

"Silence in 'Blossoms' — An Analysis of the Chinese Aesthetics of Blank-Leaving in the TV Adaptation Blossoms Shanghai

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Abstract

The term "不响" (*Buxiang*, "not speaking"/"silence") appears over 1,300 times in the novel *Blossoms*, making it an indisputable keyword. Director Wong Kar-wai interprets "不响" as a form of blank-leaving (留白), describing it as both the creative cipher of author Jin Yucheng and the key to his own adaptation. It is precisely by embedding "不响" into every facet of the series that the TV adaptation *Blossoms Shanghai* has garnered widespread acclaim among audiences in Shanghai and across China. This paper examines the manifestations of "不响" in the TV series from the perspective of blank-leaving aesthetics.

Keywords: Blossoms, WongKar-wai, *Buxiang* ("not speaking"/silence), aesthetics of blank-leaving

1. Introduction

The TV adaptation *Blossoms Shanghai* is based on Jin Yucheng's eponymous novel. The literary *Blossoms* explores the existential helplessness of ordinary individuals adrift under macro-historical currents, reconstructing the lives of Shanghai's common folk and their quotidian desires. Through portraying civic communities across three distinct eras, it unveils the collective psyche of Shanghainese while critiquing the interplay between historical memory and contemporary reality, ultimately revealing the symbiotic essence of "city and its inhabitants" in urban life. Thus, the novel serves as both a spiritual chronicle of Shanghai's citizens and a Bildungsroman of the city itself.

To better depict Shanghai's transformative narrative under China's Reform and Opening-Up policy, the TV adaptation seeks to transcend the novel's pervasive "*Buxiang*" (silence) atmosphere, instead foregrounding a clamorous era of reform, opportunity, and collective striving. Yet it simultaneously inherits the original's contemplative core—its stable yet profound "*Buxiang*" ethos. The novel employs a "*storyteller*" framework, weaving dual timelines (the 1960s-70s and 1990s) through protagonists Hunsheng, Ah Bao, and Xiao Mao, who traverse between "*upper corners*" (*Shangzhijiao*) and "*lower corners*" (*Xiazhijiao*)—urban zones demarcating socioeconomic divides. This structure, devoid of conventional narrative propulsion, earned the 9th Mao Dun Literature Prize's acclaim: "*A vivid raconteur endows the world with a unique timbre, immersing readers into the interstices and folds of modern metropolitan life.*"

In contrast, the TV series streamlines this complexity by excising the 1960s-70s timeline, sharpening narrative focus. Centering on Ah Bao's trajectory, it microscopically examines how ordinary individuals script urban legends amidst epochal shifts, sparking fervent debates between literary purists and adaptation advocates. The former critique its perceived divergence from the source material, while the latter defend its necessity for cinematic reinterpretation.

Despite narrative divergences, the adaptation's production philosophy reveals a symbiotic relationship with the novel. It not only visually resurrects the novel's urban texture but also spiritually perpetuates its "*Buxiang*" essence. This aesthetics of silence is reimagined through blank-leaving techniques—manifest in chiaroscuro lighting, deliberate compositions, and diegetic music—to craft a distinctly Shanghainese chronicle of time.

2. The "Buxiang" Flavor of Shanghai

In the variety show *Round Table Party*, Jin Yucheng, author of the novel *Blossoms*, explained the meaning of "不响" (*Buxiang*): "When narrating an event through Shanghainese logic, the phrase '不响' inevitably emerges. These two characters encapsulate an omission. For instance, if everyone is already aware of a situation, and I approach a leader who remains silent—'the leader does not speak' (领导不响)—the silence itself conveys the atmosphere."

Though the leader utters nothing, the possibilities are implicit, suggesting unresolved tensions or potential consequences. Shanghainese unconsciously repeat '不响' countless times daily; it is an ingrained linguistic habit."

"Buxiang" is a phrase deeply embedded in the upbringing of Shanghainese. "Buxiang" (不响), a common term in Shanghainese dialect, signifies "not speaking"—a deliberate silence, refusal to respond, or a punctuated pause in speech. It can also function as a resonant *blank-leaving* (留白) in dialogue, imbuing discourse with unspoken depth. Elders admonish with phrases like "侬先勿响" (You stay silent first) or "He's competent, but seldom speaks up" (他做事可以, 但平时不太响的). This reflects how "Buxiang" epitomizes a quintessential Shanghainese temperament, rooted in local cultural codes. Literary critic Xu Zidong posits that "Buxiang" serves as "a single phrase that speaks volumes" for Shanghainese—a linguistic efficiency unique to their identity. The novel *Blossoms* opens with the epigraph: "God does not speak, as if all is decided by me..." This line also appears in the trailer for the TV adaptation, foreshadowing the series' commitment to inheriting and reinterpreting "Buxiang". Director Wong Kar-wai elaborates in the documentary *From Blossoms to Blossoms: The Silence Chapter*: "When I choose not to speak—whether to avoid self-contradiction or interpersonal conflict—that is 'Buxiang'." In *Blossoms*, "Buxiang" functions as a deliberate blank-leaving technique. Superficially, it manifests as calm reticence; beneath lies a torrent of unspoken tensions between characters. Through masterful audiovisual storytelling, Wong externalizes intricate inner worlds, replacing dialogue with atmospheric silence to achieve the effect of "soundless profundity" (此时无声胜有声).

The TV adaptation *Blossoms Shanghai* interprets the city's culture through an aesthetic of blank-leaving that prioritizes *essence over form*. By disembedding regional symbols from their material contexts and transforming them into floating semiotic fragments, the director abstracts the "Shanghainese ethos" into a collective memory demanding active decoding. Food emerges as an intimate chronicle of its era—Bao's ritualistic breakfast of rice porridge with six side dishes (fermented tofu, pickled radish, etc.) is magnified through close-ups that linger on the crimson hue of bean curd or the crisp sound of biting into preserved vegetables. Conversely, the unresolved emotional tension between Miss Wang and Ah Bao crystallizes in the remnants of their unfinished pork chop rice cake rendezvous: a half-eaten 排骨 with visible bite marks, raindrops snaking down fogged windows—a sensory monument to petit-bourgeois romance's quiet tragedies.

The cadence of the Shanghainese dialect itself becomes an auditory blank-leaving. When Uncle Ye admonishes Ah Bao in 沪语—"A suit should wear the man, not the man the suit"—the camera dwells not on his face but glides across the sartorial details: impeccably stitched cuffs, collar interfacing. The dialect's rhythmic pauses and elongated vowels ("yī" in "yīfu") intertwine with visual scrutiny of tailoring craftsmanship, encoding the *laokel* (old-School Shanghainese connoisseurs)'s worldly wisdom into an audiovisual riddle. Spatial politics lurk within partial symbols: the oppressive low-angle shots of exposed beams in Shikumen attic rooms viscerally evoke proletarian constraints, while the geometric shadows cast by Peace Hotel's Venetian blinds map invisible hierarchies of power. The iconic Bund Customs House clock materializes seven times yet never fully—its face obscured by neon billboards or blurred in rain-mist, its chimes lingering as acoustic metaphors for clashing temporal orders.

Even sartorial details whisper unspoken identity narratives. Lingzi's evolving earrings—from Japanese pearl studs to Lao Fengxiang jade-in-gold designs—trace her metamorphosis from repatriated émigré to local entrepreneur without expository dialogue. Such blank-leaving strips cultural symbols of utilitarian functions, rendering the steam rising from a bowl of rice porridge, the tonal lilt of a Shanghainese phrase, or the slatted light through blinds into free-floating signifiers. Audiences must assemble the city's essence like cryptographers piecing together Morse code fragments. As the ambient hum of alleyway life (scissor-sharpeners' scrapes, popcorn machines' roars) fades beneath Huanghe Road's neon cacophony, the director refrains from didactic critiques of urbanization. Instead, the erasure of sound sources and the silencing of acoustic landscapes compel viewers to palpitate the scars of urban transformation through absence. The soul of Shanghainese ethos, much like the bespoke suits Uncle Ye wears—devoid of brand logos—resides in the blank spaces between stitches, awaiting the discerning gaze of those who understand silence as the ultimate vernacular.

While the novel never explicitly defines "Buxiang", the TV adaptation demystifies it through a dialogue where the protagonist Ah Bao mentors Miss Wang in business strategy: "To succeed in business, first master two words: 'Buxiang'. Refrain from speaking when it is unnecessary, unclear, unplanned, or detrimental to oneself or others. Always leave room for maneuver." This philosophy permeates *Blossoms*: "acting decisively without fanfare" (闷声干大事) in commerce, "tacit understanding" (心照不宣) in relationships, and "wordless默契无言" in daily life. It is embodied in Mr. Bao's calculated restraint during negotiations, withholding his trump card until the final moment; in the unspoken rivalry between Li Li and Bao, who share no direct confrontations; and in the veiled truths Lingzi and Bao exchange at Night Tokyo. These artful blanks between relationships distill

the "*Buxiang*" essence of Shanghai as portrayed in the novel. Through "*Buxiang*", Wong Kar-wai reconstructs his vision of Shanghai—a city glittering within its golden age. It is precisely this inheritance and reinterpretation of cultural nuance that has earned *Blossoms Shanghai* acclaim and resonance nationwide.

3. The Art of Blank-Leaving in Audiovisual Language

Blank-leaving (留白) is a quintessential technique in Chinese artistic creation, deeply rooted in the nation's aesthetic traditions. Originating from classical Chinese painting—where the omission of trivial details evokes profound artistic conception—it was later adopted in literary works through the deliberate exclusion of redundant dialogues, exhaustive character biographies, and explicit environmental descriptions, thereby granting readers expansive interpretative space.

Director Wong Kar-wai masterfully employs blank-leaving to articulate emotional subtexts, a strategy abundantly evident in *Blossoms Shanghai*. Through layered superimpositions or obstructions of scenery and lighting, he subtly amplifies atmosphere and foreshadows narrative trajectories. Visual blank-leaving often relies on wide shots. In *Blossoms*, windows and blinds frequently dominate the foreground, framing characters positioned mid-to-background to accentuate spatial depth. This *frame-within-frame composition* epitomizes Wong's signature aesthetic of stratified elegance, while simultaneously externalizing the emotional tensions between characters. A prime example occurs in the reunion scene between Ah Bao and Xue Zhi. In over-the-shoulder reverse shots, Ah Bao's entrances are persistently shadowed by Xue Zhi's silhouette, metaphorically reflecting her lingering presence in his psyche and his vulnerable position—a visual metaphor for their imbalanced relationship and power dynamics. When Ah Bao occupies the focal point, the camera maintains a seemingly static position but trembles with imperceptible vibrations, mimicking human breath to evoke unease, thereby mirroring his inner turmoil (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Close-up of Mr. Bao

The frosted glass patterns and Xue Zhi's figure form a nested frame, while rising steam inside and outside the glass further obscures her features, enhancing mystique (Figure 2). As the camera glides, Ah Bao gradually emerges, his presence now counterbalancing Xue Zhi's dominance. This compositional equilibrium signals his psychological metamorphosis—a resolve to conquer his world. Diagonal lines intersecting the frame intensify visual tension, foreshadowing their impending divergence (Figure 3). Wong's use of architectural frames (windows, doorways) as voyeuristic lenses not only enhances visual allure and natural soft focus but also silently narrates subtext.

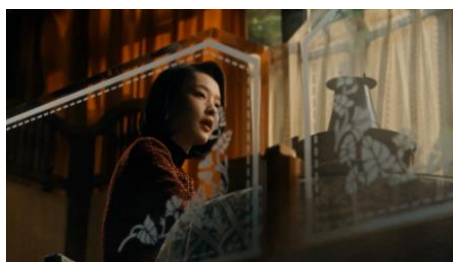


Figure 2. Close-up of Xue Zhi



Figure 3. Confrontation between Mr. Bao and Xue Zh

"*Silence necessitates music*"—as Hong Kong film critic Law Chun Fung observed of Wong's cinema. When characters and narratives adhere to "*Buxiang*", the soundtrack becomes the vocal surrogate. All ineffable stories and emotions find expression through music.

Wong has long exploited music to fill emotional, behavioral, and atmospheric voids in his films, a prowess fully manifested in his debut TV series. When Lingzi returns to Jinxian Road from Tokyo, Wong employs Peking Opera excerpts to foreshadow destinies. The downstairs neighbor's radio plays Mei School's *The Drunken Concubine* (《贵妃醉酒》), whose tale of a woman awaiting her lover's vow parallels Lingzi's predicament. As Lingzi settles into her room, the radio shifts to *The Locked Phoenix Casket* (《锁麟囊》), its narrative of serendipitous kindness mirroring Ah Bao and Lingzi's storyline—all conveyed through restrained implication, demanding audience interpretation. Beyond opera, *Blossoms* curates a tapestry of 1990s pop anthems and film soundtracks. These collective-memory-laden melodies instantly evoke temporal context, character psyches, and motivations, embodying "*Buxiang*" through cultural resonance. When Mr. Bao secures a life-threatening deal with counterfeit mogul Ma in a KTV scene, the Taiwanese anthem *Strive to Win* (《爱拼才会赢》) blares—a motivational anthem cherished by entrepreneurs of that era. When Miss Wang confesses her feelings to Ah Bao while eating pork cutlet rice cakes alone at her trading company, Faye Wong's *Obsession Without Regret* (《执迷不悔》) underscores her candid resolve and foreshadows their tragic romance. Characters remain silent ("*Buxiang*"), while the soundtrack clamors. Through this auditory alchemy, Wong subliminally maps emotional landscapes and fates, immersing audiences in the golden age's nostalgic aura

4. Emotional Entanglements Under Nonlinear Narration

Nonlinear narrative stands in dialectical opposition to linear narrative. The latter, which aligns with human perception of chronological order and quest for structural coherence, has been canonized since Aristotle's era. Characterized by story integrity and causality-driven progression through sequential time, linear narration dominates Chinese television dramas as creators prioritize audience comprehension and production efficiency, often conforming to collective memory frameworks.

Blossoms Shanghai defies this convention. Here, time—like the lingering ambiguity of *In the Mood for Love*—recedes into the background of a fervent era bathed in kaleidoscopic light. It morphs into the "*rhythm of Shanghai*" or "*Shenzhen speed*", silently observing characters' fates amidst societal upheavals. Through interwoven recollections of Ah Bao's (Mr. Bao) business conquests, the series deftly braids three timelines: 1978-1987, November 1984-1988, and post-1992. These temporal threads unravel Ah Bao's mentorship under Uncle Ye, his romantic entanglements with Miss Wang, Lingzi, and Xue Zhi, while chronicling the economic metamorphosis of Shanghai and Shenzhen. Wong Kar-wai's innovative nonlinear approach employs analepses to rewind chronology, incrementally disclosing Ah Bao's rags-to-riches backstory. This technique heightens dramatic tension without compromising artistic refinement, granting audiences interpretive latitude.

Since its premiere, the emotional webs binding Ah Bao, Miss Wang, Li Li, and Lingzi have captivated viewers. Yet *Blossoms* delineates these relationships with surgical precision. Unlike most TV dramas that accelerate emotional evolution into high-intensity arcs (prioritizing "*life-or-death*" stakes, betrayals, or separations), *Blossoms* adopts a restrained blank-leaving narrative to portray individuals navigating historical tides. It minimizes overt conflicts, instead embedding emotional crescendos within quotidian interactions—a strategy that elevates the series' epochal texture while achieving "*thunderclaps from calm skies*" dramatic potency.

Romance in *Blossoms* is not articulated through grand vows but materializes in mundane symbols: pork chop rice cakes from a humble diner, fermented bean curd from Zhujiajiao, or an upturned coat collar. When Tao Tao—introduced as Ah Bao's childhood confidant—first appears, Wong deliberately omits exposition of their shared

past. Though their bond ("*having grown up sharing trousers*") could fuel melodramatic flashbacks, the director leaves it unspoken. A pivotal moment occurs when Tao Tao's loose tongue embroils Ah Bao in peril. While Ah Bao shields him despite threats, contrasting sharply with Xiao Liu's factional "*brotherhood*", their reconciliation requires no verbal catharsis. A mere gesture—Tao Tao adjusting his collar—epitomizes wordless camaraderie (Figs. 4, 5).



Figure 4. Mr. Bao adjusting his collar



Figure 5. Tao Tao adjusting his collar

5. Conclusion

Li Jingsheng, vice president of the China Federation of Radio and Television Associations, likened Blossoms* to "a bomb detonating industry inertia," a statement that acutely captures the revolutionary significance of the series' blank-leaving aesthetics. When Li asserted that "this ingeniously crafted, intensely distinctive 'bomb' has upended the normalized mediocrity of creative practices," he essentially pinpointed how Blossoms employs "Buxiang" (不响, silence) as a methodological scalpel to dismantle and rebuild the industrialized production logic of Chinese television dramas. This deconstruction manifests not only in its dissolution of conventional narrative density but also in its reconstruction of dialogic dimensions between image and audience, history and present, through a "poetics of silence" in audiovisual language.

The subversion of "Buxiang" aesthetics first emerges as a rebellion against the "information overload" syndrome plaguing contemporary television. Amid the industry-wide anxiety over "three-second viewer retention" in the streaming era, Blossoms defiantly channels the Shanghaiese linguistic logic of "勿响" (refraining from speech) into the respiratory rhythm of its imagery. In the 47-second wordless reunion scene between Mr. Bao and Xue Zhi, the fogged glass window, the subtle tremor of an Adam's apple, and the Huangpu River wind tousling a suit jacket collectively orchestrate a silent hurricane. Such blank-leaving is not narrative absence but a restitution of interpretive agency to the audience. As Li Jingsheng noted, what it "detonates" is not merely the safety net of linear storytelling but also creators' arrogant presumption of viewers' cognitive limitations.

A deeper subversion lies in its reconstitution of television's aesthetic hierarchy. When Wong Kar-wai deconstructs the "fast-food visual grammar" of TV traditions with cinematic lighting techniques—geometric shadows sliced by Venetian blinds, multiplied reflections in elevator mirrors—"Buxiang" becomes a cross-media lingua franca. The corporate duel between Mr. Bao and Li Li unfolds without verbal sparring; instead, neon lights ripple across tailored suit fabrics like liquid semaphores. This "speaking through light" approach reduces television from "storytelling lectern" to "sensory immersion," epitomizing what Li Jingsheng termed "intense distinctiveness": it redefines the medium's aesthetic altitude through cinematic visual rigor.

The "bomb effect" Li emphasized also ruptures collective creative complacency. Blossoms' blank-leaving aesthetics reject industrialized TV's assembly-line production of "emotional canned goods," instead weaponizing material details as mnemonic triggers: the crackling grease of Miss Wang's pork chop rice cakes, the fading chime of Lingzi's Japanese windbell, the steam spiraling from Mr. Bao's daily rice porridge ritual... These moments—often dismissed as "Transitional Shot" in mainstream productions—become silent epics in Blossoms. As Li

observed, this creative stance "detonates" not just narrative clichés but the industry's systemic underestimation of audience discernment, forcing practitioners to confront a fundamental question: Should television be a force-fed didacticism or an encrypted narrative co-authored with its viewers?

The "thunderclap" achieved through "Buxiang" ultimately constitutes an enlightenment movement on creative ethics. When Li Jingsheng metaphorized it as an industry bomb, the subtext resounding beneath the explosion demands attention: in an algorithmic winter gripping film and television, only reverence for "blank-leaving" can blast open fissures toward artistic dignity. Within these cracks glimmers not merely the golden afterglow of 1990s Shanghai but the chrysalis of Chinese television's metamorphic rebirth.

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