

An experience that changes lives

Many stage actors – even veterans – will tell you they experience an indescribable ‘high’ while performing on stage.

That same sentiment is also shared by non-actors, like the participants in Hua Dan’s performing arts workshops, who have described the experience as ‘intangible magic’.

Lai Kelin, a 22-year-old student from Guangdong University of Business Studies, experienced Hua Dan’s ‘magic’ first hand during the spring festival break.

After seeing an online ad posted by Hua Dan to recruit new volunteers, he enrolled in one of their free workshops, held once a week at a courtyard in Jiudao Wan Hutong, in Beijing’s Dongcheng district.

Other projects

In 2004, Hua Dan started its first training programme in cooperation with the Beijing Rural Women Knowing All Institution, an NGO that operates a skills training centre in Beijing’s suburb for young girls from rural areas.

Since then, Hua Dan has been providing regular training programmes to female workers and the children of migrant workers to help improve their employability and quality of life.

Other programmes include the Beansprouts Project for migrant youth, Women’s Empowerment and Sichuan Rehabilitation programmes.

To assess the level of improvement in participants’ attitude and behavior, Hua Dan has also developed a multi-dimensional evaluation method.

Their efforts have not gone unnoticed as they recently secured sponsorship from embassies, enterprises and charities.

Increasingly, other NGOs and private enterprises are also showing interest in their work. Watson says Hua Dan has been invited by a Guangdong-based firm to provide training programmes for its employees.

At the workshop, Lai and 16 other participants first took turns to mimic the voices and mannerisms of their leader as an ice-breaker, and also as a way of introducing themselves to the class.

They then split up into groups to act out a scenario of a five-year-old boy 'eloping' with his six-year-old girlfriend. What each group did was subject to their own interpretation – using words, body language and props.

As acting compels you to look inwardly to tap your inner reserves of emotion, Hua Dan founder **Caroline Watson** believes this is how the organisation can help unlock one's hidden potential.

"In Chinese opera, Hua Dan is the heroine embodying both beauty and brains. We hope that each woman will become a 'hua dan' through our training," she says.

Psychologist Hou Chun-long, says that with emotion being such a powerful force, a person's inner strength can be released through the performance arts. This in turn, he says, builds self-confidence and ultimately achieves relaxation and frees the soul.

Watson says Hua Dan's workshops help participants connect the games and activities with their everyday lives, which then enables them to get in touch with their inner self, thereby enhancing their social and economic well-being.

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