

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: A Framework for Analyzing Female Characters in the Theater Bailu Plain

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Abstract: *Bailu Plain*, written by Chen Zhongshi between 1988 and 1992, won the 4th Mao Dun Literature Award in China in 1998 and was selected for “the Collection of 70 Novels in the 70 Years of the People’s Republic of China” in 2019. At the same time, the novel has also been adapted into various art forms such as films, TV series, theaters, and a Qin opera. In the face of such an excellent work, many scholars consider it a selected topic. However, only some scholars have applied Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory to analyze the motivations of the characters in the play. In this paper, we review Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory, analyze the motivations for the behavior of two female characters in the work of *Bailu Plain*, Tian Xiao’e, and Bai Ling, using different levels of the theory, and conclude the basic rules. With this article as an example, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory can be used as a theoretical framework for analyzing characters’ behavior in literary works in the field of social sciences, in addition to business and management psychology.

Keywords: Theater *Bailu Plain*, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Female Characters

1. Introduction to the Theater Bailu Plain

The Beijing People’s Art Theatre version of the play *Bailu Plain* began to be performed on stage in 2006. Directed by Lin Zhao-hua and written by Meng Bing, head of the General Political Science Drama Troupe, the play lasted over two hours and featured a cast of more than 80. Over the past 11 years, Pu Cunxin, Guo Da, and Lu Fang have followed the play through a hundred performances.

This theater takes Bailu Village on Bailu Plain in the Guanzhong area of Shaanxi as a microcosm place. In order to restore the humanistic appearance of the white deer plain to a high degree, the actors were required to speak the Shaanxi dialect throughout the performance. In addition to the actors from Beijing People’s Art Theater, they invited the Qin Opera Art Troupe and more than 30 Qin Opera and Laoqiang actors to act as extras. The old tune dominates the play’s opening and closing, while the Qin tune is used as the background when the plot unfolds. In the stage art, the props were collected from Shaanxi to show the Shaanxi style on the *Bailu Plain*.



Figure 1: The old tune performance in the theater *Bailu Plain*. [1].

The story tells the grievances between the three generations of the two families of Bai and Lu. In addition, it also tells the relevant storyline of the Leng family and the Zhu family, who are related to the two prominent families. The period is as long as half a century. It experienced the last feudal dynasty in China, the demise of the Qing government, the melee of warlords, the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, the Chinese Civil War, the victory of the Chinese Communist Party, and the establishment of New China. From the perspective of the drama structure, the drama concentrates on taking a precious land by strategy, playing a badger game, a filial son as a bandit, a father-in-law killing a daughter-in-law, brothers frying each other, and lovers turning against each other. The dramatic conflict is quite apparent.

The title of *Bailu Plain* is also an important symbol, a kind of animal, “white deer,” which represents luck and has the exact words and pronunciations with “Bailu” in Chinese. At the theater’s beginning, the first plot is “taking a precious land by strategy.” Through this plot, the main character, Bai Jiaxuan, tells a legend about “white deer.” A snow-white deer appeared on this plain, bringing auspiciousness and happiness to humanity. Therefore, this is also the origin of the original name of Bailu. Bai Jiaxuan sees a thistle growing on the slope of the Lu family’s land, and it is drawn like a deer, so he is reminded of the legend of the white deer. Bai Jiaxuan used his better land to pay back this “auspicious land,” but not well. Since the successful land exchange, the Bai family members have prospered, and their family is more prosperous than before.

2. Introduction of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory

“Abraham Maslow is one of the foremost psychologists of the twentieth century.” [2]. “In *Motivation and Personality*, Maslow presents his theory of hierarchical needs and human development.” [3]. The hierarchy of needs is used to study how humans intrinsically partake in behavioral motivation. Maslow used the terms “physiological,” “safety,” “love,” “esteem,” and “self-actualization” to describe the pattern through which human needs and motivations generally move.

The “physiological needs” include people’s most essential needs in life, such as oxygen, food, water, sleep, warmth, and sex. No living thing other than a human could survive on Earth without these basic needs. The “safety needs” can become active when all physiological needs are satisfied. It means feeling safe, stable, and free from fear or anxiety. The sense of “security” refers to the peace of

mind in which people know in their hearts that they are protected and dependent. The sense of “safety” indicates that one is in a safe place where there is no danger, and it is the objective feeling that one is safe. Also, “adults have little awareness of their security needs except in times of emergency or periods of disorganization in the social structure (such as widespread rioting). Children often display the signs of insecurity and the need to be safe.” [4]. If both the physiological and the safety needs are relatively well gratified, then there will emerge the “love and affection and belongingness” needs. The whole cycle already described will repeat itself with this new center. And Maslow stressed at this point is that “love is not synonymous with sex. Sex may be studied as a purely physiological need.” [5]. The “esteem needs” are soundly based upon actual capacity, achievement, and respect from others. This involves needs for both self-esteem and the respect a person gets from others. If people have more esteem, they will become more confident. “self-actualization” means that people must be and do what they were born to do. “A musician must make music; an artist must paint; a poet must write to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be.” [5].

Furthermore, one must be made clear that these five needs are not the only determinants of certain behaviors. That is, most behaviors are multi-motivated. Within the context of motivational determinants, any behavior is often determined by several or all of the basic needs simultaneously, not just one. For example, a person may have sex not only to satisfy a physiological need for pure sexual release but also to satisfy an unmet need for self-esteem, to convince oneself of one’s manhood, or to win love and thus satisfy one’s need for love. Thus, a single behavior of a person may be analyzed holistically across five different dimensions: physiological needs, safety needs, love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs.

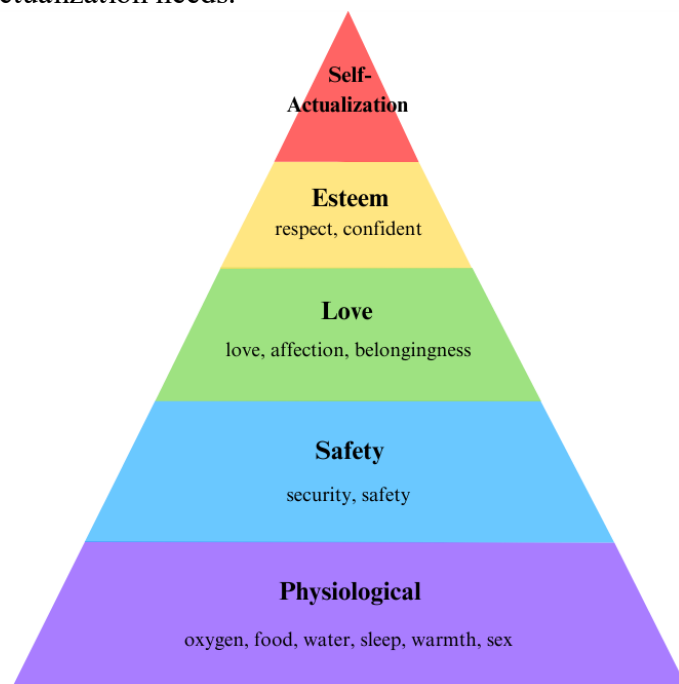


Figure 2: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory Pyramid

3. Two Female Characters in the Theater Bailu Plain

In the original novel and the social context of the time, the Guanzhong region of Shaanxi Province in China was a patriarchal society. In the Bailu Plain, the patriarch was the head of the people and could decide whether a particular person could enter the ancestral hall; in their respective small families, the father was also the absolute head of the family, enjoying absolute discourse power in the family.

However, two distinct characters are not afraid of the shackles brought to women by the feudal society and dare to break through them to pursue their own “happiness” and their desired “hierarchy needs,” which are exceptional research cases. Tian Xiao’e is pursuing “physiological needs,” “safety needs,” and “esteem needs” in her short life as her basic needs cannot be met. Another female character, Bai Ling, also known as “White Deer,” is fulfilling “physiological needs,” “safety needs,” “esteem needs,” and “love needs” to achieve “self-actualization.” The Bailu Plain is the epitome of traditional culture and feudal rites. At the same time, the Bailu Plain was at a time when the old and new societies were in transition, and the collision of the new thinking and the old culture made the tragic colors of the two women, Tian Xiao’e and Bai Ling, particularly distinctive. In the theater, except for these two female characters, other female characters stick to the stereotypes and obey the dogmatism. The researcher considered analyzing these two exceptional female characters a better choice than exploring regular female and male roles.

4. Tian Xiao’e - A Rebel Out of Human Instincts

Tian Xiao’e was born into a family of scholars. Her father was a skillful writer, which in those days could be called an “intellectual.” Perhaps for money or social status, Tian Xiao’e’s father married Tian Xiao’e off to a 70-year-old man named Guo Juren (a provincial graduate) as his concubine. This is the beginning of Tian Xiao’e’s tragic life. Guo’s wife saw Tian Xiao’e as a panacea for Guo’s longevity. Their sex life was limited to three times a month, and Tian Xiao’e was allowed to use her body to “soak jujubes” for Guo Juren. Tian Xiao’e’s experience during this period is not only one of disrespect but also one of being aroused by desire while at the same time trying to repress it. Failure to meet her basic “physiological needs” and “esteem needs” leads Tian Xiao’e to rebel.

Guo’s family recruited a new laborer, Hei Wa, who was a strong and agile worker, which made Tian Xiao’e very interested in him. She seduces Hei Wa and has sex with him on several occasions, pleading with him to take her away from the “cage.” Hei Wa does not respond to this request at first. However, after being hypocritically forgiven by Guo Juren on the surface but sent to kill him behind his back, he worries about Tian Xiao’e’s situation. When he learned that Tian Xiao’e had been repudiated by Guo Juren and returned to her hometown, Hei Wa took the initiative to look for Tian Xiao’e and brought her back to the Bailu Plain. However, Tian Xiao’e was not accepted by Hei Wa’s family and the clan members; she could not enter the ancestral hall and was forced to live in a kiln outside the village. During this period, Tian Xiao’e lived a joyful life because she was finally free from humiliation, satisfied her “esteem needs” and “physiological needs” (sexual needs), and even gained her “love needs.”

The good times did not last long, but due to changes in the political situation, Hei Wa left the Bailu Plain and became a criminal. To “save” Hei Wa, Tian Xiao’e did not refuse when Lu Zilin (Tian Xiao’e’s nominal uncle) proposed to have sex and even took the initiative to develop a lover’s relationship with Lu Zilin to “look for a backer.” As Hei Wa had been away from home for a long time, she had few financial resources and was often harassed by others. At this time, Tian Xiao’e needed to satisfy her need for food and her “safety needs” to ensure she was safe.

At the same time, a fellow villager, Dog Egg, has been harassing Tian Xiao’e. Lu Zilin taught Tian Xiao’e to design a plan to “seduce” Dog Egg while Lu Zilin brought someone to “catch her in the act.” Because of this, Tian Xiao’e, as the victim, was whipped “without discrimination.” Tian Xiao’e was already resentful of Bai Jiaxuan (the patriarch of Bailu Plain) for not allowing her to enter the ancestral hall. With this incident and Lu Zilin’s ill-intentioned provocations, Tian Xiao’e decided to take revenge on Bai Jiaxuan by following Lu Zilin’s idea. According to Lu Zilin, Bai Xiaowen is Bai Jiaxuan’s eldest son and also Bai Jiaxuan’s pride. Making Bai Jiaxuan fall is the best way to take revenge on Bai Jiaxuan. Tian Xiao’e listened to Lu Zilin’s idea and decided to seduce Bai Xiaowen. Lu Zilin then told Bai Jiaxuan about this, and Bai Jiaxuan decided to separate from Bai Xiaowen. Bai

Xiaowen had a wife but gave Tian Xiao'e most of the money from the separation. The two live a life of eating, sleeping, and smoking opium. Tian Xiao'e initially seduced Bai Xiaowen to take revenge on Bai Jiaxuan, but she gradually discovered Bai Xiaowen's good qualities and developed a sense of belonging to him. Bai Xiaowen sold his family's assets to smoke opium, and when he was finally left penniless and unable to eat, he went to the Bailu Plain to beg for relief food. When he was seen by Lu San (Hei Wa's father), Lu San felt that Tian Xiao'e had caused Bai Xiaowen's death, so he killed his de facto daughter-in-law, Tian Xiao'e, with his own hands.

Throughout her short life, Tian Xiao'e never bowed to fate; she was always concerned with her needs and expressed her desires. However, the unfairness of the male discourse for women in those days made Tian Xiao'e unable to help herself and had to rely on men to fulfill her needs.

5. Bai Ling - A seeker of Self-Actualization

Bai Ling is the youngest child and the most beloved daughter of Bai Jiaxuan. Bai Ling has had no worries about any "physiological needs," "safety needs," "love needs," or even "esteem needs" since her childhood because of her family. Her parents and his elder brothers love her, and she has two good friends - Lu Zhaopeng and Lu Zhaohai. Under the premise that these "basic needs" are satisfied, she begins to pursue the needs of "self-actualization."

Women were not allowed to enter the school to study at that time. Bai Ling prayed to her father, Bai Jiaxuan, for the opportunity to study in the village. After seeing that the two boys of the Lu family could go to the new school in the county, she also prayed for her father to go to the new school to study successfully. Going to school was extremely important for young Bai Ling to form her independent worldview and values, and it laid a solid foundation for her later freedom of marriage, independent work, and participation in the revolution. "Maslow believes that the only reason people would not move well toward self-actualization is because of hindrances placed in their way by society. He states that education is one of these hindrances. He recommends ways education can switch from its usual person-stunting tactics to person-growing approaches." [4]. As Maslow said, education is the path to people's self-actualization, which can be verified in Bai Ling's character. When she encountered her father forcing her to marry, Bai Ling also firmly refused and withdrew from the marriage, which was an infrequent event in those days.

After learning new ideas, Bai Ling and Lu Zhaohai buried the heroic warriors' corpses in the war's ruins under the background of the revolutionary uprising to overthrow the feudal rule of the Qing government; moreover, in the game of "throwing a copper plate and guessing the pros and cons" with her puppy love, Lu Zhaohai, fate arranged for Bai Ling to join the Kuomintang and Lu Zhaohai to join the Communist Party. This seems to be a joke from God. A few years later, Lu Zhaohai joined the Kuomintang instead. At the same time, Bai Ling chose to join the Communist Party and pretended to be husband and wife with Lu Zhaopeng, Lu Zhaohai's brother. The result was accurate; Bai Ling and Lu Zhaopeng became a couple. In the civil war, Bai Ling sacrifices, unfortunately, but her whole life has been in pursuit of the realization of self-worth. Studying, joining the party, pursuing free marriage, and becoming a revolutionary fighter are all awakening female consciousness without exception.

6. Conclusion

The researcher did not use popular moral standards to evaluate the character of Tian Xiao'e. Nevertheless, the researcher analyzed Maslow's hierarchy of needs to illustrate human nature: people always pursue some hierarchy of needs that they lack. To apply the pyramid model, only some people pursue these levels of needs from the bottom to the top. Just like Tian Xiao'e, she is willing to give up better physiological needs, which means she has a good living condition in Guo's family and pursues sex needs, safety needs, and esteem needs.

Furthermore, Bai Ling represents the choice of most people. Usually, people only pursue higher-level needs after satisfying the most basic physiological and safety needs. For example, in times of famine, the greatest wish of ordinary people is to have food and survive. In times of war, the greatest desire of ordinary people is to live in peace. However, some people will distribute porridge to help the famine refugees. Even a great scientist like Yuan Longping spent his life researching and inventing hybrid rice so everyone had enough cereals. There are also countless heroic soldiers rushing to the front line of the war, killing the enemy and resisting the Japanese. There were also great men like Mao Zedong who could lead the Chinese soldiers to victory in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.

In short, the researcher believes everyone has different goals to achieve at varying levels of needs and is not limited to the shape of the pyramid model. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is an excellent theoretical model for scholars of various disciplines to analyze human motivation. It can also be a good analysis of the characters and motivations in a theater, helping the audience better understand the play itself.

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