

Re-viewing Blossoms Shanghai: Haipai Culture, Mediated Place-Imaginariness, and Cross-Regional Participation

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Abstract

This article examines how *Blossoms Shanghai* (*Fanhua*, 2023) renewed public attention to *Haipai* (Shanghai-style) culture by combining auteurist visual aesthetics, place-based symbols, and a narrativised entrepreneurial ethos. Framed by cross cultural communication and place branding, we adopt a multimodal, text led qualitative design to analyse the drama's visual grammar, character arcs, and discourses of identity and taste. We integrate visual semiotics, feminist critical discourse analysis, and thematic analysis to show how architecture, dialect, cuisine, and dress interact with plotlines of market reform, mobility, and intimacy to produce resonant place imaginaries. Drawing on industry and platform reports, we document short term indicators of cultural and tourism spillovers and treat these signals as contextual traces rather than causal estimates. We argue that the series operates as a relay between the port city sensibility of auteur cinema and the mass address of serialised television, enabling mediated forms of belonging and attachment that circulate across regions while remaining locally anchored. The study clarifies how aesthetic density becomes social practice and outlines implications for regionally grounded cultural production and for the integration of film and television, urban culture, and tourism.

Keywords: *Haipai* Culture, Place Branding, Cross Cultural Communication, Visual Semiotics, Film Induced Tourism

Introduction

As a cultural text and media event, *Blossoms Shanghai* (繁花, 2023) illuminates the mutually constitutive relations among serial storytelling, urban imaginaries and place consumption in contemporary China. Premiering on CCTV-8 and Tencent Video on 27 December 2023, the 30-episode series (Wong Kar-wai's first for television) reanimates 1990s Shanghai as an affectively dense, hyper-stylised field of commerce, desire and risk, foregrounding markers of

Haipai (海派) culture such as dialect, cuisine, fashion and architecture (Ye & Lv, 2024). In identity-oriented place-branding terms, it mobilises cultural signifiers that express and reshape Shanghai's self-image as a cosmopolitan, mercantile city (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Its early circulation spilled into the urban economy: travel platforms reported sharp spikes in searches for the Peace Hotel and Nanjing Road, while food-delivery data showed week-on-week surges in Shanghainese dishes highlighted by the series (Y. Zhao, 2024). These ripples exemplify the media–tourism nexus theorised in destination-branding scholarship and invite a culturally grounded reading of how a serial drama encodes local identity and how audiences decode it across China's internal cultural gradients.

Recent scholarship on city branding and historic urban imaginaries in China shows how municipal governments and cultural industries mobilise heritage, nostalgia and digital media to craft differentiated city identities (Law, 2023; Lu & Ma, 2023; Wang & Feng, 2023). Work on the visual semiotics of Chinese destination logos demonstrates how heritage resources are codified through multimodal graphic systems that promise both local rootedness and global legibility (Liang & Cheong, 2025). Within this policy and branding field, Shanghai's authorities explicitly elevate "*Haipai* culture" to the status of a named cultural tourism cluster, cultivated through flagship projects and curated consumption corridors along the Huangpu riverfront (Hu, 2023). *Blossoms Shanghai* therefore needs to be read not only as Wong Kar-wai's first serial television project, but also as a high-profile televisual event that intersects with ongoing efforts to commodify and re-narrate Shanghai's hybrid *Haipai* identity in the post-pandemic media–tourism economy.

Research on film- and TV-induced tourism has evolved from descriptive case studies towards integrative accounts that connect screen texts, destination image formation, stakeholder orchestration and sustainability. Recent work foregrounds how narrative worlds shape destination imaginaries and how local actors manage the resulting attention (Huerta-Viso et al., 2024), while psychological studies trace mechanisms, especially empathy, through which viewing translates into travel intentions and practices (Yi et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2023). Together, these strands encourage reading *Blossoms Shanghai* not merely as a successful period drama but also as a node in broader circuits where cultural texts, platforms, municipal actors and visitors co-produce place meanings and material flows.

At the same time, a small but fast-growing body of scholarship has begun to treat *Blossoms Shanghai* itself as an object of critical analysis. Zhang (2024) reads the series as a carrier of collective memory, showing how its narrative and visual style translate individual remembrance into prosthetic memories of 1990s Shanghai. Ni (2025) foregrounds the aesthetics of "blank-leaving" (liubai) and silence as a key cipher in Wong Kar-wai's adaptation strategy, while An (2025) examines how the series' female characters recalibrate media representations of "she power" and gendered value. Complementary Chinese-language work has traced the drama's urban memory rhetoric, feminist landscapes and nostalgic taste cultures, often focusing on visual language, emotional experience and "taste" as commodified nostalgia (Cao, 2024; Ding, 2024; Li, 2024). As a whole, this emerging literature demonstrates the drama's cultural salience and aesthetic complexity but remains largely text-centred. It pays limited attention to cross-regional audience practices, to the multi-layered mediation of *Haipai* identity through streaming platforms, tourism infrastructures and municipal branding, or to how intra-national cultural gradients condition these processes.

The Chinese television context sharpens these questions. Nationally distributed “local” dramas must travel across pronounced north–south, coastal–inland and dialect divides, raising issues of cultural proximity and cultural “discount” within a single market (Straubhaar, 1991; H. Zhao & Liu, 2021). At the same time, city branding in China is decentralised and polyphonic: identity work is co-authored by media producers, municipal departments, businesses, platforms and audiences (Björner & Aronsson, 2022; Lucarelli, 2018). Yet we still know little about how a serial’s visual, sonic and narrative labour interfaces with audience practices (CityWalk routes, culinary sampling, heritage revisitation) to mediate an ethos like *Haipai*, or how such practices feed back into governance and industry strategies. Against this backdrop, we conceptualise *Blossoms Shanghai* as a “mediated *Haipai* relay”: patterned circulations in which textual encoding and audience decoding iteratively materialise urban identity across screens, streets and platforms. This draws on Hall’s (2019) encoding–decoding model and an identity-based view of place branding, which treats *Haipai* as a dynamic repertoire articulated through creative industries, policy and everyday practices (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). The case is especially telling because Wong’s globally recognisable aesthetic is transposed into long-form television, Mandarin and Shanghainese versions were differentially scheduled, and media features, brand tie-ins and municipal “check-in” routes scaffolded audience and commercial participation.

Empirically, we situate the case within debates on Chinese urban culture and the evolving meanings of *Haipai*. Rather than treat *Haipai* as an essentialised label, we approach it as a negotiated modernity in which Shanghai’s layered architectural heritage and cosmopolitan cultural histories are continually recoded (Ouairy, 2024; Wakeman, 2019). The series’ dialectal choices and heritage locations (for example Bund-area hotels and Huanghe Road), consolidate a recognisable Shanghai modernity while inviting audiences to rehearse that modernity materially through culinary and spatial itineraries. This interplay clarifies how screen texts can catalyse, without determining, place-based identifications under conditions of platformed distribution and variegated cultural proximity across China.

The study pursues three research questions. RQ1 asks how *Blossoms Shanghai* encodes *Haipai* across visual, sonic and narrative resources to render 1990s Shanghai legible and affectively attractive beyond the city. RQ2 investigates how audiences and intermediaries, including media, platforms and municipal actors, decode and mobilise those encodings in practices such as language appreciation, foodways, hotel and heritage “check-ins” and CityWalk itineraries that instantiate an urban sensibility. RQ3 explores what this two-way mediation reveals about intra-national cross-cultural communication and the governance of culture and tourism linkages in China’s post-pandemic media economy. These questions matter because media-driven place imaginaries now mediate how cities narrate recovery, attract visitors and cultivate civic affect, yet the cultural mechanics by which serial dramas accomplish this remain under-theorised.

Methodologically, the study adopts an interpretive qualitative design, combining close reading of the series’ audio-visual grammar with analysis of paratexts and curated media coverage reporting platform-aggregated indicators from Tongcheng Travel, Ctrip, Meituan and Ele.me. These numbers are treated as boundary objects that locate and illustrate practices emerging in the show’s wake rather than as generalisable estimates of causal effect, in line with interpretive traditions in cultural and media studies that privilege situated

meaning-making while attending to circulation infrastructures (Hall, 2019; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Section 3 elaborates the data, coding procedures and strategies for rigour in detail.

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

This study advances a qualitative, mechanism-oriented account of how a regionally marked television drama mediates an urban identity within a single national mediascape characterised by strong intra-national cultural gradients. Rather than presuming “cross-cultural communication” in the transnational sense, we conceptualise the circulation of *Blossoms Shanghai* as cross-regional mediation inside China, where dialects, culinary regimes, and historically sedimented city images operate as semiotic resources that are unevenly familiar to audiences along north and south as well as coastal and inland axes. Three strands of scholarship provide the conceptual backbone: cultural proximity and audience meaning-making; identity-based place branding and urban semiotics; and film and television induced tourism. We integrate these with classic insights from encoding and decoding and with recent work on platformed circulation to frame *Blossoms Shanghai* as a “mediated *Haipai* relay” in which aesthetic encoding, paratextual amplification, and audience practices iteratively materialise a place identity.

Cultural proximity and audience desire. Cultural proximity theory explains why audiences often prefer “nearby” cultural products that are linguistically, historically, or stylistically proximate over distant imports; proximity lowers interpretive frictions and reduces the cultural discount that otherwise hinders circulation (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007). In a vast national market such as China’s, proximity and desire dynamics operate intra-nationally. Shanghainese voicing, Bund-era architecture, and *Haipai* sensibilities are deeply legible to some publics through education, migration, and media repertoires yet remain partially exotic to others. This unevenness primes *Blossoms Shanghai* to travel domestically by offering layered entry points. Mandarin audibility furnishes accessibility, while Shanghainese voicing, culinary signs, and visual motifs provide authenticity and distinction. In our qualitative design, proximity and desire function as a heuristic for reading how viewers position themselves in relation to the show’s urban imaginary in talk, practice, and paratextual traces.

Identity-oriented place branding and urban semiotics. Place-branding research has moved beyond promotion to conceptualise places as identity systems co-constructed by organisations, residents, and visitors through narratives, symbols, and practices (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Lucarelli, 2018). This identity view aligns with urban semiotics, where landmarks, cuisines, idioms, and styles are sign-vehicles that condense historically produced meanings and can be re-authored by cultural industries and audiences (Cresswell, 2014). In Shanghai’s case, the long history of *Haipai* as a syncretic aesthetic of cosmopolitan modernity and vernacular refinement, from treaty-port architecture and lilong alleyways to sartorial codes and service etiquette, offers a deep reservoir for contemporary re-encoding (Hutt, 2000; Wakeman, 2019). Rather than ask whether the series represents a singular “real” Shanghai, we ask how its semiotic and narrative design renders *Haipai* recognisable and actionable, and how publics’ responses fold back into the city’s ongoing identity work.

Film and television induced tourism. Classic studies established that screen exposure shapes destination imaginaries, mobilises visit intentions, and reconfigures local economies

(Beeton, 2021; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). Recent work expands from promotional effects to collaborative governance, sustainability, and heritage protection, acknowledging both benefits and risks of screen-induced flows (Araújo-Vila et al., 2024; Yi et al., 2022; S. Zhang et al., 2024). For our purposes, the most productive move is to treat effects not as linear causation but as negotiated articulations. Screen texts offer scripts for feeling and acting, while audiences test, appropriate, or resist them through practices that leave paratextual and infrastructural traces. Reading *Blossoms Shanghai* through this lens allows us to follow how “check-ins”, “same-dish” tastings, and heritage itineraries function as affective verification loops that stabilise, or contest, the drama’s truth-claims about *Haipai* modernity.

Encoding and decoding and platformed circulation. Hall’s model posits that media texts are structured in dominance yet open to negotiated and oppositional readings (Hall, 2019). For a regionally marked drama, encoding involves aesthetic choices such as cinematography, colour science, step-printing, slow motion, and music, alongside speech registers and *mise-en-scène* that together stage a legible urban ethos. Decoding occurs in context and may diverge across viewer cohorts. In a platformed environment, readings are operationalised into actions. Playlists and fan edits circulate the show’s audio-visual grammar. City-walk maps re-author scenes as routes. Food-ordering interfaces ritualise taste as participation. Platform affordances such as algorithmic curation, location-based discovery, short-video templates, and couponing do not determine behaviour but scaffold it, providing low-friction paths from watching to doing (Jenkins et al., 2013; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). We therefore treat paratexts and platforms not as peripheral noise but as constitutive layers of mediation.

Operationalising *Haipai* as layered repertoire. We approach *Haipai* not as an essence but as a layered semiotic repertoire that is continually re-authored. For analytic traction, we work with three interlocking layers: object-signs such as architecture, cuisine, garments, and idioms; narrative values such as risk, calculation, polish, and hospitality; and pragmatic scripts such as how to dine, greet, and transact. We examine how *Blossoms Shanghai* encodes these into recognisable figures. Aesthetic density matters here. Wong Kar-wai’s signature grammar compresses time into saturated tableaux that invite slow looking, rewatching, and screenshotting. These practices are conducive to granular participation in which audiences copy, remix, and perform micro-gestures in everyday life. Such granularity is fertile for place branding because it enables the brand to be enacted through small, repeatable practices rather than merely recognised (Jenkins et al., 2013; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

Contestation and governance. The same signs that attract can alienate, especially when stylisation drifts into perceived inauthenticity or when short-term traffic stresses local ecologies (Lucarelli, 2018). Film and television induced tourism studies increasingly ask about governance, including how municipal actors, businesses, and communities align around screen-driven flows, and how benefits and burdens are distributed (Araújo-Vila et al., 2024; S. Zhang et al., 2024) Our framework therefore includes a feedback stage in which audience practices and media attention precipitate organisational responses such as curated routes, co-branded offerings, and event programming, and in which policy discourses appropriate the show to narrate development or heritage agendas.

Methodological implications. First, introducing numbers into a qualitative design does not render the study mixed-methods or causal. Platform-reported indicators such as search spikes and order surges function as boundary objects that situate practices in time and space and that triangulate interpretive claims (Huerta-Viso et al., 2024; Yi et al., 2022). Second, a mechanism view shifts evaluation from impact size to articulation quality. We ask how coherently textual encodings, paratextual affordances, and audience practices align to stage *Haipai* as a lived option; where articulations fail or meet resistance; and which scripts for participation are being stabilised, with what socialites and exclusions.

Temporality. Screen-induced participation often displays flash heat, namely short windows of heightened attention that decay unless converted into durable circuits of practice and memory. The *Haipai* relay model therefore treats *Blossoms Shanghai* not as a one-off trigger but as a moment in a longer urban narrative. Prior waves of Shanghainese representation, municipal branding campaigns, and heritage revitalisation furnish antecedents and successors that condition reception and reuse (Jenkins et al., 2013; Wakeman, 2019).

Research Design and Data

This study adopts an interpretive, qualitative design to trace how a regionally marked drama mediates an urban identity across text, paratext, platforms and audience practices within a single national mediascape. The design proceeds from the theoretical premises laid out earlier, cultural proximity and desire, identity-based place branding, film and television induced tourism, and encoding and decoding, and operationalises them as a set of analytic moves that privilege meaning-making while remaining attentive to circulation infrastructures (Burgess et al., 2017; Hall, 2019; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Lucarelli, 2018). Rather than estimating effect sizes or causal impacts, the inquiry reconstructs a mechanism, the *Haipai* relay, by which *Blossoms Shanghai* encodes a place identity, audiences and intermediaries decode and enact it, and organisations respond.

Case strategy and corpus boundaries. The case selection is theoretically driven. *Blossoms Shanghai* (CCTV-8 and Tencent Video, first window beginning 27 December 2023) concentrates a rare conjunction of factors: a globally recognisable authorial style (Wong Kar-wai), a historically dense urban repertoire (*Haipai*), a dual-track circulation architecture (Mandarin and Shanghainese), and paratexts that bridge screens and streets (broadcast programming, municipal “check-in” maps, media features). These conditions are analytically fertile for observing cross-regional mediation inside China, where dialectal and culinary repertoires are unevenly distributed across audiences. The primary text comprises the complete 30-episode series. For linguistic analysis we view both the national Mandarin track and the Shanghainese track where available in the initial broadcast and streaming window and in subsequent municipal rebroadcasts (guides by Sohu and The Paper on versioning and scheduling, alongside Shanghai media reporting). Paratexts include production interviews, broadcaster and platform announcements, city-media features and destination-marketing materials released during the first two broadcast cycles (late December 2023 to late January 2024, and key echo weeks in February and March 2024).

Analytic units and sampling. To preserve narrative integrity while enabling fine-grained semiotic analysis, the drama is segmented at the level of sequence units, namely

coherent stretches of action continuous in time and space (Bordwell et al., 2004). Each episode is first mapped into sequences; sequences hosting core place-identity work are then purposively sampled for close reading. Three inclusion logics structure this purposive sample: (1) place-bearing sequences (for example, the Bund and Peace Hotel, Huanghe Road, Nanjing Road, lilong interiors, heritage hotels and restaurants); (2) language-bearing sequences (sustained Shanghainese voicing, code-switching, idiomatic exchanges or metapragmatic comments on dialect and register); and (3) practice-bearing sequences (food ordering and eating, service etiquette, sartorial routines, transactional rituals) that crystallise pragmatic scripts of *Haipai* modernity. Shot-level annotations on lighting, colour, step printing and slow motion, focal length and framing serve as micro-evidence of the aesthetic encoding of place (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Sampling stops at thematic saturation, the point at which additional sequences no longer add new codes to the semiotic and pragmatic repertoires under study (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Paratexts and platform-adjacent traces. To contextualise decoding and enactment, we compile a curated dossier of reputable media coverage and platform-reported indicators that document emergent practices. Sources include culture and industry articles from *The Paper*, *Shangguan News*, CCTV news segments and national portals; industry dashboards and press notes from Tongcheng Travel and Ctrip concerning search and booking heat; and Meituan and Ele.me concerning dish search and order trends published during the show's first window. We treat such numbers as boundary objects, time-stamped traces that situate practices and anchor our interpretive claims, rather than as generalisable measures (Huerta-Viso et al., 2024; Rogers, 2015). For each item, we archive publication date, outlet, platform attribution, indicator definitions where disclosed (for example, "search heat" and "week-on-week orders"), and the precise textual excerpt reporting the figure. When multiple outlets cite the same platform metric, we prefer the earliest report, cross-check subsequent republications and note any discrepancies in wording or magnitude.

Procedures and coding. Analysis unfolds in three iterative cycles (Saldana, 2025). In Cycle 1, open coding, we annotate sequence units for object-signs (architecture, cuisine, garments, idioms), narrative values (risk, calculation, polish, hospitality), pragmatic scripts (greeting, ordering, paying, dealing) and aesthetic grammar (light, palette, temporality). In Cycle 2, axial and thematic development, we cluster codes into relational constellations that form the encoding matrix, comprising object signs, narrative values, pragmatic scripts and aesthetic cues, asking how the drama renders *Haipai* as a performable sensibility. In Cycle 3, articulation mapping, we align textual encodings with paratextual affordances (for example, dialect-track scheduling, promotional headlines, route maps) and with audience practices documented in our dossier (for example, same-dish tastings, hotel and heritage check-ins, CityWalk itineraries). The output is a set of articulation tables, not frequency tables but narrative matrices, that trace how particular encodings become actionable scripts and how organisational responses, including co-branded menus, curated routes and eventisation, feed back into the relay.

Linguistic handling and translation. Shanghainese sequences are transcribed with orthographic conventions used in major media features where available; otherwise, we employ expert-assisted transliteration, annotate salient phonolexical features such as terms of address and politeness markers, and provide English glosses. For idioms central to *Haipai*

pragmatics, including markers of refinement, thrift, face and situational tact, we include analytic glosses that retain pragmatic force over literal meaning (House, 2014). All quoted dialogue is cross-checked across the Mandarin and Shanghainese tracks to avoid artefacts of dubbing.

Interpretive protocol for platform-reported indicators. Given the opacity of proprietary metrics, we follow a conservative protocol consistent with qualitative digital methods (Marres, 2017; Rogers, 2015). First, we document the time window explicitly, for example 27 December 2023 to 5 January 2024 in Tongcheng reporting, and refrain from extrapolating beyond it. Second, we maintain the platform's own unit semantics, for example "search heat" and "week-on-week orders", without converting to absolute magnitudes or per-capita rates. Third, we triangulate numbers with thick descriptions, including quotes from restaurateurs and hotel managers, photo essays of queues and municipal notices where available, so that figures are embedded in situated accounts of practice rather than treated as stand-alone evidence (Huerta-Viso et al., 2024). Fourth, we explicitly mark any uncertainty, for example base effects during holidays or confounded openings and events, and refrain from causal claims.

Rigor and trustworthiness. Following best practice in qualitative research, we pursue credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln, 1985; Tracy, 2010). Credibility is supported by analyst triangulation, namely two coders for a subset of sequences to discuss interpretive drift rather than to compute reliability coefficients inappropriate for reflexive thematic work (Braun & Clarke, 2021), by negative-case analysis that attends to scenes and reports which contest or complicate the emergent relay, and by thick contextualisation of platform-reported numbers. Transferability is pursued through detailed case descriptions of scenes, sites and practices so readers can judge resonance with other Chinese cities. Dependability is addressed through an audit trail, including codebook versions, sequence maps and the paratext dossier with links and capture dates. Confirmability is pursued via reflexive memos documenting the researchers' positionalities as viewers and as readers of Shanghainese where applicable, and how these inflect interpretive choices (Finlay, 2024).

Reflexivity and positionality. In a media–tourism nexus, researchers risk reproducing celebratory narratives of screen-driven revitalisation. We therefore maintain a reflexive stance. Memos capture moments where our own affective responses to Wong's aesthetic, including nostalgia and admiration of craft, could bias coding towards positive readings. We actively seek and analyse ambivalent or critical paratexts, for example charges of heritage theatre, concerns about short-term crowding and classed access to heritage hotels, to balance the relay. Language competence is explicitly recorded. Where non-native analysts code Shanghainese sequences, transcripts are reviewed by a native speaker for pragmatic nuance.

Ethical considerations. The primary text and broadcast schedules are public. Paratexts include publicly accessible journalism and institutional announcements. No direct interaction with identifiable individuals is undertaken. We follow prevailing guidance for internet-mediated qualitative research. Even when content is publicly visible, researchers should minimise harm by avoiding unnecessary aggregation of low-visibility personal posts, by

paraphrasing where direct quotes could be traced to private individuals, and by favouring institutional or professional accounts for paratextual evidence (Heise et al., 2019; Hewson & Buchanan, 2013). Screenshots of journalistic pages are archived for verification but are not reproduced in publication without permission when they include identifiable non-public figures. Where we cite platform-reported metrics via media outlets, we attribute figures to the reporting outlet and the named platform and clarify the mediation chain.

Limitations. Four limitations should be noted. First, while the corpus captures the first broadcast window and immediate echo weeks, we do not follow long-tail dynamics, for example summer reruns or overseas circulation, which may involve different affordances and publics. Second, the proprietary opacity of platform metrics constrains interpretability; our boundary-object protocol mitigates but does not eliminate this constraint. Third, purposive sampling, even with saturation, privileges sequences that are dense in place-identity work; more diffuse encodings may be under-represented. Fourth, by design, the study focuses on practices that leave traces in reputable media; informal practices not covered by such outlets, for example small-scale community responses, may escape our net.

Analytic deliverables. The procedures above yield three kinds of outputs mobilised in the findings. First, close-reading dossiers of emblematic sequences, including verbally described stills, dialogue excerpts and micro-aesthetic notes. Second, articulation tables that align encodings, paratextual affordances and documented practices. Third, relay diagrams that visualise the sequence “encoding, distribution affordance, decoding and practice, organisational response”, annotated with time-stamped paratextual anchors. These are not models of causation but maps of articulation quality against which we discuss plausibility, robustness and limits.

Collectively, this design positions the study to show how *Blossoms Shanghai* renders *Haipai* modernity actionable through aesthetic and linguistic choices; how publics across regions decode, verify and perform those choices as culinary and spatial itineraries; and how organisations respond, sometimes enabling durable circuits of practice and sometimes amplifying short-window flash heat. The next two sections present findings on the encoding side, namely the textual and affective construction of *Haipai*, and on the decoding-to-practice side, namely audience enactments and organisational feedback, before we return to the broader implications for intra-national cross-regional mediation and urban governance.

Findings I: encoding *Haipai* in *Blossoms Shanghai*

This section reconstructs how *Blossoms Shanghai* encodes “*Haipai*” not as a static essence but as a layered, performable repertoire. Drawing on close reading of purposively sampled sequences (see Section 3), the analysis proceeds from the show’s visual and sonic grammar to its linguistic design, and then to an “encoding matrix” that aligns object signs, narrative values, and pragmatic scripts. Throughout, we treat aesthetic density not as ornament but as a production of legibility and actionability: by thickening perceptual and affective cues, the series renders *Haipai* modernity recognisable to non-local publics and repeatable as small practices, what can be worn, ordered, said, or done (Birdsall et al., 2021; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

Visual and Sonic Grammar: Saturated Memory and Choreographed Risk

Across emblematic night-market and dining sequences, the show mobilises a palette of golds, ambers, and saturated greens under low-key lighting. The cinematography repeatedly uses frontal close-ups that isolate faces against luminous bokeh, interleaving them with lateral tracking shots across glass, chrome, lacquered wood, and polished tableware. Temporal manipulation (step-printing and stylised slow motion), lingers on micro-gestures (a glance before a bid, the tilt of a porcelain spoon, the moment a suited sleeve grazes a lacquered menu), while the sound design alternates muffled diegetic ambiance with crisp foley (tableware, heels on terrazzo) to produce a sensualized tactility. These choices style the 1990s as a field where calculation and desire are rendered visible and audible; risk appears not as crash and noise but as poise and timing. Put differently, the show brands time through texture: viewers can “feel” a *Haipai* temporality as composed patience, calibrated velocity, and the choreography of arrival (Bordwell et al., 2004). In place-branding terms, the visual and sonic grammar performs identity work by fusing cosmopolitan polish with everyday service ecologies (countertops, hostess stands, menus, napkins), so that “modernity” is anchored in ordinary interfaces rather than only monuments (Birdsall et al., 2021; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

A recurring *mise-en-scène* motif is the reflective surface (mirrors, window panes, polished tabletops), often framing characters in nested rectangles. The compositional habit doubles figures with their environments, suggesting that “self-making” in Shanghai is inseparable from the city’s designed surfaces. The camera’s lingering on fixtures (door handles, brass rails, lamp shades) is not merely fetishistic; it stages a pragmatic script of how to occupy space: touch lightly, move smoothly, keep time with the room. Such scripts will reappear below when we align aesthetic cues with *Haipai* pragmatics.

Linguistic Encoding: Dialectal Voicing, Register, and Pragmatic Cues

The series’ dual-track circulation (Mandarin and Shanghainese) allows linguistic choices to carry identity work at two levels. First, where Shanghainese voicing is available, it supplies indexical richness, address terms, sentence-final particles, and prosodic contours that mark stance (respect, tact, amused distance). Even in the Mandarin track, the show retains a repertoire of Shanghainese lexical items and cadence in greetings, small talk, and service interactions. Second, code-selection and code-switching perform boundary work: business negotiation and flirtatious banter are not only about risk and intimacy, they sound like different forms of social calculation. The pragmatic economy of *Haipai* (being polished without being pompous, direct without being brusque), emerges as a sonic template. From an encoding standpoint, dialect functions less as an ethnolinguistic badge than as a device for calibrating distance and familiarity in interaction, enabling audiences to hear civility as choreography. In Goffman’s terms, the series supplies an interaction order keyed to *Haipai*: speech and gesture distribute deference and demeanour in micro-calibrations, teaching viewers “how to carry” themselves in doorways, at tables, and across thresholds (Goffman, 1983; House, 2014).

Object Signs and Pragmatic Scripts: From Recognisable Tokens to Repeatable Acts

The drama’s densest place-encoding occurs where object signs (architecture, cuisine, garments, service implements) are sutured to pragmatic scripts (how to greet, order, wait, pay, tip, exit). A recurring dining sequence condenses this logic: entry through a revolving

door; micro-pause at the hostess stand; exchange of courtesies with understated eye contact; a server's two-handed menu presentation; the lead's fingertip rotation of a porcelain spoon while listening; a brief head-tilt to accept or decline a recommendation; the arrival of a classic Shanghainese dish plated with a garnish that mirrors the room's colour temperature. None of these gestures is narratively necessary, but collectively they stage *Haipai* as polish-with-pragmatism. The encoding matrix here is four-way: object sign (lacquer, porcelain, menu typography), aesthetic cue (low-key amber, shallow depth of field), narrative value (composure under risk, discretion), pragmatic script (light touch, measured assent). The show thus translates "*Haipai*" from a discursive label into a sequence of bodily and conversational acts available for imitation (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020; Van Leeuwen, 2005).

Garments and tailoring perform parallel work. Suits are not generic Westernness; they are cut to emphasise shoulder line and sleeve fall, coordinated with cuff, tie width, and fabric sheen that echo room palettes. Female costuming moves between sheaths, silk blouses, and tailored outerwear, aligning character arcs with codes of competence and self-command. Costume changes map risk environments: darker, matte textures for high-stakes negotiation; lighter, reflective fabrics for celebratory closings. Viewers learn to read and do *Haipai* through clothes: refinement is communicative labour that organises encounters, not a private indulgence (Entwistle, 2023).

Narrative Values as Moral Economy: Risk, Reciprocity, and Tact

If the visual and sonic and linguistic layers supply the grammar, the plot engineers a moral economy in which exchange is saturated with value judgements about timing, reciprocity, and face (Sayer, 2000). Business is cast neither as pure predation nor romantic self-realisation; deals are wagers on trustworthiness under uncertainty, adjudicated in restaurants and hotel lobbies where hospitality and calculation interweave. Scenes of "treating" (请客) calibrate hierarchy and intimacy: who orders, who pays (and how visibly), who acknowledges the server, who signals exit. When characters succeed, the show frames their wins as tactful risk: the courage to move early, tempered by civility that keeps social surfaces smooth. When they fail, it is often a failure of tact (boorishness, haste, tone-deafness), not merely a mistaken bet. In this sense, *Haipai* is encoded as a style of conduct that binds self-advancement to aestheticised consideration for others, a linkage the show upgrades from etiquette to ethical claim.

The same moral economy governs the series' treatment of romance. Affective ties are staged as negotiations of tempo and threshold: how long to wait before speaking, what to leave unsaid, how to hold posture when desire could disrupt calculation. Stylised slow motion here is not an auteurist signature alone; it encodes a norm—good timing is good form. This normative coupling makes *Haipai* portable: one can rehearse it in dining, in courting, and in deal-making. The show's consistency across these arenas is a crucial part of its encoding power.

Encoding Matrix: Synthesis

To consolidate, Table 1 abstracts an encoding matrix from the close readings. The point is not to exhaustively list motifs but to show how the series binds together sign-vehicles, aesthetic cues, values, and scripts into a teachable repertoire.

Table 1. Encoding matrix abstracted from close readings

Encoding dimension	Recurrent resources in the series	<i>Haipai</i> articulated	value	Pragmatic script made repeatable
Object signs	Heritage hotels; lacquer and porcelain; tailored suits; menu typography	Polish pragmatism; hospitality competence	with as	Light touch; measured assent; two-handed exchange; poised entry and exit
Aesthetic cues	Low-key warm palettes; step printing; shallow focus; reflective surfaces	Composure under risk; saturated memory		Slow looking; screenshotable micro gestures; awareness of tempo
Linguistic cues	Shanghainese voicing; address terms; code switching	Tact; civility; amused distance		Register shifts by scene; deference markers; cadence-based stance
Narrative framings	Deals as wagers; treating as social calculus; romance as timing	Risk tempered by consideration; face as ethical labour		Ordering, paying, thanking, and departing as choreographies of respect

Taken together, these encodings render “*Haipai*” legible to viewers without prior embeddedness in Shanghai’s lifeworld, while also supplying a kit of small, repeatable acts that audiences can perform elsewhere. In identity-based place branding terms, the show enacts a cycle of expression and mirroring: the city “says” itself through an authored aesthetic; publics recognise themselves in parts of that saying, try it on, and feed it back through practices that municipal and commercial actors can then amplify (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Lucarelli, 2018). The next section turns to that amplification and uptake, how decoding becomes practice, and how organisations respond.

Findings II: Decoding, Participation, and Organisational Feedback

Building on the encoding analysis, this section follows how audiences and intermediaries converted the show’s cues into situated practices, and how organisations (municipal bodies, destination managers, and businesses), calibrated their responses. Rather than treating “effects” as linear outcomes, we trace articulations in which viewers verified, replayed, and materialised *Blossoms Shanghai* through food, routes, lodging, language play, and micro-rituals of comportment. Paratexts and platform affordances lowered frictions between watching and doing, enabling small, repeatable performances that carry narrative value into everyday life (Jenkins et al., 2013; Poell et al., 2019). Read together, the cases demonstrate a two-way relay: textual form invited participation; participation, in turn, furnished cues for organisational amplification and restraint.

Paratextual Scaffolding: Scheduling, Dialect Versioning, and Framings of Participation

The series’ dual-track circulation (Mandarin and Shanghainese) did more than widen access; it signalled that linguistic authenticity would be rewarded with distinctive affect (see Section 4.2). Broadcast and streaming notices positioned the Shanghainese track as a parallel experience, normalising code choice as both an audience decision and an identity cue. News features and programme guides, “how to watch the Shanghainese version,” “where the dialect lands most poignantly”, operated as instructional paratexts, teaching viewers to treat language as an experiential parameter and as a test of taste. When platforms frame a dialect track as a valued option, dialect-specific memes, catchphrases, and cadence play become socially legible and hence repeatable (Hall, 2019; Poell et al., 2019).

A second cluster of paratexts organised mobility. Media outlets curated “Blossoms routes” linking filming locations and heritage venues; hotels and restaurants floated co-branded offers (menus named after characters, rooms themed around emblematic scenes). Even when modest, such offers compressed the series’ aesthetic into tickets to perform: a visitor did not merely go to the Bund; she “checked in” to a Blossoms suite, ordered a “same-dish,” and posted proof-of-participation in templated short videos. Paratexts thus made the show spreadable by scripting small, easy-to-rehearse acts (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Culinary Participation: From Same-Dish Searches to Pragmatic Apprenticeships

Culinary uptake was the most immediate decoding-to-practice. Dishes spotlighted by the series (paigu niangao, paofan, youdunzi), were familiar Shanghainese fare that the show re-indexed as manners rather than merely tastes. Audience posts paired food with etiquette: how to address the server, whether to accept a recommendation with a head-tilt or a brief smile, how long to let a dish rest before eating. The linkage between object signs and scripts identified in section 4.3 reappeared as a menu-to-compartment apprenticeship. Participants did not only consume; they tried on a dining style that coordinates modesty with discernment, small talk acknowledging service without ostentation, gestures that mark care without fuss.

Organisational responses tracked these moves. Restaurants designated “Blossoms tables” or “heritage seating”; some adjusted service tempo (two-handed menu presentation, deliberate pacing between dishes). A few venues converted the brief pause at the hostess stand into a micro-ritual with scripted greetings. Textual encodings thus travelled as operational cues: staff training and service sequence became vehicles for translating an authored aesthetic into reproducible hospitality. The risk, discussed below, is performative ossification, service becoming theatre of the show rather than service to the diner’s comfort, but in the early window the effect was to make *Haipai* scripts observable, learnable, and postable.

Heritage and Hospitality: Check-Ins as Affective Verification Loops

Heritage hotels and Bund-facing venues functioned as high-signal checkpoints where viewers verified the show’s truth-claims about polish, tact, and temporality. Physical affordances, lobbies that frame entrances, brass rails catching warm light, staff choreography, aligned closely with the series’ mise-en-scène (Section 4.1), producing a recognisable sensorium. Visitors staged arrival as a photo-op of entrance performed correctly: poised walk, measured turn, acknowledgment of staff, graceful deposit of a coat or bag. In this sense, the check-in post is less a souvenir than a certificate of apprenticeship, proof of learning to inhabit *Haipai* time.

Hotels reciprocated with subtle scripting: wayfinding shifted tone; front-desk introductions referenced “the Blossoms view”; evening playlists and lighting temperatures edged toward the series palette. These low-cost, semantically dense micro-tunings teach guests to notice, to slow down, and to use the room as a partner in conduct. Identity-based place branding reads such cycles as expression and mirroring (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013): the city expresses an ethos through hospitality design; guests mirror it in posted performances; the mirror informs the next round of expression.

CityWalk and Route-Making: From Screenshots To Itineraries

Platform affordances (map layers, route pins, short-video templates) enabled screenshot-to-route conversions. Users extracted stills capturing colour temperature, fixtures, or framing geometries and overlaid them on street views to identify vantage points. Grassroots guides then bundled points into walkable circuits with precise timing, “arrive at dusk; stand by the brass rail for backlighting; exit through the revolving door after the jazz set.” Circulating via municipal media and tourism boards, these itineraries signal a shift from “visit where it was shot” to “move as the show moves.” Tempo, posture, and angle become part of route description.

Commercial actors followed suit. Cafés advertised shot-matching corners; boutiques aligned window displays with the series palette to attract colour-match photos. The promise to participants is twofold: convenient templates for on-brand images and the social capital of doing *Haipai* properly. The risk is homogenization, routes collapsing to the same vantage points, producing crowding and repetitive content. Yet in the first wave, the spreadable grammar made route-making a communal craft, thickening engagement beyond passive sightseeing (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Language Play and the Social Life of Dialect

Decoding also took a linguistic turn. Short videos circulated Shanghainese address terms, sentence-final particles, and micro-pronunciation guides; some paired snippets with scenes to teach cadence. For non-Shanghainese speakers, trying a line (however imperfectly), operated as affiliative performance. For Shanghainese speakers, correcting and elaborating such attempts became curatorial labour that policed nuance while extending hospitality. This division of labour (non-locals as apprentices, locals as custodians), stabilised a polite asymmetry consistent with *Haipai's* ethic of tact. Tensions surfaced: prescriptivist gatekeeping elicited charges of “performing Shanghai for the camera,” while others defended the pedagogical value of playful attempts. From an encoding and decoding perspective, dialect functioned as a practice of measure: sounding right exhibits care; correcting kindly enacts the civility the show itself valorises (Hall, 2019; House, 2014).

Contestation and Boundaries: Authenticity, Crowding, and Extractive Check-Ins

Not all articulations were affirming. Critical essays flagged heritage theatre, a stylised Shanghai that flattens classed and gendered contradictions under amber light. Residents near popular vantage points reported noise, queues, and the conversion of everyday spaces into backdrop economies. Hospitality workers cautioned that theatrical service can drift into emotional labour that erodes dignity. Place-branding and tourism studies anticipate these ambivalences: the same identity scripts that bind publics can exclude or exhaust them, and the same flows that monetise heritage can strain its social ecologies (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Lucarelli, 2018; Yi et al., 2022; S. Zhang et al., 2024).

Pragmatically, flash-heat patterns, sharp spikes followed by swift declines, produced inventory mismatches and over-investment in show-branded corners that under-performed after the first wave. In response, some venues pivoted toward quiet integrations (staff micro-rituals, palette adjustments) rather than overt theming, aiming for durability over virality. Municipal messaging folded Blossoms into longer histories of Shanghainese modernity and existing heritage routes, reframing the moment as a chapter rather than a rupture. This

recalibration aligns with governance-oriented evolution in film and TV-induced tourism: durable value emerges when screen-driven flows are absorbed into stakeholder routines and heritage stewardship, not when they are chased as standalone spectacles (Araújo-Vila et al., 2024; Huerta-Viso et al., 2024).

The Relay in Action: Three Articulation Vignettes

To crystallise the argument, we distil three vignettes that stitch together encoding cues, audience practices, and organisational feedback.

Vignette A: The Lacquered Table. A dinner scene encodes a four-beat script, poised entry, two-handed menu exchange, measured assent, a pause before the first bite (Section 4.3). Viewers replicate the beats at a heritage restaurant, posting clips that emphasise the handoff and the pause. The restaurant standardises the handoff protocol, training staff to align wrist angle and menu position for photographic clarity. The result is a small but stable ritual recognised as how to do it here, while staff recover agency by mastering the choreography. The identity claim (polish with pragmatism) is enacted by all parties.

Vignette B: The Revolving Door. The camera stages arrivals through revolving doors at golden hour to encode temporality as choreography (Section 4.1). CityWalk guides specify arrival times and positions; hotels adjust evening lighting to match the show's warmth; guests produce near-isomorphic clips. When crowding peaks, the hotel redirects flows with velvet ropes and alternative doorways, while maintaining the "walk-through" shot as a periodic event (e.g., on the hour) to protect operations. The articulation is sustained by cadenced scarcity: the door-as-scene is not always on offer, preserving dignity for workers and guests.

Vignette C: The Dialect Toast. A scene pairs a Shanghainese toast with a business turn. Short videos teach pronunciation; locals correct gently; restaurants add a bilingual line on coasters. The toast becomes a tool for affiliative risk-taking: non-locals try it and are applauded for effort; staff reciprocate with a brief gloss on meaning. The practice thickens civility (mutual face work) without imposing purity tests on pronunciation. When prescriptivism spikes online, venues and media emphasise care over correctness, keeping the relay open.

Across these vignettes, the through-line is articulation quality. Encodings travel best when they yield small, teachable acts that publics can rehearse without humiliation and that organisations can adopt without self-parody. Where articulations overextend, turning service into pantomime, routes into bottlenecks, the relay falters or is moderated by counter-speech and policy adjustment. The next section synthesises these dynamics into a governance-aware model, drawing implications for cross-regional mediation and for cities seeking to work with, rather than be worked over by, screen-driven flows.

Discussion: A Governance-Aware Model of the "Haipai Relay"

This section synthesises the textual and practice-based findings into a governance-aware model of cross-regional mediation in China's platformised mediascape. Rather than treating *Blossoms Shanghai* as a discrete cause of urban flows, we argue that the series catalysed a relay, a patterned articulation in which aesthetic encoding, paratextual scaffolding, audience participation, and organisational calibration co-produce a performable urban identity. The

value of the model is twofold: analytically, it traces how textual density becomes social practice; pragmatically, it specifies where municipal and industry actors can intervene to support benefits while containing costs.

Mechanism Synthesis: From Aesthetic Legibility to Organisational Calibration

Across Sections 4-5, five interlocking mechanisms recur:

Aesthetic legibility: filmic density (palette, step-printing, reflective mise-en-scène) and dialectal voicing render *Haipai* a recognisable grammar of conduct rather than a list of traits. This shifts reception from recognition (“that looks like Shanghai”) to rehearsal (“this is how one arrives, orders, greets”).

Paratextual scaffolding: dual-track audio (Mandarin and Shanghainese), broadcast and streaming guides, and media features translate style into a menu of entry points (watch in dialect, trace filming routes, taste “same-dish” cuisine), lowering the friction between watching and doing (Jenkins et al., 2013; Poell et al., 2019).

Verification loops: “check-ins,” “same-dish” tastings, and CityWalks act as affective tests through which participants evaluate and stabilise the show’s truth-claims about tact, timing, and polish.

Custodianship and pedagogy: locals curate and correct (especially around dialect), while businesses and staff operationalise micro-rituals (two-handed menu exchanges, lighting cadence), thereby teaching *Haipai* scripts in situ (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

Organisational calibration: hotels, restaurants, and municipal actors convert emergent practices into routinised offerings (theme-light “soft theming,” curated routes), or de-emphasise fragile articulations when crowding or caricature looms (Lucarelli, 2018).

The relay is neither linear nor unidirectional. It involves feedback with adjustment: when a ritual begins to ossify into theatre, venues throttle visibility (e.g., cadenced scarcity around revolving-door shots); when gatekeeping spikes in dialect debates, institutional messaging shifts from correctness to care, preserving affiliative openness (Cohen & Cohen, 2012).

Cross-Regional Mediation: Proximity, Desire, and a Dual-Track Authenticity Principle

The case clarifies how cultural proximity (linguistic, culinary, stylistic) and desire for distinction combine to enable internal circulation across China’s cultural gradients (Straubhaar, 1991; Wagner & Kraidy, 2023). We distil a Dual-Track Authenticity Principle:

Accessibility track (Mandarin, generic routes, simplified scripts) for breadth;
Situatenedness track (dialect, heritage venues, refined scripts) for depth.

Crucially, the situatenedness track must be signalled as legitimate and rewarding, not as an optional extra. This legitimisation invites non-locals to apprentice themselves to local repertoires without demanding purity; it also recognises locals as custodians while discouraging punitive prescriptivism. The result is polite asymmetry: a pedagogy of tact that mirrors the very ethics the series encodes.

Stakeholder Orchestration: Roles, Rules, and Guardrails

A governance-aware reading foregrounds orchestration over spectacle (Araújo-Vila et al., 2024; Lucarelli, 2018). We propose a light-touch role matrix:

Producers, broadcasters and platforms: sustain spreadable micro-scripts (temporal templates, linguistic clips) while resisting heavy, extractive co-branding that fixes the text to a few bottleneck sites (Jenkins et al., 2013).

DMOs and municipal agencies: translate verification loops into distributed circuits (multiple vantage points, time-phased events) that reduce pressure on heritage chokepoints; integrate the show as a chapter within longer city narratives (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

Businesses and hospitality: adopt “soft theming” (lighting, pacing, service choreography) rather than literal set-dressing; align staff training with dignity-preserving scripts; use cadenced scarcity to protect operations.

Communities: co-design “quiet hours,” signage tone, and benefit-sharing (e.g., neighbourhood cultural funds) to keep everyday life from becoming perpetual backdrop (Zukin, 2009).

Two practical guardrails follow: a No-Exhaustion Rule (avoid converting ordinary service into continuous theatre) and a Care-over-Correctness Rule (privilege hospitable pedagogy over linguistic gatekeeping). Both maintain articulation quality and reduce backlash.

Replicability Conditions and a Risk Register

The relay is conditionally replicable. Necessary conditions include: (a) a deep symbol reservoir (object-signs with lived uses, not just monuments); (b) craft-intensive authoring that binds aesthetics to pragmatic scripts; (c) platform infrastructures that make scripts easy to rehearse; and (d) governance capacity to orchestrate flows and stakeholder routines (Evans, 2003; Kavartzis & Hatch, 2013).

A concise risk register:

Heritage theatre: stylisation flattens contradictions; mitigated by counter-narratives and distributed circuits (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Zukin, 2009).

Extractive check-ins: spaces reduced to backdrops; mitigated by community co-governance and benefit channels.

Flash-heat volatility: short spikes misread as steady demand; mitigated by pilotable, reversible interventions and cadence management.

Platform drift: algorithmic shifts erode discoverability; mitigated by multi-channel communication and physical wayfinding that does not depend on one platform.

Gatekeeping: purism around language and etiquette; mitigated by the Care-over-Correctness Rule.

Rethinking Evaluation: From Impact Size to Articulation Quality

For municipalities and venues, standard KPIs (footfall, ADR, RevPAR, order counts) are necessary but insufficient. We propose qualitative indicators keyed to articulation quality:

Teachability of scripts (clarity and uptake of small, courteous acts);
Density of scaffolds (availability and tone of paratexts that invite non-humiliating participation);
Distributed custodianship (evidence that locals, staff, and visitors co-author rituals rather than perform a fixed script);
Cadence and load management (temporal dispersion, absence of bottlenecks);
Dignity metrics (front-of-house accounts of emotional labour; resident satisfaction in micro-surveys).
These can be captured through observational audits, staff/reflection diaries, short intercept interviews, and curated media analysis, aligning with qualitative governance approaches (Richards, 2020; Tracy, 2010).

Comparative and Transnational Extensions

The *Haipai* relay is a heuristic for mechanisms, not a claim of Shanghai's uniqueness. Comparative work might examine Cantonese-coded dramas in the Greater Bay Area, Northeast vernacular comedies, or inland heritage serials, tracing where dual-track authenticity is viable and how proximity and desire gradients differ. Transnationally, export circuits will modulate the relay: dialect tracks may become subtitles; culinary scripts face ingredient availability; verification loops shift to diasporic venues. Here, policy mobilities and cultural translation become central (House, 2014; McCann & Ward, 2011). The model invites such adaptations.

Conclusion

This article has reframed *Blossoms Shanghai* as a case of cross-regional mediation in which a regionally marked drama, circulating through platformised infrastructures, materialises an urban identity as performable practice. The analysis contributes to media and urban studies by specifying how a filmic aesthetic becomes a civic repertoire and to destination governance by identifying points of orchestration that privilege dignity, care, and distribution over spectacle.

We addressed RQ1 by showing that *Blossoms Shanghai* encodes *Haipai* as a layered grammar (object-signs, narrative values, pragmatic scripts), stitched together by a distinctive visual-sonic design and dialectal voicing. The show translates "*Haipai*" from an abstract label into small, teachable acts (poised entry, two-handed exchange, cadence-aware speech), making refinement a communicative labour rather than a posture.

We addressed RQ2 by tracing how audiences decode the grammar through culinary apprenticeships, heritage and hospitality check-ins, CityWalk route-making, and language play. Paratexts and platform affordances lower the barriers from watching to doing, enabling verification loops that test and stabilise the show's truth-claims. Custodianship emerges as a social division of labour: locals curate nuance; venues operationalise scripts; participants post proofs of apprenticeship. Contestations (heritage theatre, crowding, gatekeeping), form part of this process, indicating where articulation strains.

We addressed RQ3 by articulating a governance-aware model (the *Haipai* relay), that identifies stakeholder roles, guardrails, and replicability conditions. We advocate a Dual-Track Authenticity Principle, the No-Exhaustion and Care-over-Correctness rules, and a shift from

impact size to articulation quality as evaluation focus. For policy and industry, the actionable implication is not to “theme” cities around a show but to translate style into distributed, dignity-preserving routines that communities can own and adapt.

The study’s limitations are deliberate: a first-window corpus, reliance on public paratexts for practice traces, and an interpretive stance that resists causal quantification. Future research could extend temporally (follow long-tail routinisation or fatigue), comparatively (test the relay across dialect regions and genres), and transnationally (diasporic check-ins; export circuits). Mixed-method designs might combine our qualitative articulation maps with lightweight sensing (temporal crowding indices, acoustic ambience logs) to triangulate cadence and load without collapsing meaning into metrics.

More broadly, the findings recommend an ethics of measured hospitality in media-tourism governance. When dramas travel as grammars of conduct, they can renew civic life by inviting publics to do urbanity with care. The task for cities is to enable such invitations while protecting the everyday from exhaustion. If the *Haipai* relay holds any general lesson, it is that the most durable cultural circulations are not the loudest spectacles but the quiet, repeatable acts through which strangers learn to share rooms, tables, and time.

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