consciousness

If the angry words of her friend and the mirror image of Mrs. Wu's wasted life made Reiko finally realize that she had been playing the wrong role all along, then during the period of disappearance, her revisiting Tokyo was like a self-examination journey full of ritualistic sense, and her return to Shanghai was her rebirth. She neither wasted her time nor evaded reality. Instead, she returned to rationality. Her original aspiration was to open a restaurant and create a “Yez Tokyo” of her own. So why did she end up creating a “Yez Tokyo” for others in the past years? With a clear self-awareness, she investigated the market, reset her goals, and transformed “Yez Tokyo”:

a “Yez Tokyo” that truly belonged to Reiko - the Shanghai local kaiseki restaurant “Yez Tokyo”.

Miss. Wang did not wait for Mr. Bao's promise. During her days working in the warehouse, she endured the filth and hardship, and in the process, she gradually came to understand herself. Why should she compromise and beg for others' charity, only to return to No. 27 The Bund, where she was fundamentally distrusted? After leaving the warehouse, she chose to start her own company and fight for herself.

Lee Lee struggled to make progress in the narrow space, but she skillfully balanced the advantages and disadvantages on both sides, seemingly facing certain death. In reality, she not only avenged her great enemy but also sold the “Zhizhen Garden” restaurant at a high price, ensuring her safety, and withdrew completely. In the end, she chose to turn and leave, never stopping her steps for anyone. Her mysterious arrival on Huanghe Road had stirred up a storm, and her departure was equally enigmatic. She left the place she had briefly stayed at and embarked on a entirely new path of her own.

The choices made by the three female characters after returning to rationality reflect the construction of their self-identity following the awakening of female consciousness, as Richard Schechner described in his discussion of “the reconstructive act of performance”: The reconstructive act of performance is both symbolic and reflective; The self can perform within another role or as another role; The social or transpersonal self itself is one or a series of roles (SCHECHNER, & SUN, 2010). Reiko is no longer Mr. Bao's devoted wife; she is the head chef and owner of “Yez Tokyo”, the pioneer of local kaiseki cuisine. Miss Wang is no longer Mr. Bao's close revolutionary comrade; she is the founder of Pearl Limited Company and successfully secured the historically significant Walmart century-long order. Lee Lee is no longer anyone's confidante; she comes and goes without a trace, having avenged her former lover, successfully sold “Zhizhen Garden” restaurant at a high price, and then vanished into the crowd.

They are no longer anyone's anyone; they are themselves, each an independent, beautiful individual.

Conclusion

The British playwright Shakespeare wrote the following lines in *As You Like It*:

“All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts.”

From misunderstandings and misalignments to confusion and pain, and finally to clarity and independence, the journey of female consciousness awakening in the TV series “Blossoms Shanghai” is not achieved overnight. Some may have once been lost in relationships dependent on others, taking pride in their connections yet unable to fulfill their desires; others may have been shocked and saddened by their own misjudgments upon awakening. However, ultimately, after self-discovery and self-reconstruction, they pursued the material and spiritual lives they desired through their own efforts. The qualities of self-reflection, upward striving, and independence conveyed in their journey of awakening provide diverse models for other women who have yet to awaken.

The path of women's growth is often long and arduous. The TV series “Blossoms Shanghai” presents us with a feast of women's awakening consciousness. The journey

of women's self-awakening sometimes requires enduring pain and struggle, yet the rainbow that emerges after the storm is all the more beautiful.

Note:

1. Since "Blossoms Shanghai" has undergone several revisions from its original novel form, been adapted into a stage play, and then into a television series, with different creative teams making additions, deletions, and adaptations, this article will focus solely on the television series version directed by Wong Kar-wai as the basis for analysis. This is noted for clarification.

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Author Bio: TAN Jing, PhD candidate in performance studies, Shanghai Theater Academy, email address is dadahamu@qq.com