



Universiteit Leiden

Chinese Community Theater:
Voice in The Maternity Chronicles

MA Thesis

Sanne Gommers

MA Asian Studies

Leiden University

June 30, 2021

15,074 words

Thesis supervisor:

Prof. Maghiel van Crevel

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the women of the Mulan Center, who shared their experiences with others, including me, through *The Maternity Chronicles*.

I would like to thank director Zhao Zhiyong for sharing his experiences and ideas with me, and for generously providing me with materials related to the play.

I want to thank my supervisor Maghiel van Crevel for his questions, advice, insights, and kindness. Thank you for helping me find out how to write this thesis.

I would also like to thank the second reader for their time and efforts.

Xinyu, thank you for helping me translate, and sharing your language once again.

My family, thank you for your encouragement; your early lessons on what it means to listen to those who cannot speak are at the very core of this project.

Floris, thank you for all your help and your loving words; and for seeing me through this adventure.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
1. INTRODUCTION	4
1.1. CHINESE MIGRANT WORKERS AS A SUBALTERN GROUP	4
1.2. VOICES OF MIGRANT WORKERS	4
1.3. <i>THE MATERNITY CHRONICLES</i> : A COMMUNITY THEATER PLAY.....	5
2. METHODOLOGY	7
2.1. MATERIAL: THE PLAY AND RELATED RESOURCES	7
2.2. MATERIAL: MY INTERVIEW WITH ZHAO	7
2.3. METHODS OF ANALYSIS	8
2.4. CONTEXT.....	8
2.5. WRITING ABOUT VOICE	8
3. THEORETICAL CONCEPTS	11
3.1. SUBALTERNITY, GENDER, AND VOICE	11
3.2. ABORTION AS A TABOO	14
3.3. COMMUNITY THEATER	17
4. THE MATERNITY CHRONICLES	20
4.1. BACKGROUND	20
4.2. SYNOPSIS	20
5. TELLING MARGINALIZED STORIES ON STAGE	22
5.1. <i>ABOUT</i> MIGRANT WORKER WOMEN	22
5.2. <i>BY</i> MIGRANT WORKER WOMEN	25
5.3. <i>FOR</i> MIGRANT WORKER WOMEN	27
6. COMMUNITY THEATER AS A PLATFORM FOR STORYTELLING	29
6.1. GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND INTERVIEWS	29
6.2. PERFORMING	31
7. KEY DETERMINANTS OF VOICE	34
7.1. COMMUNITY, SOCIAL FABRIC, AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS	34
7.2. PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS.....	38
7.3. OWNERSHIP OF EXPERIENCE: <i>OF</i> MIGRANT WORKER WOMEN?	39
8. CONCLUSION	43
9. BIBLIOGRAPHY	45

1. Introduction

1.1. Chinese migrant workers as a subaltern group

A significant part of the Chinese population consists of migrant workers; people who have moved from rural to urban areas to work. Since the 1980s, they have played a crucial role in China's economic development. In 2020, there was an estimated number of 286 million migrant workers in China. (China Labour Bulletin 2021)

A structural factor that marginalizes rural migrant workers in cities is the household registration (户口, *hukou*) system. Every citizen has an urban or rural registration, which entitles them to different rights. Changing from a rural to urban registration has been impossible for most migrant workers. Without urban registration they cannot access public social services such as education and healthcare in the cities. (Ngai 2005, 5)

As such, the household system restricts the integration of rural people into the cities. There is also a pervasive prejudice of urban populations toward rural migrant workers; they are consistently construed as the inferior 'other' to the modern urban population. (Jacka 2015, 31)

1.2. Voices of migrant workers

In dominant urban discourses about migrant workers, migrant workers themselves rarely get to speak. (Jacka 1998, 71) These discourses include dehumanizing language, for example addressing migrant workers as 'floods'. (Jacka 1998, 46) When migrant workers are invited to speak about their experiences and challenges on public platforms, the focus is often on their individual weaknesses, which obscures structural gendered or class-related aspects to their hardships. (Jagućik 2011, 135)

While largely excluded from participation in mainstream culture and cultural organizations, individual migrant workers and migrant worker collectives have engaged in cultural practices. Literature and theater are among the art forms that have become part of what might be called 'migrant worker culture.' The reach of such cultural productions varies greatly; from poems published on dorm room walls read by fellow migrant

workers, to those published online read by people all over the country, and even translated for international readers. (Ngai 2005, 23; Qin 2016)

Platforms such as the journal *Nongjianü Baishitong (Rural Women Knowing All)* offer spaces where migrant workers can speak for themselves. (Jagućik 2011, 126) Online platforms and workers' organizations have also played an important role in the formation of cultural communities. (Cliff and Wang 2018, 45) Examples include the Migrant Workers Home in Picun, and the Working Sisters' Home, both located in Beijing. (Fu 2009) In these communities, the production of culture often goes hand in hand with the formation of collective identities. (Qiu and Wang 2018) Such communities have also been observed to empower individuals, and offer a platform for expression. (Fu 2009)

1.3. *The Maternity Chronicles: a community theater play*

One of these communities is the Beijing-based Mulan Community Service Center (hereafter the Mulan Center), a non-profit organization that supports migrant worker women in Beijing. It was established in 2010 by migrant worker Qi Lixia and three 'sisters', as they refer to each other. After several relocations, their activity center is now located in the Dongsha area in Beijing, which has around 2000 local inhabitants and a large population of migrant workers varying from 30,000 to 70,000. (Fan 2019, Jianchang 2019, Mulan Center December 2019)

The organization aims to introduce social and cultural resources to migrant women and their children, in order to create opportunities for social interaction and cultural life, and to improve gender equality and women's independence. (Mulan Center December 2019) More than 150 people had participated in their activities as of 2019. (Mulan Center December 2019; Womenvoice 2019) The Mulan Center has a reading group, classes for children, recreational events, and a Women's Literature and Art Team. (Fan 2019, Womenvoice 2019)

They have also organized several theater plays, all based on experiences of members of the community, and performed by members as well. Topics have included the exclusion of migrant children from schools in Beijing, and the demolitions causing forced moving of migrant workers. (Fan 2019) For several of these plays, the Mulan Center collaborated with Zhao Zhiyong, who is a theater director and teaches applied

theater at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. Zhao previously worked with another migrant worker community, and his collaboration with the Mulan Center started in 2014. (Fan 2019; Feng 2019; Jianchang 2019; Wang 2019) He uses the approach of community theater, which makes drama techniques available to people with limited cultural resources and experiences, and aims to empower people through theater. (Zhao 2017)

From 2017 to 2019, the Mulan Center and Zhao Zhiyong worked on a theater project called *The Maternity Chronicles* (生育纪事). In this play, women share experiences of childbirth and abortion, topics that are taboo and are normally not discussed in public. *The Maternity Chronicles* challenges this; it addresses the topics of pregnancy and abortion from the mother's perspective, as well as the underlying socio-economic marginalization, and was made by migrant worker women themselves.

In this thesis, I look at how the women's experiences were made into *The Maternity Chronicles*, with particular attention to the concept of voice, and the power dynamics that shaped this theater project. This leads me to the following research question: How is the migrant worker woman's voice negotiated in *The Maternity Chronicles*?

To make this question operational, I ask: Whose voices are heard at which moments during the theater-making process? What does it mean for a community and its individuals to have voice? How does the format of community theater facilitate storytelling as a medium for voice? How did different people involved in *The Maternity Chronicles* help shape the spaces where voice could emerge?

2. Methodology

This thesis builds on a paper that I wrote for a class on Chinese migrant worker culture in 2019. Since that time, several sources related to *The Maternity Chronicles* have become available to me. In this chapter, I will discuss my methodological choices, reflect on the central notion of *voice*, and identify some limitations of my research.

2.1. Material: the play and related resources

The play *The Maternity Chronicles* forms an important part of the analysis in this thesis. I have not attended any performance of the play myself, but director Zhao Zhiyong has generously given me access to a video recording of the premiere, the script, the transcript of the interview with the woman whose story the play is based on, and a document with written feedback from members of the audience and performers of the play. I assisted Zhao by translating the lines of the play into English.¹ This translation was used to add subtitles to the video recording.

2.2. Material: my interview with Zhao

I met with Zhao in January 2020, when he was a visiting scholar at Utrecht University. I conducted a semi-structured in-depth interview with him as part of my research. The interview was over three hours long, and was recorded.

During the interview we discussed *The Maternity Chronicles*, and issues of voice and participation specifically. I am aware that in considering Zhao's views, I need to take into account his positionality in relation to representations of the play, as organizer and director of the play, and as an academic. During our scholarly conversation on community theater, we explicitly identified issues of representation, voice, gender, and class, and the role community theater can play in addressing these issues. As empowering people to tell stories is an integral part of the concept and goals of community theater, it is not surprising that voice played a significant role in Zhao's accounts of the process of making this play. (Van Erven 2001, Introduction) I am especially interested in investigating *how*

¹ With the help of Xinyu Li and Floris Meertens.

Zhao talks about voice, and *how* he reflects on his own position in the process of ‘giving voice’ in this community theater project.

2.3. Methods of analysis

I analyzed the play by close-reading the script and the video recording, in conjunction with the related resources mentioned above. I transcribed and coded the interview, and after grouping the codes thematically (important themes including shared experience, taking initiative, roles of people involved, and different phases of the project), I analyzed the corresponding contents of the interview. In this thesis, I do not present a literary analysis of the play, nor a purely qualitative analysis of the interview. Drawing on methods traditionally associated with different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, I used an approach of triangulation by putting together and comparing the information from the play and related resources on the one hand, and the information from the interview, on the other.

I have anonymized some of the details about individuals that Zhao shared with me during the interview, since I could not ask permission to use the names of the individuals in question.

2.4. Context

In this thesis, I situate *The Maternity Chronicles* in existing scholarly debate about marginalization, gender, voice, abortion as a taboo, and community theater in the Chinese context. Unfortunately, my Chinese skills are insufficient to access Chinese-language scholarship, which could contribute to follow-up research by myself or others in future. In addition to scholarly work, I have used in-depth news articles and videos about *The Maternity Chronicles* in Chinese and English.

2.5. Writing about voice

I am approaching the issue from the resources that are currently available to me. The news articles and videos include statements by some of the women involved in the project, the feedback document contains a few short statements written by participants,

and during the interview I have asked Zhao about the women's positions and reactions. However, direct accounts of the migrant worker women are missing. The play itself is the most direct account available to me.

There is a certain irony in me - a university student on the other side of the world - writing this thesis about voices of the Chinese subaltern based on all sorts of accounts except for direct accounts of the migrant worker women themselves. This is a limitation to my project that I cannot overcome at the moment, but I hope that my work can lay the foundation for later research that will draw more directly on perspectives of the women themselves.

At different stages of this research I have wondered whether I should be undertaking it at all. Zhao told me that the women involved in the project were very excited upon hearing that I was writing my thesis about their work. Although I am aware that theorizing about *The Maternity Chronicles* from such a distance in space and experience will not directly benefit the community, it means a lot to me to have their approval.

This research project has been a search for language that acknowledges both power inequalities and agency. I specifically struggle with the term 'giving voice.' This term can sound paternalistic in that it makes the subject's voice and agency dependent on another party's benevolence (e.g. director Zhao or indeed myself) – which could reinforce the very 'voicelessness' that community theater addresses.

How can I describe such interactions without creating a dichotomy in which only one actor has the power? If I say 'Zhao lets the community suggest themes for the theater projects,' does this emphasize Zhao's agency and obscure the agency of the community? Phrasing it differently, for example 'The community suggests the themes that they want to talk about,' would emphasize the agency of the community more. At the same time, it obscures Zhao's actions that contributed to the environment in which *The Maternity Chronicles* was created. I want to make those actions explicit, because I think they also played an important role in the success of this project.

What complicates the matter, is that some of these actions resemble inaction, such as 'not speaking up' so that someone else can speak. How do we discuss space that is *not* taken up, power that is *not* used? Should I give Zhao credit for not taking up space

that is so often (unconsciously) taken up by people who are in a power position similar to his?

Nidhi Goyal, an activist and comedian from Mumbai who advocates for the rights of women with disabilities, stated: “My advice to other non-disabled people, [is] giving a seat at the table, but also just recognizing that you are not *giving* anyone the space, you’re not creating a space for anyone, because the space belongs to all of us.” (Goyal 2018) The problem with the term ‘giving space’ is that it implies prior ownership of space, and obscures the illegitimacy of that ownership. I think Goyal’s approach offers a way to acknowledge a person’s action of sharing a space or pointing out its availability, while also acknowledging that the space should not have belonged solely to that person to begin with.

In the case of *The Maternity Chronicles* this applies to the space to speak. Throughout this thesis I work to apply this idea to acknowledge both power inequalities and ways in which these are addressed.

3. Theoretical concepts

In this chapter, I will discuss theoretical concepts that are central to my thesis: subalternity, gender and voice, abortion as a taboo, and community theater.

3.1. Subalternity, gender, and voice

3.1.1. Subalternity

The question “Can the subaltern speak?” was introduced by Spivak, who questions the idea that “the oppressed, if given the chance ... *can speak and know their conditions.*” (Spivak 1988, 78, emphasis in the original). While she used the term ‘subaltern’ to refer to those oppressed by colonialism, it has since been used more broadly to refer to people in marginalized positions. I have used Spivak’s question as a starting point, and read authors who write about Chinese migrant workers as a subaltern group. As I explained in the introduction, the exclusion of migrant workers from social services in the cities creates a structural marginalization. The prejudice of the urban population toward rural migrant workers also contributes to their subaltern position in society.

3.1.2. Gender

To understand how migrant worker women occupy a subaltern position in society, we need to look at the intersection of their identities as women (gender) and as migrant workers (class). (Jaguścik 2011, 121) Jacka argues that the combination of elements of their social identities marginalizes these women in the city; more concretely their rural origins, their often low level of education, their language, their clothes, their jobs, their gender and their age. (Jacka 1998, 57)

This intersectionality of gender and class – and the associated social status – is already explicit in the word *dagongjiemei* (打工姐妹), ‘working sisters’, which is used by the Mulan Center to refer to its members.

Various designations of migrant workers are contested in Chinese, and it is difficult to properly translate *dagong* (打工), which means “working for the boss” and refers to precarious labor. (Sun 2012, 993) The term *dagongmei* (打工妹), which is usually

translated to 'working sisters', is commonly used to refer to young, unmarried female workers from the countryside. (Jacka 1998, 44; Jaguścik 2011, 121) The term *dagongjiemei* seems to refer to women undertaking precarious labor at large, married or unmarried, young or old, and points to female solidarity.

The structural marginalization and discrimination do not only affect rural people who work in the cities, but also their families. Many women stay behind in rural areas while their husbands move to the city to work, or come to the city to take care of the children while their husband has a paid job. *The Maternity Chronicles* and the sources I use include these women in the category of migrant workers, and so will I in this thesis. To include women who belong to working families, I have chosen to use the term 'migrant worker women' rather than 'female migrant workers', placing the emphasis on women rather than workers.

The regulation of families happens partly through the biological and social regulation of women's bodies.² In this thesis, I will not give a detailed biopolitics perspective on the regulation on women's bodies, but I will briefly go into the concept of women's time. Ngai explains that women's time is cyclical, and therefore often in conflict with the seasonal timeline of farm work, and the linear timeline of industrial work. (Ngai 2005, 174-177) When a woman has to comply with the industrial or agrarian timeline, it means she has to neglect the bodily experience of her women's cycle. Ngai describes how this can lead to the negative effects of menstruation on the health of female factory workers; or maybe we should say the negative effects of factory work on the health of menstruating women. (Ngai 2005, 172-173)

Some have observed a specific precarity of pregnancy among migrant worker women. (Fan 2019; Feng 2019; Womenvoice 2019; Zhang 2019) Qi discusses several challenges that they face with regards to pregnancy, which include lack of knowledge about birth control, ineffective contraceptive methods, the lack of proper healthcare to deal with failing contraceptive methods such as IUD's³ falling out, and husbands who are absent because they are away to work. (Fan 2019; Feng 2019; Jianchang 2019) Financial

² For a discussion of the fluidity of sex and gender in relation to *dagongmei*, see Ngai 2005, 135-136, 150-151.

³ Intrauterine devices, contraceptive devices that are inserted into the uterus.

pressure also poses a challenge for this group to access necessary health care, such as abortions at a hospital. (Fan 2019)

Zhang points out that migrant worker women face challenges in their work as a result of pregnancy, which may lead to dilemmas such as having to choose between keeping either their child or their job. (Zhang 2019) Qi emphasizes that many rural migrant women give up work and depend on their husbands financially after having children. They have a hard time finding work because they often lack professional skills or diplomas, and because care duties overwhelmingly fall to women. (Zhang 2019)

The socio-economic status of the family also plays an important role in the decision to have an abortion. As a result of the one-child policy and the traditional preference to have a son rather than a daughter, there are now more men than women, making it difficult for men to find a wife. This has increased the traditional standards of what the family of the man provides; nowadays for your son to get married you need to provide a house or apartment in the town or city, a car, and more than 150,000 yuan. This is a lot, especially for people from rural areas who can only make money as migrant workers. Many people need all of their savings to pay for their son's marriage. Therefore, although rural people are often (partially) exempted from the one-child policy, many people in this situation do not want to have a second or a third son, and choose to have an abortion when they get pregnant. (Nie 2005, 46; Zhao 2020)

3.1.3. Voice

As set out in the introduction, migrant worker women have limited opportunities to speak in public discourses, but they speak on other platforms. Jacka observed that the discourse produced by migrant workers is similar to the dominant urban discourse in that it emphasizes the rural-urban divide, but reverses the roles of who is 'good' and 'bad'. (Jacka 1998, 71) This functions "to construct, or reclaim, a migrant identity that is still subaltern, but also moral and dignified." (Jacka 1998, 72) Jaguścik observes that migrant worker women refer to migrant workers as a collective, based on "the shared experience of the hardship they face in the city." (Jaguścik 2011, 132-133)

Scholars have placed accounts of migrant worker women in the context of 'the women's script,' which is "a culturally accepted code for the expression of feminine

endurance,” (Jaguścik 2011, 127) and the Maoist practice called ‘speaking bitterness’, during which villagers publicly spoke about their sufferings and framed them as a result of ‘feudal oppression’. (Jacka 1998, 59) In these ways of speaking, migrant worker women defined themselves as belonging to an exploited collective self in the face of an oppressive ‘other’. (Jacka 1998, 61)

Jaguścik discusses the participation of female migrant workers as ‘guests’ in tv talkshows, and points out that the opportunity to talk on these shows does not really give the women power to speak. When the women speak in these tv shows, they only talk in vocabulary that is handed down from above, and thereby reproduce the “established symbolical hegemony.” (Jaguścik 2011, 132) Fu observes that the Working Sisters’ Home in Beijing constructs an identity for women as *dagongmei* (working sisters). As *dagongmei*, the women can speak, whereas they previously could not. However, they can only speak *as dagongmei*, following a set discourse in which they are a valuable part of China’s economic development. She observes that theater forms a space in which women can speak more freely with their bodies. (Fu 2009, 556)

This touches upon an important aspect of ‘voice’: speaking with the literal voice is not necessarily having voice in terms of power to express yourself. In addition, not everyone who has voice is expressing themselves through their literal voice; the body can also serve as a means of expression. (Jaguścik 2011, 129) Fu moves beyond the physical ability to speak and expands the understanding of ‘speaking’ to encompass not only the literal voice, but also the body. (Fu 2009, 531)

3.2. Abortion as a taboo

Limitations to voice include not only *who* can speak, but also *what* they can speak about. In this subchapter I discuss how people do and do not talk about abortion in China.

3.2.1. Abortion in China

One of the performers in *The Maternity Chronicles* stated that nine out of ten mothers in the Mulan community had had abortions; some for physical reasons, some because they did not want to have a daughter, and some because they already had a son

and did not want another one. (Jianchang 2019) Zeng et al. researched the contraceptive practices and induced abortion status among migrant women in Guangzhou. Of the participants in this quantitative study, 41.6% had had an induced abortion, 36.5% of whom had had repeated abortions. The more affordable private clinics that migrant women often resort to because of limited access to and insurance coverage of regular health care services, are often unlicensed and illegal, and these women often do not receive proper follow-up care. (Zeng et al. 2015; Jacka 2015, 112-113)

Interestingly, none of the articles I have read mention self-induced abortions, which is actually one of the topics of the play.

3.2.2. Taboo

Pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, and the suffering that they can cause are rarely discussed in public spaces in China. (Fan 2019; Jianchang 2019; Wang 2019; Zhang 2019; Zhao 2020) It is a taboo, especially among the older generation. (Zhang 2019) According to Qi, many men are indifferent to this suffering of women because they consider childbearing something natural. (Zhang 2019) Interestingly, abortion itself does not seem to be a taboo, so perhaps it is *talking about* abortion that is taboo.

Nie analyzes official discourses and policies about abortion in the context of population control policies since the 1950s as a “general political-social framework for the views expressed by individuals.” (Nie 2005, 40) While abortion was initially restricted in communist China in the context of desired population growth, in the early 1960s abortion was made widely available to the general population, in order to reduce the amount of illegal and unsafe abortions. Abortion, including late term and coerced abortions, also came to play an important role in the national birth control program, although the government has indicated that it is not the preferred method of population control. (Nie 2005, 43-49)

The urgency and importance of population control is commonly acknowledged by the Chinese public, and as a result, the state’s interference in personal reproductive contexts has been accepted and supported by large parts of society. (Nie 2005, 58)

Nie argues that the commonly held idea that Chinese do not consider abortion an ethical issue because there is no public debate about it is misleading; silence in the public

sphere does not equal lack of moral concern. (Nie 2005, 7, 14, 31) Political sensitivity of the national family planning program and repression by the authorities, as well as self-censoring, form important factors in the absence of public debate about abortion in China. (Nie 2005, 33) Nie lists a range of different reasons why individuals remain silent:

“For a particular individual, silence might signify self-protection, fear, helplessness, self-censorship, anger, shame, anxiety, bitterness, acceptance, embarrassment, indifference, resistance, disagreement, a desire for secrecy, privacy, or escape, or simply having nothing to say. Various political or personal reasons may compel one to be silent, to "choose" not to speak out. A person may lack the capacity to speak out, or lack the vocabulary to discuss the subject. The dynamics and multiple meanings of an individual's silence can never be fully understood or articulated. To comprehend even one individual's silence, one must enter a unique life world.” (Nie 2005, 31)

3.2.3. Chinese voices on abortion

Nie researched how Chinese women *do* talk about abortion when asked about their experiences. Voice plays an important role in his discussion; most women he interviewed stated that they were not good at speaking, but turned out to be very capable narrators. (Nie 2005, 136)

Nie observed an overall feeling of bitterness about abortion, shared by women who had had abortions and medical practitioners who performed abortions. Many women described the feeling of having had no alternatives for abortion. (Nie 2005, 135, 141) Many of their pregnancies had resulted from failed IUD's. The most reported reason for abortion was the state population policy, the second reported reason was that living conditions did not allow for the support of a child. (Nie 2005, 147) Several of Nie's participants reflected on abortion as a part of the female experience, and stated that it was difficult to be a woman. (Nie 2005, 146)

The women commonly described the immense physical pain during the procedure, as well as the impact of abortion on their overall and reproductive health. (Nie 2005, 4) Another common theme was the uncaring attitude of health care professionals during the abortion. (Nie 2005, 135, 141)

Nie's participants found varying degrees of support in their husbands. One added that "no matter how much your husband and family members love you, no one can experience the pain *for* you. I must suffer it by myself." (Nie 2005, 139, emphasis in original)

Women who had had a middle or late term abortion often saw themselves as having given birth to a child, and referred to the aborted fetus as "my son." (Nie 2005, 138) I think this is because the abortion process resembled the birth process, sometimes both in the biological and the social sense. (Nie 2005, 3) Women also described the difficulty of having to go back to work without the *yuezi*, which is the period of one month after giving birth during which it is customary for a woman to stay inside and be taken care of. (Nie 2005, 3) This period includes physical aspects of rest and social aspects of recognition of the event of childbirth.

3.3. Community theater

In this section, I will discuss how community theater can provide people with opportunities to speak.

3.3.1. Theater of the oppressed

Augusto Boal introduced the concept of 'theater of the oppressed'; a form of theater that aims to encourage expression and action among people who normally do not get to speak in society. (Zhao 2017) According to Boal, all theater is political. (Boal 1979, ix) In line with Marxist art theory more generally, he argues that theater has often been used by the ruling class to suppress people and maintain the status quo. (Boal 1979, ix, 55) In different forms, however, theater can also be a weapon for liberation, or a "rehearsal for revolution." (Boal 1979 ix, 127) This is achieved by destroying the barriers between actors and spectators; the audience no longer passively takes in the information presented by the theater practice, but they themselves become active practitioners of theater, and by extension, of reality. (Boal 1979, x, 124)

Central to this approach is the idea that oppression, as well as liberation, is embodied. In order for people to enact situations different from the status quo, they first

need to be able to imagine them, and one way to do that is by participating in theater. Roles can literally be reversed in theatrical realities, and this can not only empower people to think differently, but ultimately also to act differently.

The body is considered the most important instrument for community theater, so getting to know your own body through exercises and learning to make the body expressive are the first steps of community theater practice. (Boal 1979, 126-127, 155)

Referring to Eugene van Erven (2001), Zhao defines community theater as “such dramatic phenomena, which emphasize and attach importance to the story of the local or individual rather than rehearsing a written text in advance.” (Zhao 2017) Community theater differs from mainstream theater in that its main goal is to serve the participants, who are often in subaltern positions in society. To achieve this goal, the process of making the drama is more important than the final product (the performance). (Zhao 2017)

3.3.2. Community theater in China

In one of his articles, Zhao explores how theater is used by Chinese precarious workers to extend and defend their rights. (Zhao 2017) He calls this type of theater “new workers drama”⁴ and defines it as “a drama activity launched in the new workers' community, with new workers as the main body and with new workers' living conditions and ideological and emotional appeals as the main body.” (Zhao 2017) Zhao stated that the genre should be based on self-expression of workers. As this expression does often not emerge naturally, professionals can offer guidance to theater practice.

One of the challenges of providing guidance to marginalized groups is that the marginalized group usually does not have the social resources to decide when they receive this guidance. (Florence 2019; Zhao 2017) Communication and power dynamics can also be a challenge in such projects, related to the different positions of migrant workers and theater professionals. (Zhao 2017) In a broader sense, this is related to the question ‘Who gets to speak?’ In this case where people are being ‘empowered’ to speak, we can also ask: ‘Who invites whom to speak? Who creates a platform for whom to speak

⁴ New Workers (新工人) is an alternative for the term ‘migrant workers’, see also Van Crevel 2019.

and be listened to?' In the next chapters, I will analyze *The Maternity Chronicles* in the light of these questions, using the concept of voice.

4. *The Maternity Chronicles*

In this and the following chapters, I will present my analysis of *The Maternity Chronicles*, starting with some background information about the production process and a brief synopsis of the play. In the three chapters after that, I will discuss how this work of community theater tells marginalized stories on stage, how it serves as a platform to speak, and how voice is negotiated in the play.

4.1. Background

The entire process of production of this play took more than a year, and included recruitment, interviews, writing and editing the script, rehearsals, and performances. (Womenvoice 2019)

The first two months of the theater project consisted of workshops, during which the women shared and discussed their stories. The next phase of the project consisted of interviews, conducted with 29 women aged 50 to 90 years old. (Jianchang 2019; Wang 2019; Zhang 2019) Based on the interviews and discussions during the workshops, director Zhao wrote the script of the play. After that, there were regular rehearsals. As the Mulan Center was not big enough for the rehearsals, a new venue needed to be rented every time. (Jianchang 2019)

The play premiered in January 2019 at the Juyin Theater. It was performed again at the Fanxing Theater in May 2019, and twice in the Penghao Theater in December 2019, all located in Beijing. (Fan 2019; Mulan Center April 2019; Mulan Center December 2019; Wang 2019) Attendance was free of charge, but donations were asked to support future performances. (Mulan Center April 2019) To reduce costs, most props were made by the women themselves. (Womenvoice 2019; Zhang 2019)

4.2. Synopsis

The play chronicles the experiences of Xiaoyu, a 44-year old woman from a rural village. She experienced five pregnancies in her life. First, she gave birth to two sons; due to financial constraints she gave birth at home and received no adequate care for the

complications that arose. Later, her contraceptive ring (IUD) failed repeatedly, resulting in three accidental pregnancies. As she could not afford to take time off work during harvest season, and the cost of abortion in the hospital was too high, she attempted to self-induce abortion by beating her belly, throwing herself off farming terraces, and carrying heavy baskets. Her attempts did not succeed. By the time she was already 4-5 months pregnant, she had to go to the hospital to induce labor to have an abortion. Later, Xiaoyu came to Beijing as a migrant worker.

The entire play is about one hour long and includes stage acting, monologues, central narration, and the use of multimedia projection and puppets.

Xiaoyu is portrayed on stage by six different performers: two stage performers, three monologue performers, and one interviewee performer. Xiaoyu's experiences are acted out by the stage performers, one portraying a younger Xiaoyu, and one a middle-aged Xiaoyu.

Xiaoyu's thoughts and memories are woven into the story in the form of monologues. Community theater often uses a central narrator who comments on the story and its social significance. (Zhao 2017) In *The Maternity Chronicles*, the story is narrated by Xiaoyu herself, and this role of the narrator was divided between three different monologue performers.

Lastly, the present-day version of Xiaoyu is portrayed by an interviewee performer located at one side of the stage, providing narration in the form of an interview. This part of the portrayal is very close to the actual interview the play is based on; the interviewer is portrayed by the woman who also interviewed the real Xiaoyu.

Like many community theater plays, *The Maternity Chronicles* has a fragmented plot. (Zhao 2017) The play starts when Xiaoyu finds out about one of her accidental pregnancies, after which she has to go back to work and later gets an abortion. Then the play jumps back in time to the birth of Xiaoyu's two children, followed by an accidental pregnancy and her attempts to self-induce abortion, and then jumps ahead in time to Xiaoyu as an older woman who is worried about her sons' marriage and childbearing.

5. Telling marginalized stories on stage

In mainstream literature and culture, migrant worker women are not often the protagonists or the authors of stories, nor are they usually the intended audience. With abortion also being a taboo topic, these women's stories about abortion are especially marginalized. In this chapter, I analyze how *The Maternity Chronicles* challenges this. I will discuss how it presents a story *about* migrant worker women, *by* migrant worker women, and *for* migrant worker women.

5.1. *About* migrant worker women

5.1.1. Based on the story of an individual migrant worker woman

Xiaoyu, the protagonist of the play, was based on a historical person, and the play chronicles her experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and abortion. Xiaoyu's story was selected - I do not know by whom - because it was deemed "most shocking." (Zhang 2019) This might raise questions about representativeness; to what extent is the portrayed experience a shared experience? Before discussing how the story presented in *The Maternity Chronicles* is representative, I would like to ask: would it matter if it were an individual story rather than a shared one? Ngai offers an important insight regarding this question: "a minor genre of resistance focuses on personal accounts, and its magical power lies not in generalizing individual narratives into a collective enunciation but rather in directly displaying that there is no individual story that is not also a historical narrative." (Ngai 2005, 193)

While most of the play was taken directly from Xiaoyu's account, one character was invented and added by Zhao. This symbolic character called 'the little angel' (小天使) comforts Xiaoyu, while the interviewee performer tells the audience that she experienced this all by herself. While the character was Zhao's idea, the difficulty of going through the experience alone and the need for comfort were also expressed by the real Xiaoyu in the interview.

During the rehearsals, participants repeatedly told Zhao that they liked this character. I would say that the little angel embodies the support and comfort that was

absent in reality, and by doing so makes the lack of such support more explicit and visible to the audience.

5.1.2. Shared aspects of the story

According to Zhao it is important for community theater to present “the collective experience, and the collective memories of the community” (Zhao 2020), and not just the story of a single person. While the plot of the play was based on Xiaoyu’s story only, the experiences of other participants overlapped with Xiaoyu’s experiences to different degrees.

According to Zhao, the story belongs to the collective memory of migrant workers born in the 1970-80s, many of whom have had this kind of abortion. Several participants strongly identified with the protagonist: “they always say ‘this is our own story, because we have very similar experience.’” (Zhao 2020) For instance, one participant had three abortions because she and her husband could not afford a child, and had to go through the procedure alone, because her husband was away at work.

This collective aspect also became visible in the emotional responses of participants during rehearsals. One talked about this in an interview: “Because I have similar experiences, I know the pain of losing a child.” (Fan 2019) Another cried regularly during the rehearsals, having undergone the procedure herself less than a month ago. (Jianchang 2019; Zhang 2019) One participant felt physical pain in her stomach during the abortion scene, and was often very emotional during the rehearsals. She stated: “I thought that the trauma would remain hidden in the most secret place deep in my heart. But now it was uncovered again, there was no anesthetic, no comfort, only heart-piercing pain raging silently.” (Feedback document 2019) Zhao worried that it was impacting her too much, but she thought they needed to continue, as she also stated in her written feedback.

The shared aspect of the story also showed in the performance. In a scene that stood out to me, the remains of the aborted baby are folded in a blanket and handed to Xiaoyu, who says: “I’m sorry, my child. But you already have two older brothers and we are such a poor family. If we have you, imagine how much toil me and your father would endure, how much we would suffer. Please forgive Mama.” (Mulan Center and Zhao

2019) Zhao told me that this was the best of this participant's acting, because it was so real for her. She told Zhao that these lines were really what she wanted to say to her own three babies that she aborted.

5.1.3. Portraying gender and class identities

Gender and class form crucial layers of the protagonist's experience. Male characters were included in the story to emphasize that Xiaoyu's struggle is not only about gender, but also about class.

In order to include the suffering of migrant worker men in the play, a short video featuring a man doing construction was added. A big screen shows a stylized image of a construction site with people moving, all consisting of white lines on a dark background, accompanied by sounds typical to a construction site. Zhao told me that he purposefully contrasted the video with the realistic style of the rest of the play. By making the video abstract, without an identifiable person or place, Zhao made this part of the play go beyond the specific experiences of Xiaoyu's husband to extend to a more general migrant worker experience.

At the same time, I think the style also alienates this male experience and emphasizes the distance between Xiaoyu and her husband. It depersonalizes the character of the husband, especially because of the sharp contrast with Xiaoyu's character who is portrayed in three different ways (stage, monologues, interview) and whose voice we hear at length.

Zhao said it was a conscious choice to leave the specifics of Xiaoyu's husband out of the script. In the interview, the woman who Xiaoyu is based on complained about her husband at length, describing him as absent, unsupportive and unempathetic towards her experiences and needs. He did not understand her suffering because he considered giving birth a natural process for a woman, and she felt unable to share her experiences with him. Zhao decided to leave this out of the script, because he did not want to portray a negative image of migrant worker men, or to represent the entire group as unsupportive; several other women at the Mulan Center had very supportive husbands.

I think this decision has to be viewed in the context of the marginalization and discrimination of migrant worker men. (Jacka 2015, 236) Zhao and I talked about the

power to tell a story about a group that is rarely heard in public discourses, and he made a distinction between what can be said in public and private discussions, saying that on a stage you have to consider the public image you create.

However, some sentiments of what Xiaoyu shared about her husband still found their way into the play. In one scene, an unnamed man remarks: “I wish I were a woman. After having a child, at least in one year you can rest for one or two months, and during *yuezi* (the customary resting period) people serve you, how comfortable!” To this, Xiaoyu replies: “so you know the *yuezi* is comfortable, then why do you not know about the hardships of giving birth?” (Mulan Center and Zhao 2019) The man replies that he would rather suffer for a short time than work so hard all year. As he walks off the stage, Xiaoyu says to the audience that he does not understand, but that she cannot blame him because both rural men and women suffer so much. This is the moment in the play where Xiaoyu is directly and explicitly confronted with ignorance and prejudice about the female experience of giving birth. The passer-by embodies the male other, in the face of whom a female self is constructed and embodied by Xiaoyu. In this way she gets to respond not only to this individual, but to the audience and to society at large, and perhaps to her husband.

Two scenes with a male birth attendant and a male doctor also portray the disrespect for the female experience on the professional level in healthcare settings.

5.2. *By migrant worker women*

The play is not only *about* migrant worker women, but was also largely made *by* migrant worker women. In this section, I will discuss the different people involved in the play, and their roles.

Qi, one of the founders of the Mulan Center, and director Zhao worked together in leading the project. Qi used to be a migrant worker herself and lives in the migrant worker community where the Mulan Center is located. She took care of the logistics within the community and provided the necessary resources, and Zhao managed the creation of the play and the connections in the theater world. During my interview with him, Zhao repeatedly corrected me when I referred to ‘his play’ and made very clear that it was not his work, but that of the community. He does not view himself as director of

the play, but rather as a facilitator, or a social worker who uses the methods of theater and art. This view of the director's role is exemplary of the principles of community theater.

Roughly one third of the participants was part of the community of migrant workers who live near the Mulan Center.⁵ (Fan 2019; Mulan Center April 2019; Zhang 2019) The real Xiaoyu did not participate in this part of the project. Because there were not enough participants from the community, another one third of the participants consisted of volunteers and staff members of the Mulan Center, and a few of their relatives. Some staff members were social workers, others were migrant workers who stayed at home to take care of their families and participated in the Center's activities, and were appointed when the Center needed staff. The last one-third of the participants consisted of Zhao's theater students. They mostly took up logistical roles and played supportive roles to facilitate the play. Zhao did not want them to act the roles of migrant workers.

While reversing the roles actually is a technique used in community theater to challenge existing power relations, I think that in this case, the goal of the performance was to facilitate self-representation. Zhao also explained that migrant worker women are most suitable to play these roles themselves, because they are familiar with the experiences of the protagonist and can perform intuitively. (Zhang 2019)

Migrant worker women were directly involved in the theater making process during workshops, interviews, rehearsals, and performances. The script-writing was the only phase in which the women were not directly involved. Zhao told me that as the theater professional on the project, this was his responsibility, but I am not sure by whom and how this was decided. However, I would argue that also in this part of the process, migrant worker women got to speak to some extent, because the script-writing process was informed by the previous workshops and interviews in which the women had shared their experiences.

Most importantly, all lines in the script come directly from the interview with Xiaoyu. (Jianchang 2019, Mulan Center April 2019, Zhang 2019) This is interesting in terms of voice; the audience is literally hearing Xiaoyu's words, even though she is not the one

⁵ For portraits of the performers, see Fan 2019.

uttering them during the performance. Neither did she choose which of her words formed the script, and in which order; that was up to Zhao.

The real Xiaoyu became involved in the process again after Zhao had written the script. Both Zhao and Qi considered it necessary to show her the script. Xiaoyu told them that she cried when she read the script, and felt compelled to read it three times. Afterwards, she could not sleep, had nightmares and kept waking up crying. For all these years she had turned away from those experiences, and now that she was confronted with them again, she felt really emotional.

5.3. *For migrant worker women*

Was this story, and the telling of the story, also *for* migrant worker women? In terms of the audience of the performance, only partly; the performance was also aimed at educating other people. In total, up to 400 people attended live performances of the play, and Zhao estimates that one fourth of them were migrant workers. The remainder of the audience included students, scholars, journalists, and activists. The video recording of the play was screened more than ten times for audiences consisting mostly of migrant workers and activists, and also at an online art festival, which was covered by a documentary program, reaching an estimated 3,000 to 10,000 online viewers. (Zhao 2021) Community theater intends to serve its performers as much as the audience; the telling of a story is not only *for* the audience, but also has functions for the tellers of the story. (Van Erven 2001, Introduction)

In this case, the play definitely provided the performers with an opportunity to tell a story. Zhao recalled that one participant felt the need to present the story to the public: “[She] said, ‘it’s not just the interviewee’s story, it’s also my story and [her] story and it’s also the story of our generation, and we need to let people know what happened.’” (Zhao 2020) After the performance, the participants watched the video recording of the performance together. They saw a migrant worker woman represented on stage, both in terms of the performed and the performers. In future research, it would be interesting to see how the participants experienced this.

The performance was not the only part of the theater project; in community theater, the making of the play is usually considered as least as important as the play itself. In the case of *The Maternity Chronicles*, participants used their spare time to rehearse, and Zhao observed that the social interaction during the rehearsals formed a welcome contrast to staying home with their children and doing housework alone.

One of the women involved in organizing the play stated that the play was a healing process for the participants. (Feedback document 2019) Zhao also stated that during the project, he observed a process of healing in some participants, even though this was not in itself the purpose of the project. Especially participants in the same age group as Xiaoyu, who struggled at the beginning of the process, became, in Zhao's words, "stronger" in the course of the project. When I asked how he thought this process worked, he explained that it can be very helpful when you tell your story, especially when it is about experiences of suffering, and you feel like your story is being respected and cared about. I think this is a powerful aspect of telling stories, especially stories that are normally considered taboo. Interestingly, in this case the participants were technically telling Xiaoyu's story, but identified with it to such an extent that it still provoked a cathartic effect.

6. Community theater as a platform for storytelling

How did *The Maternity Chronicles* provide spaces for storytelling as a community theater project? In this chapter, I will discuss how different phases of the project served as a platform for marginalized stories.

6.1. Group discussions and interviews

6.1.1. An individual breaking the silence

The real Xiaoyu told the story about her three abortions during a talk on breastfeeding in the Mulan Center in 2017, during which pregnancy, childbirth and dilemmas about having a second or third child were discussed. (Womenvoice 2019) Later I will discuss the social fabric that created the environment in which she could speak up, but for now I will focus on how it served as a starting point for *The Maternity Chronicles*. After Xiaoyu told her story, others followed; her individual act of breaking the silence on the topic of abortion opened up the space for other women to tell their stories as well.

6.1.2. A group sharing stories

The first two months of the community theater project consisted of workshops, during which the women shared and discussed their stories in a group setting. Zhao told me that these stories were often difficult for him to understand at first, so he would ask questions to better understand the women's experiences and their social context. Recurring topics were the women's conflicts with husbands or mothers-in-law; they would discuss the women's experiences and their wishes for the future. As Zhao describes it, the discussions were largely centered around the narratives of the women. In the beginning the focus was on discussing and understanding their experiences, and only later they started working on the actual play.

Participants were also invited to bring in 'materials' such as objects, texts or stories that they considered relevant to the theme of the project. During the workshop they discussed these materials and how they could use them for the play. I think this method provided the women with a space to take initiative within the discussions.

Music also provided a platform for the women to speak during the workshops, and subsequently during the play. During one of the workshops, a musician was invited, and the women wrote a song about their social status as mothers and women. One song called “I am a woman”, was performed by two participants at the beginning of the play: “I am a woman / I also want to own a piece of my own sky / I don’t want to be like a kite / Unable to steer my own direction.” (Mulan Center and Zhao 2019) The other song called “Imperfect Mother”, was performed by all participants at the end of the play, and discusses the sacrifices women make as mothers:

“That landscape painting in the room
Is that the place you want to go?
The dress that has remained silent for a long time,
She also yearns for the sun
...
Oh, being a mother is just one identity in life,
It doesn’t define your entire life
Women don’t have to be mothers (all the time)”
(Mulan Center and Zhao 2019)

6.1.3. From individual to shared experience through storytelling

Given the taboo nature of abortion, creating a social environment in which people could relate to one another’s experiences was important. In this process, individual experiences became shared; not only in the sense of being discussed with other people, but also in the sense of becoming (or perhaps, turning out to be) collective experiences. Although I cannot explore this further, the collective story might in turn also have shaped those individual stories, similar to how Fu describes that women start speaking *as dagongmei*.

I think the shared experience paved the way for participants to speak about abortion openly in the subsequent individual interviews. According to Zhao, several women expressed that they previously had never had an opportunity to tell these stories. One wrote: “They experienced all this silently and depressed, they never had the

opportunity to tell [anyone] about it, nor were they able to let themselves be seen.”
(Feedback document 2019)

During one-on-one interviews conducted by members of the Mulan leadership, women shared personal and often detailed stories. Whereas the workshops offered a space to connect with others in similar situations, the interviews offered the opportunity to discuss individual stories in-depth. I think that finding out that their experiences were shared by others in the group, and by the interviewers themselves, was an important factor that allowed individuals to open up about their experiences with a normally-taboo issue.

6.2. Performing

In this section I will discuss how the performances of the play served as a platform for storytelling.

6.2.1. Embodied storytelling

As discussed earlier, Xiaoyu was portrayed by several performers simultaneously. During the play, the experiences of the protagonist are embodied by all of these participants. Zhao reflected that this made the play go beyond the story of an individual, becoming more of a collective story. I think that especially during the scene where the stage performer is lying on the hospital bed in pain, and the three monologue performers are lying on the floor, rolling and twisting in Xiaoyu’s pain, this pain is embodied by all of them. This also underlines the physical aspects of community theater. While only one performer at a time was speaking Xiaoyu’s experiences in words, several others were speaking her experiences with their bodies.

As discussed before, the lines spoken in *The Maternity Chronicles* were taken directly from the interview with Xiaoyu. In this sense, the words are not the performers’ own words. Fu discusses how theater can offer people an opportunity to speak with their bodies, and thereby going beyond prescriptive language. However, I doubt this was also the case for *The Maternity Chronicles*, as the physical movements were also part of the script. Some of the women had to portray physical experiences that were quite different

from their own. One participant had to portray a pregnant Xiaoyu walking with difficulty, while she herself had worn high heels far into her pregnancy. This made her more distanced from the portrayal, and she needed to practice her movements. (Zhang 2019)

6.2.2. Involving families in storytelling

The husbands and children of the participants were invited to the performance, and many of them attended. For these children and their fathers, this would be a rare (if not their only) opportunity to ever come to a theater. Zhao also saw the play as an opportunity for the husbands to learn more about their partners, because they would normally not talk about the issues addressed in the play. Here we can see that the play functions not only as a platform for the women to talk amongst themselves or to communicate with the audience, but also as a platform to facilitate conversations within families.

Several children of participants were also included in the performance, during the scene in which Xiaoyu has just given birth to her first son. The scene was not rehearsed; three children were just playing with the balloons until one of the women came to take them off-stage. Zhao wanted to include these children of the participants to introduce them to the audience.

Qi also texted the husband of Xiaoyu an invitation, but he did not come. According to Zhao he did not know what the story was about and was not interested in it.

6.2.3. Connecting and interacting with the audience

After the performance, there was a post-show talk, an interactive discussion between the audience and the performers. According to Zhao, these discussions usually last around thirty minutes, and form a crucial element in the communication with the audience in community theater projects. One of the participants reported that most of the audience stayed during the post-show talk. (Feedback document 2019) One of the topics discussed was the taboo nature of childbirth and abortion. Some people in the audience remarked that while mothers are always praised for their sacrifices, the pain and process of giving birth are never discussed.

The play seems to have served as a platform where these taboo topics could be discussed. Zhao described how after the play, some of his colleagues told him stories about their own experiences and suffering during pregnancy and childbirth. They had never talked about it and said that it was really good to have the chance to do so. I think it is interesting to see that while Xiaoyu's story aims to represent the experiences of a particular social class of migrant women, during the post-show talk also women of a different class felt connected to the story. One of the participants expressed the hope that men who watched the play would take more precaution to avoid pregnancy, and support women more during childbirth. (Feedback document 2019)

With previous projects that dealt with controversial topics, Zhao observed polarization in the audience and in the discussions. In this case, however, people mostly commented that they liked the play and were really moved. Zhao thinks this is because the story is a non-fictional account of someone's experiences and does not contain any ideologies. However, given the taboo nature of the topic of the play, I think that while the events described in the story might not be controversial, the act of *telling* the story is. I also think it is relevant that the audience reacted positively, and engaged actively in the discussion afterwards. Although this does not tell us much about the general willingness in society to listen to the story, it shows that at least part of society appreciates a platform to talk about these issues. To come back to Nie's work about the silence about abortion in Chinese society: not all people *want* to be silent; once a platform to speak about it is offered, people engage, and value the opportunity to do so.

During one of these post-show talks, someone asked what participants hoped their family members would do after the play. Qi wanted the participants to answer one by one, but nobody spoke. (Zhang 2019) This exemplifies that *The Maternity Chronicles* also has limitations as a platform to speak. I can only speculate about the reasons for this particular silence. Perhaps the question took the participants by surprise, or perhaps answering it with family members present in the audience was too much. Or perhaps, as Nie also mentions in his long list of reasons for silence, they simply did not know what to say. (Nie 2005, 31)

7. Key determinants of voice

Creating a platform for migrant worker women's voices was at the core of *The Maternity Chronicles* as a theater project. Questions we can ask about such platforms include: Who creates the platform? Who contributes to it, and who are its gatekeepers? Who gets to speak on the platform?

In this chapter I will discuss several aspects of the force field that surrounds voice in *The Maternity Chronicles*. I will discuss the function of community and social fabric of the Mulan Center in taking the initiative for the project and in managing the participation of women in the theater project. Then I will discuss how practical considerations informed choices of form, including who got to speak on stage in which way. Lastly, I will discuss how ownership of experience was used in negotiations of voice in *The Maternity Chronicles*.

7.1. Community, social fabric, and personal relationships

One of the challenges of providing guidance to marginalized groups is that these groups rarely have the power to initiate collaboration with professionals, so the relationship begins on an unequal footing. *The Maternity Chronicles* presents an interesting case in this respect.

7.1.1. Community representations "from below": Qi Lixia as mediator

Qi seems to have played the role of a mediator between the migrant worker women and Zhao - or perhaps to have represented the women, as she herself is part of this group.

Zhao attributes the initiative for his collaboration with the Mulan Center to Qi. After Qi had repeatedly suggested him to come work with the Mulan Center, and expressed that they needed someone to help them improve their theater projects, Zhao started working with the organization in 2014.

Zhao told me that within his collaboration with the Mulan Center, the themes of plays are suggested by the community. The fact that the Mulan Center was already doing

community theater before they started collaborating with Zhao, as well as Zhao's assertion that he often does not know about the themes before the community introduces them to him, support the idea that it is indeed the community that takes the initiative.

I do not know who took the initiative *within* the Mulan Center. The initial hesitance of the migrant worker women to participate in the play, which I discuss below, makes me doubt that the play was their idea. It is more likely that Qi or someone else from the Mulan leadership observed the relevance of the theme within the community, and took the initiative to create a platform to discuss it further in the form of a community theater project, for which they enlisted Zhao. This does not detract from the play's status as a production 'from below', but it is important to keep in mind the complexity of power dynamics on every level of society, also *within* a marginalized group like migrant worker women. *The Maternity Chronicles* still exemplifies how a grassroots organization can in fact initiate collaboration with professionals in the cultural field.

Zhao is concerned about the power inequalities between the migrant worker women and himself as a director, and also emphasized this during my interview with him. When I spoke about 'his play' or 'what he wanted to do with the play', Zhao corrected me: "It's not my proposition, it's the focus of the cultural center." (Zhao 2020)

7.1.2. Social fabric and personal relationships: trust

According to Zhao, social connections within the community of migrant worker women played a crucial role in the interviewing phase of the project. For interviewing, creating an environment where participants feel comfortable to express themselves is crucial, and trust plays an important role in that. Zhao attributes the success of the interviews to Qi and Zhang Rui, also part of the Mulan leadership, and the relationships they have with the women in the Mulan community. Zhao describes their role as 'sisters' rather than social workers.

The original plan was to let students from different universities conduct the interviews with the migrant worker women, after a short training. However, the students tried to connect over things such as clothes or make-up that the interviewees did often not have access to. This only emphasized the distance between interviewer and

interviewee in terms of social status and experience. In the end, Qi and Zhang conducted the interviews themselves. Even after the rather unpleasant student interviews, the women were still very willing to talk to their 'sisters' Qi and Zhang. During the interviews, many of them shared intimate stories that they could not share with their husbands or parents. Qi and Zhang could also easily follow up with the women when questions arose after reading the interview transcripts.

The social fabric also provided a form of support during the theater making process, which was psychologically demanding for the participants. One example is Zhao's account of Xiaoyu's attendance of the play. She was invited to the premiere, but did not come because she thought she would not be able to face the story in front of her. She came to the second performance, and Zhao saw that she cried during the play. After the performance, everyone hugged her, a moment that Zhao considered important because it showed that they all supported her. Afterwards, Qi and the other participants accompanied her on her way home.

7.1.3. Negotiating participation

The importance of personal connections also showed during the recruitment of participants. According to Zhao, Qi and her colleagues knew everyone's stories and therefore also knew who to interview. They functioned as a connection between Zhao and the migrant worker community, and therefore also as gatekeepers of the project.

They told Xiaoyu that they wanted to make a play about her experiences, and she agreed to do the interview. Zhang conducted the interview, and Zhao thinks that their relationship of trust contributed to the openness of the interview. Xiaoyu was very emotional, and shared a lot of personal details. Zhao views this as an active gesture that she really wanted her story to be shared. This brings us to an interesting point: taking initiative and giving consent are multifaceted. They are more than a verbal agreement to do the interview, and also include body language, tone, as well as the length and the depth of the answers. This also echoes in Nie's writing about interviewing Chinese women about abortion, in which he describes the subtle ways in which participants showed their (un)willingness to talk. Within the discussion about voice and agency it is relevant to

observe that once invited to speak about her experiences, Xiaoyu took an active role in this.

The recruitment of participants also forms an interesting layer to the negotiation of voice in this project. Finding enough performers was a challenge, and partly relied on chance. People who accidentally entered the rehearsal room were asked to have a look and join a simple theater game. The women often said that this was not really for them or that they were not good at this, but Zhao (and perhaps also Qi) would strongly encourage them to stay, and some would eventually take part in the performance.

This initial hesitance of the women to join is similar to what Nie describes. The women he interviewed often stated that they were not capable of or suitable for talking about abortion, but upon encouragement they would start talking and actually proved both very willing and very capable of voicing their thoughts and experiences. (Nie 2005, 136) I think this is a good example of self-silencing, and of what is needed to break free from it; while these women were explicitly invited to speak and participate, they did not immediately agree to do so. Self-silencing might result from a variety of causes, ranging from individual circumstances and experience to the internalization of implicit and explicit silencing by external actors or society at large. (Nie 2005, 31)

So how can we understand the act of breaking free from self-silencing? Does 'inviting to speak' sometimes include actively challenging a hesitation or reluctance to speak? Are the hesitation and reluctance to talk or participate refusals of invitations, or might there also be an element of modesty or indirect form of communication? Zhao considered it worth mentioning to me that the women initially refused, so while there might be class- or gender-specific aspects of this communication that he is not fully aware of, at least in his mind the initial refusal of the women to join was more than just a convention of speaking.

When evaluating these responses, I think we should also include other elements of communication such as body language. Of course, for *The Maternity Chronicles*, I cannot do that retrospectively; I rely on Zhao's account of the events. He told me that after Xiaoyu agreed to do the interview, she responded very actively and elaborately to the questions, which he viewed as a sign of her willingness to speak and participate in the project.

7.2. Practical considerations and limitations

As director, Zhao played an important role in shaping how *The Maternity Chronicles* was presented on stage. Zhao's account shows how both practical and ideological aspects informed decision-making in the script-writing process. Whereas he seems to have primarily taken the position of a 'listener' during the workshop and interview phase of the process, his role as a theater professional providing guidance became more apparent during the script-writing and rehearsals.

7.2.1. Performers in precarious positions

As discussed, the script of *The Maternity Chronicles* was based entirely on the interview with a single participant. Zhao originally planned to include as many stories from the interviews as possible, and there used to be a stable group of participants in the workshops and interviews. After a tragic fire in a residence building in a migrant worker community in southern Beijing, the local government decided to evict migrant worker residences deemed unsafe. (China Labour Bulletin 2017; Niewenhuis 2017) Many members of the Mulan community were displaced and moved back to rural areas. As a result, there were no participants left, and Zhao figured it would be easier to start with a script based on the story of a single woman, and possibly include more stories in a sequel.

7.2.2. Performers new to performing

The choice to have Xiaoyu portrayed by two stage performers, three monologue performers and one interviewee also came from a practical issue. In Zhao's experience, the most difficult thing for participants in community theater is remembering the lines. This specific play has a lot of text and only one protagonist, so Zhao decided to separate the protagonist from the narrator, and also add a present-day version of the protagonist in the form of an interviewee. The role of the narrator was divided between three different monologue performers, so they each had to remember only a few lines, and they could also help each other.

Constantly training new participants who did not have any theater experience was a challenge, according to Zhao. The physical aspects of certain scenes were especially challenging, and the participants needed a lot of instructions, such as “now slow down, now show [the] audience your pain.” (Zhao 2020) According to Zhao, the performers improved a lot between the premiere in January and the later performances in December.

7.3. Ownership of experience: *of* migrant worker women?

Whereas the workshops and interviews largely followed the narratives of the participants, the rehearsal phase of the project presented participants with a script to which they could respond. Not all participants identified with Xiaoyu’s story, or with all parts of her story. For example, for one participant, Xiaoyu’s physical experience of pregnancy was so different from her own that she felt distant from the portrayal. (Zhang 2019)

I have previously discussed how in *The Maternity Chronicles*, stories are told *about* migrant worker women, *by* migrant worker women, and to some extent *for* migrant worker women. Here I would like to discuss the question: are the experiences portrayed *of* migrant worker women? In other words, *whose* are the experiences portrayed in *The Maternity Chronicles*?

7.3.1. Ownership: intergenerational differences

During the process of making the play, Zhao observed intergenerational differences between the participants. Some participants of the younger generation felt like it was not their story that they were presenting, because their own experiences were quite different from Xiaoyu’s. Some of them questioned whether after performing the play three times, it was necessary to perform it again. This brings us to an important layer to the story in terms of collectivity; *The Maternity Chronicles* portrays the story not only of people of a certain class and gender, but also of people of a certain generation.

Interestingly, participants made claims about the collectivity and representativeness of the story not only in challenging the relevance of the story, but also

in justifying its relevance. One participant told the group that she had just been to the doctor and would need surgery to treat a problem that had resulted from her last abortion. Zhao reflected on this moment (partially cited earlier above):

“She said she never talks about it, doesn't want to, cannot sleep at night because of this pain. And now she told it and said ‘it's not just the interviewee's story, it's also my story and [her] story and it's also the story of our generation, and we need to let people know what happened.’ That's the moment I really know this is not an individual story, it belongs to a group of people, it's their collective memory. And it's very important for them to present to the public.” (Zhao 2020)

7.3.2. Ownership: Zhao

During the interview, Zhao and I discussed his distance to the story in terms of gender and experience. He felt like his gender was never an obstacle; the women always wanted to share their stories with him, even very private stories, and ignored him or his gender in group settings. Zhao speculated that it might be because they could feel that he was always open and supportive, and didn't judge, or because he agrees with a lot of feminist arguments and could therefore understand the women's stories.

Zhao also stated that while he had done a lot of research, read all of the interview records, talked with the women extensively, and was deeply moved, he realized that there might be things he cannot understand fully, because he has not experienced them.

I think the following example shows how Zhao really aimed to make the play about Xiaoyu's experiences from her own perspective. In the abortion scene, the doctor is shown to inject a syringe into the fetus's head. Zhao explained that in reality, the doctor injects the syringe into the amniotic fluid around the fetus, not into the fetus. However, Xiaoyu thought this was what happened during the procedure, and this is how she recounted her experiences. Zhao decided not to change the narrative into what would medically speaking be more accurate, but decided to stick to Xiaoyu's version of the story to stay close to her experience. (Zhang 2019)

There were also moments, however, that Zhao's distance to Xiaoyu's and the participants' experience played a significant role in negotiations over the portrayal of these experiences. Zhao recalled that during rehearsals, Qi regularly became very emotional, at which point everyone had to stop and wait for her to compose herself. Zhao was very worried that the participants would not be able to present the story to the audience well, and told them that during the performance, as artists, they needed to control their emotions. (Zhang 2019) Qi did not accept this, Zhao recalled: "She [told] me, 'I think you really do not understand. You don't know what happened in my life, and when you say that you are really cruel.'" (Zhao 2020) Zhao disagreed and told her that he did know about her experience, but that they were going to have a performance, "so you need to keep distance from your personal life." (Zhao 2020) Qi still did not agree with him.

I think this is an interesting tension; Qi legitimizes her position based on the ownership of her experience as a migrant worker woman, whereas Zhao justifies his stance with his professional experience. Based on that, he prioritized the needs of the audience, and in order to do that differentiates between the emotions and the acting of Qi. During my interview with him, he argued that while the production process was focused on the stories from the community, the goal of the performance was to communicate with the audience. To come back to my earlier discussion of who the play was *for*, it seems that in Zhao's view, the performance was certainly not only for the migrant worker women who were involved with the play, but also for the audience, or at least for the interaction between the participants and the audience.

While Zhao had worried that Qi's emotions would get in the way of her communication with the audience, he reflected that the audience was actually very moved when Qi lost control over her emotions during the premiere.

7.3.3. Ownership: the individual?

Zhao recalled one instance during a post-show talk where a participant shared some of her personal ideas, which Zhao called anti-abortion, and which he attributed to her Buddhist beliefs. She said that in the performance, you could see how much the woman suffered when she could not give birth to her children, and told the audience that

once you get pregnant, you cannot kill the baby. Zhao and Qi were shocked upon hearing this for the first time during the post-show talk with the audience present. This was not the message they wanted to deliver, especially because they were worried about the increasing emphasis on women's sacrifices for the family in parts of Chinese society and politics. Zhao explained that abortion is generally accepted in China, and that this participant was the only one who expressed such anti-abortion sentiments.

After the performance, the entire group had an informal hotpot gathering at the Mulan Center to celebrate. They watched the video recording of the performance, and discussed how they could improve next time. At this occasion, they also discussed the anti-abortion remark. They discussed that while having an abortion is very difficult, telling women that it is wrong might also result in unbearable burdens, as a lot of women from younger generations had described during the interviews. According to Zhao, when Qi talked with the woman personally, she also agreed that opposing abortion was not a good idea.

This example brings us back to the fundamental questions this thesis discusses: Who gets to speak? What does it mean to have voice, to give voice, and perhaps to *claim* voice? This woman had the opportunity to speak and used it to express her view on abortion. However, it seems that she was not speaking as an individual only; she was speaking within the context of a group, and her opinion crossed a line of what was permissible within this group and the message they wanted to present. To the earlier list of questions, we might add: Who gets to speak and dissent?

8. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored how migrant worker women's voices were negotiated in the community theater project *The Maternity Chronicles*, and what this meant to them.

I looked at how director Zhao Zhiyong and the women of the Mulan Center navigated the inherently unequal relationship between director and participants in community theater. Including the women in the play required not only a space for them to speak, but also active encouragement to take that space.

As a grassroots community with a leadership able to mediate between the community and an outside cultural professional, the Mulan Center was able to take the initiative for the collaboration with Zhao. Zhao viewed his role as that of a social worker rather than a director, and tried to prioritize the stories of the participants in the making of the play. Choices of form, such as dividing the role of Xiaoyu over several performers, simultaneously served the portrayal, and allowed people who were new to theater to participate. Migrant worker women themselves played a significant role in most parts of the making of this play; they chose the theme, shared their experiences, provided the lines of the script, and performed the play. In this sense it is a play *by* migrant worker women.

It is also a play *about* migrant worker women. In *The Maternity Chronicles*, normally marginalized stories about abortion took center stage. The methods of community theater facilitated conversations about this taboo topic. The tight social fabric in the community and the trust this provided also played an important role in the process of breaking the taboo. The shared experience, and the sharing of that experience, created a platform where individual experiences could also be shared.

The reflections of participants exemplified the important emotional function of having voice for those who speak and get to tell their stories. In this sense, *The Maternity Chronicles* is not just a theater project *by* and *about* the migrant worker women who participated in the play, but also a play *for* them. It also reached an audience that partly consisted of migrant worker women.

Is *The Maternity Chronicles* also a play *of* migrant worker women? To answer this question, it is important to recognize the diversity within the group of migrant worker

women. Which aspects of the experiences portrayed are shared, and by whom? In *The Maternity Chronicles*, intergenerational differences surfaced. Participants of the older generation made claims to the ownership of the experience presented in order to justify the relevance of the play.

As a community theater project, *The Maternity Chronicles* aimed to prioritize the voices of participants, and I think it succeeded in creating a space for participants to speak as individuals and as part of the community. Especially during the workshops and interviews, participants had the opportunity to express their own ideas and experiences. On stage, individual expression was not always prioritized. Some tension occurred during rehearsals when Zhao tried to take into account the needs of the audience by asking participants to keep their emotions under control during performances. Were those emotions a form of individual expression, a means of speaking with the body while performing someone else's words? Within the spaces for speaking *The Maternity Chronicles* created, we can ask to what extent individuals can speak and dissent when they speak as part of a group.

Did the women in *The Maternity Chronicles*, 'rehearse revolution', as Boal phrases it? Perhaps a small-scale revolution: participants spoke about experiences that are normally considered taboo. The on-stage enactment of a reality in which a woman talked openly about her experiences with abortion also prompted members of the audience to open up.

The Maternity Chronicles provided a platform for migrant worker women, and others, to speak about their experiences with abortion. I will end with Qi Lixia's reflection on the value of the play:

"Of course, one cannot expect a play to solve such a big social problem that has built up over so many years. Allowing more people to see [the social issue], to hear [about it], and afterwards to think and to act, may be the greatest value of the work."

(Feedback document 2019)

9. Bibliography

Boal, Augusto. 1979. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Translated by Charles MacBride. London: Pluto Press.

China Labour Bulletin. 2017. "Migrant worker families face eviction after 19 die in Beijing fire." Published November 23, 2017.

<https://clb.org.hk/content/migrant-worker-families-face-eviction-after-19-die-beijing-fire>

China Labour Bulletin. 2021. "Migrant workers and their children." Published May 4, 2021. <https://www.clb.org.hk/content/migrant-workers-and-their-children>

Cliff, Tom and Wang Kan. 2018. "Survival as Citizenship, or Citizenship as Survival? Imagined and Transient Political Groups in Urban China." In *The Living Politics of Self-Help Movements in East Asia*, edited by Tom Cliff, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, and Wei Shuge, 29–55. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Fan, Liya. 2019. "I Want My Own Sky': Chinese Migrant Mothers Onstage." *Sixth Tone*, July 8, 2019. <http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1004256/i-want-my-own-sky-chinese-migrant-mothers-onstage> Accessed December 2019.

Feedback document. 2019. Document recording feedback from audience and participants of *The Maternity Chronicles*, provided to the author of this thesis by Zhao Zhiyong on January 31, 2020.

Feng, Jiayun. 2019. "Women migrant workers in Beijing are creating an empowering play based on their childbirth experience." *SupChina*, April 18, 2019.

<https://supchina.com/2019/04/18/chinese-corner-zhili-is-the-child-modeling-capital-of-china/>

Florence, Eric. 2019. "Rural Migrant Workers in Independent Films: Representations of Everyday Agency." In *Dog Days: Made in China Yearbook 2018*, edited by Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, 266-73. Acton: ANU Press.

Fu, Diana. 2009. "A cage of voices: Producing and doing dagongmei in contemporary China." *Modern China*, 35, no. 5: 527-561.

Goyal, Nidhi. 2018. "Disabled Women Challenging Stereotypes." Interview by Nelufar Hedayat. *The Conversation*, BBC World Service, December 3, 2018. Audio.

Jacka, Tamara. 1998. "Working Sisters Answer Back: The Representation and Self-Representation of Women in China's Floating Population." *China Information* 13, no. 1: 43-75.

Jacka, Tamara. 2015. *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration, and Social Change*. London: Routledge.

Jaguścik, Justyna. 2011. "Cultural representation and self-representation of dagongmei in contemporary china." *DEP-Deportate, Esuli, Profughe* 17, Special Issue: 121-138.

Jianchang. 2019. "被忽略的女工生育之痛." Published November 5, 2019.

<https://m.jiemian.com/article/3650251.html>

Mulan Center and Zhao Zhiyong. 2019. "The Maternity Chronicles." Recorded January 2019 at the Juyin Theater, Beijing. Video.

Mulan Center. 2019. "木兰花开非虚构社区剧场作品《生育纪事》将于5月11日再度上演，期待你的参与！" Published April 26, 2019.

https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzU2MjcxMTI5Ng==&mid=2247484142&idx=1&sn=2d8785b37a1ad8c543e2c797f9805685&chksm=fc641c81cb1395978c0821f7e089c74b08c41699f64333b4d3fc42d55fafbc51046c4ca6d559&token=3867

Mulan Center. 2019. "【木兰十周年庆】距离木兰十周年还有三十天，我们想找回三十段依旧温暖的记忆....." Published December 4, 2019.

<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/L3b6cx6ig6T7ha3ikHPLAA>

Ngai, Pun. 2005. *Made in China: Women factory workers in a global workplace*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Nie, Jingbao. 2005. *Behind the silence: Chinese voices on abortion*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. EBSCO.

Niewenhuis, Lucas. 2017. "Beijing haphazardly evicts migrants for 'safety'." *SupChina*, November 27, 2017. <https://supchina.com/2017/11/27/beijing-haphazardly-evicts-migrants-for-safety/>

Qin, Xiaoyu. 2016. *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*. Translated by Eleanor Goodman. Buffalo: White Pine Press.

Qiu, Jack Linchuan and Wang Hongzhe. 2018. "Working-Class Cultural Spaces: Comparing the Old and the New." In *China's Peasants and Workers: Changing Class Identities*, edited by Beatriz Carrillo and David Goodman, 124–46. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271-315. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Sun, Wanning. 2012. "Poetry of Labour and (Dis)articulation of Class: China's worker-poets and the cultural politics of boundaries." *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 78: 993-1010.

van Crevel, Maghiel. 2019. "Debts: Coming to Terms with Migrant Worker Poetry." *Chinese Literature Today* 8, no. 1: 127-145.

- van Erven, Eugene. 2001. *Community Theatre: Global perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Wang, Xiaoyun. 2019. “观众招募 | 《生育纪事》女性不可言说的痛与幸福.” Published November 30, 2019. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/dJvDPVDf1uV5uzkSPX3IYQ>
- Womenvoice. 2019. “听到 看到 《生育纪事》——首部打工女性本色演出的生育话剧在北京正式公演.” Published January 9, 2019. <http://www.womenvoice.cn/n1/2019/0109/c414274-30512476.html>
- Zeng, Jiazhi, Guanyang Zou, Xiaoqin Song, and Li Ling. 2015. "Contraceptive practices and induced abortions status among internal migrant women in Guangzhou, China: a cross-sectional study." *BMC Public Health* 15, no. 1: 1-10.
- Zhang, Nanqian. 2019. “将生育经历排成话剧，女工们的生育纪事.” Published April 1, 2019. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/AKg_CYc_TYdMTZO5bmcm4A Accessed December 2019.
- Zhao, Zhiyong. 2017. “The cry from the edge: an examination of the new workers' Dramas.” *Literary theory and criticism* 1. Chinese Social Sciences Net. http://www.x14k9o7.tk/wenlian/201908/t20190816_4958519.shtml
- Zhao, Zhiyong. 2020. Interview of Zhao by the author of this thesis. January 30, 2020.
- Zhao, Zhiyong. 2021. WeChat message to the author of this thesis. June 21, 2021.