

Audience Interpretations of "Baixing", an Entertainment-Education Television Serial in China

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"I think in today's China, people should have the freedom to choose their marriage partners. When a daughter gets married, her family should not ask for dowry. Parents should not arrange their children's marriage. What I learned from "Baixing" is that parents should give children total freedom in making decisions about their marriage. They should let them marry the ones they love, and support their choices instead of opposing them".

-- Excerpts from a letter written by a viewer of "Baixing".
"Everybody should learn from Greenleaf and Autumn about the importance of being independent, taking control of their life, and not submitting to fate".

-- Excerpts from a diary maintained by a viewer of "Baixing".
"Baixing" really makes the audience think about birth control and the problems associated with having large families".
-- Excerpts from a letter written by a viewer of "Baixing".

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"What I don't like about "Baixing" is the title of the program which means 'ordinary people'. I do not think ordinary people in China are like this. These characters are too backward!"

-- Excerpts from an in-depth interview with a viewer of "Baixing".

The purpose of the present article is to investigate the audience members' interpretations of "Baixing" ("Ordinary People"), an entertainment-education television serial in China. Entertainment-education is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members' knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Entertainment-education seeks to capitalize on the popular appeal of entertainment media in order to show individuals how they can live safer, healthier, and happier lives (Singhal & Brown, 1996; Piotrow, Kincaid, Rimon II, & Rinehart, 1997)

"Baixing", an 18-episode¹ entertainment-education television serial, was consciously designed to address a variety of social issues in China: Gender equality, small family size, freedom to choose one's marriage partner, abrogating traditional and fatalistic thinking, and others. The program was produced in China with technical assistance from Population Communications International (PCI), New York, an organization specializing in launching entertainment-education serials, both on television and radio, in such countries as India, Kenya, Tanzania, St. Lucia, and Madagascar. The production process for "Baixing", managed locally by its Executive Producer, Mr. Yan Jiande, a former official of the State Family Planning Commission, in cooperation with technical advisors of PCI, included various components: Audience needs assessment through formative research protocols, delineation of educational values promoted in the television serial, message design workshops, pre-testing of storyline and key episodes, and subsequent finalization of episodes. "Baixing" was

¹ Plans are presently underway to produce a second set of "Baixing" episodes, building on the first "Baixing" series.

broadcast on Channel 8² of CCTV from June 21 to July 1, 1999 (Monday through Friday); two episodes were broadcast each night, and repeated the next morning.

Research Questions

Our qualitative investigation of “Baixing” was guided by four research questions:

Research Question #1: What was the textual narrative of “Baixing”?
 Research Question #2: What educational messages did the viewers report learning from “Baixing”?

Research Question #3: How did the viewers perceive the main characters of “Baixing”?

Research Question #4: What limitations of “Baixing” were identified by its viewers?

Qualitative Data-Collection Activities

The present article draws upon three types of qualitative data that were gathered during our research investigation³ of “Baixing”. These included (1) diaries maintained by viewers of “Baixing”, (2) letters written by viewers of “Baixing”, and (3) in-depth and focus group interviews conducted with heavy viewers of “Baixing”. What was the nature and scope of these qualitative data-collection activities?

To enhance our understanding of how viewers of “Baixing” processed the television serial’s messages on a daily basis, a diary

² CCTV’s Channel 8 primarily broadcasts television soap operas and serials and mostly reaches an urban audience. Our very preliminary screening of the post-broadcast survey data shows that “Baixing” had a total viewership of 4 percent in a city, township, and rural (stratified) sample survey in Shandong Province; the viewership in our city sample was higher -- about 10 percent. Audience ratings data provided by CCTV, as conveyed to us by the producers of “Baixing”, place the national viewership of “Baixing” at about 10 percent or slightly lower. In the context of China, even this low audience percentage figure translates into tens of millions of viewers.

³ Our research investigation of “Baixing” also included quantitative data-collection activities. Two pre and post-broadcast sample surveys of 1,000 and 1,560 respondents, respectively, were implemented in China’s Shandong Province in 1998 and 1999. The post-broadcast survey data were cleaned, collated, and entered into computer files in late 1999. As a next step, the post-broadcast survey data will be compared with the pre-broadcast survey data to gauge the audience effects of “Baixing”.

protocol was designed and provided to 30 viewers in Hebei and Sichuan Provinces (15 diaries in each location), prior to the broadcast of “Baixing”. The diary-writers were encouraged to watch “Baixing” every night, and record their daily impressions about the program, its educational messages, the behaviors of its characters, its production attributes, and what they might have personally learned from viewing this entertainment-education serial. Amazingly, all the 30 diary-writers, who were provided with dairies, diligently recorded their daily impressions of “Baixing”, providing a highly-rich qualitative data-set for the present analysis.

To obtain another form of audience feedback, an open-ended letter-writers questionnaire was designed and mailed to 600 respondents in the Beijing metropolitan area, Pengzhou township in Sichuan Province, and Zhunhua County, Hebei Province, prior to the broadcast of the television serial. Respondents were encouraged to watch “Baixing”, and then to return the completed questionnaire in a pre-addressed, pre-stamped envelope. Some 250 letter responses were received, a response rate of over 42 percent.

In addition, to gathering data via viewers’ diaries and letter-writers’ questionnaire, we conducted some 15 in-depth interviews and 4 focus group discussions (including same-sex and mixed gender groups) with heavy viewers of “Baixing” in Zhunhua County, Hebei Province.

Here we draw upon the above three qualitative data-sets to enhance our understanding of how the viewers of “Baixing” processed and interpreted the television serial’s messages. A caveat is in order, however. Note that our three sets of respondents – the diary-writers, letter-writers, and in-depth interview/focus group participants – all represent highly-involved viewers of “Baixing” and are atypical of the general viewing audience. Thus, our purpose here is not to generalize our findings to the larger general audience of “Baixing”, but rather to gain qualitative insights on how highly-involved audience members’ interpret the television serial’s messages. To do so, we also draw upon our repeated viewing of all 18 episodes of “Baixing”, which helped in familiarizing us with its textual narrative.

The Narrative of “Baixing”

Research Question #1 asked: What was the textual narrative of “Baixing”? Our viewing of “Baixing’s” 18 episodes informed us that

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, Greenstem, and Greenpetal, and son, Jinliang. 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, Jinliang. Greenleaf, his second daughter, vehemently opposes her young brother's child engagement. However, Li Laowan's is adamant about engaging Jinliang, so as to ensure the continuance of the family line. The family of the little girl who is being engaged to Jinliang 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 enamored 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, Greenstem, 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 Jinliang'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 faints 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. Yuanyuan, 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, 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, Yuanyuan 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 Yuanyuan 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 superstitious".

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 of 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 whomever 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 one'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 befall 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

that rural China has experienced since the economic reforms began. The serial indicates that farmers can get rich as long as they work hard with both their brains and hands, and also if they follow their will. What I have learned from the serial is the following: (1) we have to respect ourselves, strengthen our abilities, and be self-reliant; (2) we have to have the spirit to endure hard work; (3) only the strongest survive; and (4) when there is a will, there is a way.

Perceptions of Key Characters

Research Question #3 asked: How did the viewers perceive the main characters of "Baixing"? Our reading of the viewers' diaries, letter-writers' responses, and transcripts of the in-depth and focus group interviews suggests that our various respondents perceived the various characters of "Baixing" in various ways. Clearly, their perceptions about "Baixing's" characters were influenced by their own backgrounds, past experiences, and personal viewpoints.

However, certain general trends with respect to our respondents' perceived valence of "Baixing's" characters were apparent. Characters were generally perceived as being (1) positive, (2) negative, or (3) complex (embodying positive, negative, and alternative dispositions).

#1. Positive Characters. A close reading of our data shows that Greenleaf, Autumn, and Autumn's mother were perceived by our respondents as "positive" characters, worthy of praise and emulation for their modeled behaviors.

Overwhelmingly, our respondents highlighted the "positive" virtues of Greenleaf and Autumn, the two principal characters in "Baixing", whose love falls victim to cruel circumstances, but who are later reunited in marriage. As one letter-writer summarized: "Greenleaf and Autumn represent the good characters because they seek happiness in free love. They have the courage to challenge feudal and traditional authority. Moreover, both of them are straightforward and kind".

Many of our respondents, both women and men, talked glowingly of Greenleaf, especially her ability to not despair under difficult circumstances, and her untiring efforts to master her fate. Consider the following representative statements. A female letter-writer noted: "Greenleaf moved me much. As a woman, she realized that she should carve her own path and master her fate. It inspired

me". A diary-writer echoed this sentiment: "I liked Greenleaf the most because she dared to fight against fate, and finally obtained what she wanted". Another respondent remarked: "The character that I liked the most was Greenleaf. She is tender-hearted and virtuous. She maintained her dignity -- always".

The widespread appeal of Greenleaf among our respondents can perhaps be attributed to the three levels of universally-appealing archetypes⁴ that were embodied by Greenleaf's character. Archetypes are forms and images that that are part of a universal and collective memory (Lozano & Singhal, 1993). First, Greenleaf represented the archetype of self-reliance, reflected in her desire for self-belonging and self-determination, while overcoming oppression and hardship. The ability of Greenleaf to endure, a strength derived from her moral superiority to those who inflicted hardship on her, made this archetypal dimension especially resonant with audience members. Second, Greenleaf also reflected the archetype of a disobedient female, where a women reshapes her world and that of others through endurance, determination, and curiosity (Allen, 1979). The archetypal Greenleaf disobeyed the social restraints that forced her into oppression, creating a better place for herself in society.

Greenleaf's disobedience was universally celebrated, rather than condemned. Finally, it seems Greenleaf embodied the archetype of the heroic struggle, a highly powerful role that resonates universally. Her struggle was waged against human monsters, ill-fortune, and poverty. Greenleaf was a hero in the classical Jungian sense because in the final reckoning, she did not let the monster devour her. Rather she subdued it, not once, but many times (Campbell, 1971). Greenleaf thus exemplified the counter-interpretation of Foucault's idea "where there is power, there is resistance" into "where there is resistance, there is power" (Svenkerud, Rahoi, & Singhal, 1995).

Autumn, Greenleaf's lover, was also perceived highly positively by our respondents, as reflected in the following representative comments. A letter-writer said: "I liked Autumn the most. As a farmer, he has self-respect and is independent". A diary-writer noted: "I like Autumn because he shows filial obedience to his mother, and helps his friends. I was impressed that he painted his

⁴ For a detailed description of these three types of universally appealing archetypes which are common in television soap opera stories, see Svenkerud, Rahoi, and Singhal (1995); and Singhal and Udornpim (1997).

mother's coffin every day before going to work in the city". One of our respondents, however, was critical of Autumn, precisely because he was so good: "Autumn is a good character. However, he was so kind – too kind -- to others, that he lost the opportunity to marry Greenleaf. There is no 'goodness' in this extreme kindness; it created problems for everybody, including his love, Greenleaf".

Most of our respondents applauded the uprightness, care, and concern exhibited by Autumn's mother. Many respondents found her gesture of selling her wooden coffin in order to make arrangements for Autumn's and Greenleaf's wedding as highly endearing. Other respondents were impressed by her parental role, as reflected in the comments of a diary-writer: "I was very impressed by Autumn's mother...[Her] love for the younger generation is not just embodied in providing them enough food and clothes, but rather in providing them a new direction when they were facing difficult times. I was most impressed when Autumn's mother told Autumn not to come back home without any accomplishments. This guidance is highly precious".

#2. Negative Characters. A close reading of our data suggests that Ershui, Ershui's mother, Greenbud's husband, and Yuanyuan were generally perceived as being "negative" characters, worthy of punishment for their repugnant behaviors.

Overwhelmingly, Ershui, the rogue who married Greenleaf by paying her father a handsome dowry, was identified as the "devil" incarnate. The following comments from viewers are representative: "Ershui is the prototype of an evil person. He is bad-hearted. To earn money, he would use any means; even break the law. And he often abused and beat his wife, Greenleaf". A letter-writer simply noted: "I dislike Ershui. He is a barbarian". A diary-writer agreed: "I think that Ershui was portrayed as a collection of all the bad characters that can exist".

Interestingly, viewers displayed a tremendous amount of emotional intensity in assessing and prescribing appropriate levels of punishment for Ershui's ill-deeds. As a diary-writer noted: "Ershui did not get the punishment he deserved. Instead, he got married in the end to Lanzhi". A letter-writer echoed this sentiment: "What I don't like about 'Baixing' is that the director got Ershui married in the end. He should have been left wifeless, so to compensate for his torture of Greenleaf".

Also, our respondents took great pleasure in describing certain scenes of "Baixing" in which Ershui faced a bad consequence. For instance, many respondents vividly described the scene in which Greenleaf's grandmother marched into Ershui's home like a military general and beat him up for ill-treating Greenleaf. Another diary-writer noted: "I was struck by the scene in which Yuanyuan got to know Ershui's misdeeds and spat on his face. After watching it, we as viewers felt happy that Ershui was treated in a way that he deserved". Another diary-writer described the following scene: "Although Li Laowan's family had seen Ershui standing on the other side of the river, nobody went to bring him home on a boat. Then Greenbranch rowed a boat to transport him. Once aboard, Greenbranch threw Ershui into the ice cold winter water. To save his skin, Ershui had to agree to treat Greenleaf well. I remember the scene of Ershui shivering in the cold water. His expression can make viewers happy, because he deserved to be punished".

Ershui's mother, who was an overbearing, unkind "mother-in-law" to Greenleaf, was also perceived negatively our respondents. The following comment by a diary-writer is representative: "I disliked Ershui's mother the most. She is a snob, troublesome, and did not display any love. It's hard for such mothers to have caring children. We can see her ugly characteristics in the scene in which Greenbud goes to her house looking for shelter, and Ershui's mother shoos her away".

Another character, greatly disliked by our respondents, was the male chauvinist husband of Greenbud (Greenleaf's elder sister), who threw out his wife for bearing him daughters. As one respondent said "Greenbud's husband is a shameless man. He neither cares for his wife or his children. He exemplifies that men are superior to women". A letter-writer prescribed: "Greenbud's husband should be taught a lesson by having to live without a wife. Only then will he realize his fault".

Our respondents were also repulsed by the scheming, urbane Yuanyuan, for whom self-interest was paramount. As a letter-writer noted: "I disliked Yuanyuan. As a girl, she doesn't know to respect herself and is very casual with her relationships. I was shocked when she lied to Greenleaf about having Autumn's baby and then forced Greenleaf to resign. She is shameless!"

#3. *Complex Characters*. Certain characters in “Baixing” were perceived by our respondents as being neither predominantly “positive” or “negative”, but somewhat more complex⁵ (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”.

⁵ These “complex” characters had certain commonalities with what Sabido 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.

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 feel 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 meanings⁶ 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

⁶ Formative research and pretesting the episodes with audience members can help limit, but not eliminate oppositional readings of an entertainment-education text.

Greenleaf was beaten by Ershui and returned home, the grandmother led the whole family to beat Ershui. The plot reflected the contradictory nature of her role. On one hand, she was poisoned deeply by feudal values. On the other, she rebelled against feudal values and turned into a social defender. It was really miserable. I didn't know who she was!

Limitations of "Baixing"

Research Question #4 asked: What limitations of "Baixing" were identified by its viewers? The key limitation of "Baixing", according to our respondents, was that its storyline was out of sync with the reality of rural Chinese life, especially in terms of the time period in which the serial was set. While the story of "Baixing" was set in the early 1980s, several respondents felt that the events that were depicted belonged to a previous era. As one diary-writer noted: "We discussed about Li Laowan's inappropriate behavior in arranging his young son's marriage. All of us felt that Li Laowan's thoughts were too backward. It seems only in the 1930s or in the 1940s that such backward thoughts existed. But the story was supposedly set in the 1980s. It was confusing!"

A diary-writer echoed a similar sentiment about the inconsistency between the plot of "Baixing" and the time in which it was set:

In the rural areas, there was almost no "child marriage" at that time [in the early 1980s]. Although Greenleaf sacrificed her happiness for her brother's marriage, the cost was too big. I think that there is a difference between real life [at that time] and Greenleaf's experience. By the 1980s, people's thoughts even in rural areas had changed greatly. In the rural areas it was advocated that a family have two children. But in the soap opera, Greenbud gives birth to three children. So the real situation with respect to implementing the family planning policy was not depicted. What "Baixing" shows is that there is chaos without birth control. It was impossible for Greenbud to give birth to three children without intervention from the government. At that time, it was not permitted to have a third child.

Several respondents pointed to another situation in "Baixing" which exemplified this time-plot inconsistency. As a letter-writer noted: "I think Autumn's salary of 7 Yuan each day in the early 1980 is too much. At that time, most officials made about 100 Yuan a month, which was considered a big salary".

Our respondents were also quick to point out several props in "Baixing" that were inconsistent with the time in which the television serial was set. Respondents felt that the depiction of such props contributed to a perception of inauthenticity about "Baixing". The following respondent's statement is representative: "There were no Tide washing powder, Wahaha beverage, or Ban Dao Jing wine in China in the early 1980s. But in Ershui's store, these products were on the shelf. This made 'Baixing' unrealistic".

Several respondents were puzzled that the characters in "Baixing" always donned heavy winter clothing, despite the passage of seasons in the storyline. As one respondent noted sarcastically:

What I do not understand is that about two years have gone by in the serial, but all the characters in "Baixing" still wear the same heavy winter coats. We do not know whether all the events happened in winter, or whether the producer thought that people seemed to be experiencing a long winter with their unliberated thoughts. Only after their minds change, will the natural spring arrive? If the former reason is correct, it is too unreal. It is during winter that Greenleaf waited for Autumn. After three months, it was still winter. When Greenleaf bore her baby, it was still winter. Nobody can understand what is happening with seasons and time.

Another diary-writer echoed a similar sentiment in frustration: "Yes, it is hard to believe the reality of the story. The soap opera showed what happened over several years. Autumn worked in the lantern factory for more than half a year, but he never take off his green coat and red shirt. While the producer focused on portraying the changing personalities of the characters, he ignored the coming and going of natural seasons. This is the biggest defect of the soap opera"

Summary and Conclusions

"Baixing" was an 18-episode entertainment-education television serial broadcast in China in mid-1999. Set in the early 1980s, its narrative, *The Kentucky Journal of Communication*, Volume 23, No.1, Spring 2004

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 Yuanyuan, 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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