

Tian'ai's Ordeal

Tian'ai's Ordeal was produced by Children's Channel of Wuhan Broadcasting and Television Bureau in China. The story takes place after the 5/12 Wenchuan Earthquake. The sunny 11-year-old girl Tian'ai lost her dearest father and her best friend. Her hands were injured when she tried to save her friend in the quake, and she can no longer play her beloved Koto. In her new school, she constantly comes into conflict with her teacher and classmates who used to care about her. She begins to run away from school and goes back to her original school looking for her schoolbag in the ruins. What's the secret in her bag? Can Tian'ai get over the psychological shadow? As the answers to her behavior are revealed one by one, we will discover a child's crystal-like heart that was deeply touched by a warm and noble human nature.

Tian'ai's Ordeal was one of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2010 finalists in the 7-11 Fiction category.

International experts' opinions

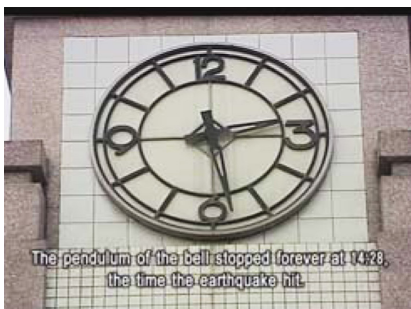


Figure 1: The bell stops forever when the earthquake takes place.



Figure 2: Tian'ai dreams of her failed attempt to save her friend and how she hurt her hands.

The international experts had mixed opinions about the program. Many of them were awe-struck watching the earthquake scenes in the program which were really touching. "I was thinking about this environment where it was shot, the part with the earthquake damages. For me it was so real. I was wondering: Is this actually the ruins of an earthquake? Is it possible to make a film; how is it to shoot in such a place where all this had happened, and maybe people are still in the ruins" (female expert, Sweden). Some appreciated the use of fiction in the program for sending the message about the earthquake. "I thought it was terrific to use the fictional style to help kids deal with the big national issue. It is the kind of thing that was never done after Katrina in the United States. I was trying to imagine what a drama about Katrina for kids might have looked like. The production values weren't great and the acting was kind of over the top, and it was a little bit corny, at least for the first half, but it got better toward the end. But, just the effort was really kind of impressive" (male expert, Canada).

The experts really appreciated the fact that the program was able to capture the trauma that a child has to face during a natural disaster like an earthquake. "I thought it was an amazing opportunity to look at how a child was held by the teacher and allowed to actually move through the trauma. She wanted to touch the parts where you assume that she went for her bag; she couldn't move on in the ground or go to the new bag, and in the gap between them, she needed to have that closure, and how that teacher saw that and allowed her, went and settled her while she was in the rubble. I thought that was beautiful. The metaphor of her bag, when she opened her bag and revealed those photographs. There was a fluidity and a letting go of a trauma. I just thought



Figure 3: Tian'ai tells her teacher that she does not want to attend the ceremony for fear that other people would notice her scarred hands.



Figure 4: Tian'ai was shocked to learn that her father had also died in the earthquake.



Figure 5: Mr. Zou helps Tian'ai look for her old schoolbag.



Figure 6: Tian'ai's scarred hands, which can never play her favorite musical Koto again.

Screenshots from *Tian'ai's Ordeal* © Children's Channel of Wuhan Broadcasting and Television Bureau

that it was a very intelligent structure of how to move forward. I really appreciated that" (female expert). Some thought that this would be quite impossible to show in the western world. "It is not something you could use in the United States. Instead, you are constantly demoralising things, actually – to look forward. There was nothing produced in the States like this after 9-11, for example, but everything was demoralised. We don't have these kinds of films that move on with really adjusting – the successful part of it" (male expert, USA). They really liked the character of the girl who was successful in portraying her character as a child facing an ordeal. "I liked the fact that the child was narrating the story. I thought that the girl who played the part was very good; she was well cast. She also seemed to take directions, well, because some little subtle things that she did that conveyed various emotions, etc, seemed as if she was given very good directions, and she was able to execute it" (female expert, Jamaica).

Many international experts also felt that the program helped them in removing their preconceived notions about Chinese kids. "I think it was challenging. It has been a really good thing for me to have seen this film. I think it challenged my idea of how children would be portrayed in Chinese drama. I think I had a pre-conception, and I was really glad that I saw this to say that wasn't how it is" (female expert, Australia). Another expert agreed with this. "Yea, that is an important reflection. In fact, we have lots and lots of preconceptions like that. Yes, because they are habitually rebellious" (male expert, Germany).

The majority of the experts, however, did not understand the program very well and found the acting of the characters unsatisfactory in many aspects. "That program for me was kind of special. It was really bad acting, but I think they took some real footage, in the beginning there was some real footage from the real earthquake, I think. Then there was one scene with the hand from the friend, which was, of course, fiction. That was quite confusing I have to admit, that they took some real footage. I wasn't sure if it was the right kind of storytelling for coming over this big earthquake, which really happened. I wasn't sure" (female expert, Germany).

Some found the grief too much to handle in one episode. "I just felt that there were too many things that they showed. The girl had so much trauma: she lost her dad, her friends, lost the school, and what happened to her hands. Considering that it was only for 30 minutes, all four were just too much to carry. I think it is not realistic in that sense" (female expert, Philippines). The limited time also made the program congested with a lot of incidents, and some experts felt that the time was not used properly. "I do think



Figure 7: With the help of her classmates, Tian'ai finally finds her old schoolbag.



Figure 8: In the schoolbag, Tian'ai finds treasured pictures of her beloved friends and parents.

they were unable to deal with it in the timeframe of the program, but they spent a lot of time in the beginning on other things, I think. It could have moved a little bit better towards that. They spent too much time, I think, on the hands and the gloves. There were other things that she was also struggling with. We understood the situation. They could have probably gone into the adults getting that a little bit sooner than they did, because I think they stretched it out more than it needed to be” (female expert, Jamaica).

Some of the international experts did not like the characterization and the presence of too many adults. “I think she did a very great job, but the story spoiled it. She was very good, but too many grown-ups. They didn’t explain and do anything, you get lonelier than when you started. In the end she was lonelier with the problem, I felt. I thought she did a great job though” (female expert, Denmark). Some found the adults in the program very thoughtless about the sentiments of a child during the time of trauma. “That was very harrowing in many ways, because I sat there and thought: Why are the adults around this child so insensitive about her situation; they were forcing her to do this stuff. I felt that they kind of needed to think about that. It didn’t strike me as being very sensitive. But I think the understanding shown by adults throughout the show could

have been done perhaps more sensitively” (female expert, UK).

There were a lot of discussions about the ending of the program. Some of the international experts enjoyed the ending while some were further confused by it. “I sat there and didn’t enjoy that one until the very end when she got photographs. That bit suddenly put it together – the reasoning behind making it: the social aspect to it. But just that bit where you suddenly see all the people who she was seeking and sorting the pictures – that was beautiful” (female expert, UK). Another expert echoed the same sentiments. “I think it was kind of satisfying at the end when she actually found her backpack, and she saw the pictures” (female expert, USA).

There were others who did not understand the ending at all and found it very abrupt. “For me it was just like ‘let’s have a quick solution for this big trauma. Let’s overcome it and go on further.’ It was a little bit shocking for me. For me it was not a good example for dealing with psychological problems – here I felt that they were pushed too much into ‘come on, you just have to overcome it and go on’” (female expert, Germany).

The discussion about the program perhaps could be summarized in one line by one of the international experts. “Strong story, but weird script – because the story is so strong, so you get touched” (male expert, Norway).

*Prof. Dr. Dafna Lemish, Namrata Bansal, and Hao Cao
(Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA)*