

Soap opera may be script for change in China

By EMILY CALDWELL

A Chinese soap opera promoting family planning and the status of women may help replace the government mandate of one child per couple with voluntary choices to have small families in China.

That's the premise of a massive research project led by Arvind Singhal, Ohio University associate professor of interpersonal communication. Singhal has helped conduct research leading to the design of characters and story lines for the upcoming Zhongou Baixing ("Ordinary People"), a soap opera expected to be watched next year by approximately 750 million viewers, or about 15 percent of the world's population. China is a nation of 1.2 billion people.

Singhal will study the show's effects on Chinese people's attitudes and behavior surrounding the status of women and family planning. The soap opera and follow-up research also will touch on HIV/AIDS prevention in response to the increasing number of cases of the disease reported in some urban areas of China.

Singhal's specialty is entertainment, the use of education in entertainment programming that reaches massive audiences in developing countries. He is one of about a half-dozen scholars in this emerging line of communication research, in which researchers track various mass media efforts to increase awareness of social issues and change attitudes and behaviors.

Singhal already has documented the appeal of soap operas in China. Between 1980 and 1990, the Chinese became hooked

Singhal will study the show's effects on Chinese people's attitudes and behavior surrounding women and family planning.

on domestically produced soap operas at the same time the number of TV sets increased from 5 million to 160 million.

Ke Wang ("Aspirations"), a soap opera created in 1990 that addressed several social issues such as the status of women, class conflict and maintenance of traditional culture, was broadcast up to five times per night to satisfy the high viewership. That soap attracted 95 percent of Beijing's viewers and up to 90 percent in other parts of China.

Singhal's study of Ke Wang led to his participation in the creation and study of "Ordinary People."

"Soap operas needn't be perceived as a mindless genre," Singhal says. "Viewers have an ongoing relationship with characters, so they become an important part of their daily life. Here is an unusual opportunity to bring people information which can help them lead safer lives."

Soaps in other countries, including Mexico and India, already have shown results of educational benefits, Singhal notes. "Soaps can be entertaining, commercially viable, and in addition, meet many educational objectives," he says. "It seems like a unique phenomenon — commercial profits and social



Singhal's specialty is enter-education, the use of education in entertainment programming that reaches massive audiences in developing countries.

Photo: Rick Fatica

responsibility can go hand in hand."

The key is to design characters and story lines that relate to viewers' concerns. Singhal designed the formative research for "Ordinary People," in which a profile of the projected viewing audience was created based on interviews with 4,000 Chinese couples. Characters in turn will be based on the audience profile.

Researchers will interview another 3,000 people over the next two years before, during and after the time the soap opera is aired. They also will analyze scripts, letters responding to the soap opera, ratings, and clinic visits for counseling on family planning and HIV/AIDS prevention. Transmission of the program will be blocked in one remote region of China, which will function as a control group for the study.

Singhal and his team of researchers will draw on social learning theory, which suggests

human beings don't always learn directly from other humans, but instead learn from observing the characters in mass media. The show's creators hope viewers will be persuaded to pattern their behavior after characters whose actions convey the desired message of promoting the status of women and use of birth control.

"We're hoping viewers, as they become hooked, will identify with certain characters and some will be encouraged to change their behavior," he says. Even a small percentage of those changing behavior will translate into millions of people, he notes.

"Hopefully there will be millions of people who will look upon the issue of the status of women and family planning a little differently, and who will change their behavior regarding HIV/AIDS."

Singhal, who joined the Ohio University faculty in 1990, earned a \$131,000 grant from the Ford

Foundation/China and \$25,000 from the Helen Lang Charitable Trust for the field study.

Singhal traveled in September to India, where he began work as director of a field experiment to gauge the effects of an Indian radio soap opera dealing with similar issues as the China project: status of women, family planning and HIV/AIDS prevention. The soap opera, titled Tinka Tinka Sukh ("Happiness for All"), will begin broadcast Dec. 1 in the Hindi-speaking region of Northern India, where population problems are increasing because of non-adoption of voluntary family planning services, Singhal said.

The soap opera is designed as a "motivational" project. A private donor contributed \$10,000 toward baseline research on the project, and Singhal is seeking funding for post-broadcast data collection activities, as well as analyses of soap opera scripts and listener letters.

Outlook

Nov '95

P. 9