

From Literary Subject to Cinematic Object: Wang Qiyao's Cross-Media Adaptation of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of female subjectivity in the cross-media adaptation of Wang Anyi's *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, with particular attention to the transition of Wang Qiyao from a literary subject to a cinematic object. Through close textual analysis and feminist film theory, especially Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, this study explores how the film adaptation reconstructs Wang Qiyao's identity through changes in narrative perspective, visual representation, and spatial narration. In the original novel, Wang Qiyao functions not only as an autonomous female consciousness but also as a symbolic embodiment of Shanghai's urban culture and historical memory. However, in the cinematic adaptation, her psychological depth and narrative agency are significantly weakened through the dominance of male-centered visual structures and melodramatic romantic narratives. Meanwhile, Shanghai itself is reduced from an active narrative subject to a decorative nostalgic backdrop. This paper further argues that such a transformation is closely related to differences in media specificity, audience expectations, and the commercial logic of cultural production. Ultimately, the adaptation reflects broader issues concerning gender politics, spectatorship, and the reconstruction of female subjectivity in cross-media storytelling.

Keywords

Wang Anyi; *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*; cross-media adaptation; female subjectivity; male gaze.

1. Introduction

Wang Anyi is a leading figure and pioneer of contemporary Chinese literature, particularly within the Shanghai school. Her magnum opus, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, through its portrayal of the soul of Shanghai, its profound exploration of women's destinies and everyday lives, and its unique narrative style, has not only earned her the highest honour—the Mao Dun Literature Prize—but has also cemented her immortal status in contemporary Chinese literature. *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is one of Wang Anyi's most representative works. Set against the backdrop of Shanghai, a city steeped in legend, it unfolds a vivid portrait of women's lives by recounting the life story of Wang Qiyao, spanning nearly half a century. In this work, Wang Anyi, through a perspective uniquely sensitive to the female experience, delves deeply into the inner world of women, revealing their living conditions, emotional ups and downs, and relentless pursuit of self-worth during a specific historical period, thereby embodying a rich and profound sense of female consciousness [1].

It is precisely because of its outstanding literary value and rich cultural significance that the film and television adaptations of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* have become a cultural phenomenon worthy of in-depth exploration. Works adapted from Wang Anyi's *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* span various genres, including films, television dramas and stage plays. This paper will take the original novel and its film adaptation as case studies to explore the shifts in

female subjectivity and gender power during cross-media adaptation, with a view to deepening our understanding of the differing gender perspectives within the adapted versions.

With regard to research on the original literary work, scholars have thoroughly demonstrated Wang Qiyao's subjectivity and her symbiotic relationship with Shanghai. On the one hand, such research analyses the complexity of Wang Qiyao's inner world, illustrating her struggles and survival strategies within a patriarchal society; on the other hand, it reveals the intertextuality between her and Shanghai's culture. As the 'daughter of Shanghai's alleyways', her fate and temperament are rooted in the city's alleyways, rumours and the vicissitudes of the times. This implies that to deconstruct her relationship with the city is to deconstruct the validity of her characterisation. These studies collectively establish a premise: Wang Qiyao is a female character with a rich sense of agency, inextricably linked to Shanghai by blood.

With regard to studies on film and television adaptations, scholars have sought to highlight the deviations of these adaptations from the essence of the original work. The film version shifts the narrative focus from 'a story of the city' to 'a woman's story', reducing Shanghai to a 'superfluous backdrop', whilst simultaneously intensifying Wang Qiyao's emotional entanglements, transforming her into a tragic figure 'born for love'. However, existing research largely remains at the level of descriptive analysis, failing to delve deeply into the underlying narrative logic of gender and power.

With regard to cross-media comparative studies, scholars have touched upon the core issue, pointing out that the film adaptation reduced Wang Qiyao from a 'narrating woman' to an 'object of gaze'; however, there is a lack of systematic theoretical depth, and no detailed analysis of the process by which her subjectivity is eroded or the cultural motivations behind it.

In summary, there is a clear gap in existing research: no study has yet taken 'subjectivity' as the core theoretical yardstick, combined with feminist theory, to systematically examine cross-media comparisons and elucidate the mechanisms by which power relations operate. This paper aims to fill this gap by examining, through close reading and visual analysis, the process and causes of the dissolution of Wang Qiyao's female subjectivity, thereby deepening our understanding of gender politics in cross-media narratives.

2. Wang Qiyao's Subjectivity in the Novel

2.1. Psychological Depiction

The subjectivity of a literary character is first and foremost rooted in her rich, complex and authentic inner life. During her glorious 'Miss Shanghai' period, the author Wang Anyi devoted considerable attention to depicting her psychological processes, taking Wang Qiyao's 'self-awareness' as an example. Wang Qiyao's self-awareness is manifested in her ability to rationally assess her own position and external feedback, neither overestimating the ease with which opportunities might be obtained nor underestimating the influence of her self-image.

In Chapter One, Wang Qiyao is invited to visit a film set; when the director suddenly invites her to audition, Wang Anyi uses subtle yet tension-filled psychological descriptions to sketch a three-dimensional portrait of Wang Qiyao. The original text reads as: "Wang Qiyao's heart was pounding, and her palms felt slightly cold." "She didn't know if this was an opportunity, she thought. 'Is an opportunity really so easy to come by [2]?' This reflects a sense of instinctive anticipation coupled with rational scepticism: "She didn't believe it, yet dared not disbelieve it" captures her awareness of the disparity between her humble origins and this unexpected opportunity. This mindset represents a sober assessment of her self-worth: she knows that her beauty alone may not be enough to 'rise to the top in one fell swoop', so she neither blindly trusts in luck nor readily gives up on a potential turning point. Furthermore, her initial intention to "go alone, quietly, and return just as quietly; even if it came to nothing, only she would know, as if it had never happened", This mindset represents a conscious avoidance of the risk of failure,

signifying her unwillingness to let others witness her embarrassment, and even less her desire to become a laughing stock for overreaching. Behind this mindset lies a strong defence of her self-respect, which vividly embodies Wang Qiyao's agency.

2.2. The Symbiosis of Person and City

In the original novel, Wang Anyi constructs a narrative aesthetic characterised by the 'symbolic fusion of person and city'. Wang Qiyao is not merely the protagonist of the story; she is also the spiritual embodiment and perceptual agent of the city of Shanghai. In an interview, Wang Anyi explicitly described Wang Qiyao as a spokesperson for Shanghai, stating: "*The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is a very realistic work. In it, I wrote about the fate of a woman, but in fact this woman is merely a spokesperson for the city; what I really wanted to write was the story of a city [3]."

The original text contains passages that explicitly state Wang Qiyao embodies the essence of Shanghai's culture: 'Shanghai's nights thrive on social gatherings—what the Shanghainese call "parties"... Without Wang Qiyao, these gatherings would be hollow, mere fleeting glimpses of glamour. Wang Qiyao is the most meaningful aspect of this charm and glamour; she is that inner longing. Without her, the charm would be charm without reason, and the glamour would be glamour without reason.' Wang Qiyao is the centrepiece of the entire soirée; at the same time, the image of the Shanghai woman she embodies is also at the heart of Shanghai culture.

Not only that, but in shaping Wang Qiyao's fate, Wang Anyi deliberately links her destiny to that of Shanghai itself, just as Cheng Naishan wrote in *Shanghai Women*: "Every city has its own unique soul, and the soul of this city is its women [4]." The rhythm of her life—from her coming of age as a girl in the alleyways, to the height of her splendour as 'Miss Shanghai', and on to the quiet resilience of her days in Ping'anli—is a re-enactment and reconstruction of a specific historical period in Shanghai:

Daughters of the Lane: The Women Known as 'Wang Qiyao'

Shanghai's vibrancy is, in fact, a reflection of feminine charm; the breeze carries a distinctly feminine air, and the oleanders and lilacs in the courtyards are also symbols of femininity. The damp, cloying winds of the plum rain season are like a woman throwing a little tantrum, whilst the chattering Shanghainese dialect is reserved for women to share their innermost thoughts. The city itself is like a grand lady, clad in feathered robes and rainbow-coloured garments; the sky is strewn with gold and silver, and the multicoloured clouds are the sleeves of a woman soaring into the heavens.

In the author's portrayal, Wang Qiyao's femininity becomes an inseparable part of Shanghai's urban character; the flowers and plants in the courtyard, the plum rain, the local dialect, and even the clouds in the sky are all intimately connected to her.

(1) The 'Miss Shanghai' Era: The Height of Splendour

The streets were filled with 'Third Misses'... and these 'Third Misses' were a familiar sight, a scene we knew well; the fabric of their cheongsams seemed to radiate warmth. In truth, the 'Third Miss' best reflected the sentiments of the people. The 'First Miss' and 'Second Miss' were idols—our ideals and beliefs—but the 'Third Miss' was connected to our daily lives; she was the figure who made us think of concepts such as marriage, life and family.

Wang Qiyao became the archetype for Shanghai's 'Third Misses'. Distinct from the unattainable 'idols' and the hollow 'ideals and beliefs', she represented the image of the ordinary, everyday Shanghai woman—she was down-to-earth and within reach.

(2) The Wuqiao Period: A Dream of Glamour and a Down-to-Earth Attitude

① Upon arriving in Wuqiao: Wang Qiyao was a dream come true. As she walked the streets of Wuqiao, bathed in the glittering light and shadow of the city's splendour, one could almost hear

the lingering echoes of song and dance trailing behind her. Ah Er thought: this Shanghai woman had come here solely to seduce him.

This reflects Wang Qiyao's relationship with Shanghai through Ah Er's perspective; in the eyes of others, Wang Qiyao is Shanghai itself; whatever Wang Qiyao is like, so too is the Shanghai woman.

② Preparing to return to Shanghai: In the morning, as she combed her hair before the mirror, she saw Shanghai reflected back at her; yet this Shanghai looked somewhat haggard, with fine lines at the corners of her eyes. Walking along the riverbank, she also saw Shanghai's reflection in the water—a faded version of the city. As she tore off a page from the calendar, she felt as though Shanghai had aged yet another year.

Through the use of metaphor and personification, although the mirror clearly reflects her own face, the narrative skips over the notion of 'seeing herself' and directly equates the Wang Qiyao in the mirror with 'Shanghai'; simultaneously, Shanghai is portrayed as a concrete woman—with skin, fine lines at the corners of her eyes, capable of looking haggard and ageing, and possessing a certain age. This vivid description endows Shanghai with a strong sense of texture. Furthermore, through a three-tiered sequence of imagery—'mirror surface, water's reflection, calendar'—Wang Anyi intertwines Wang Qiyao's ageing with the rise and fall of the city of Shanghai, thereby realising, on a linguistic level, the symbiosis between person and city: 'the person is the city, the city is the person'.

(3) The Ping'anli Period: Silence and Resilience

Wang Qiyao always wore a plain-coloured cheongsam; on the streets of 1950s Shanghai, such cheongsams were becoming increasingly rare. The few that remained inevitably carried an air of nostalgia, relics of a bygone era, embodying both the old and the modern.

Wang Anyi once remarked in a 1982 autobiographical essay: 'My current aspiration is to achieve this: to write about a single person through whom one can glimpse many years of history and a vast society, much like Gao Xiaosheng's Chen Huansheng [5].'

Plain-coloured cheongsams are becoming increasingly rare, just as the traces of the old era in Shanghai are gradually fading away. Yet, through her quiet resilience, Wang Qiyao has preserved the warmth of a bygone era in Shanghai, allowing this history to find a concrete yet subtle extension through her very being—a nuance of emotion that is difficult to convey through cinematic language.

Expressions such as these in the text bind Wang Qiyao's personal fate to the fabric of the city; behind her every gesture lies the very rhythm of Shanghai itself. It is through observing Wang Qiyao's behaviour, analysing her psyche and empathising with her feelings that we gain an understanding of the city of Shanghai; the way Wang Qiyao understands Shanghai is the way we understand it, making this a 'urban epic written through an individual's fate'.

3. The Process and Manner in Which Wang Qiyao's Subjectivity Is Dissolved in Cross-Media Adaptations

3.1. The Shift in Narrative Perspective (Looking–Being Looked At)

Through the design of its cinematography and the reinforcement of male characters, the film transforms Wang Qiyao from the 'subject who defines the world' in the book into an 'object viewed by the world' on screen, in line with Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze, proposed in 1973.

(1) The Erotic Pleasure of the Active Gaze: The Symbolic Female Body and the Construction of the 'Courtesan' Illusion

The film's narrative flows seamlessly through several of Wang Qiyao's romantic relationships, yet consistently overlooks the catalysts and processes by which these relationships develop. It

merely switches between romantic partners mechanically and without foreshadowing, as if Wang Qiyao were constantly flitting rapidly between several men, appearing flighty and promiscuous. In reality, prior to the commencement of each relationship, Wang Qiyao undergoes distinct emotional journeys [6].

The film features numerous ambiguous scenes between Wang Qiyao and male characters. These scenes deliberately sever the connection between the body and the characters' emotions and circumstances, whilst also deliberately downplaying Wang Qiyao's genuine feelings and psychological struggles as depicted in the original work, retaining only the erotic tension of 'being watched'. These scenes isolate specific body parts—such as the lips—from the whole person, transforming them into independent visual symbols, deliberately magnifying the details of physical contact whilst failing to convey Wang Qiyao's psychological state or her attitude in the moment in any way. When the audience cannot see her hesitation, helplessness or regret, but is presented only with her flirtatious interactions with various men, what is presented to them is the image of a 'frivolous socialite'. The vivid character from the original novel has become, in the film, an object serving to satisfy male emotional needs, having lost the three-dimensionality found on the pages of the book. As Laura Mulvey points out in her theory of the gaze: by symbolising the object of the gaze and linking it to erotic pleasure, the viewer is able to derive erotic pleasure directly from the object of the gaze. The audience's attention is directed towards a one-way appreciation of 'beauty', rather than a deep understanding of the 'person'; Wang Qiyao's body is reduced to a visual vessel for satisfying the viewer's voyeuristic desires.

(2) The Reinforcement of the Male Character's Perspective: The Weakening of the Love Triangle and the Absolute Concentration of the Power of the Gaze

In the original novel, Wang Anyi adopted an omniscient perspective, whereby the omniscient narrator remains outside the story, able to observe events from any angle, gain insight into the inner workings of any character, and occasionally adopt a character's internal perspective or feign the role of a bystander. However, in the film text, the narrative perspective shifts from the original omniscient viewpoint to that of a first-person witness—that is, the story of Wang Qiyao's legendary life is told from Mr Cheng's perspective in the first person [7].

At the same time, the film downplays the love triangle involving Mr Cheng, Jiang Lili and Wang Qiyao, thereby also diminishing the intertextual perspective within the female collective. This allows the male gaze to become the sole criterion of judgement, reinforcing the dominance of the male characters' gaze. In the original novel, the triangular relationship between Mr Cheng, Jiang Lili and Wang Qiyao is fraught with subtle tension; however, the film has greatly simplified this dynamic. In the film, Jiang Lili's character is substantially marginalised; the emotional resonance between the women is scarcely depicted. Furthermore, the camera frequently frames Wang Qiyao from the perspective of male characters such as Mr Cheng, blending the camera's gaze, the male characters' gaze and the audience's gaze. This triple gaze structure reinforces the audience's sense of control over Wang Qiyao whilst aligning the audience's perspective with that of the male characters. As Mulvey observes, 'the audience is made to identify with the viewpoint of the male protagonist on screen'; that is, the audience is compelled to view Wang Qiyao through Mr Cheng's eyes, and her value is no longer self-defined but rather conferred by the gazes of other characters.

3.2. Shanghai -The Backdrop

'In *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the city is treated as a vivid protagonist within the novel; Wang Qiyao and Shanghai form a single entity, serving as a microcosm of Shanghai's history.' Since Wang Qiyao's subjectivity in the novel stems from her symbiotic relationship with Shanghai, reducing the city to a mere backdrop amounts to severing the historical and spatial foundations that underpin her subjectivity [8].

Through its narrative choices, the film amplifies the emotional threads between Wang Qiyao and several male characters, positioning them as the core driving force of the plot. At the same time, the city of Shanghai—which in the original work served as Wang Qiyao's spiritual vessel and one of the narrative subjects in intertextual dialogue with the characters—is diminished to a monotonous backdrop providing merely a sense of nostalgia. In the original novel, her identity as a 'lane girl' or 'Miss Shanghai' is inextricably linked to the very breath of the city; in the film, however, this profound sense of historical weight has been stripped away. Consequently, a complex, multifaceted character who bore the weight of history and the city in the original novel has been reduced to a romantic heroine navigating multiple love affairs. Wang Qiyao's strong sense of agency in the book was rooted in the vast narrative space of Shanghai, but in the film this has been replaced by the confined space of romantic entanglements, thereby depriving her agency of the soil in which it could flourish.

3.3. Psychological depictions have been omitted, and character relationships have been restructured

This shift in narrative choice has resulted in Wang Qiyao's inner world losing the space to develop. The film does not follow the original novel's logic of 'shaping the character through the city'; instead, it completely skips the first four chapters and almost entirely omits the first twelve, fast-forwarding directly to the scenes where Wang Qiyao and Director Li spend time together. Furthermore, it deliberately expands Director Li's screen time as a political figure, reinforcing his dominant role in the plot. In contrast, the character of Wang Qiyao has been significantly diminished: she is no longer the driving force behind her own life's trajectory, but has been reduced to a 'supporting character' dependent on Director Li; her appearances seem primarily intended to serve as a conduit for Director Li's emotional arc and symbols of power, whilst the motivations behind her actions have become obscure.

In the original novel, even when depicting the relationship between Wang Qiyao and Director Li, the narrative was consistently told from Wang Qiyao's perspective; yet the film has entirely abandoned this perspective. There is neither sufficient inner monologue to supplement her psychological processes, nor does the cinematography convey Wang Qiyao's subjective experiences; instead, a multitude of shots focus on Director Li's power and control, reducing Wang Qiyao to an object to be observed and defined.

In a study of the English translation of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, one scholar noted: 'At the lexical level, the translator primarily employed domestication as the main translation strategy... altering the charm unique to traditional Chinese women embodied by Wang Qiyao, and weakening her image as a shrewd yet measured figure [9].' Although this discussion centres on the domestication of English translations, the pattern it reveals applies equally to adaptations for film and television: when producers 'polish' characters for the sake of 'readability' or 'market appeal', the first thing to be smoothed over is precisely Wang Qiyao's nuanced blend of 'shrewdness, vanity, decorum and calculation'; Once her psychological motivations have been polished away, she is naturally reduced to the shell of a 'mistress/socialite/nostalgic woman', and her agency vanishes accordingly.

When the audience can only infer Wang Qiyao's character through Director Li's perspective and actions, her originally multi-dimensional personality is flattened, her rich inner world consequently dimmed, and that 'urban epic written through individual destinies' is reduced to a hollow narrative of dependency.

4. Reasons for the Dissolution of Wang Qiyao's Subjectivity

4.1. Characteristics of the Medium

The reason literary characters exhibit complexity, nuance and dramatic tension lies not in the genre itself, but in how the medium of language organises experience, generates meaning and guides the reader's perception. The abstract nature of language, the delay of narrative time, and the pervasive influence of the subjective perspective collectively form the mechanism through which character is generated. This mechanism ensures that characters are no longer fixed roles, but rather constantly unfolding psychological entities; their personalities are not bestowed upon them, but are generated through the act of reading [10].

The transition from text to image—a shift in media characteristics—constitutes the most fundamental constraint.

The strengths of literature lie in the following: firstly, it is an abstract symbolic system; through the extensive use of interior monologue and free indirect speech, Wang Anyi is able to lead the reader directly through the characters' conscious minds to reach their true psychological processes. Secondly, reading is an active process of construction on the part of the reader; when reading psychological descriptions, readers actively draw upon their own past experiences to understand the characters' thoughts and feelings, or extrapolate different emotional nuances based on their own life experiences—this is a process of active reader participation.

Film narrative, however, is constrained by the nature of the medium: firstly, film is a concrete audiovisual system, and all content must be conveyed through perceptible means—that is, visible images and audible sound. Psychological processes, however, constitute an invisible, internal experience that cannot be directly conveyed through concrete visuals, although films do indeed employ techniques to depict them, such as voice-over, flashbacks and symbolic shots, which can supplement the psychological portrayal of characters through such compensatory methods; however, in the original work *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the extensive use of psychological description and free indirect speech has already made it difficult for the film adaptation to present a complete psychological portrayal. Secondly, watching a film is a process of passive reception for the audience. Through shot composition, lighting, editing and other techniques, the camera directly establishes a cognitive framework for the audience; what the audience sees has already been artificially determined and bears no direct connection to their own life experiences. Viewers need not actively seek to understand the characters' inner lives; they need only passively accept the psychological conclusions presented by the camera through direct visual information—such as the actors' tears and smiles on screen, or the colour tones of the scenes. This makes it difficult for viewers to independently explore the complexity of the characters' inner lives in the same way as when reading text directly, thereby indirectly undermining the characters' agency.

4.2. Audience Expectations

The 'audience' is a collective term referring to the recipients of communication. ... The audience for television dramas, however, often exhibits the characteristics of a passive and casual 'potential audience', constituting a broader and more structurally complex group. ... As an 'epic' novel, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* targets an audience with a high level of literary literacy [6]. This segmentation of the audience determines the direction of adaptation. In the film and television consumption market of the early 21st century, the audience's core expectations of such works were characterised by low cognitive load and strong emotional compensation; this tendency directly influenced the film adaptation of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow's* emphasis on romantic narratives. From the perspective of audience psychological needs, the reason why 'the female lead's emotional entanglements with multiple male characters' is more likely to attract attention is essentially because such narratives align with the public's psychological

need for vicarious fulfilment of idealised emotional experiences—amidst fast-paced lives and the pressures of reality, audiences are more inclined to seek emotional satisfaction through film and television works that require no deep thought. In the market environment of the time, ‘profound’ was often equated with ‘mentally taxing’; watching Wang Qiyao navigate her romantic entanglements allowed audiences not only to appreciate the visual pleasure derived from nostalgic symbols such as cheongsam and Western-style mansions, but also to experience an immersive emotional journey through the plot’s twists and turns. This mode of viewing—where one can immerse oneself without having to think—was far more appealing than attempting to understand ‘the symbiotic relationship between Wang Qiyao and the city of Shanghai’ or ‘the struggles of women in a patriarchal society’.

4.3. The Logic of Cultural Production

As a form of cultural production, film and television adaptations bear the indelible imprint of their creators’ perspectives and the consumption logic of their era. Scholars have pointed out that films possess a uniqueness that novels lack: firstly, they are constrained by their artistic form; secondly, their creative objectives are more closely tied to the pursuit of commercial interests [11]. Had the film adhered to the narrative logic of the original work, it would not only have had to portray Wang Qiyao’s inner struggles and the cultural significance of Shanghai, but also retain the sense of reality and critical edge inherent in the ‘unfulfilled’ nature of her fate. This would clearly have run counter to the mainstream market demands of the time—it would have been difficult to attract audiences seeking catharsis through a compelling plot, whilst the depth of the themes might have raised the viewing threshold, ultimately rendering the work commercially uncompetitive. Consequently, the film’s decision to simplify the characters’ complexity and emphasise the romantic subplot was, in essence, a compromise with the aesthetic sensibilities and market dynamics of the time.

5. Conclusion: Dissolution Mechanisms, Weight Analysis and Insights for Cross-Media Adaptations

Through an analysis of the cross-media adaptation of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* from novel to film, this paper demonstrates how Wang Qiyao—a literary subject rooted in rich psychological portrayal, the spirit of Shanghai, and possessing subjective agency—is reduced to an object on screen that is gazed upon, defined and admired.

Drawing on the preceding analysis, this section will focus on addressing three core questions: What are the specific mechanisms underlying the dissolution of Wang Qiyao’s subjectivity? What are the relative weights of the three contributing factors—medium, audience and cultural production? And what insights does this offer for the preservation of female subjectivity in future cross-media adaptations?

5.1. The Three-Pronged Mechanism of the Dissolution of Subjectivity

The erosion of Wang Qiyao’s subjectivity during the adaptation process is primarily the result of the combined effect of three mechanisms:

(1) The relinquishment of narrative perspective.

The film replaces the omniscient and omnipotent narrative perspective of Wang Qiyao in the novel with a triple ‘gaze’ mechanism. Consequently, Wang Qiyao loses the right to self-definition; her body is fragmented into independent erotic symbols such as her lips, her psychological complexity is erased, and she undergoes an alienation from ‘seeing’ to ‘being seen’.

(2) The detachment from urban space.

The film adaptation reduces Shanghai—which in the original novel was inextricably linked to Wang Qiyao—to a monotonous, nostalgic backdrop. Once the intertextual ties between her and

the city's history are severed, Wang Qiyao loses a crucial anchor of identity, transforming her from a complex, multifaceted figure imbued with historical depth and urban culture into a two-dimensional romantic heroine confined to emotional entanglements.

(3) Simplification of the inner world.

The extensive omission of psychological descriptions has robbed the film's Wang Qiyao of her capacity for self-reflection and autonomous action. Furthermore, the absence of inner monologues and subjective shots obscures the motives behind her behaviour, causing her rich inner world to fade; ultimately, she is reduced to a functional prop for driving the plot forward. The filmmaker sought to add further layers of meaning whilst remaining faithful to the original novel's central theme, yet ended up portraying a different fate for Wang Qiyao.... The film's greatest flaw lies in altering Wang Qiyao's character and motivations, rendering it incapable of conveying the tragedy of the protagonist's fate and thus failing to resonate with the audience [12]. In other words, the urban epic that the original work sought to emphasise has been rewritten on screen as a nostalgic tale of Shanghai, shaped by the gaze and the imagination, thereby eroding the agency of Wang Qiyao as the protagonist.

5.2. The relative weighting of the three causes

The three factors leading to the aforementioned dissolution are not parallel in nature, but rather exhibit a hierarchical structure:

(1) Media characteristics: fundamental formal constraints

Media characteristics carry the greatest weight. The transition from the abstract symbols of literature to the concrete symbols of the visual medium presents the most insurmountable obstacle. Verbal language—such as free indirect speech—possesses an innate capacity to penetrate consciousness and present contradictions, a quality that audiovisual language struggles to fully replicate. Media characteristics define the boundaries of adaptation, limiting the film's ability to fully preserve Wang Qiyao's psychological agency in formal terms.

(2) Audience Expectations: The Role of Market Orientation

Audience expectations carry the second-highest weighting. In the early 21st century, audiences' preference for 'low cognitive load' and 'emotional compensation' served to promote narrative simplification. In order to cater to viewers' demand for effortless visual pleasure and emotional immersion, the film sacrificed the original work's profound exploration of urban decline and women's survival, transforming it into a love story that is easily disseminated and understood.

(3) The Logic of Cultural Production: The Structural Final Verdict

This is the decisive factor. As a commercial product, the film must conform to the logic of profit. For the producers, retaining the original work's critique of patriarchal society and the unresolved fates of its characters could mean raising the barrier to entry for audiences and assuming market risks; consequently, the logic of cultural production serves as the final arbiter.

5.3. Implications for Preserving Female Agency in Cross-Media Adaptations

In the original work, Wang Anyi silently and gradually deconstructed patriarchal culture, progressively eroded the history of women's subordination to men, emphasised women's own sense of independence, and established a world belonging to women, this is precisely what the original work sought to express [8]. Wang Qiyao's logic of existence has always been that 'only she herself can determine her own destiny; only she herself can write her own destiny'.

Ultimately, the essence of adaptation should be 'transplantation' rather than 'reshaping'. Cultural producers must guard against the illusion that a hollow story, stripped of the original work's spiritual essence, can still turn a profit through audiovisual special effects. Yet the reality is precisely the opposite: the very reason a work is selected for adaptation is that its unique spiritual core possesses market value. To arbitrarily erode this value during the adaptation

process is tantamount to 'buying the box and returning the pearl'. Only by endeavouring to preserve the original work's spirit and soul to the greatest extent possible can one avoid the alienation of the work and truly achieve a harmonious balance between artistic value and market returns. Therefore, cultural producers may explore a new adaptation strategy:

(1) Using audiovisual elements to compensate for psychological depth

One should not abandon the portrayal of inner life simply because of the limitations of the medium. Instead, one should utilise subjective sound design, symbolic mise-en-scène or non-linear editing to construct psychological space on an audiovisual level, thereby replacing the inner monologue found in literature.

(2) Reclaiming the dominance of the female gaze

It is essential to break free from the structure of the singular male gaze. This can be achieved by strengthening the intertextual perspectives between female characters—for instance, by restoring Jiang Lili's narrative function, or by employing long takes to focus on Wang Qiyao's unspoken choices, rather than merely depicting men's reactions to her—thereby re-establishing women's status as narrative subjects.

(3) Balancing Commercial Logic with Artistic Integrity

We should abandon the binary thinking that 'commercial works must be popular, whilst profound works must be niche'. Creators could attempt to treat 'Shanghai' as a genuine secondary protagonist, retaining the grand narrative thread of the city's transformation alongside the emotional storyline, thereby demonstrating that audiences are fully capable of—and willing to accept—a female character who possesses both emotional appeal and historical depth, rather than merely serving as a nostalgic symbol.

In summary, the dissolution of Wang Qiyao's agency is not an inevitable fate of cross-media adaptation, but rather the product of the combined influence of specific media environments, market choices and industry logic. Only by acknowledging these mechanisms and proactively adopting decentralised, de-scenic narrative strategies in the adaptation can we truly achieve the transition from a 'literary subject' to a 'screen subject', rather than merely creating an exquisite, voiceless object.

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