

Writing and Acting Our Own Stories for Change

by Du Fangqin; translated by Huang Yan

“A mother is the dearest of all in the world and a child in a mother's care is the most precious of all treasures ...”



Photo courtesy of Liang Jun

This is the beginning of a popular song that has touched the hearts of millions of Chinese people. However, whether girls are as precious as boys is another story. Though Chinese laws strictly forbid sex testing and sex-selective abortions, women who have only given birth to girls face discrimination because traditional patriarchal ideas such as the importance of having sons to carry on the family name and care for their parents in their old-age are deeply rooted in the rural regions of the country.

The traditional preferences for a son has caused serious harm in women's reproductive health in China and has led to the proliferation of female infanticide. Because of the pressure a woman has to face when giving birth to a female child, many women opt to terminate their pregnancy and in turn suffer adverse effects from unsafe abortion. Moreover, the preference for a son has also resulted in a serious imbalance in the sex ratio of newly born children in some regions. In recent years, government bodies such as the Population and Family Planning Committee have been working with NGOs to address these

concerns by advocating gender equality through the forum of community theatre.

An example of this was a unique celebration on Mother's Day, May 9, 2010, in Dengfeng City in Henan Province in central China. Twenty rural women from the villages of Zhoushan and Xiyao, who had written about their own experiences, debuted in an acting performance called "The Story of a Mother and Her Daughter."

The play is a riveting enactment of the women's shared experience of facing pressure and discrimination of giving birth to a girl child in these communities. From before birth, when a tender moment between a mother and her unborn child is disrupted by her family's

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demands for an abortion, to when the baby is born and mother and child become the subject of abuse and violence, it is a moving tale that poured forth from the pain and suffering that the women have endured.

The story likewise tells of how these experiences are replicated through generations but it ends in a hopeful tone. The play concludes with a scene where the unwanted daughter is taking care of her ailing mother in place of the favored son, who has abandoned her. At the end, the actors – the mothers and daughters – make an appeal to the audience to change their perspectives and abandon the old rules as they call out the following messages:

"I have a daughter only and I'll persuade my husband and his family to give up the idea of having another kid. We shall manage to bring up our daughter well so that she can have all her talents developed!"

"I used to regard men as superior to women, and would not allow my daughter to go on studying in high school. I'll change and make sure that she can enjoy her right to education!"

"I am going to change: I am a married woman living in my husband's house. But I have on my shoulders the responsibility of supporting and caring my own parents. The homes of my parents-in-law and my own parents are both mine, and so are the dear ones from both families!"

"I am going to change: I am the Party Branch secretary at Xiyao Village. I'll work with the villagers and have our old village rules revised. We shall train more women cadres and have women's social position promoted!"

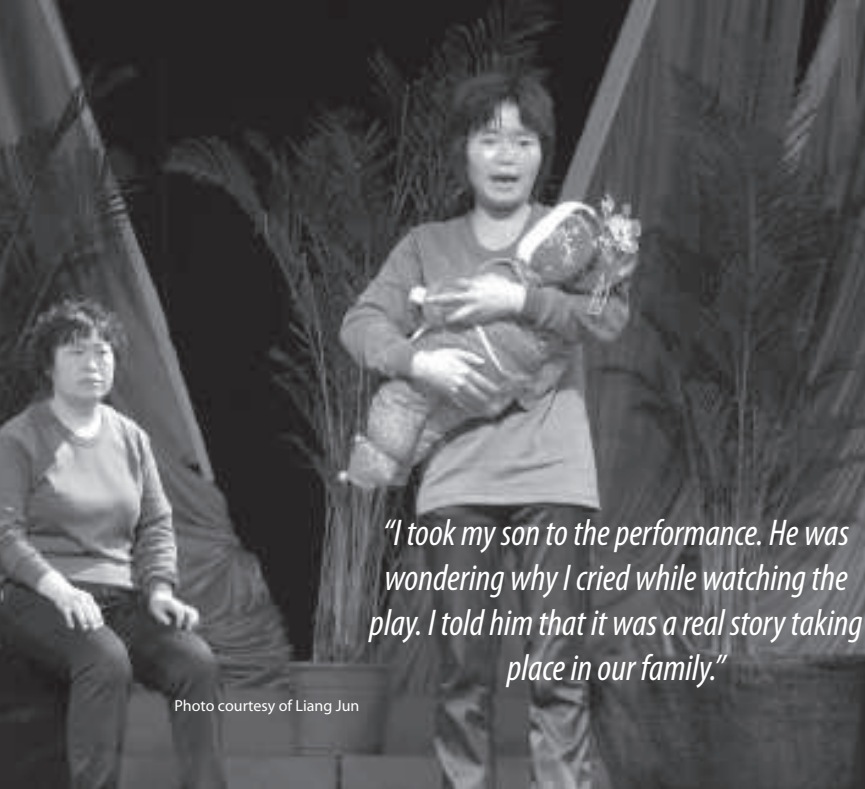
Their adamant claims were followed by loud applause from an audience of thousands of men and women – echoing their calls as they cheered, "We want change!"

Months after the performance, the women who acted in the play still feel exhilarated. One of them emphasised, "The play allowed me to vent my anger. I have suppressed these thoughts and emotions for decades. Now I have just poured them out by acting on the stage. It feels great!"

Women who were not part of the play but who saw it also felt a sense of relief after watching it. A woman from the audience shared, "I took my son to the performance. He was wondering why I cried while watching the play. I told him that it was a real story taking place in our family." A male leader said, "The play is so touching that I burst into tears. It is Mother's Day today, I'll phone my mother and convey my regards to her." Still others believed that the play had been effective in communicating an important message and it needs to be shared to an even wider audience "This drama should be recorded on DVD. It is so thought provoking. The old rules ought to be changed!"

The sharing of women's stories through theatre is a project initiated by Henan Community Center for Education and Research (HCCER), through the leadership of Ms Liang Jun, it's





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founding director. The Center is a grassroots women's NGO founded in Dengfeng City over a decade ago.

The mass drama activity started with selecting performers before the scenario writing. Twenty actresses were selected from a pool of volunteer women villagers. Their ages ranged from as young as 20 to over 50, and they were from Zhoushan and Xiyao Villages. These women were trained in storytelling and acting in preparation for the play by Lian Yihu, a drama artist from Hong Kong.

In this process the women are the performers and the playwrights, and their experiences are a rich source of materials. Moreover, the women emphasised that allowing the women to reflect on their experiences by asking them questions about them allow them the time and the space to let out suppressed feelings such as pain, anger and frustration.

Through the course of the training, Yihu asked them, "How did you feel when you were informed of being pregnant with a baby girl? "How did you take it when giving birth to a daughter?" or "Who take care of you when sick?" The emotional answers the women gave to these questions became the material for the play and their shared experiences fueled their performance.

"The entire family is looking forward to having a boy as a first born child. I had to get my baby girls aborted several times in order not to disappoint them. Finally, I became too weak to get off the operation table by myself..." "My mother-in-law and my husband were very disappointed seeing that I was to have a daughter. My mother-in-law hid the little girl away when I went to work in the fields. When I came back, it was her crying that helped me to find her. From then on, I dared not to leave the baby girl alone at home..." It was from the women's tearful narration of their personal life stories that the final play gradually came into being. After three days of intensive rehearsal, the women succeeded in moving an audience of over a thousand to rethink about their values and to take action.

When the women returned to their villages in Xiyao, they restaged the play and performed it all over the village. The performances educated the other women and resulted in gradual changes in the discriminatory traditions and practices against women. For instance, previously a girl's placenta could not be buried in the courtyard of the house which indicates a girl must move out her parents house after getting married. Now, this is no longer the practice in Xiyao.

Through this initiative, women are becoming the major driving force in reforming their villages. Presently, Dengfeng is advocating the revision of village rules in the entire city, adding aspects of gender equality into the rules. Community drama, one of the most effective tools of advocacy, is challenging old ideas and arousing people's consciousness and enthusiasm to move towards gender equality. ◆

Du Fangqin, Director and Professor at the Institute of Gender and Social Development Studies, Tianjin Normal University, China. She is also a Vice President and Board of Directors, Chinese Women's Research Society (CWRS). She also sits in the Board of Directors of Asian Women's Studies Magazine. She started her research in women's / gender studies since 1985. Her Areas of research include Chinese ancient women's/gender history, women's development and empowerment, and women's and gender studies curriculum building in higher educations.