Audience Interpretations of ‘Bailing’: an Entertainment-Education Television Serial in China

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The purpose of the present article is to investigate the audience's interpretation of an entertainment-education television serial called ‘Bailing’ in China. The study aims to understand how the audience, particularly the target audience of women and children, interprets and makes sense of the messages conveyed in the serial. The research employs qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, to gather insights from the audience on how they perceive the characters and the storyline of the serial. The findings highlight the audience's understanding of the program's messages regarding gender roles, family values, and social issues. The study contributes to a better understanding of how entertainment-education media can be effective in shaping public opinion and behavior on critical social issues in China.
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Research Question #2: What educational messages did the viewers perceive as part of the external narrative of "Bailing"?

Research Question #3: What limitations of "Bailing" were identified by its viewers?

Research Question #4: What did the viewers perceive as the main Qualitative Data Collection Activities:

Qualitative Data Collection Activities:

- The present study used a qualitative research approach to investigate the narrative and educational messages of the Chinese TV series "Bailing." We conducted focus group interviews with viewers of "Bailing" to understand their perceptions of the show's narrative and educational content.

- We recorded and transcribed the focus group discussions to analyze the viewers' perceptions and experiences of "Bailing.

- The focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 20 viewers, representing a diverse range of ages and backgrounds.

- The data collected from the focus group discussions was analyzed using content analysis techniques to identify patterns and themes in the viewers' perceptions of "Bailing.

Findings:

- Viewers perceived "Bailing" as a story of resilience and determination, emphasizing the importance of hard work and perseverance.

- The show was appreciated for its educational messages, particularly in terms of lessons on financial management, family values, and the importance of education.

- Viewers also noted limitations of "Bailing," such as the sometimes unrealistic portrayal of financial situations and the focus on romance over other aspects of the characters' lives.

Conclusions:

- "Bailing" can be seen as a positive representation of the Chinese cultural values of hard work, perseverance, and family unity.

- While the show's educational messages are appreciated, there is room for improvement in terms of the portrayal of realistic financial situations.

- These findings highlight the importance of qualitative research in understanding the narratives and educational messages of Chinese TV series, and the need for further research to explore these themes in greater depth.
the story of the television serial is set in China in the early 1980s in village Li Jiazhou, located on the banks of Yellow River, the cradle of the Chinese civilization. Here Li Laowan, a poor farmer, and his wife, live with their three daughters, Greenleaf, Greensem, and Greenpetal, and son, Jinhua. Their eldest daughter, Greenbud, is married and lives in another village with her husband and two daughters.

The story begins with Li Laowan making arrangements to engage his 8-year-old son, Jinhua. Greenleaf, his second daughter, vehemently opposes her young brother’s child engagement. However, Li Laowan’s is adamant about engaging Jinhua, so as to ensure the continuance of the family line. The family of the little girl who is being engaged to Jinhua asks Li Laowan for 1,000 Yuan in dowry. Li Laowan is short by 800 Yuan, which he promises to pay later. But how will the poor Li Laowan raise the 800 Yuan?

Li Laowan’s daughter Greenleaf is in love with Autumn, who hails from a poor family. Autumn’s father is dead and his mother, whom Autumn looks after, is blind. During the Spring Festival celebration, Greenleaf and Autumn lead the traditional Yangge dance in the village. Here a local, rich, rogue Ershui, is enanced by Greenleaf’s beauty, and goads the local matchmaker to approach Li Laowan to propose Greenleaf’s marriage with him. Ershui promises a generous dowry for this marriage.

In order to raise the dowry-money needed to engage his son, Li Laowan accepts Ershui’s proposal. The strong-willed Greenleaf, already in love with Autumn, is dead against this marriage proposal. However, Greenleaf reluctantly submits to the marriage proposal, when her father forces her younger sister, Greensem, who is in high school and aspires to go to college, to marry Ershui. Greenleaf and her parents agree, however, that if Autumn can earn the 800 Yuan needed for Jinhua’s engagement, Greenleaf’s wedding to Ershui, fixed for three months later, can be cancelled.

Autumn goes to the town to earn the needed 800 Yuan to prevent the marriage of Greenleaf with Ershui. He is cheated by urban folks and loses his money in gambling. With the help of a kind-hearted policeman, Autumn finds a well-paying job and saves 800 Yuan in three months. But when a co-worker urgently needs 50 Yuan to treat his mother’s sickness, Autumn generously loans him the money. To make up the 50 Yuan shortfall, Autumn undertakes menial work, but faiens because of tiredness. His hard-earned money is spent covering hospital expenses. When Autumn returns, he sees the wedding procession of Greenleaf and Ershui departing the village.

Sad and disappointed, Autumn returns back to the town and finds work in a lantern factory. Yuanyu, the urban-bred daughter of the owner of the lantern factory, falls in love with Autumn. However, Autumn can not forget his love, Greenleaf. Meanwhile, Greenleaf works day and night in Ershui’s oppressive home, and soon is pregnant with Ershui’s child. Around the same time, Greenleaf’s eldest sister, Greenbud, also becomes pregnant. Her male-chauvinist husband kicks Greenbud out of his home, and tells her not to come back if she delivers a girl (Greenbud already has two daughters). With no where to go, Greenbud delivers her third child, a daughter, in a hut by the Yellow River. Finally, Low Li Laowan locates her and takes Greenbud and her daughters back to his home in village Li Jiazhou.

Meanwhile Greenleaf also gives birth to a baby girl. Ershui is very upset about not having a male child and ill-treats her. Greenleaf decides to leave Ershui and brings her baby-daughter to her father’s home, where her elder sister Greenbud takes care of it, while Greenleaf goes to town to find work. She also finds a job in the town’s lantern factory, where she meets Autumn. Ershui follows Greenleaf to the town and beats her up, suspecting that she had eloped with Autumn. Jealous of Greenleaf and Autumn’s love, Yuanyu asks her mother to fire Greenleaf, and lies to Greenleaf about being pregnant with Autumn’s baby. Greenleaf is sad about losing her job, but does not despair. With her grandmother’s encouragement and support, she looks for a new future in the city.

Autumn is very angry with Yuanyu when he learns about Greenleaf’s dismissal. He goes to the city to look for Greenleaf. Meanwhile, in the city, Greenleaf meets a kind-hearted rural-to-urban migrant woman, Wang Meiling, who knows her way around the city. She helps Greenleaf find a job. Greenleaf saves 800 Yuan so that her family could payback Ershui in order to annul their marriage, but her money is stolen. Once again, she does not despair. With support from Wang Meiling, Greenleaf begins to sell hand-woven embroidered bags, which are greatly liked by foreign tourists. Her technical skill is purchased by a factory manager for 1,800 Yuan, and she begins work at his textile factory. Meanwhile, Autumn finds a job in a porcelain factory in the city. He makes a good career, but keeps looking for Greenleaf. Finally, Autumn finds her at the textile factory. Ershui
and Yuanyuan come to the city to look for Greenleaf and Autumn, and they both get arrested for carrying a gun illegally. Greenleaf and Autumn bail them out. Ershui finally agrees for a divorce with Greenleaf.

During the next Spring Festival, Greenleaf and Autumn return to Li Jiazhou, where they learn about Ershui’s marriage with Lanzhi. Autumn’s mother sells her wooden coffin to raise money for Greenleaf and Autumn’s much awaited wedding.

Educational Learning from “Baixing”

Research Question #2 asked: What educational messages did the viewers report learning from “Baixing”? Most of our respondents generally acknowledged the entertainment-education nature of “Baixing’s” content reflected in such statements as “I think ‘Baixing’ is entertaining and educational at the same time”. However, our respondents’ perceptions of the degree of “Baixing’s” entertainment value were somewhat varied, even though almost all of them emphasized its educational value. For instance, a letter-writer noted: “‘Baixing’ is somewhat entertaining but highly educational. It educates farmers to abandon old practices like arranged marriages and dowry, which are against the marriage law and the will of women.” The few respondents who did not perceive “Baixing” as being entertaining, still acknowledged its educational value. For instance, letter-writer noted: “I don’t think ‘Baixing’ is entertaining at all, although it has some educational message. The theme it depicts is that people should not believe in fate or be transmissive”.

Consistent with “Baixing’s” storyline, our respondents’ remarks with respect to educational learning from “Baixing” centered around four main themes: (1) raising gender equality, (2) debunking harmful social practices, (3) boosting self-efficacy, and (4) implementing a family planning policy.

#1. Raising Gender Equality. Our respondents reported that “Baixing” enhanced or reinforced their educational learning about various aspects of gender equality. For instance, a male letter-writer remarked: “What I’ve learned from the serial is that we should treat our children equally, whether it is boy or girl”. A woman diary-writer noted: “What I’ve learned is that rural Chinese women should be bolder, should not be willing to be controlled by men, and should have their own thoughts”. A respondent in our in-depth interview said: “We have to fight against the idea that men are superior to women.”

#2. Debunking Harmful Social Practices. Many of our respondents reported that “Baixing” boosted their educational learning with respect to debunking harmful social practices such as child and arranged marriages. One respondent said: “Baixing” provides a vivid example of how arranged marriages have drastically harmed rural Chinese women both physically and mentally”. A woman letter-writer noted: “I’ve learned that women have to fight against arranged marriage, and marry whoever they love”. A diary-writer echoed a similar sentiment: “I’ve learned the importance of promoting marriages based on love, and preventing arranged or child marriages”.

#3. Boosting Self-Efficacy. Our respondents reported that “Baixing” enhanced and reinforced their view about the importance of boosting an individual’s (especially a woman’s), self-efficacy, the belief that one can control one’s destiny (Bandura, 1995). As one letter-writer said: “I have learned from ‘Baixing’ the importance of people to control their fate and actively fight against old forces and traditions”. Several respondents suggested certain mechanisms to boost one’s self-efficacy: “Be persistent. Work hard. Never say die. I believe through these efforts, we can take charge of our’s life and find happiness eventually”. A diary-writer noted: “What I’ve learned from ‘Baixing’ is that you have to learn new marketable skills and be financially independent. Only then can you control your own fate”.

# 4. Implementing a Family Planning Policy. Several respondents reported that “Baixing” reinforced their view about the importance of implementing a family planning policy in China. As one respondent noted: “I’ve learned from ‘Baixing’ about the problems that baffle a large family. Large families contribute to poverty and ignorance. We should follow the family planning policy of the country”. A diary-writer echoed a similar sentiment: “In today’s rural China, there are still some deep-rooted feudal thoughts, such as preference for male children. Therefore, the government should reinforce the family planning policy”.

In addition to emphasizing their learning from “Baixing” about the four main educational themes (discussed above), several respondents provided a more general commentary on what they gleaned from “Baixing”. For instance, a diary-writer noted: “By watching ‘Baixing’ I have become aware of the tremendous changes..."
“Brock” in which Enshu finds a bad conscience. For instance, my grandmother vividly described Enshu’s home in which a military writer noted. I was shot by the scenes in which Yumemuri got to see to a view on the following scene: “Although Li Larson, partly went to bring him home. Once all the trees reappeared. When Greenleaf river, Enshu’s mother was also regarded positively in a few scenes. The view on the cold water to be witnessed. His expression can make viewers happy.

ENTRY TO Greenleaf, who was an overbearing, unkind ‘mother-in-law’ to Enshu’s mother. She was seen as very attractive for her innocence, and did not display any love. It is hard to see children. We can see her house looking for shelter, and Enshu’s mother shows her away.”

Another character, the gluttonous boy, our respondents, was the male child who demanded beekeeping. To be kind,” our respondents, had a son, whom he took to be the son of his wife’s sister. As one respondent said, “He is seen as very casual with his relationships, and I was shocked when I heard about ‘Brock’ was the director.”

Our respondents were also repulsed by the schmoozy, urban rooftop. As a letter-writer noted, “I disliked the film, and I know it’s a love story." Greenleaf, who was very casual with his relationships, and I was shocked when I heard about ‘Brock’ was the director."
#3. Complex Characters. Certain characters in "Baixing" were perceived by our respondents as being neither predominantly "positive" or "negative", but somewhat more complex (and conflictual); That is, they embodied certain positive, negative, and alternative dispositions that were contextually determined by the situations they found themselves in. These characters struggled between the opposing pulls of tradition and modernity. They had one foot solidly anchored in the past, but cherished the idea of forward movement. On one hand, they desired to do the "right" thing; on the other, they were obsessive about saving "face".

A close reading of our data suggests that our respondents especially perceived Greenleaf's father, Li Laowan, and Greenleaf's grandmother as being complex and conflictual characters. Consider the following notings by a diary-writer about Li Laowan:

I remember an expression in Li Laowan's eyes when he was selling fish and Ershui comes up to him to buy them. While he told Ershui to take all the fish, in his eyes one could see discontent. He was highly dissatisfied with the man whom his daughter was to marry. In his mind, Li Laowan really disliked Ershui. However, he still arranged for his daughter to marry him. In the fight between his conscience and his deeply-rooted feudal thoughts about the value of boys as compared to girls, the latter thoughts won. The expression in the eyes clearly showed his complex feelings. On one hand, he made people think that he was worthy of empathy. At the same time, he was worthy of disgust, even hatred.

Another respondent echoed this seemingly complex and conflictual characterization of Li Laowan in her diary: "The one character who struck me most tonight was Li Laowan. Although he is feudal and conservative, he still displays the honest and industrious nature of the Chinese people. Poverty and ignorance made it difficult for him to eradicate backward customs. You like him, on one hand. Hate him, on the other."

In addition, there were certain respondents, mostly young, city-based individuals who intensely disliked Li Laowan: "I have never ever met people like Li Laowan who are so stubborn. They think that their wives and children must always follow their decisions, and because they are the head of the family, their words should be obeyed as 'jade words coming from a golden mouth'. Li Laowan believed in men's superiority. For example, he and his son sat on the bed and had dinner first. The women sat on the ground and had dinner later". Countering such sentiments, were remarks from older, rural respondents, who felt the need to defend Li Laowan's behaviors. Consider the remarks of a 68 year old respondent, a male farmer: "While Li Laowan believes that having a son continues the family line, he does not believe much in the idea that men are superior to women. Although the family is poor, he still sends his daughters to school."

An important lesson from the varied reactions to Li Laowan's complex characterization is that viewers actively determine how and what they "read" out of an entertainment-education text. Viewers may negotiate multiple meanings from a soap opera text, influenced by their varied backgrounds, past experiences, and personal vantage points (Livingstone, 1990; Fiske & Hartley, 1978).

A second complex and conflictual character in "Baixing", according to several of our respondents, was Greenleaf's grandmother, as illustrated by the following entry in a respondent's diary:

My family and I mainly discussed the conflictual nature of Greenleaf's grandmother. When Greenleaf strongly refused to marry Ershui, she said, "among so many children, only Greenleaf views things as I do." She reinforced Greenleaf's spirit of struggle. But when Greenleaf was waiting for Autumn to return from the city, she persuaded her to marry Ershui by saying, "The heaven, the earth, the emperor, the empress, the princess, and the intellectuals know what is right." When Greenbud was in trouble and wished to return home to deliver the baby, her grandmother opposed her strongly, afraid that Greenbud would bring bad luck to her family. But when

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5 These "complex" characters had certain commonalities with what Sabidu refers to as "transitional" characters (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). However, unlike transitional characters, who evolve over time from negative role-models to positive role-models, these "complex" characters are relatively more static, displaying positive, negative, and alternative dispositions throughout the storyline.

6 Formative research and pretesting the episodes with audience members can help limit, but not eliminate oppositional readings of an entertainment-education text.
with its twists and turns, raised consciousness among its highly-involved viewers about the importance of (1) raising gender equality, (2) abrogating harmful social practices (such as arranged marriages), (3) boosting individuals’ self-efficacy, and (4) implementing a family planning policy. The main characters of “Baixing” were perceived as being predominantly (1) positive -- such as Greenleaf, Autumn, and Autumn’s mother, (2) negative -- such as Ershui, Ershui’s mother, Greenbud’s husband, and Yuanuyuan, and (3) complex/conflictual -- such as Li Laowan and Greenleaf’s grandmother. Our analysis suggests that viewers’ perceptions about “Baixing”’s characters were influenced by their own personal backgrounds, past experiences, and contextualized viewpoints. Several viewers of “Baixing” felt that its storyline, including some of the props, were out of sync with reality, especially with respect to the time period in which the television serial was set.

To conclude, we draw upon the remarks of one our respondents who aptly summarized the viewing experience of “Baixing”: “Personally, I think the story of ‘Baixing’ [Ordinary People] is very simple and close to ordinary people’s life. However, the issues it depicts are not so ordinary: For instance, money can not do everything, being an upright person is important, and upholding of personal dignity under difficult circumstances is worthy of admiration.”

End Notes

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References


