FEMALE "EMPOWERMENT" WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS: GUANXI AND SOCIALISM IN THE TV SERIES THE IDEAL CITY (理想之城, 2021)

"EMPODERAMIENTO" FEMENINO CON CARACTERÍSTICAS CHINAS: *GUANXI* Y SOCIALISMO EN LA SERIE DE TELEVISIÓN *THE IDEAL CITY* (理想之城, 2021)

"EMPODERAMENTO" FEMININO COM CARACTERÍSTICAS CHINESAS: *GUANXI* E SOCIALISMO NA SÉRIE *THE IDEAL CITY* (理想之城, 2021)

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the Chinese TV series *The Ideal City* (理想之城, 2021) from a gender perspective, focusing on the trajectory of the protagonist Su Xiao in a male-dominated corporate environment shaped by the logic of *guanxi*. Through textual analysis, the series is shown to intertwine neoliberal, socialist, and Confucian values, exposing tensions between meritocracy, work ethic, and social justice. While incorporating elements of pink dramas, it adopts a realistic and critical aesthetic that questions the limits of individual female "empowerment." The narrative ultimately proposes a collectivist alternative aligned with the socialist ideal of a "community of shared destiny".

Keywords: Female empowerment; guanxi; workplace dramas.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la serie china *The Ideal City* (理想之城, 2021) desde una perspectiva de género, centrándose en la trayectoria de la protagonista Su Xiao dentro de un entorno corporativo masculinizado y regido por la lógica del *guanxi*. A través del análisis textual, se observa la articulación de valores neoliberales, socialistas y confucianos, que revelan tensiones entre meritocracia, ética laboral y justicia social. Aunque incorpora elementos de los *pink dramas*, la serie adopta una estética realista y crítica que cuestiona los límites del "empoderamiento" femenino individual. La narrativa propone una alternativa colectivista basada en la "comunidad de destino compartido".

Palabras Clave: Empoderamiento femenino; guanxi; dramas corporativos.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa a série chinesa *The Ideal City* (理想之城, 2021) a partir de uma perspectiva de gênero, centrando-se na trajetória da protagonista Su Xiao em um ambiente corporativo masculinizado e estruturado pela lógica do *guanxi*. Por meio de análise textual, observa-se a articulação entre valores neoliberais, socialistas e confucionistas, que evidenciam tensões entre meritocracia, ética do trabalho e justiça social. Embora incorpore elementos dos *pink dramas*, a série adota uma estética realista e crítica, questionando os limites do "empoderamento" individual. A narrativa propõe uma alternativa coletivista inspirada na "comunidade de destino compartilhado" do socialismo chinês.

Palavras-chave: Empoderamento feminino; *guanxi*; dramas corporativos.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes the Chinese television drama *The Ideal City* (理想之城), which consists of a single season with 40 episodes. It was produced by CCTV, Dragon TV, and iQiyi, and is available to international audiences on the iQiyi platform with English subtitles. The narrative genre of *The Ideal City* (hereafter abbreviated as TIC) is the workplace drama (职场剧) – that is, dramas that have the workplace and its characteristic conflicts as the core of the narrative – featuring a female protagonist. Although the drama is directed by a man, Liu Jin (刘进), it is based on a novel written by a woman, Ruo Hua Ran Ran (若花燃燃).

The central objective of this article is to analyze the Chinese drama TIC from a gender perspective, investigating how the narrative represents so-called female "empowerment" within the cultural, economic, and political context of contemporary China. The study aims to understand how the protagonist Su Xiao's trajectory reveals the tensions between neoliberal values of individual advancement, Confucian traditions related to hierarchy and the maintenance of social harmony, and socialist principles of collectivity and social justice. Additionally, the article seeks to identify how the practice of *guanxi[1]* (关系), understood as a specific form of social capital based on interpersonal relationships and exchanges of favors that is recurrent in the Chinese corporate environment, functions as an obstacle to gender equity, exposing the limitations of empowerment discourse when embedded in a masculinized and hierarchical relational environment.

The events of TIC take place within the Chinese construction sector. Despite its high visibility, this industry is seldom critically examined in Chinese audiovisual media (Chen, 2022), even though Chinese films frequently address the impact of rapid urban transformations[2]. TIC is set in the construction firm *Yinghai* and its subsidiaries. Within this context, the drama follows the challenging professional journey of the protagonist Su Xiao – a talented cost engineer in the construction sector, portrayed by actress Sun Li（孙俪）– in a workplace depicted without idealization, characterized by male dominance and unfavorable conditions for working women.

TIC is set in Shanghai, a city often associated with modernity, sophistication, and social mobility. In Chinese television narratives, professional success in Shanghai signifies the realization of an ideal career within a highly competitive environment that demands excellence, resilience, and constant self-overcoming. Like many other Chinese working women, TIC's protagonist embodies the effort and challenges faced by migrant women lacking personal networks as they strive for upward mobility in such a demanding setting. While other female-led workplace dramas set in Shanghai emphasize the sophisticated landscapes of Pudong[3] and The Bund[4], TIC offers a less idealized portrayal of the city. The protagonists Su Xiao and her friend Hong

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[1] The Pleco dictionary translates *guanxi* as "relations" and "relationships."

[2] Examples include *Still Life* (Jia Zhangke 2006), *The Chinese Mayor* (Hao Zhou 2015), and *Dead Pigs* (Cathy Yan 2018).

[3] Pudong is Shanghai's financial district, famous for its skyline of futuristic skyscrapers.

[4] The Bund is a famous waterfront promenade along the Huangpu River in Shanghai, characterized by Western-style buildings erected mainly during the period of the foreign concessions, and located opposite the iconic skyline of Pudong, a symbol of the city's urban modernity.

Mei live in micro-apartments located in middle- or lower-middle-class neighborhoods, characterized by aging buildings and narrow alleyways, revealing a Shanghai far removed from postcard imagery.

According to Chen and Li (2022), the career trajectory of the protagonist Su Xiao in TIC unfolds in accordance with the narrative arc of the "three rises and three falls" (三起三落), a dramatic structure of professional ascents and setbacks commonly employed in audiovisual productions as well as in representations of the careers of numerous Chinese politicians. The spiral logic of this arc ensures that each rise does not lead to a definitive resolution, but rather to new and increasingly complex conflicts. This model proves particularly effective in workplace dramas such as TIC, where success entails emotional sacrifice and psychological strain, and professional advancement follows a non-linear path. Situated within a logic of resilience, the protagonist's strength is defined less by the overcoming of antagonists than by her capacity to endure pressure and keep moving forward. Thus, even though Su Xiao's trajectory is not strictly shaped by three rises and three falls, this framework offers a productive lens through which to analyze her professional journey.

Su Xiao's first rise is established in the very first episode, when she receives the good news that she passed the exam required to obtain her cost engineer certification. She is also engaged, and we see her joyfully making plans for the ceremony. However, the fall follows swiftly in the second episode: she discovers that her fiancé is cheating on her and loses her professional license after being unjustly blamed for a construction site accident. She is forced to accept a lower-level job in which she works long overtime hours, is undervalued by her supervisor, and – without her certification – cannot claim credit for the successful cost spreadsheets she produces.

Su Xiao's second rise occurs when, through a skillful strategy, she regains her professional license and becomes an asset to the subsidiary where she is employed. She begins to attract attention from other engineering firms and considers resigning but is instead promoted and assumes a central role in one of *Yinghai*'s subsidiaries. Su Xiao also moves past her fiancé's betrayal and begins a romantic relationship with the engineer Xia Ming. However, now occupying a managerial position, she faces ethical dilemmas, bribery attempts, interpersonal tensions, and politically motivated actions marked by misogyny. Confronted with power games aimed at undermining her, she comes to understand the high personal and professional costs of professional advancement – costs that ultimately lead to the end of her relationship with Xia Ming. This marks what can be considered Su Xiao's second fall.

Although increasingly aware of the misogynistic and toxic nature of her professional environment, Su Xiao demonstrates remarkable resilience and exceptional talent, which leads the director of *Yinghai* to invite her to take on a coveted position at the company's headquarters. This marks Su Xiao's third and final rise. For the first time, she changes her clothing and hairstyle, trading in the casual attire of an engineer for an executive wardrobe. This transformation is not sufficient to earn her acceptance from a group of older male colleagues who question her authority and continually attempt to create circumstances that might lead to her failure. Nevertheless, Su Xiao not only retains her position but also initiates a major shift within the company toward social justice. She successfully persuades *Yinghai*'s board to adopt a corporate restructuring with

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socialist characteristics, redistributing shares among workers. The drama concludes with Su Xiao and Xia Ming – now friends – sharing a confident gaze over Shanghai's urban skyline, as if their youthful, honest, and fair perspective might offer the city a new direction.

In this introduction, we offer a concise summary of the plot of TIC. Throughout the following textual analysis, other narrative elements will be presented or unfolded whenever they contribute to the discussion on the gender dynamics represented in the series.

2. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE SELECTION OF THE IDEAL CITY AS A CASE STUDY

The universe of television dramas is virtually inexhaustible, and it is often difficult to select a research object from among the many high-quality productions with aesthetic and sociological relevance to which we are exposed. TIC, however, presents certain characteristics that seem to set it apart from other similar productions, as observed in viewer evaluations and, more importantly, in the academic literature on the TV dramas.

In the online database Douban（豆瓣）, one of the main Chinese platforms for the evaluation and discussion of cultural products, TIC has received over 100,000 user ratings and holds an average score of 7.5[5], which is considered high for a workplace drama. Douban users commend the drama for avoiding a romantic entanglement between the protagonists, praise the quality of the cast, express surprise at its realism and authenticity in depicting the work environment, and, in some cases, go so far as to describe it as the masterpiece of the workplace drama genre.

The academic literature on TIC tends to highlight similar features. For Chen (2022), the drama stands out for its faithful representation of the corporate world, particularly within the construction sector, rigorously portraying professional hierarchies and everyday labor dynamics. The author proposes TIC as a paradigm for Chinese television productions addressing occupational themes. In contrast, according to Chen, the drama *I Will Find You a Better Home* (安家, 2020)[6] offers a narrative that distorts the real estate profession by replacing its professional complexity with stereotyped personal conflicts, thereby privileging sensationalism over verisimilitude. Zhang (2021) offers a similar assessment, contrasting TIC with other workplace dramas that often fail to authentically portray the professional sphere, reducing it to a mere backdrop for romantic plots or manufacturing unrealistic conflicts that bring the genre closer to palace drama[7]. Along the same lines, Chen and Li (2022) argue that one of the main criticisms leveled by audiences against workplace dramas lies in their unconvincing representation of professional life, lack of typified characters, weak construction of professional ethos, and excessive glamorization of a *modus vivendi* completely detached from material reality. According to Chen and Li (2022), TIC stands out for its meticulous pursuit of accuracy and realism, signaling a qualitative

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[5] DOUBAN (豆瓣). *The Ideal City* (理想之城). Available at: https://movie.douban.com/subject/35047559/. Accessed on: January 19, 2026.

[6] The drama *I Will Find You a Better Home*, also starring Sun Li, portrays the real estate sector in China, which is why it is often compared to *The Ideal City*.

[7] The palace drama centers on political intrigues, social ascensions, or revenge plots within Chinese dynastic courts.

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evolution when compared to dramas that prioritize fictionalized approaches. This realism is expressed through the construction of credible characters, restrained and convincing performances, and the integration of prototypical figures from all levels of the labor hierarchy, presented with interpretive sobriety, qualities that lend the drama both artistic merit and intellectual depth. Moreover, as Chen and Li (2022) emphasize, the drama adopts a visual aesthetic akin to documentary cinema, employing an unfiltered audiovisual language that reinforces its realistic atmosphere.

The realism of TIC underpins a form of social critique that blends entertainment with reflection, addressing themes such as gender in the labor market and the ethical dilemmas of market economies. This realist approach enables the drama to establish meaningful dialogues with both feminist and liberal values as well as with elements rooted in Chinese cultural tradition. It is important to acknowledge, however, that TIC is not an isolated case in this regard, as other productions may also foster this type of engagement. In other words, other dramas could have been selected for analysis, potentially yielding distinct outcomes, given that the combination of style, performance, and narrative make TIC a singular work. Nonetheless, we argue that the drama's positive reception by both the audience and specialized critics reinforces its analytical relevance. It thus meets the criteria proposed by Pierre Sorlin (1985) for the selection of audiovisual materials, which emphasize audience reception and critical appraisal as indicators of a work's academic significance.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature review for this study is structured around three main axes: studies on media and Chinese television drama; debates on gender and feminism in the context of contemporary China; and sociological and anthropological analyses of the practice of *guanxi* (关系).

Regarding studies on media and Chinese television dramas, this research draws upon the works of Zhu (2008), Zhu, Keane, and Bai (2008), and Cai (2017), which emphasize the central role of television dramas in shaping identities and imaginaries in post-reform China, while also reflecting on the growing popularity of corporate and female-centered dramas. In addition, we consulted Chinese-language articles that focus specifically on TIC, including those by Chen (2022), Chen and Li (2022), and Zhang (2021), which contributed to establishing the relevance of this drama within the Chinese audiovisual context.

In the field of gender studies, this work engages with the scholarship of Wang and Mihelj (2019), Wang (2021), Zhu and Xiao (2021), and Song (2022), who examine how female representations in Chinese media incorporate neoliberal, socialist, and Confucian values, thereby revealing the tensions between individual "empowerment" and structural inequalities of class and gender.

Finally, studies on *guanxi*, including those by Yang (1988; 1994), Hwang (1987), Smart (1993), Withers (2015), Xu and Li (2015), and Scott, Fu and Wu (2014), were essential in understanding this practice as a specific form of social capital within Chinese society, especially when intersected by gender dynamics.

The articulation of these theoretical contributions enabled a critical reading of the drama TIC within the landscape of Chinese television, positioning its narrative at the intersection of corporate culture, gender relations, and political discourse in contemporary China.

4. METHODS

The methodology employed in this study is textual analysis, approaching TIC as a narrative text – an expression that encompasses both the story (its content) and the discourse (the way the content is conveyed) (Fongaro, 2023). Textual analysis aims to systematically and critically examine the discursive, narrative, and symbolic elements present in these audiovisual products. This approach seeks to identify and interpret the linguistic, visual, and structural strategies used in the construction of serialized narratives, considering aspects such as plot, dialogue, character development, setting, and aesthetic choices. Furthermore, textual analysis of television dramas considers the sociocultural context of production and reception, as well as the possible communicative and ideological intentions underlying the audiovisual discourse. It is, therefore, a valuable tool for understanding how these productions construct meaning, shape identities, and reflect contemporary social values and practices.

This methodological choice aligns with established practices in television, communication, and cultural studies, which understand the audiovisual text as a privileged site for the production and circulation of meanings and ideologies. In this sense, the analysis of the narrative text draws, on the one hand, from the Sociology of Art and, on the other, from Cultural Studies. The Sociology of Art seeks to establish a connection between a society's mentalities and its cultural products. Pierre Sorlin (1985), a central figure in this field, argues that audiovisual media do not offer a faithful representation of social reality, but rather stage it – selecting and reorganizing certain aspects of society. In doing so, they construct worldviews shaped by specific interests and situated within particular historical and social contexts. Cultural Studies, an interdisciplinary field of inquiry originally systematized in the British academic context and explicitly referenced by scholars such as Dai Jinhua (2002) in her analyses of Chinese cinema, are also highly relevant insofar as they provide a historical and cultural perspective for textual analysis. This approach allows us to understand narrative not merely as isolated fiction, but as part of a contested symbolic field, in which different discourses on success, ethics, power, and femininity are articulated, challenged, and negotiated. Such a perspective is particularly valuable in the analysis of serialized audiovisual productions like TIC, which, over the course of multiple episodes, interweaves ethical, social, and institutional conflicts through the trajectory of a protagonist embedded in a competitive and unequal corporate environment.

Based on the methods adopted, this study will be structured to describe – without claiming exhaustiveness – a selection of textual elements from TIC and to analyze the discourses they produce, particularly about feminism, corporate culture, socialism, and neoliberalism. This analysis aims to situate these elements within the broader social and cultural context of contemporary China, engaging with relevant

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literature to position the drama both within the landscape of Chinese television and in relation to the sociocultural dynamics of present-day Chinese society.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Workplace Dramas and Pink Dramas in China

TIC is part of a contemporary trend of dramas centered on female protagonists navigating predominantly male corporate environments – a recurring theme in liberal and popular feminism, which emphasizes women's individual advancement. Although the female-led workplace drama genre originated in the West, it has become increasingly prominent in Chinese television and streaming platforms, reflecting broader social transformations in a China that has industrialized while maintaining – or, according to some scholars such as Wang (2016), even intensifying – gender inequalities. Moreover, narratives about women striving for success in competitive contexts extend across multiple genres, including Cinderella-like romances and palace intrigue dramas. According to Zhu, Keane and Bai (2008), TIC aligns with a trend observed since the 1990s in which gender inequality in the labor market is portrayed as part of the broader social tensions within an increasingly competitive and less egalitarian society.

The plot of TIC is adapted from a novel titled *Su Xiao's War* (苏筱的战争), written by Ruo Hua Ran Ran (若花燃燃) and published in 2016. In recent years, numerous novels have been published in China that focus on the recognition and professional ascent of female characters within workplace settings (Cai, 2017, p. 64), many of which have been adapted into television dramas. This trend of literary adaptation reflects a growing interest in so-called pink dramas (粉红电视剧) in China – female-led dramas with urban, modern themes, primarily set in professional rather than domestic environments. Typical characters in pink dramas are young, independent, childless, single Chinese "white-collar" women. These figures represent a shift from the female characters of traditional family sagas, which were prevalent on Chinese television until the 1990s and were largely defined by self-sacrifice and devotion to family.

Pink dramas have been associated with the socioeconomic changes that have reshaped China since the economic reforms of the 1980s (Cai, 2017), as their protagonists embody individualist ideals and fashion-forward lifestyles traditionally linked to liberalism and consumerism, values once viewed as characteristic of the West. However, it would be simplistic to assume that such characters merely reflect liberal Western values, as Confucian and socialist ideals also permeate many of these narratives, as is the case with TIC. The female protagonists of pink dramas often engage with socially charged and even controversial topics for contemporary Chinese women, such as the "problem" of unmarried women over the age of 27 (剩女), male infidelity, and compulsory motherhood. TIC clearly engages with the pink drama tradition, particularly through its depiction of a young, independent, competent, and single female protagonist. However, it distinguishes itself from the genre's characteristic optimism by adopting a more "adult" perspective and a realist aesthetic, thereby also appealing to a male viewership.

5.2. The impact of *guanxi* on Su Xiao's trajectory

One of the defining features of TIC, praised by both audiences and scholars, is its realistic portrayal of the workplace, with particular attention to how it is shaped by gender dynamics. Corporate culture in China, which differs from its Western counterpart in several respects, has attracted the attention of scholars of Chinese television, especially given its recurrence as a theme in numerous dramas, often in comedic or romantic formats. According to Cai (2017, p. 60), Chinese workplaces place a high value on harmony among employees, collectivism, hierarchical structures, and the principle of "saving face"[8]. Zhu (2008, p. 59) links these values to Confucian thought, which also legitimizes seniority and benevolent leadership. Cai further explains that in Chinese corporate settings, "people can survive only if they have connections and it doesn't matter whether or not they are proficient in the job" (Cai, 2017, p. 63). As Chen and Cai (2019) observe, the gendered division of labor – which traditionally allocates the public sphere to men and the domestic sphere to women – creates disadvantages for Chinese women in establishing the kinds of personal connections and professional relationships required for career advancement, known as *guanxi*.

Although *guanxi* recurs throughout TIC, the drama makes a deliberate effort to establish its relevance to Su Xiao's early struggles by introducing the theme within the first few episodes. In a revealing conversation with Xia Ming, Su Xiao is confronted with the centrality of *guanxi* in the construction sector. Xia Ming claims that every cost spreadsheet[9] is, in fact, a *guanxi* spreadsheet, that is, a spreadsheet of interpersonal relationships[10]. Su Xiao initially rejects this view, insisting that a spreadsheet should reflect only the cost of labor and materials. However, as the drama progresses, she comes to realize that each budgetary item may impact corporate and personal alliances established through *guanxi*. We see that replacing more expensive suppliers with more competitive ones, for instance, threatens male-dominated power networks built on these relational ties. The drama thus offers a critique of *guanxi*'s effects on the public interest, as its logic undermines impartiality and inflates project costs. Su Xiao's "clean" cost spreadsheets are successful in terms of resource efficiency, but they frustrate her colleagues and superiors, who are intent on preserving their personal networks and maintaining *face*.

Also early in the drama, Su Xiao, a newcomer to the workforce and a migrant in Shanghai, is fired and loses her professional license after being unjustly held responsible for a construction site accident. Her supervisor, a senior and well-connected man, is to blame, having used low-quality cement to cut project costs. The contrast between Su Xiao's integrity and her superior's greed is made immediately evident. She is expected to demonstrate loyalty to the company by sacrificing herself and protecting her male superiors. It becomes clear to the viewer that Su Xiao lacks the *guanxi* that could have shielded her from such injustice.

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[8] "Saving face" refers to a set of symbolic practices aimed at preserving individuals' honor, prestige, and social standing in public interactions, by avoiding embarrassment, the exposure of failures, or the loss of status in the eyes of others.

[9] A cost spreadsheet in civil engineering is a document that details all the expenses involved in the execution of a construction project. It is essential for planning, financial control, and decision-making throughout the project.

[10] In Mandarin, his sentence is: 每一张造价表都是一张关系表.

TIC aims not only to portray Chinese corporate culture but also to interrogate its intrinsically masculinist nature, in which women are rendered expendable in the service of preserving male *face*.

Although it features a female protagonist, TIC devotes considerable screen time across its episodes to male-centered subplots focused on the everyday operations of construction firms. Sequences of male socialization – such as dinners, saunas, and meetings filled with technical jargon – may appear not to directly advance the narrative. However, these scenes serve to stage *guanxi*, making visible the networks of male sociability that underpin power dynamics in the corporate environment. By thematizing *guanxi*, the drama must also perform it, incorporating into the narrative moments of male interaction through which relevant information emerges indirectly or implicitly. Through Su Xiao's trajectory, TIC devotes significant attention to the gendered nature of *guanxi* and the challenges Chinese women face in accessing this complex system of social capital.

5.3. *Guanxi* and corporate culture in China

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the precise origins of *guanxi* in Chinese society, scholars suggest that the institutional disorder of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) encouraged the reinforcement of personal ties as a strategy for survival (GOLD et al., 2002, p. 17). In the corporate context, the diffusion of *guanxi* intensified following the economic reforms of 1978, which brought an influx of investment from Hong Kong. According to Smart (1993), in the absence of a regulated business environment, Hong Kong entrepreneurs turned to *guanxi* to facilitate investments in mainland China, thereby consolidating this practice as a key mechanism for commercial success.

Yang (1988; 1994) highlights three core aspects of the concept. First, *guanxi* is not established between strangers but is based on preexisting ties such as kinship, shared place of origin, or workplace affiliation. Second, these connections must be nurtured through the exchange of gifts, favors, and banquets. Finally, *guanxi* combines personal affection with instrumental interest, articulating networks of reciprocity without eliminating the emotional component. In this regard, Pinheiro-Machado (2011) notes that business practices in China value the enjoyment of human relationships, in contrast to what she describes as the more impersonal nature of Western interactions. Smart (1993) similarly argues that although *guanxi* involves gift-giving and banquets, it should not be equated with bribery but rather understood as a practice aimed at strengthening trust and social bonds.

The instrumental aspect of *guanxi* involves an expectation of reciprocity: individuals are expected to return favors, gifts, or banquets they have received. As Hwang notes, "Chinese ethics gives a positive value to the obligation of reciprocation" (1987, p. 957). This dynamic brings *guanxi* close to the logic of the gift as analyzed by Marcel Mauss (2003), in which exchange is not limited to material value but also encompasses honor and prestige. As in the *potlatch*[11] system, *guanxi* demands reciprocity, and failure to return a favor may

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[11] *Potlatch* refers to a ritual exchange system practiced by indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest coast, described by Marcel Mauss, in which gift-giving establishes obligations of reciprocity and functions as a mechanism for the production of prestige and

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cost social status. Mauss himself associates this logic with the Chinese notion of *face*, linking the circulation of favors to the preservation of honor.

Yang (1988) devotes part of her pioneering study on *guanxi* to the gendered dimensions of the practice. According to the author, women tend to rely on *guanxi* for domestic matters, whereas men are more commonly responsible for negotiations that require broader engagement in the public sphere. Women who cultivate extensive public networks may have their reputations questioned, as such relationships often involve closeness with unrelated men and may carry the risk of sexually charged favor requests. As Yang summarizes, "there exist two gender domains of *guanxi* activity, that of the domestic arena, in which women tend to be more active than men, and the public-society-wide domain, in which men tend to be more active than women" (1988, p. 81).

Recent research based on interviews and case studies demonstrates that *guanxi* has a direct impact on the professional lives of women in China. According to Withers (2015), faced with exclusion from male networks, many women build female alliances as alternative spaces for support and exchange. Some avoid traditional *guanxi* rituals – such as banquets and drinking – and seek less masculinist forms of connection. However, as they rise through the ranks, they tend to experience isolation and emotional strain, remaining within a system that undergoes little structural change. Xu and Li (2015) also highlight this ambivalence: although *guanxi* is crucial for professional advancement, many women express ethical discomfort and even aversion to its favor-based logic. Networking environments are described as male-dominated and exclusionary, yet many women continue to engage with them pragmatically. Scott, Fu and Wu (2014) show that among women entrepreneurs, *guanxi* depends heavily on family support and inherited social capital. Access to useful networks is mediated by patriarchal norms and often requires male validation, thereby reproducing inequalities and excluding women without economic or social capital. In this context, *guanxi* functions more as a mechanism of adaptation than of transformation.

As Gold et al. (2002, p. 3) point out, some authors regard *guanxi* as exclusive to Chinese culture, while others identify it as a practice, albeit with variations, present in different societies. Still others relate it to specific historical and institutional conditions that are not limited to China. In this paper, we reject an Orientalist reading that exoticizes *guanxi* as an exclusively Chinese practice. Instead, we understand it as a particular form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1998), shaped by local historical and cultural contexts and intersected by gender dynamics. Specific forms of cultural capital exist in various countries, such as the Old Boys' Club in the U.S., *kone* (コネ) in Japan, *yongo* (연고) in South Korea, *jugaad* (जुगाड़) in India, the "jeitinho brasileiro" in Brazil, and so on. In TIC, *guanxi* is not portrayed as an essentialist trait of Chinese culture, but rather as an embedded social practice shaped by power and gender, one that is comparable to informal mechanisms in other societies. The drama makes explicit its impact on the corporate environment,

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social hierarchy. Within the logic of the potlatch, the value of exchange lies less in the goods themselves than in the public recognition, honor, and status conferred by the ability to give and reciprocate.

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particularly in terms of gendered inequalities, and articulates a critique that, while situated in a specific context, engages broader global debates on influence networks and meritocracy.

5.4. *Guanxi* in other Chinese dramas

TIC is not the first drama to suggest that Chinese corporate culture hinders women's professional advancement. In 2010, *Go Lala Go* (杜拉拉升职记) followed the journey of Du Lala, an employee at a Western company operating in China. Although she comes from a working-class background and lacks strategic connections, the narrative suggests that, in this context, professional merit outweighs social capital. In contrast to the corporate environment depicted in TIC, where Su Xiao must conceal dissent and navigate the subtleties of *guanxi*, Du Lala's workplace is characterized by direct communication and a strong emphasis on individual competence.

Chinese-Style Relationship (中国式关系, 2016), analyzed by Song (2022), also links *guanxi* to masculinity. The drama's protagonist, Ma, experiences a crisis of masculinity after being betrayed by his wife and losing his job, but ultimately regains both professional and emotional status through his skillful navigation of *guanxi* and understanding of the rules of the Chinese market. In the narrative, *guanxi* is portrayed positively as a distinctive cultural trait, as an interpersonal network that fosters trust and respect, and is closely tied to the reaffirmation of masculinity (Song, 2022).

Thus, the representation of *guanxi* and its gendered dimensions is not the primary innovation of TIC. Given the popularity of workplace dramas and the centrality of *guanxi* in Chinese corporate culture, it is expected that this element would appear in a range of productions. What sets TIC apart, as noted by Chen (2022), Chen and Li (2022), and Zhang (2021), is its rejection of the escapist tropes typical of the genre – such as comic relief, the glamorization of the Shanghai career woman, or the use of the office as a romantic setting – in favor of a critical and austere approach. Ultimately, this perspective culminates in a socialist critique of corporate logic, including *guanxi* itself, a topic that will be explored in a later section.

5.5. Male hypergamy and affective bonds as strategies of power

Let us return to Su Xiao. Our heroine barely has time to recover from her unjust dismissal before suffering yet another setback: her fiancé is cheating on her with a socially superior woman. In justifying his betrayal, he states that he would rather live comfortably than stay with Su Xiao, fearing a life of hard work and financial limitations. Su Xiao, in turn, responds by reaffirming her commitment to honest labor, aligning herself with the ideal of the socialist worker who attributes moral value to personal effort. The criticism she receives from her fiancé – accusing her of being

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naive and idealistic – echoes the clean and transparent view she upholds in relation to cost spreadsheets. From its early episodes, TIC frames Su Xiao as a diligent, honest, and idealistic figure, in stark contrast to a male corporate world defined by pragmatism and self-interest.

In the second half of the drama, Su Xiao once again confronts the logic of male hypergamy, this time in conjunction with *guanxi*. As her professional relationship with Xia Ming deepens, a romantic bond develops between them – one that is met with disapproval by Xia Ming's uncle, who wants his nephew to pursue a relationship with the daughter of an influential man in order to strengthen strategic alliances. Several episodes focus on the uncle's efforts to sabotage the romance, highlighting his instrumental view of affective relationships, in which social and economic interests take precedence over emotional attachment.

Many Chinese scholars (Chen, 2011; Wang, 2012) note that marriage in China is not just about love but also an economic choice. While this is true in the West too, it is often concealed by the romantic ideal. Despite this greater pragmatism regarding marriage in Chinese society, Chinese mass culture, particularly through its television dramas, largely aligns itself with the ideology of romantic love. TIC portrays marriage driven by economic interest in an overtly negative light, as viewers are clearly encouraged to root for the romantic relationship between Su Xiao and Xia Ming.

Mass culture has far more frequently thematized female hypergamy, often through Cinderella-style narratives in which a woman secures the affection of a man from a higher social class. In China, hypergamy is featured in some palace intrigue dramas, where a servant rises to become an empress, as well as in workplace dramas, in which a cheerful and resilient employee wins over the bossy CEO (霸道总裁). This type of narrative is popular in Chinese literature and is frequently adapted into television dramas (Song, 2022; Liang, 2015). Female hypergamy reinforces the patriarchal fantasy of male dominance over a vulnerable woman, whereas male hypergamy is often depicted as a morally compromising strategy for upward mobility. In TIC, it takes the form of *guanxi*.

Xia Ming's uncle makes villainous efforts to prevent the relationship between Su Xiao and his nephew but ultimately fails. However, the relationship does not flourish. Xia Ming is a master of *guanxi*, not only because he establishes strategic connections, but also because he skillfully maps the social networks that underpin the power of his colleagues and superiors. His position as an outsider to these networks – manipulating them without fully submitting to them – sets him apart from other men and legitimizes him as a potential romantic partner for Su Xiao. Nonetheless, she becomes increasingly uneasy with his power games and chooses to end the relationship – a narrative strategy valued both by the audience commenting on the series on Douban[12] and by the academic literature

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[12] DOUBAN (豆瓣). *The Ideal City* (理想之城). Available at: https://movie.douban.com/subject/35047559/. Accessed on: January

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referenced here (Chen, 2022; Chen; Li, 2022; Zhang, 2021), as it prevents the workplace from being reduced to a mere backdrop for a love story.

5.6. Su Xiao's rises and the limits of female empowerment

Following her first downfall – the construction site incident – Su Xiao is reassigned to one of *Yinghai*'s subsidiaries, where she is humiliated with a desk next to the bathroom and denied credit for the cost spreadsheets she produces, since she has lost her professional license. Gradually, she overcomes the professional obstacles on her way to her second rise. To achieve this, however, she must work significantly harder than her male colleagues, putting in long hours and clashing with supervisors who favor subordinates linked through *guanxi*. Although her merit is evident, her immediate superior chooses to promote a mediocre male employee, valuing loyalty and seniority –criteria that ensure hierarchical control and preserve male social networks. The promotion is publicly legitimized through a collective farce, in which Su Xiao's successful cost spreadsheet is attributed to her male colleague.

Faced with this injustice, Su Xiao decides to resign, but the director of the subsidiary intervenes and promotes her, recognizing that he cannot afford to lose her talent. His decision to promote her partially corrects the distortions caused by a masculinist corporate logic that privileges personal ties and power relations over professional merit. Narratively, Su Xiao's second rise sustains the dramatic rhythm of rises and falls, maintaining viewer engagement while simultaneously portraying a professional environment woven from a plausible network of relationships and positions, contributing to the drama's complex and realistic depiction of the workplace.

From Su Xiao's second rise onward, the drama begins to critique the individualistic limits of female "empowerment," which does not necessarily benefit other women or the working class. Accustomed to working harder than her male colleagues, Su Xiao comes to reproduce this same logic by imposing excessive workloads on her subordinates, becoming a nightmare for her team, including other working women. As a result, she becomes the target of misogynistic criticism, being labeled "masculine" and overly ambitious – traits that, in a man, would likely be naturalized or even praised. At this point, in line with the drama's de-glamorized and realist style, Su Xiao's trajectory is revealed to be marked not only by achievements but also by managerial missteps and emotional strain, even in moments of professional rise, from which she is forced to learn and grow.

In Su Xiao's third and final rise, she becomes an executive at the *Yinghai* group with only two years of seniority, much to the outrage of male colleagues at the same hierarchical level. To

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protect herself, she is explicitly advised to engage in *guanxi*, something she deeply resents. Su Xiao believes in impersonal and transparent work relations and refuses to offer favors. Every time she receives a man in her office, she is met with requests for favors she finds inappropriate. Lacking *guanxi*, the men at headquarters conspire to have her dismissed and replaced by someone with whom they have stronger personal ties. A misogynistic smear campaign erupts on the company's internal social network, and she is called a "concubine," with rumors suggesting her professional advancement is the result of sexual favors granted to the president of *Yinghai*. Su Xiao's executive position comes with misogyny and isolation. The viewer is left anxious, uncertain whether she will withstand the pressure.

As is common in female-centered dramas, the narrative includes the protagonist's best friend, in this case, Hong Mei, an employee in the Human Resources department. Her immediate supervisor, Maria, is a fashionable woman who mixes Chinese and English and holds a position of power. The best friend character adds new layers to the discussion of women's conditions by allowing the drama to explore the multiple forms of gender-based oppression experienced by female characters.

Through the parallel between Su Xiao's trajectory and that of her friend Hong Mei, TIC constructs a powerful intersectional critique of the limits of liberal feminism and its emphasis on individual female advancement. Hong Mei is a working-class woman from a lower-middle-class background, with no social or cultural capital. She lacks a sense of style, and her parents, ignorant and traditional, reject her for being a woman, investing all the family's resources in her younger brother. She lives with her fiancé in a tiny apartment without a private bathroom in a working-class neighborhood of Shanghai. While Su Xiao's career is marked by success – albeit with many obstacles – Hong Mei's career is stagnant, and she suffers from severe workplace bullying by her boss, Maria, eventually developing depression.

The drama makes the contrast between Su Xiao and Hong Mei explicit: while some women rise, others, from more disadvantaged backgrounds, without cultural or social capital, are left behind. Hong Mei is anguished by the comparison with Su Xiao, who appears to her as an unrealistic model of the working woman: a kind of "superwoman" she knows she can never become. In this sense, through the figure of Hong Mei, TIC advances a critique of the very genre of female empowerment dramas, which often portray women as so extraordinarily talented and self-assured that they risk provoking feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and frustration among viewers who recognize themselves as merely "ordinary" women. Unlike Su Xiao, Hong Mei possesses no extraordinary talent,

determination, or optimism. Like most women, she remains merely a spectator of Su Xiao's "empowerment".

Hong Mei's trajectory also functions as a critique of working-class masculinity. Her fiancé represents an infantilized, sexist, and emotionally insensitive man who relies on gendered clichés, dismisses his fiancée's emotional suffering, and devalues her professional aspirations, claiming that men should be the sole providers – a role he himself is far from fulfilling. Culturally limited, he spends his evenings playing video games and criticizes his fiancée's modest expenses, all while being frugal to the point of saving on metro fare. Although the drama portrays him with some degree of empathy, he ultimately symbolizes in the drama a crude and inattentive form of masculinity.

5.7. A community of shared future as an alternative to a personalist corporate culture

Just as the first two episodes were central to introducing the theme of *guanxi*, the final two episodes play a crucial role in proposing an alternative corporate culture, one based on transparency and social responsibility, and aligned with the logic of a market economy in a socialist country[13].

Su Xiao leads the restructuring of *Yinghai*, which is set to merge its subsidiaries, prompting the need to define the new company's shareholding distribution. In this process, she discovers that many of the company's former workers, especially retired construction laborers, live in precarious housing conditions, and she is moved by their situation. She takes the president of *Yinghai* to meet the workers and appeals to his conscience by noting that although these men built countless homes in Shanghai, they do not own a single one themselves – a clear reference to the Marxist maxim that if the working class produces everything, everything should belong to it.

The president embraces her proposal, and together they present it to the board. "In my opinion, *Yinghai* doesn't belong to the president, the leaders, or me," Su Xiao declares. "It belongs to all the employees of *Yinghai*, including anyone who used to work for us, who is employed by us and who will join us in the future (…). If anyone falls behind, we won't be *Yinghai*"[14] (THE IDEAL

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[13] The characterization of the political-economic status of contemporary China constitutes an open and historically situated debate in the academic literature. Following the economic opening, particularly from the 1990s onward, interpretations that describe China as a form of state capitalism or as the outcome of a capitalist restoration became predominant, in light of the expansion of market relations, rising social inequality, and the centrality of wage labor. More recently, especially as the central role of the Chinese state has become increasingly evident, approaches emphasizing planning, financial sovereignty, and state control over strategic sectors have gained greater prominence, giving rise to notions such as market socialism or a new socio-economic formation. In this article, the term "socialist" is employed in dialogue both with this recent shift in the debate and with the self-definition of the Chinese state as "socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era," without any intention of definitively resolving the theoretical controversies surrounding the Chinese mode of production. For more in-depth discussions, see, for example, Amin, 2014; Naughton, 2017; Nascimento Muchalak et al., 2019; De Assis, 2024; Jabbour; Dantas, 2021.

[14] Translation as provided in the English subtitles. In Mandarin in the original dialogues: "我所认为的赢海不只是董事长，不只是领导班子，不只是我。它是属于每一个赢海员工的，曾经的、现在的，以及未来的。所有人聚在一起才成为了赢海。任何一个人掉队了，那都不是赢海".

CITY, ep. 40, 11min50s). According to Su Xiao, a socially committed company must also uphold transparency, which entails rejecting the personalist logic of *guanxi*. In the final minutes of the drama, accompanied by a solemn soundtrack, the president defends this proposal before the board: "We will become an enterprise where the employees and the shareholders share the same future and become rich together or we will become an enterprise that only values the interest of the shareholders?"[15] (THE IDEAL CITY, ep. 40, 39min29s).

Both the president and Su Xiao employ the term *mingyun gongtongti* (命运共同体), commonly translated as "community of shared future." Originally introduced by Hu Jintao in 2012 and widely promoted by Xi Jinping, the expression reflects the Chinese ideal of fair and mutually beneficial international cooperation. Incorporated into the Constitution in 2018 as part of "Xi Jinping Thought for the New Era," TIC adapts the concept to the corporate sphere: the company is envisioned as a community of shared destiny among workers, executives, and shareholders.

The conclusion of TIC thus aligns with the defense of socialism with Chinese characteristics: in a country integrated into the global market economy, the drama envisions a company not oriented toward profit, but toward the well-being of its workers. Although Su Xiao's trajectory initially reflects liberal values of individual advancement, her narrative arc ultimately affirms collective and class-based principles. Upon reaching the top, she demonstrates sensitivity to those left behind – a gesture absent from most of the male leaders in the narrative. Her rise, therefore, transcends individual "empowerment" by embracing solidarity with the working class.

6. CONCLUSION

The economic opening of 1978 introduced new representations of femininity in China, "marked by a contradictory blend of individualism, sexual liberation, and consumerism, but also a revival of traditional gender norms" (WANG and MIHELJ, 2019, p. 36). According to Wang and Mihelj (2019), Chinese mass culture began to produce female figures that hybridize neoliberal values – such as individual advancement and middle-class lifestyles – with socialist ideals, associated with responsible consumption, sustainability, and global economic participation.

In this context, TIC proposes a significant shift. By the end of the drama, the protagonist leads a corporate reform that breaks with both the logic of *guanxi* and neoliberal individualism, advocating instead for a company conceived as a "community of shared future". This ideological turn, in recovering socialist ideals of justice and collectivity, also brings Su Xiao closer to the Confucian ideal of wise and just leadership – anchored in transparency, social harmony, and equitable resource distribution.

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[15] Translation as provided in the English subtitles. In Mandarin in the original dialogues: 我们要成为一个什么样的赢海？一个员工跟股东命运共同体的赢海，一个共同致富的赢海，还是一个只注重股东利益的赢海？

The drama thus not only represents but dramatizes the at-times-tense coexistence of neoliberal, socialist, and Confucian values – characteristic of a China in which the discourses of the past century have not disappeared but coexist and are continually remobilized (Wang, 2021).

Su Xiao's trajectory in TIC reveals the tensions and contradictions inherent in female "empowerment" within a China marked by economic transformation, pluralist values, ideological contestation, and the clash between tradition and modernity. The drama presents a protagonist who embodies neoliberal ideals of individual professional success, but who confronts the limits of that logic within a masculinized environment defined by *guanxi* and exclusionary hierarchies. TIC's critique of *guanxi*, portraying it as a practice that perpetuates inequality and undermines meritocracy, sheds light on a central aspect of Chinese corporate culture, often invisible to non-local audiences.

From an ideological perspective, TIC offers a solution that might be described as reformist, limited to the scope of currently possible socialism, in which the relations of production (i.e., the division of labor) remain untouched, while the relations of ownership (i.e., *Yinghai*'s shares) are restructured. This mirrors the current state of the Chinese economy, which cannot relinquish the market system, with its deeply entrenched division of labor, but must find ways to mitigate the inequalities it generates. We align ourselves, however, with Umberto Eco (2001), who questions the application of the concept of reformism to mass culture on the grounds that once an idea enters public circulation, it broadens discourse and initiates processes that can no longer be controlled by those who set them in motion. In this sense, we believe that the great merit of TIC lies in its ability to spark in the viewer an expectation of greater gender equality, transparency in decision-making, and social commitment within the framework of the socialist market economy.

However, it is important to highlight certain limitations of the drama that may undermine its critical potential. Firstly, although TIC strives for realism in its portrayal of the corporate environment and gender inequality, the construction of the protagonist as an extraordinary talent capable of single-handedly solving every problem reveals a degree of narrative idealism. While this representation may be inspiring, it also involves certain exaggerations and overlooks the fact that even highly capable women face entrenched systemic barriers that cannot be overcome through individual merit alone. The risk here is the reinforcement of the "superwoman" model which, rather than empowering, may provoke feelings of inadequacy and failure among female viewers who recognize themselves as simply "ordinary" working women. The character of Hong Mei underscores these limitations: her trajectory is marked by exhaustion, stagnation, and a persistent sense of inadequacy in the face of unattainable models of feminine excellence.

Secondly, the model represented by Su Xiao, marked by grueling work schedules and personal sacrifices, may be disconnected from the values of a younger generation of Chinese workers who increasingly question the logic of productivity at any cost. In recent years, expressions such as 躺平 (*tǎng píng*, "lying flat") and 摆烂 (*bǎi làn*, "let it rot") have emerged as symbolic forms of resistance to the culture of overachievement. The *tǎng píng* movement, which gained popularity in 2021, rejects dominant values of competitiveness, consumption, and unrelenting self-sacrifice, advocating for a simpler life and the refusal to participate in the

meritocratic logic underlying the "996" system – working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week – widely criticized by urban youth. *Băi làn*, in turn, expresses an even deeper disillusionment: the idea of giving up or letting go in the face of a system perceived as inherently unequal and unreachable.

TIC emerges as a complex narrative permeated by tensions: while it criticizes structural aspects of Chinese corporate culture and proposes collectivist alternatives, it also reproduces ideals of individual self-advancement that may appear anachronistic or unattainable in light of the concrete conditions faced by large segments of the Chinese working youth, insofar as the series is situated in a historical moment in which confidence in meritocratic individual progress is increasingly contested. In this context, TIC should be read as a product that produces and circulates social meanings – at times contradictory – within which desires, tensions, and possibilities are inscribed. Its merit lies less in the answers it provides than in the way it brings to the fore key contemporary issues concerning the position of women in the Chinese economy, the tensions between social justice, productivity, and collective well-being, the limits of a socialism that preserves capitalist labor relations, and, above all, the need to imagine forms of empowerment that do not overburden the individual but are sustained by networks of solidarity and structural transformation.

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