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# Female migrant workers' theater, labor NGOs, and grassroots culture in China: variations on the theme of "home"

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**Abstract:** This paper explores self-representations of female migrant workers in mainland Chinese grassroots theater, understood as a localized variety of trans-Asian people's theater. It discusses the 2018 play *They Say* that was created by women associated with the Shenzhen-based NGO Green Rose Community Center. The analysis of the text and its performance seeks to shed light on the multifaceted identities of the authors and performers of the play, who left the countryside for precarious work in Shenzhen's production and service industries. Beyond offering a close reading of the play with a particular focus on the images of "home" and "homemaking," this paper embeds female migrant workers' cultural activities into a larger social context that is shaped by state policies, non-governmental organizations, cultural norms and values, and legacies of the socialist era.

**Keywords:** activism; diceng; gender; grassroots; migrant workers; theater

In this homeless strange land, I grow like a blade of grass.<sup>1</sup>

In the middle of the 1990s, Chinese intellectuals began voicing their criticism of increasing wealth inequality. They often spoke in the name of the *diceng* 底层 (the lower strata, subaltern),<sup>2</sup> or large groups of society that were left behind in

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<sup>1</sup> From Zheng Xiaoqiong, "Grass roots." Translation by Jonathan Stalling. [https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-24309\\_GRASS-ROOTS](https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-24309_GRASS-ROOTS) (07/11/2022).

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I either leave the term *diceng* untranslated, or translate *diceng* as "subaltern." When untranslated, *diceng* is a descriptive category that refers to groups at the bottom of post-socialist Chinese society – peasants, migrant workers, the unemployed. When translated as "subaltern," the critical term foregrounds the lack of discursive power of certain individuals and collectives.

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the course of economic reform. This critical discourse, which questioned narratives of unrestrained social mobility and equal opportunities, has solidified since then. Scholars, writers and artists have not stopped worrying about the human and ecological costs of economic development. Making use of their representational power, intellectuals have depicted the lives of vulnerable and marginalized members of the Chinese society in their academic and creative writing, but simultaneously they also increasingly acknowledged the existence of a genuine grassroots literature movement, particularly among migrant factory workers.<sup>3</sup> Thus, after the turn of the twenty-first century, the term *diceng* in its comprehensive, but sometimes also competing, meanings of writing “about,” “by,” “for,” and “of” the subaltern, permanently entered the vocabulary of Chinese literary criticism. Since then, literary and cultural scholars have demonstrated increasing awareness of cultural activities, particularly by urban migrants, not only in their academic writing but also in other activities that target a broader audience, such as public lectures, cultural festivals or voluntary community work.<sup>4</sup>

In 2007, writing by *diceng* authors entered the field of view of broader literary audiences. This was the year when the factory worker Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 won a major literature award, the People’s Literature Award, for her poetry. To date, poetry by migrant workers (*dagong shige* 打工诗歌) is the genre that has received most attention compared to other sorts of *diceng* writing.<sup>5</sup> The reasons for this tendency are manifold. To begin with the most prosaic ones, the sheer quantity of poetic texts outnumbers works of lengthy prose or ephemeral drama. This is due to the fact that poetry demands less time to create than longer works, and in addition, the brevity of poems is well matched to the typical tapped input method used on cellphones, the ease of sharing online and, finally, the potential to go viral.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the interest in migrant workers’ poetry is fueled by the transgressive character of the underclass engagement with poetic writing since the genre is considered elitist in the local literary tradition. The canon of classical Chinese poetry that even today remains the backbone of literary education, was defined by a small group of literati, educated men, who shared verses about their political ambitions and patriotic ideals with likeminded members of their social group. Similarly, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the main force behind the literary revolution that hailed ideals of modern, aka westernized, simpler writing in the vernacular language, were highly educated, cosmopolitan, and

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<sup>3</sup> On the terms “diceng” and “diceng writing” see Cai 2004; Li 2014; Hui 2021.

<sup>4</sup> See Lü 2014; Sun 2014; Qin 2016.

<sup>5</sup> See Sun 2012: 994 ff.; Van Crevel 2021: 166.

<sup>6</sup> On the meaning of the internet and smartphones for the migrant worker poets’ community, see Van Crevel 2021: 174–175.

mainly male elites. It was only in Maoist China (1949–1976) that poetry became the target of popularization campaigns that aimed at unleashing the creative powers of workers, peasants and soldiers. Nevertheless, in contrast to current grassroots literature, the Maoist poetry movements were orchestrated top-down to accompany larger political campaigns, such as the Great Leap Forward (1958), and focused on traditional (non-western) poetic forms, such as folk songs.<sup>7</sup>

Next to composing folk poetry, other grassroots cultural activities, for instance, the writing of essays and reports for factory bulletin boards, or the staging of theatrical pieces inspired by folk dances and songs, were all officially promoted by the party-state after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The masses engaged with these cultural activities with the support and supervision of cadres from a vast network of cultural institutions such as urban cultural centers or village clubs.<sup>8</sup> Many of these community-level cultural spaces have formally survived the Mao era. However, the majority of them underwent a functional transformation after the beginning of the Reform and Opening Up policy in 1978. In the course of their ongoing commercialization and professionalization, the former amateur art centers have become much less accessible to grassroots cultural groups.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, a lack of infrastructure did not prevent the upsurge of a new wave of literary activities by migrant workers of rural origin who flocked into the Special Economic Zone in south China throughout the 1980s. Moreover, after the 1990s, the vacuum left by the withdrawal of the party-state from grassroots cultural spaces has been entered by nongovernmental institutions (NGOs), which targeted the segments of Chinese population that have lost access to cultural production.

In 1995, Beijing hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women, which was a watershed event for transnational and local activism. In the course of the preparation for the conference, NGOs became a politically legitimate organization that could work on advancing rights or alleviating poverty. In 1996, the first two NGOs for migrant women, the Migrant Women's Home (*Dagongmei zhi jia* 打工妹之家)<sup>10</sup> and the Chinese Working Women Network (*Nügong guanhuai* 女工关怀), were set up in Beijing and Shenzhen, respectively. They were each established by female intellectuals—editors of the journal *Rural Women* (*Nongjianü* 农家女) in the north and Hong Kong academics in the south. These labor NGOs put educating migrant women workers about their rights at the center

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<sup>7</sup> See Tian 2017.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 4 in Hung 2021.

<sup>9</sup> See Qiu/Wang 2012.

<sup>10</sup> The organization became the focus of Tamara Jacka's research. See Jacka 2006. The NGO is known in English-language scholarship as the "Migrant Women's Club," but for the purposes of this paper I translate its name literally as Migrant Women's Home.



of their work, followed by raising the women's bargaining skills when confronted with unjust treatment at work. The Migrant Women's Home occasionally organized cultural or entertainment activities, but the majority of its efforts were dedicated to educating women of rural origin to navigate an unfamiliar urban environment. In her monograph dedicated to the Beijing-based NGO, the scholar of gender relations Tamara Jacka criticized the female journalists in charge of publications on migrant women's lives for paying little attention to gender as a systematic basis of discrimination in Chinese society.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the Chinese Working Women Network, which spread from Shenzhen to other cities in the Guangdong province, advocated for a progressive agenda that emphasized the importance of gender education. Besides, the southern NGO actively promoted intersectional collaborations between labor and women's organizations.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, despite the differences in their agendas, the organizers in Beijing and Shenzhen both invoked the notion of "home," either in the name of the NGO or in the way they introduced the network to international public. For both of them, the concept of "home" implied a place of reassurance and community that begets identity formation.

## 1 Grassroots theater in post-socialist China

The turn of the twenty-first century witnessed the first attempts to organize theater activities among migrant factory workers in the PRC. These efforts bespeak the development of a cultural agenda among labor NGOs on the one hand, but, on the other, there is also a corresponding growing interest in various forms of politically engaged theater among Chinese intellectuals. From a broader cultural perspective, these theatrical activities are another trend that belongs to the *diceng* discourse and, furthermore, demonstrate the ability of the discourse to shape social and intellectual practices.

Significantly, the development of the Chinese workers' theater in the twenty-first century proceeded in dialogue with various strains of Asian and global performance practices. The year 2005 marks an important turning point in the history of contemporary grassroots theater (*caogen juchang* 草根剧场) in the PRC.<sup>13</sup> In that

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<sup>11</sup> Jacka 2006: 74.

<sup>12</sup> See the Network's website, <https://www.cwwn.org/> (07/11/2022). Even though the website remains active, no new content has been added since 2019.

<sup>13</sup> The notion of "grassroots theater" refers throughout the essay to theater practices from below, organized outside the official state-supported system of cultural institutions and sustained by a network of individual and collective actors, such as NGOs, engaged intellectuals and independent theater collectives.

year, performers from Hong Kong, who had already cooperated with other facilitators of socially-engaged theater in Asia, organized the first people's theater (*minzhong xiju* 民众戏剧) workshop in mainland China.<sup>14</sup> Associates of local labor NGOs, journalists and intellectuals, who all recognized the potential of theater practice for the cultural integration of migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta region, participated in this event. The organizers of the workshop tasked these stakeholders with spreading the idea of workers' theater in their home areas. Soon after, local NGOs in the cities of Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Beijing began organizing theater workshops with migrant workers.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of people's theater emerged in the 1960s as part of a broader anticolonial democratization movement and has, since then, influenced theater practices across Asia.<sup>16</sup> The people's theater network has its historical origins in the heterogeneous forms of radical, postcolonial, educational theater associated with the movement of the "theater of liberation."<sup>17</sup> Today's grassroots troupes in East Asia often combine these legacies with a critique of the neoliberal economic model. Theater collectives in South Korea, Taiwan and Japan have adapted the methodologies of people's theater and the localization of the practice in the PRC took place in exchange with people's theater initiatives in these countries. In general, people's theater is an umbrella term that encompasses diverse inclusive activities outside mainstream theater performance, mostly community-based, that seek to empower the vulnerable.<sup>18</sup> In Asia, ideas of people's theater has been spreading in a "rhizomatic"<sup>19</sup> mode since the 1960s, but in the PRC, they began taking root only around the turn of the twenty-first century. Personal contacts between people's theater practitioners from Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and mainland China facilitated this development. In 2005 independent theater collectives from Shanghai and Beijing participated for the first time in the Asian Madang Theater Festival in Gwangju, South Korea. The festival, organized in the city of the 1980 democratic uprising against the authoritarian military regime, celebrates Asian grassroots theater traditions, such as the Korean madanggŭk (people's theater or resistance theater), the Japanese tent-theater or the Taiwanese left-wing people's theater. The Shanghai-based collective Grass Stage (*Caotaiiban* 草台班) has subsequently become the first independent theater troupe to develop its own version of people's theater in the PRC.

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<sup>14</sup> Zhao 2017: 38–39.

<sup>15</sup> Zhao 2017: 38.

<sup>16</sup> See Van Erven 1992; Liang 2012: 388; Chapter 4 in Ferrari 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Van Erven 1992.

<sup>18</sup> See Ferrari 2020: 142–143.

<sup>19</sup> Ferrari 2020.

## 2 Workers' theater in mainland China and its spaces

The theater scholar and facilitator, Zhao Zhiyong 赵志勇, lists the following foreign influences behind the movement of workers' theater in twenty-first century mainland China: Augusto Boal's "theater of the oppressed," people's theater from the Philippines and South Korea, and the practice of the Playback Theater. Locally, according to Zhao, the biggest impact comes from televised entertainment formats, such as the CCTV New Year's Gala.<sup>20</sup> In the course of the localization of people's theater in the PRC, intellectuals involved in grassroots activities identified the migrant population in Chinese cities as a disenfranchised, oppressed group that had not yet gained a politically credible voice but could potentially do so with the support of theater practitioners. Labor NGOs played a crucial role in bringing together intellectuals interested in people's theater and workers. In his 2017 study, Zhao names the earliest workers' theater troupes that were all associated with labor NGOs in the Pearl River region and Beijing. In the south, the first one was Tiny Grass (*Xiao xiao cao* 小小草), a Shenzhen offshoot of the aforementioned 2005 workshop conducted by people's theater practitioners from Hong Kong. Tiny Grass and other workers' theater troupes typically, at least at the beginning of their dramatic activities, received assistance from either professional artists or academics; however, these individuals usually are not active in other kinds of professional mainstream theater.<sup>21</sup> Zhao emphasizes that the clash of intellectual and worker perspectives was part of the process of formation of workers' theater troupes and, in his opinion, the difficulties of cross-class communication was also a struggle over representational power that could not be easily resolved.<sup>22</sup>

Among the organizations that are most experienced in the organization of community-based workers' theater is the Beijing-based NGO Migrant Workers Home (*Gongyou zhi jia* 工友之家).<sup>23</sup> The NGO is located in a formerly rural settlement, Picun, that has become part of the capital in the course of the larger city's rapid spatial development. However, this part of the city has remained an area with problems attracting investors and residents; for many years, it was the preferred destination for migrant workers.<sup>24</sup> Already in 2002, the founders of the Migrant

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<sup>20</sup> Zhao 2017: 36.

<sup>21</sup> Van Erven 2001: 2.

<sup>22</sup> Zhao 2017: 40.

<sup>23</sup> There is a growing body of literature on the Migrant Workers Home. See Lü 2014; Jia 2017; van Crevel 2019; Connery/Xu 2019; Yin 2019; Picerni 2020.

<sup>24</sup> For more on the spatial characterization of Picun, the history of the urban village and its population see Part 4 in Lü 2014; Van Crevel 2019 and Picerni 2020.

Workers Home established the Migrant Youth Performing Troupe. Throughout the years, the troupe has undergone numerous personnel changes and has also adopted different names; nevertheless, some of its founding members remain active in the collective, which currently calls itself the New Worker Theater Troupe.<sup>25</sup> To date, this active grassroots theater troupe in China has perhaps the longest history.

Not only in Beijing, but also in other regions, labor NGOs mostly emerged in neighborhoods populated by migrant populations. In the south, they settled down in shantytowns inhabited by factory workers which were also in the immediate proximity of the factories. The example of the Migrant Workers Home, but also of other labor NGOs, justifies the claim that the particular sociocultural conditions behind the emergence of workers' theater in twenty-first century China are twofold: discursive and material. First, the emergence of new workers' theater coincides with the growing discontent voiced in the name of *diceng* that expresses the public critique of widening socioeconomic disparities on the one hand, and the increasing legitimization of grassroots culture on the other. Second, the influx of migrant workers to the cities created new housing phenomena in urban spaces. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the "dormitory-labor regime"<sup>26</sup> in the Pearl River Delta industrial hub had already solidified and the less geographically specific phenomenon of "urban villages,"<sup>27</sup> such as Picun in Beijing, emerged in many large cities. Both types of settlements feature a high concentration of rural migrants who engage in economic activities either in the neighborhood or in the factory that manages the housing facilities.<sup>28</sup>

According to the sociologist and Migrant Workers Home activist Lü Tu 吕途, a neighborhood community (*shequ* 社区) consists of material conditions, or the ecosystem, of a certain space (*qu* 区) and the relationships between people (*she* 社) who inhabit it. Thus, it is not only the material infrastructure but also the shared living experience, personal networks, affects and emotions that sum up and engender a community. Lü criticizes Chinese urban living spaces for the lack of social institutions that help to produce a sense of commonality between people who spend their leisure time in close physical proximity. Particularly, neighborhoods inhabited by migrant populations lack the physical and social infrastructure that would counter the loneliness that many workers experience in the cities.<sup>29</sup> Due to administrative regulations such as lack of permanent residence permits, the

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<sup>25</sup> See Iovene, forthcoming.

<sup>26</sup> Smith/Ngai, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> On urban villages in China, see Wang 2016.

<sup>28</sup> For more on the social space of the city and migrant workers, see Picerni 2020, Hui 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Lü 2014: 294–298.

authorities perceive even migrants who often spend their whole grown-up lives in the city as temporary sojourners. Consequently, the migrants' neighborhoods are neither sustainable, nor do they provide any tools for the integration of newcomers into the city fabric.<sup>30</sup> Even though inhabitants of these overcrowded spaces statistically have much in common, their paths hardly ever cross because they all spend most of their time at work, not in their temporary abodes. Their housing provides for only the most basic human needs and leaves no space for people to gather. Understood as a project that counters such anomic living conditions, the physical space of the Migrant Workers Home in Picun and the NGO's outspoken cultural agenda for it aim at furnishing a common space for the migrant working population. Facilities, such as a library, a courtyard featuring film screenings, and the theater, serve as meeting points for the neighborhood. Furthermore, the NGO actively promotes grassroots culture and encourages migrant workers to engage, at least as an audience, in cultural activities by and for workers. Significantly, due to its relatively long history and visibility, the Migrant Workers Home sets an example to follow for other organizations that put workers' culture on their agendas.

Many of workers' theater troupes did not survive long after the beginning of the Xi Jinping 习近平 era in 2012; however, the Migrant Workers Home has demonstrated exceptional skill in navigating the dense network of social relations with the local government, mainstream media, academic establishments and foreign researchers, among others. The reason behind the abrupt turn in the operation of many grassroots organizations, theater troupes among them, was the publication of the "Overseas NGO Management Law" in 2015. As a result, all labor NGOs that turned to foreign foundations for support came under the close scrutiny of the public security bureaus, and many, consequently, ceased operations.<sup>31</sup> However, the question of the impact of governmental control and censorship eludes simple generalizations and all workers' troupes must be examined one by one. A repeated observation in scholarship that explains the volatility of theater activities among workers is the fact that it is a time-consuming practice that occupies much of the workers' scarce leisure time. Usually, participation in a theater workshop requires a member to commit at least one half of a Sunday, their only day off, to workshops and rehearsals.<sup>32</sup> The high employee turnover in factories adds to the instability of the troupes too. In point of fact, since 2015, political restrictions have had an increasing impact on labor NGOs and the cultural

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**30** On the implications of the Chinese residence (*hukou* 户口) system for domestic labor migration, see Cheng/Selden 1994; Solinger 1999 and Zhang 2001.

**31** See Wang 2019; Howell 2021.

**32** See Jaguścik, forthcoming.



activities associated with them. At the same time however, new initiatives emerged. For example, in 2011 the Migrant Women's Home in Beijing joined the grassroots theater movement and established the Corydalis Theater Society (*Didinghua jushe* 地丁花剧社) for its members. This troupe has been active since then and has even gained a decent representation on official media outlets; for example, CCTV 13 dedicated a short documentary to the troupe.<sup>33</sup> Another example from Beijing is the Magnolia Artistic Troupe (*Mulan wenyidui* 木兰文艺队), whose performance of *Birth Records* (*Shengyu jishi* 生育纪事) attracted journalists' attention and, consequently, became not only the topic of a number of reports in online media, such as Sohu<sup>34</sup> or The Paper,<sup>35</sup> but also the recipient of a review in the respected journal *Chinese Theatre* (*Zhongguo xiju* 中国戏剧).<sup>36</sup> Similar to the Migrant Women's Home, the Magnolia Community Cultural Center (*Mulanhua shequ wenhua zhongxin* 木兰社区文化中心) that stands behind the performance is an organization dedicated to supporting migrant women, mostly domestic workers, and their children in Beijing. The third example of an NGO that has, since its inception in 2015, been uninterrupted in organizing theater activities among female workers is the Green Rose Community Center (*Lüse qiangwei shehui gongzuo zhongxin* 绿色蔷薇社会工作中心) in Shenzhen. The play *They Say* (*Tamen shuo* 她们说), authored and performed by female workers involved in the Center's activities, will be discussed in detail in the second part of the paper. Here it will suffice to say that all three organizations that continue theater work with urban underclasses stress working women and children, but without evoking an emancipative or feminist vocabulary, as was the case, for example, of the now inactive Chinese Working Women Network.

### 3 Grass Stage and workers' theater

The cooperation between the Shanghai-based independent theater troupe Grass Stage and workers' theater troupes in southern China illustrates the trajectory of localization of people's theater in the PRC described above. Grass Stage was established in 2005 by the novelist Zhao Chuan 赵川, and in the same year, it performed for the first time at the Asian Madang Festival in Gwangju, Korea.<sup>37</sup> The troupe sits at the crossroads of many dramatic traditions. Its name hints at the

<sup>33</sup> The 2017 reportage can be watched online: <https://tv.cctv.com/2017/04/22/VIDEm5u6mbFP33-ViLZZZ84Gc170422.shtml> (07/11/2022).

<sup>34</sup> Wang (2019).

<sup>35</sup> Jia/Wu 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Lu 2019.

<sup>37</sup> For more on Grass Stage, see Ferrari 2012 and 2020; Connery 2019 and 2020.



tradition of itinerant theater or so-called “grass stages” that were used for performances in villages in the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). In its theater practice, Grass Stage combines legacies of pre-Maoist traditions of amateur theater troupes with insights from Asian people’s theater.<sup>38</sup>

Zhao Chuan describes the troupe’s activities as “social theater” (*shehui juchang* 社会剧场).<sup>39</sup> He perceives theater primarily as a place for people to convene, and Grass Stage aims at overcoming any ordinary barriers to self-expression in public spaces. In their practice, the group stresses the importance of diverse perspectives and many of their plays are open-ended. They reject professional theatre training such that the troupe consists solely of amateur performers who co-write the plays. Furthermore, the troupe assigns an active role to the public, as every performance is followed by a “post-performance theater”: an exchange with the audience that can last much longer than the play itself.<sup>40</sup> Grass Stage is dedicated to the creation of a “critical space”<sup>41</sup> for discussion and the renegotiation of values, such as equality and solidarity, that have been marginalized or turned into empty slogans in mainstream cultural narratives.

From its inception, the troupe sought channels through which they could approach diverse audiences with its style of interventionist theater, seeking open discussion with viewers on political and social issues. The troupe’s interest in labor issues began during the preparation for their 2014 production *World Factory* (*Shijie gongchang* 世界工厂). Grass Stage’s practice involves “field maneuvers,” which are collective trips to different locations in China in order to perform, conduct fieldwork and gather material for new performances. During the research trips to the Chinese “world factory” in the Pearl River Delta, they occasionally performed for migrant workers and organized theater workshops for them in cooperation with labor NGOs based in the south. For example, in 2015, the troupe carried out a ten-day research stay in Longhua, an industrial neighborhood in Shenzhen. Since then, the collective has established a stable, cooperative working relationship with a number of NGOs, such as the Shenzhen-based Qinghu Xuetao 清湖学堂<sup>42</sup> and Green Rose Community Center or the

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<sup>38</sup> Li 2016: 180–181.

<sup>39</sup> Connery/Zhao 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Connery/Zhao 2019: 226.

<sup>41</sup> Connery 2020: 140.

<sup>42</sup> The NGO was forced to close in 2019. My discussion of Grass Stage’s cooperation with labor NGOs is based on a conversation with Wu Jiamin (August 2018, Shanghai), who organized theater workshops for workers. I received additional information from Zhao Chuan in July 2019 (Shanghai). I would like to express my gratitude to all members of Grass Stage who answered my questions and shared their notes with me.

Migrant Workers Home in Beijing. The following sections focus on Grass Stage's cooperation with the Green Rose Community Center in Shenzhen.

## 4 The Green Rose Community center and the first female workers' art festival

In 2015, Ding Li 丁丽, a female migrant worker from Gansu, established the Green Rose Community Center in Shenzhen.<sup>43</sup> The objective of the NGO is to conduct community work with female migrant workers in the Niushipu neighborhood. It particularly aims to offer support for older, unemployed, sick female workers and their children. The majority of women associated with Green Rose have been living and working in Shenzhen for at least ten years—long enough to develop a sense of belonging to their place of sojourn. Green Rose stands out among other labor NGOs in Shenzhen due to its methods of empowering migrant women through cultural activities. Statements issued by the organization on its official WeChat account emphasize the need to set free migrant women's creative potential for the sake of the whole community. They value highly all dimensions of female creativity, which are not limited to artistic practices but also include crafts and mothering.<sup>44</sup> The NGO hopes that participation in cultural activities will help migrant women to develop their social skills and, finally, gain an audible voice in society.

In April, 2018, Green Rose organized the First Female Workers' Art Festival (*Shoujie nügong yishujie* 首届女工艺术节). The festival was intended to be part of the celebration of International Women's Day, and in early spring, Ding Li applied for funding from the local administration. Since financial support was denied, the festival required a one-month delay for the NGO to raise money through crowdfunding, but eventually the event took place. Originally, Green Rose planned the festival as a cyclical, biennial event, however, to date, no other festival has taken place.

In the course of the preparations for the 2018 event, Ding Li invited Zhao Chuan's troupe, Grass Stage, to conduct a theater workshop and prepare a play to be staged during the festival together with female migrant workers. Green Rose had

<sup>43</sup> Guo 2020. See also the NGO's introduction video on Bilibili: <http://www.bilibili.com/s/video/BV1Jz411i7B7> (05/18/2022).

<sup>44</sup> For details, see the WeChat public account of the Green Rose Community Center. For example, the NGO runs a social enterprise that sells bags and accessories sewed from sustainable materials by retired and disabled workers. [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/\\_0ThLrRPcv0Yus3mrBx9lw](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/_0ThLrRPcv0Yus3mrBx9lw) (07/11/2022).

hosted theater workshops before and when the troupe from Shanghai arrived in Shenzhen, they picked this work back up. One member of Grass Stage, a student named Wu Jiamin 吴加闵, stayed in Shenzhen for a few months. He became part of the Green Rose community and obtained a better grip on the particularities of female workers' day-to-day existence. In the course of the rehearsals, a ten-minute-long improvisation *She Says* (*Ta shuo* 她说) by members of the NGO that was the output of a previous theater workshop was gradually expanded to a final performance running time of nearly thirty minutes. It was first staged during the festival under the new title, *They Say*.

During its workshops with workers, Grass Stage usually relied on theater techniques associated with Playback Theater, such as telling stories from one's life and enacting them on the spot.<sup>45</sup> This method brings personal storytelling and improvisation into focus; thus, every participant of the workshop is also a potential teller and co-author of the performance. *They Say* stands out among other performances conducted by Grass Stage due to its unique focus on the female experience. Zhao Chuan emphasizes that through storytelling, individuals can find a common ground and historicize their private biographies.<sup>46</sup> Thus, *They Say* is more than simply the sum of individual stories enacted on stage; it is, rather, an oral history of a cohort of women.

Green Rose's cooperation with Grass Stage lasted two years. Members of the Shanghainese troupe undertook a number of trips to Shenzhen, for example in fall of 2018, to lead a drama workshop dedicated to the topic of domestic violence. The 2019 crackdown on labor activism brought an end to Grass Stage's practice of field maneuvers.

## 5 *They Say*: daughters, wives, mothers and workers

Despite the early literary breakthrough by poet Zheng Xiaoqiong, the gendered dimension of subaltern writing has so far received less scholarly scrutiny than its class dimension. Even though a number of female migrant workers-turned-authors have already gained national and international fame, the majority of *diceng* writers are male.<sup>47</sup> Among their female peers, the Guangdong-based Zheng Xiaoqiong and Fan Yusu 范雨素, who is associated with the Migrant Workers Home, have received the most attention from a reading audience. These

<sup>45</sup> For more on Playback Theater see Rosin/Vogel 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Zhao's private notes.

<sup>47</sup> For a chronological overview of women workers writing, see Hui 2021: 49–50.

two writers symbolically represent two distinct categories of female migrants in China: the factory worker who left countryside for the southern industrial hub and the often elderly domestic worker who runs urban households. Zheng and Fan both excel in poetry and prose essays, the two genres that have been most often identified with migrant worker literature.<sup>48</sup> The following sections of the paper focus on self-representations of female migrant workers in grassroots theater. It discusses a dramatic text and its performances, aiming at shedding light on working women's subjectivities that emerge in the in-between space shaped by feelings of homelessness and efforts at homemaking.

The 2018 play *They Say* opens with a song. Seven women perform "One Family, Three Homes" (*Yi ge jiating, san ge jia* 一个家庭, 三个家) while dancing on stage with a long piece of red cloth, the only prop introduced during the performance. Red is an auspicious color in China that stands for happiness, good luck, and is traditionally used during wedding ceremonies. The lyrics contrast the symbolism of this color in that they describe in plain words the female migrant worker experience of displacement and spiritual homelessness.<sup>49</sup> Thus, already the opening scene of the play creates a tension between social expectations and the women's actual experiences and feeling. This conflict is the overarching theme of the performance that runs like a common thread through the individual performer's stories. The text of "One Family, Three Homes" makes clear that, even though every woman on stage has three places she could call "home" (*jia* 家), i.e., her place of origin (*laojia* 老家), the husband's native place (*ta xiang* 他乡) and the city of Shenzhen, none of them is really theirs. The following verse brings to the fore another commonality between the women: they live apart from their children, who usually cannot accompany their mothers to the city to work. Thus, they are all torn between different places and conflicted social roles. Every location mentioned in the lyrics is tied to only one dimension of their personality: they are either daughters, mothers or workers. However, none of the places called "home" sustains social practices that acknowledge their multifaceted identities.

*They Say* weaves individual stories into a collective biography of rural women born in the 1980s, the first decade of the economic reforms undertaken after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). They all spent their formative years in the countryside and their lives have been overshadowed by expectations inscribed

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<sup>48</sup> On the concept of "migrant workers literature," see Iovene/Picerni 2022. On migrant workers poetry (*dagong shige*) see Sun 2012; van Crevel 2017 and 2019.

<sup>49</sup> A recording of the 2018 performance may be found on Green Rose's Bilibili account: [http://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1T5411W7cn?spm\\_id\\_from=333.337.search-card.all.click](http://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1T5411W7cn?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click) (05/18/2022).

into traditional village culture. Girls soon find out that they are supposed to follow a script written by economic deprivation and gendered expectations, no matter how limiting. The migrant women on stage speak of the shame they felt when they had to drop out of middle school because their families were either too poor or had to save money for their siblings' education. This is perhaps the first time that they share their regrets with others, because as children they tacitly accepted their lot. Ding Li, who dropped out of school and began to work in Lanzhou at age fourteen, recalls:

[W]e were harvesting wheat in the fields when my mum told me gently that I would not be able to go to school if my elder brother passed his entrance exam to high school. ... [I] have four sisters, so I truly understood my parents' decision. I quietly accepted this fact. ... Before the start of the new semester, I joined fellow villagers who left for Lanzhou to work. Every time I spotted my classmates in their school uniforms, I felt overwhelmed by longing and helplessness, but the only thing I could do was to return to the dorm and silently write these feelings down in my diary.<sup>50</sup>

Green Rose decided that “Let the dialogue happen” (*rang duihua fasheng* 让对话发生) would be the leading theme of the entire Female Workers' Art Festival. Ding Li emphasized that this “dialogue” is not an instant one-time act, but an ongoing dynamic process of voicing views and exchanging and discussing them. Ding perceived the festival as an inaugural step leading to an ongoing conversation between female workers from Shenzhen and men, next to female migrant workers from other cities, intellectuals, artists. These groups were all the intended audiences for the festival. Most importantly, the event was expected to create a venue for members of the NGO and other women to speak in their own voices about their individual lives, but also about the collective history of female migrant workers.<sup>51</sup> The memories of keeping adversities quietly to themselves are a recurring theme in *They Say*. Thus, the title of the performance and the name of the festival both foreground the importance of speaking as a ritual of transformation towards the possibility of new individual and collective subjectivities endowed with a gendered voice.

The performance moves on to the topic of marriage. As a rule, the villagers expect their daughters to marry shortly after they reach the legal age and to find a husband in close geographic proximity. Preconditions for migration sometimes also include a semi-arranged marriage, as a guarantee that the local community will be able to extend social control over rural women's lives despite the distance. If a girl leaves the village unmarried, she is expected to return home and surrender

<sup>50</sup> *They Say*, 2018, 00:05:32-00:06:46. All translations are my own.

<sup>51</sup> Bu/Ren 2018.



to matchmaking. The performer squats on stage while recalling how she was pressed into marriage by her mother. Other female performers wrap her up in red cloth, and then they all grab the cloth and carry the newlywed to the other side of the stage. The bride is represented as an object, a gift to the husband's family and her lack of agency is obvious. The villagers expect that in her new role as a married woman, she would dedicate herself to the male project of continuing his family line and serving her in-laws. In this part, *They Say* entangles the performers' memories with their mothers' stories. Like their mothers, the women were held personally responsible if they failed to give the husband's family with a male heir. The similarities between the generations make clear that gender roles have not changed much in post-Mao China. According to the performers' stories, the joys of motherhood can hardly make up for the continuing pressure of childbearing:

When the child left my body, I felt the miracle of a women's body. She has a pair of hands, feet and eyes, but she is a girl...<sup>52</sup>

Ding Li's voice bursts with joy when she begins to describe her newborn daughter, but she ends the second sentence in a tone of disappointment that mocks her in-laws' reaction to the sight of their granddaughter. Her presentation indicates without doubt that in rural environments, girls still count less than male offspring.

Nevertheless, the women on stage have less children than their mothers' generation. It demonstrates that, despite ongoing regimes of gender discrimination, the daughters are less likely to bow to villagers' expectations. For example, one of the women threatened her husband's family with divorce if she was not left in peace after she had given birth to two daughters because the in-laws continued to press her for a grandson. Despite the harsh conditions of their lives, members of the Green Rose perceive labor migration as a relief from the burden of family expectations. At their workplaces, female migrant workers can share these stories and bond over shared memories of girlhoods that fell prey to traditional patriarchal beliefs. In the play, one of the women flashes back to her childhood and her lost sister's story. She vaguely remembers her mother's pregnancy and the cry of a baby girl. The girl disappeared without a trace soon after she had been born. In the light of a long tradition of gender discrimination, selective abortion, and female infanticide, every woman on stage is a survivor.

This is the only scene in which *They Say* touches upon the topic of physical violence, whereas psychological and economic violence are the women's constant

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52 *They Say*, 2018, 00:08:19-00:08:35.



companions in the play. Other texts by female migrant workers have already made clear that none of the three homes, their native place, their husbands' homes or the city, are safe places for them.<sup>53</sup> Throughout their youth, they lack access to secure spaces and sometimes migration is the only way out of an oppressive environment. In their workplaces, they met women with whom they share many experiences and living conditions. That alone does not automatically lead to deep and lasting bonds as many of the women change jobs frequently, but some of them enter a supportive network of working "sisters" (*jiemei* 姐妹). Despite the dull and exhausting work in factories, they have the chance to discover the advantages of female friendship beyond family relationships. Furthermore, they often rely heavily on this supportive network. An elderly performer recalled the care she experienced when she suddenly suffered from temporary semiparalysis due to overwork:

Suddenly, one day I could not get up from bed. Luckily, the "sisters" in my dormitory had sympathy for me. They washed my hair and massaged my back. They sang for me and made me laugh.<sup>54</sup>

This emotional and physical help is important because the reality of living apart from their families or other support networks can be harsh. *They Say* ponders the relationship between the performers and their children. These women had to choose between providing economically for their families and raising their children at home. They helplessly watch their children growing distant from them. In contrast to their mothers, whom they remember as gifted storytellers, they can only occasionally send videos and return home only once a year.

The performance follows female workers' life trajectories, and its closing section is dedicated to their third home, Shenzhen. According to the play, the city failed to fulfill their material expectations; nevertheless, they grew into the urban environment and gained a sense of strength and independence. The seven women on stage agree that the fact that they have survived in the city for many years and are able to sustain themselves economically is their major achievement. Significantly, they feel an emotional bond with Shenzhen, the place that has become more familiar to them than their other two homes in the countryside.

"I like it here," "I don't want to leave," they say, close to the end of the performance. Together with their "sister-friends," these women spend more years in Shenzhen than in their hometowns. The play ends with a song dedicated to the migrant women's ideals:

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<sup>53</sup> See Zheng 2012.

<sup>54</sup> *They Say*, 2018, 00:19:21-00:19:53.

I want a family  
 that stays together and does not live apart  
 [in a place] full of sunlight and flowers  
 I want a job  
 an eight-hour shift that pays enough to make a living  
 love, friendship and her  
 I want to fly freely  
 fly freely in the sun  
 I want to fly freely<sup>55</sup>

Even though the performers could yet not realize these dreams,<sup>56</sup> they at least found friendship and a greater scope of personal freedom than ever before. Significantly, with Green Rose's support, they courageously stepped out of the confines of traditional gender roles. Instead of continuing the line of private storytelling aimed at comforting children, they speak out about the difficulties encountered by a large group of Chinese women who leave the countryside to work in the cities. The seven women on stage, together with many others in the background, remind the local and central authorities of their responsibilities toward all citizens, including almost 120 million<sup>57</sup> female migrant workers. They say that to date, the state failed to provide for women's security and individual and collective labor rights, nor did it undertake enough to put an end to gender discrimination.

In a typical manner of Zhao Chuan's social theater, the audience is invited to interpret and comment on the performance after its completion. During the discussion, the NGO volunteer Huang Xiaona 黄小娜 brought back the main theme of the festival: the female migrant workers' voice. She also emphasizes that rural women are expected to keep their silence in public, particularly about sad or tragic events. They are more accustomed to suppressing sadness than talking openly about it. Huang speaks of the theater workshop as of a "healing" activity, and her opinion resonates with theater practitioners who believe that participation in

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<sup>55</sup> For lyrics and a short background on the song, see Green Rose's WeChat account. It is a collective work written during a songwriting workshop organized by the NGO in January 2016. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/SGB7Oy3QIqbimKj5YTD1Dg> (07/11/2022).

<sup>56</sup> Neither the dream of living together with their families, nor the dream of being able to survive without working overtime can be fulfilled without the state's systematic and structural support. Without a reform of the residence policy and a sustainable program of rural development, the women will remain torn between their three quasi-homes.

<sup>57</sup> Bu/Ren 2018.

people's theater can help to restore the emotional health of a group.<sup>58</sup> In her short opinion piece dedicated to the festival, the scholar and activist Bu Wei 卜卫 foregrounds the importance of sharing stories and collective creation, which is part of the process of establishing a grassroots perspective on female migrant labor history in the emergence of new collective subjectivities.<sup>59</sup> In general, these two opinions on the significance of workers' theater as a community-building activity are echoed in many scholarly publications on the topic.<sup>60</sup>

## 6 Home far away from home

In migrant worker literature, the topic of home often evokes painful emotions, but sometimes it also implies a sense of utopia.<sup>61</sup> Writing by women adds a new dimension to the theme as it often reveals ambivalent feelings, which authors have long kept to themselves. Male migrants first experience spiritual homelessness when they leave their hometowns and enter an unfamiliar urban environment, but rural women come to know this sense of loss earlier, when they are married off and leave their family homes. This section draws upon literary texts by female migrant workers in order to come to grips with this difference. It seeks to describe how individual and collective practices of homemaking support the emergence of different identities and subjectivities, some of them oppressive and others potentially liberating.

One of the main approaches in prior discussions and representations of migrant workers' stories is to focus on the erosion of families living apart.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, many families living in separation suffer under these circumstances. Nevertheless, stories by migrant women collected during the theater workshops conducted by Grass Stage tell us that these scholarly and artistic representations are inclined to idealize family life in the countryside. Instead of inquiring into rural family life in detail, this genre juxtaposes it with the exploitation and oppression migrant workers experience in industrial cities.<sup>63</sup> The implied contrast between countryside and the city suggests an evaluation in favor of the rural environment. Female-authored texts prove that reality is much messier. The

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<sup>58</sup> Prendergast/Saxton 2009: 12; Liang 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Bu/Ren 2018.

<sup>60</sup> See Deng/Zhao 2020; Bu 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Qin 2016: 28–30. For a throughout discussion of the rural-urban opposition in a corpus of poems by Picun-based authors, see Picerni 2020: 155–163. On nostalgia and idealization of rural life, see also Iovene/Picerni 2022.

<sup>62</sup> See Fan 2009; Chapter 3 in Zhou 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Picerni makes a similar observation, see his 2020: 157.

two rural homes from the song, “One family, three homes,” i.e., the family home and the marital one, evoke very different emotions in female migrant workers. Representations of childhood and marriage in different genres of female migrant writing bespeak a contrast between the warmth the women associate with their mothers and the loneliness and sometimes abuse they often experience in their marital homes. Fan Yusu’s viral autobiographical essay, “I am Fan Yusu,” describes a childhood filled with books and her mother’s unconditional love despite the daughter’s rebellious behavior. Fan later married an abusive alcoholic whom she left to return to her parental home with her two daughters in search of support from family and the local community. However, her efforts to reconnect with her townspeople and siblings are in vain, as they claim that the fact she had left her husband brought disgrace upon the family; the experience made her realize that she was homeless:

At this moment, I realized I no longer had a home. ... I did not resent my brother, but I understood that I was now merely a passer-by in the village where I was born and raised. My two children were even more like rootless, floating duckweed. In this world, we only had my mother who loved us.<sup>64</sup>

Fan is not the only author who cherishes her mother. The authors of *They Say* depict their mothers’ beauty, storytelling talents and everyday hard work in tender words. Motherly figures contrast with absent fathers, who either had left the villages for work, or were not involved in the upbringing of children.

Many of these tales are texts by domestic workers who lost their jobs due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Beijing.<sup>65</sup> Some of them would rather stay in the deserted capital than return to their marital homes in the countryside. In her short essay, Chen Ai 尘埃 describes the “love” she experienced from her female friends on a lonely New Year’s Eve when she was stuck in Beijing due to the pandemic. A friend let her stay in her small flat in the city and another “sister” cheered her up with massages, videos and small gifts. The only family members she spoke with were also female, her mother and her niece.<sup>66</sup> While *They Say* only briefly touches upon the subject of gendered violence, essays by migrant women engage with the topic more openly, but the extent of daily abuse remains unknown. Shi Hongli 施洪丽 focuses in her text on four domestic workers struggling with exploitative work agencies. She mentions only in passing that one of the women she shares the flat with was abducted as a nineteen

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<sup>64</sup> Fan 2017.

<sup>65</sup> For English-language discussion, see Xiao 2021: 51–53.

<sup>66</sup> Ai 2020: 62–64.

year old and sold to a Shanxi man as a wife.<sup>67</sup> She managed to escape but had to leave her firstborn son behind. Female-authored texts demonstrate that even though the women's earnings are indispensable to their families' wellbeing, their significant economic contribution to the household budget does not lead to more gender equality at home.<sup>68</sup>

Xia 夏, a female member of the workers theater troupe, the North Gate Theater (*Beimen jushe* 北门剧社),<sup>69</sup> delivers a straightforward description of her husband's violent behavior:

My husband left every evening to drink and gamble. I spent the time alone at home. I told him many times that we lived on a shoestring, but he didn't care. If I refused to open the door, he kicked it open. We had a kicked-in hole in our door...

He jumped out of bed furiously, held me tight, pressed his knees to my chest and grasped my collar with one hand while hitting my eye with the other fist.<sup>70</sup>

After this outburst of violence, Xia fled with her baby to her parental home, but her family forced her to return to her husband. She accepted because like most rural women, she knew that in the patrilineal village culture, married daughters are outsiders. Again, in Fan Yusu's own words:

My mother was a strong politician, but she did not dare to stand up against China's five thousand years of "three principles and five virtues" [according to traditional morale, a woman must follow her male family members, i.e., her father, husband and son, and adhere to feminist virtues of decency and restraint in speech and behavior].<sup>71</sup>

*They Say* does not reveal any traumatic experiences of domestic abuse; men are simply largely absent from the play. Stories collected in the play organize emotions into a matrilineal pattern. The women recall their hardworking mothers and are visibly moved, sometimes to tears, when speaking about their daughters. They differ from their mothers' generation in that they do not subscribe to patriarchal values. "I could never value men more than women" (*zhong nan qing nü* 重男轻女) one of them declares from the stage in the name of the entire troupe.

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<sup>67</sup> Shi 2020: 67.

<sup>68</sup> Texts by domestic workers add a new dimension to the topic of home because many of the women temporarily live in the urban households they work for. This is another home they do not belong to. The discussion of this aspect is beyond the scope of this paper, but many of the women's personal observations echo the scholarly description of the profession by Sun Wanning. See Sun 2009 and Li 2019.

<sup>69</sup> On the Shenzhen-based North Gate Theater Troupe, see Connery 2020: 145 and Jagusćik (forthcoming).

<sup>70</sup> Xia Pingchang, unpublished manuscript. I received the text from Xia via WeChat in 2019.

<sup>71</sup> Fan 2017.

The opening song of *They Say* names Shenzhen as the third “home.” Again, it is a home the performers, and other migrants, do not belong to. Due to the rules of the household registration system, they have no urban residence rights and have only limited access to social infrastructure, and their rights are not properly protected. The lack of social infrastructure catering to the needs of migrant workers seems in accordance with state policies that do not encourage the workers to develop a sense of belonging to the cities. The names of the two labor NGOs that have received most scholarly attention, the Migrant Women’s Home and Migrant Workers’ Home, reveal the organizations’ hope to give the floating population a sense of home in an unwelcoming city. These organizations are aware that community work is left to NGOs and, as many organizations, Green Rose included, have demonstrated, volunteers do not spare any efforts to create the material and emotional basis for the wellbeing of the migrant workforce. Writing by migrant workers demonstrates clearly that social bonds and solidarity do not develop spontaneously as a result of the workers’ similar backgrounds and shared conditions of precarity. Many texts, particularly those describing work at the assembly line, depict the contrary: the lack of human interaction and ongoing disintegration of fragile social networks due to dehumanizing work conditions.<sup>72</sup> Thus, interventions by NGOs are sorely needed and those discussed in this essay demonstrate that they can disrupt the inertia of the daily routine through the creation of material spaces in which individual stories can be shared and woven into a collective identity.

## 7 A community in the making

Services provided to female migrant workers by the Green Rose Community Center span a broad continuum of topics. They reach from issues, such as proud identification with their worker identities, to mundane concerns of day-to-day life, for example, organizing classes in basic computer skills or activities for the women’s children.<sup>73</sup> There are visible engagements on the part of NGOs to awaken a social consciousness in female migrant workers through raising their identification with local and global workers’ movements. One volunteer, a designer who created items that retired female workers could later sew in the NGO’s workshop, decided to make a shoulder bag with the slogan “Workers are heaven” (*gongren shi tian* 工人是天). The sentence can be traced back to the work of early propagators of workers’ movements in China, the revolutionaries Li Dazhao and Li Lisan, both

<sup>72</sup> See Van Crevel 2019, Iovene/Picerni 2022, Zhou 2021.

<sup>73</sup> See the NGO’s reports on its official WeChat account.



inspired by global socialist movements in the 1920s.<sup>74</sup> As a sign of its global entanglements, the NGO itself is named after the famous lyrics to James Oppenheim's "Bread and Roses" that were later set to music and became the anthem of the American feminist and trade union movements.

"Feminism" is not a specific word on the Green Rose's agenda, but there are enough reasons to believe that the NGO consciously chose euphemistic language to target women, children and community work.<sup>75</sup> From a historical perspective, even Chinese state feminism, represented since 1949 by the nationwide umbrella organization All-China Women's Federation, has a long tradition of camouflaging a feminist agenda behind the dominant official language. The historian Wang Zheng calls this strategy a "politics of concealment."<sup>76</sup> According to Wang, in the environment shaped by the pervasive patriarchal culture and male supremacy in the Party, women cadres learned to translate their demands into the language of state ideology in order to achieve their emancipatory goals. Thus, even today, and after a period of the rapid rise of gender-focused NGOs that began with the Beijing UN Conference on Women in 1995, open articulation of feminist demands in public spaces remains rare. Feminist agendas counter the party-state's politics, which, since the beginning of economic reform, have increasingly promoted the revival of traditional Confucian virtues and gender roles, in contrast to the mainstream socialist gender ideology of the Mao era. In addition, since Xi Jinping came to power, NGOs working on women's rights and particularly organizations receiving foreign funding have faced a hostile environment and consequently, many had to shut down. More importantly, the intersectional forces of social critique and potential opposition, for example, the ability of intellectuals and feminists to connect with labor NGOs, has traditionally been viewed as dangerous by the state.<sup>77</sup>

Even though the Green Rose has been operating continuously since 2015, one can assume that absence of the previously planned follow-up on the 2018 Women Worker's Art Festival, is a result of the current backlash against labor and gender NGOs. A booklet that commemorates the first edition of the Festival, introduces the activities organized by Green Rose during the event, such as a song-writing workshop, a class in photography, performances of worker's theater troupes, or a workshop on female worker's history in China. "Feminism" does not at all appear in that publication, but it mentions, for example, labor rights, and the reproductive rights of female workers.<sup>78</sup> The most recent registration certificate of the NGO Green

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<sup>74</sup> See Perry 2012: 71.

<sup>75</sup> On crackdown on feminist activism see Fincher 2018; Goldkorn/Fincher 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Zheng 2016:16–20.

<sup>77</sup> See Chapter 6 in Fincher 2018.

<sup>78</sup> I downloaded the booklet from the NGO's official WeChat account in 2018. Currently, it is no longer available.

Rose from Summer 2020, defines community and family work as the organization's realm of operation. Among the licensed activities are educational ones, such as organization of lessons or lectures and mediation between the neighborhood and broader society. The certificate expires in 2024.<sup>79</sup>

The Green Rose Community Center has created a safe space, in which female migrant workers feel accepted regardless of the precarious situation they live in. According to Lü Tu's definition, the existence of such a place is a necessary precondition for the emergence of a community. Lü organized one of her books around the claim that the new workers live permanently at a loss for choices between the city in which they cannot stay and the countryside that they cannot, or do not want to, return to.<sup>80</sup> Particularly for women, there is a double bind between traditional and modern values. Interviews conducted by Lü for her book project show that an easy way out of conflicting gender roles does not exist. As in *They Say*, marriage and motherhood cannot be chosen freely, but the roles of wife and mother inevitably clash with the demands of women's jobs, which is, again, not a path toward emancipation but pure economic necessity.<sup>81</sup> Since childhood, female migrant workers have had no place of their own, and only after they had become part of the Green Rose community did many of them hear for the first time that they deserve respect as women, workers, wives and mothers.

The feminist scholar Sara Ahmed emphasizes the significance of physical space for the creation of collectives and social movements:

A collective is what does not stand still but creates and is being created by movement. ... And yet movement has to be built. To be part of a movement requires we find places to gather, meeting places. A movement is also a shelter .... A movement needs to take place somewhere. A movement is not just a movement; there is something that needs to keep still, given a place, if we are moved to transform what is.<sup>82</sup>

The performers and authors of *They Say* show that acting on stage and participating in other collective activities stirs an intersubjective movement of emotions. The women are visibly moved by their own and others' stories. The healing potential of theater practice works on both the individual and collective levels through public storytelling. The stage and the Green Rose community, alike, do not require them to choose between different identities; they can be mothers, workers and creators at the same time. Furthermore, the commonalities in their life stories engender a community with a transformative potential.

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<sup>79</sup> Ding Ling shared the document on the NGO's WeChat account on 27 October 2022. [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/r16qYUK\\_2cR65Z5iClk5uQ](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/r16qYUK_2cR65Z5iClk5uQ).

<sup>80</sup> Lü 2012.

<sup>81</sup> Lü 2012: 218–224.

<sup>82</sup> Ahmed 2017: 2.

Despite the conspicuous sense of an absence of belonging that the authors of *They Say* have experienced in all three homes, they do not reject the idea of home. The closing song, “I wish,” reveals a set of values that the women associate with their ideal home. Love, friendship, work and freedom are the fundamentals of this projection. Their biographies show that prior to their arrival in Shenzhen, they never had a home where they could be themselves. In the traditional village culture, homemaking is a female activity that is, however, governed by male patriarchal concerns and enacted by the objectification of women. In female migrant workers’ texts, home functions as a “critical value” by, in Iris Young’s words, defining “the four normative values of home that should be thought of as minimally accessible to all people.” These four values are “safety [for example, from domestic violence], individuation, privacy and preservation [of things and their meaning].”<sup>83</sup>

The theater work and also other texts by female migrants discussed here show that the various spaces the women call home beget different identities and subjectivities. There is no doubt that even now, Chinese migrant workers of any gender have not yet reclaimed the idea of home for themselves, as the state explicitly defines the mobile workforce through its exclusion from urban spaces. But men at least carry along the memory of family homes in which they can feel comfortable and safe. In their writings, this memory fuels a sense of a nostalgic longing for an impossible security and comfort. Women from the countryside do not share this longing. In contrast, they explore the urban environment in search of new possibilities. Domestic workers discover the joys of living alone, factory workers bond through storytelling with “sisters” in dormitories, and they find extended kinship when participating in creative activities organized by NGOs or engaging with other women via social media. Their writing shows that in the cities, they engage in various homemaking projects that sometimes support personal and collective identities that differ from those engendered by traditional culture.

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<sup>83</sup> Young 2005: 151–153.

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