

## Interview with Sufeng Song

Interviewed by Tanya Lee, May 31, 2007

One of the co-directors of ***The Vagina Monologues: Stories from China***, Sufeng Song, is a professor of gender studies at Sun Yat-sen (Zhongshan) University in Guangzhou, China. Born and raised in Taiwan, Song earned her Ph.D. from Shandong University in China, taught in South Korea, and held a post-doc at the University of California, Berkeley. In 2006-07, she spent the year at the University of Illinois as a **Freeman Fellow**, and in May 2007, screened her film on campus. Soon afterwards, I had the opportunity to interview her about the project.



***The Vagina Monologues: Stories from China*** was reviewed by Hui Xiao in the Winter 2008 issue of the **AEMS Newsletter**, published with an excerpt of this interview. It can be purchased on DVD from **the Chinese University of Hong Kong**. Price is US\$150 for institutions and US\$8 for individuals.

**Tanya Lee:** Why don't we talk about who was involved and what roles everybody played. Who were the filmmakers and what different roles did they play in making the film?

**Sufeng Song:** Professor Ai and I were the co-directors [but didn't know how] to make a film so we invited Hu Jie. He was a filmmaker, and he did most of the cinematography. And Professor Ai did some, and I did parts too. But the overall structure, the plan about the film was decided by the directors.

**T:** How did the idea to make a film of this production come about?

**S:** When we first started the staging of the Vagina Monologues we had some purpose, advocacy for women's rights. And educational purposes. So these were our purposes in our staging. But if it was just one staging, then the effect would be limited, just three hundred-some audience and students, journalists and scholars—it's not enough. So we were thinking we have to start to find a very emphatic medium, and film is a more effective way and it could be circulated to a large audience. So we decided to make a film out of it.

**T:** So did that decision come before or after the staging?

**S:** Actually it was after, after the staging. I think at first we just wanted to have film taken of the whole staging. But the footage that came off was not very good because we didn't have much money for the sound effects and microphones and so on, so we decided to do another staging and make it for the record, to tape it. But at this point

[we thought] why not just do a story, the behind-the-scenes story. Originally the film was called "The Vagina Monologues: Stories Behind the Scenes," a kind of "*Mu Hou Gushi*." But it's now been changed to "Stories from China," because we've got a wider scope. We wanted to cover the situation of the whole China, not just our staging but the staging by the students and the faculty at the other universities. So that's why the name change.

**T:** You had footage of the students rehearsing beforehand though. Did you just happen to have video cameras at the rehearsals or was that something that was done later?

**S:** It's because we knew Hu Jie before that. We had some screenings of his films. So we just contacted him to do some recording of our staging. So he was there. It wasn't really decided before the staging to make a film, it just came all together after the staging happened.

**T:** Let's clarify the uniqueness of this production. So this is the first mainland Chinese production in Mandarin is that correct?

**S:** Yes, yes it is.

**T:** Where else has *The Vagina Monologues* been staged in the Chinese speaking world and what made your production unique?

**S:** I'm not sure because I'm wondering if Taiwan had some sort of Chinese speaking production. And I don't know if the productions in Singapore or Hong Kong were in Mandarin Chinese, or in Cantonese, or in English. I'm guessing in Singapore it would be in English, and in Hong Kong it might be in Cantonese, or in English. So the only place that I suspect of having a [Mandarin] Chinese production is in Taiwan .

**T:** You said there was one other in mainland China that was in English?

**S:** Yeah, it was in English. A three-person staging and I remember two of the actresses were foreigners.

**T:** So you personally became involved in this project because you are a faculty member in this program right?

**S:** As far as the staging, I got involved before I became a faculty member.

**T:** Oh really?

**S:** Yeah, in March of 2003 we started, and I began to work at Sun-Yatsen (Zhongshan) University in June of that year. Professor Ai got in touch with me and asked if I would be interested in teaching at this university and so I went there for an interview. During my stay for the interview at Zhongshan University, Bu Wei of the Network for Combating Domestic Violence based in Beijing called Prof. Ai, asking if we would like to join the cause of combating violence against women and do a staging of the Vagina Monologues. Professor Ai asked me if I could work as a co-director because she didn't know about staging. I didn't either. She hadn't worked as director before so she really wanted to find someone to work with her. I consented; I said "well, that's a very interesting thing, a very exciting thing to do." So I stayed and got involved and helped direct. And then just after that, around ...maybe it was the end of March, so it was about three weeks after we started the whole thing, SARS broke out, so I had to go back to Taiwan. But it's because of this experience that I decided to stay and work at Zhongshan University. It's very interesting, you know, sometimes you encounter these things by chance [laughter].

**T:** Yeah, what a great way to come into the program! How did you get the students involved--how did you persuade the students that this would be something that they should do?

**S:** In Chinese universities, students respect professors. The teachers, and the students are in a very close, good relationship. So whenever the teachers initiate something, most of the time the students will follow. It's a kind of respect, a close co-operative relationship, a close teamwork spirit, it's very unique to Chinese universities. But it's not that it's only the decision of the professors, of Professor Ai and me. Professor Ai asked the students to see if they were interested too. So it's not just one sided. Our division of Comparative Literature and World Literature especially enjoys a close relationship among the faculty and students and a good team spirit too. The staging involves postgraduate students of the division and some undergraduate students from the Chinese department, to which the Comp. Lit. division belongs. And those students, they have very good relations with Professor Ai because they took her courses. They like her and Professor Ai knows them as individuals, so she would ask if they wanted to join.

**T:** So approximately how big is the program?

**S:** It's not, it's not big, we're just very active. We have very few faculty--maybe the fewest among all the divisions under the Chinese department. We have four faculty in the Comp. Lit. division, but only two, Professor Ai Xiaoming and I, are involved in sex and gender education. The sex/gender education program was initiated by Professor Ai. She got funding from the Lingnan Foundation, an American-based foundation. And she got the only other faculty member--that's me!--to join. We also we invited some members from outside the program, like from the foreign language dept., but that's kind of a friendship thing. In terms of the time and energy involved for Professor Ai and I are the major members.

**T:** It's clear from the film that your students felt some discomfort with the topic of the play--learning to be comfortable saying the word "vagina" 120 times during the course of the evening. And you all had to deal with that part of the experience, right? Could you put this in context? How much of a taboo is there around that word in China today? How commonly do people talk about this; how shameful is it to talk about this?

**S:** Maybe I can tell you some stories to put it in perspective. Do you remember one story from the film? One of our students, she received a phone call from somebody harassing her, that's one instance [of the shame surrounding the word]. And you know this word ["*yindao*," or "vagina"] is not common in our daily life. One of my students said when she first heard the title of the play, she was thinking it was some kind of story that happens in a dark, hidden alley [*laughs*]. You know, "*yin*" means "dark", and "*dao*" could be "alley!" She couldn't recall any use of that word for a female part at all. So that tells you something. For some Chinese students, it's an unthinkable body part. This word has so little exposure in the language, in proper language, especially for young ladies. Our students, at first they were a little embarrassed to talk about their parts because they are like any other students. But after a while they got so involved in the preparation and the rehearsals and action and so on, that they would talk about the word and the play in the taxi loudly and just forgot the context, you know. And they told me how people were amazed in the restaurant or in the taxi about how they would talk about these things.

**T:** So there obviously must be slang and dirty words people can use as well....

**S:** But actually, the interesting part is that it's not slang, *yindao*, it's not a kind of a dirty word, it's sort of a medical word.

**T:** Right, so it's like vagina.

**S:** It's like vagina. But still people feel embarrassed about that. I remember we had a poster for the film and we had to give it to some officials in the university. They were embarrassed. They didn't look into the poster they didn't look into the words. You could feel from people's reaction in the first instance, it's embarrassment, but for the most

part it's people avoiding it and also misunderstanding the *reading* of the word at all!

**T:** At the screening here a few weeks ago, in the Q and A session afterwards, a lot of people in that audience were curious about what had happened since 2004 [when the film ends]. At one point in the film you mention that Beijing had tried to put it on and it failed.

**S:** It wasn't university students though. Both planned stagings were banned but they were not from students or universities. But there were some productions on campuses. One was in Fudan University and another was in Huadong Normal University in Shanghai, and I think a third, I don't remember. But the Beijing and Shanghai productions that were done by professional actresses and directors, they were banned.

After 2004, we just wanted to promote the film. And we brought the film to new locations and audiences--it should now be over a hundred Chinese universities and NGOs also some universities overseas, in the United States, the UK and Hong Kong. Not yet in Taiwan, maybe I should arrange one there! *[laughs]*

**T:** So what sort of reaction have you had from these other places that have seen this film?

**S:** I can only tell about some screenings in the UK at the University of Sussex, and at the forty-ninth meeting of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women in the US. And one other at the University of Michigan that was for their International Women's Day celebrations. And two screenings here [at the University of Illinois]. These were the only screenings where I was there for the screening and the discussion. I would say the reception has been really good, and some of them got the audience very excited, too. I remember at the screening in the UK I met with representatives from some international organizations, including those from Southeast Asia and from Africa. They were very touched by the film. And they were amazed that Chinese people could do that, they said it was very different from their impression of the Chinese people. They thought Chinese were very conservative about sexuality couldn't be so outspoken about their bodies, about sexuality, so they found it very amazing, very enlightening. It made them think about how it would be possible for them to do the same stuff, in their own countries, because they could see how effective the film is in influencing the audience.

**T:** I'm curious about the reception in China.

**S:** I didn't go to the Chinese screenings, except the one in Shanghai. It was the centennial celebration of the Chinese women's movement in Shanghai in 2005. So there were a lot of Chinese scholars and feminist activists there. I showed the film and it was well received. Because those participants were feminists themselves, it was a very heated discussion with a lot of laughter and a lot of vigor, too. After that, we expanded it to cover more about Chinese women's situation and the problems they face, or the efforts of Chinese feminists. So it's not just about *us*, a small group of people doing the staging, it should be about the efforts of Chinese feminists at home and abroad. It's a task that requires overall efforts from different aspects. So it's a vision, we want this film to be a process.

**T:** Now, I think I remember you saying you also, well you said it to NGOs, and you said it had also been screened in some rural settings?

**S:** Yeah, but Professor Ai and I didn't go to those screenings because we had our jobs. It was also screened on the occasion of some campaigns, like the 16-day Campaign to stop violence against women, from November 25th until December 10th--it's an international campaign. Every year on this occasion and also on International Women's Day celebration, we send copies of the film to gender research programs and some related programs at universities and NGOs in rural areas. We wanted them to show the film and have the chance to explore some problems in contemporary China and also to

give them the chance to talk about it. Maybe some solutions can come out of it, even if it's just basic solutions, it's the first step. And even women from a rural area can benefit because you don't have to have a high education in order to watch a film. So that's one advantage of film, compared to the written text.

**T:** It'd be very interesting to hear what kind of discussions they have afterwards.

**S:** Yeah. So far I haven't had the chance, but I hope I will have the chance to go to a rural area and also screen and to watch and really in person what this reception is like. Thank you of reminding me of that! We had a screening for migrant workers--remember in the film there's a workers' center in Guangzhou? It's not a rural area, but they are migrant workers [from the countryside]. It got very heated. Hu Jie and Professor Ai gave that screening and they had a discussion and they listened to the stories, they talked about a lot of female workers' problems. I think that whenever people just watch the film there will be some kind of thinking, maybe different, but it's instructive to hear.

**T:** Do you have a sense of what kind of impact this experience had on students afterwards, in their lives?

**S:** Actually some of the students, the ones in the film, already talked about their stories like the one who was too embarrassed to talk to her father about her menstruation pains, about cramps, so she always talked about how she has stomach pain, and after [performing in the Vagina Monologues] she could tell him. It was kind of a big leap for her and also for her family because it's not common for Chinese parents to talk about sexuality or sexual education with their children. I heard a lot of stories from my students in my classes, how they never talked about this to their parents. So this was a new experience for them to start to talk about things, about female bodies to their parents.

For some students, there was a change in their personality, too. Some students were kind of shy or not so outspoken, or maybe they were not thinking about gender equality or not thinking that they were entitled to developing some of their innermost aspirations before. But the stage production was a kind of a process of self-education. And education amongst ourselves. We started to reach out towards some different possibilities. In some students I know who are very close to me, I could really sense their change: they became more independent, more outspoken, and more firm about their stance advocating for women's rights. Before they might know that things weren't *right*, but because of their personalities, because of their education as young ladies and because of the expected resistance and hostility of the people around them, they tended not to want to voice out their stances.

**T:** Standing up in front of people and speaking loudly is a very different experience from thinking, reading and writing.

**S:** You get into the role too, so whenever you get into a role it teaches you something. You open up your mind and it has an effect on your heart.

**T:** Is there any kind of formal sex education in Chinese schools?

**S:** There should be, there should be. I did some investigation in my classes. That was the first year that I worked at Zhongshan University. I don't remember why we were on the topic of sex education but there was this male student who raised his hand saying, "Teacher, I think I want to talk about sex education before we go into sexuality because we have *little* education about that." I was surprised. He was so involved, so immersed in the discussion that he wanted something more in depth, to get more than the basics.

After that I started to investigate. Students said they had some sort of sex education textbooks in senior high school and in junior high school, but in most of the cases the teachers don't teach at all, they just have the books, and it's not a course, it's just a

maybe one or two hours of class, which was often replaced by some other major stuff like Chinese language or mathematics for the examinations. First, they think it's not important. Second, it's too embarrassing for teachers to teach. There was just one student who said their teacher really taught sex education. Based on the book.

**T:** So it is programmed into the curriculum, it's supposed to happen, but in most cases it doesn't.

**S:** It doesn't, it doesn't. Most students get no "formal" sex education, and also it's only for secondary school students. For primary school, I don't think they have any. Maybe things are changing now, because I heard that some people were revising sex education books, and there was talk about whether or not they were suitable for primary school students--so there was a debate going on, but I don't know the results. But even if you have a better version of sex education textbooks I would doubt that you have the teachers to teach it or that they would get taught in rural areas. It's always a small percentage of students who get sex education. I asked the students how they got sex education, and some of them, especially the male students, said they get it from "*huangpian*," you know? Dirty videos and dirty books and pictures. I said, "That's not sex education, come on!" *[laughs]* They get it from peers, too.

**T:** Is it true that you had no theatre background?

**S:** No, none at all.

**T:** Had you ever acted in a play before?

**S:** Yeah at University, because at National Taiwan University in the English department we had some annual stagings of plays. It was a tradition. But it was just students stuff, it's not comparative to this in scale. Yeah, we are all amateurs. And we were all inexperienced. All we had was a kind of innovation and some sort of sense of urgency to do something. So I tell you that even when we started to film the staging and decided to make a film documentary out of that we didn't have funding at all. We just started to do it first and then looked for funding. And fortunately we got funding. Not too much but it was still good for covering some of the basic costs. *[laughs]*

**T:** Why did you feel it was urgent to do this project?

**S:** If you live in Chinese society you see in your daily life some kind of injustice. It's not just from the news. Some people just reach you, like Professor Ai because she was so outspoken for minority groups. Professor Ai has been one of the very outspoken figures on certain Internet-based campaigns, so I think that some of the people who have experienced some injustice come to her.

Most of our students come from privilege at home so they have no problems at all--they have a future and a home and so on--but if they look outside of their context, look outside of their class, [they can see injustice]. Also, in this experience of teaching feminism you feel some kind of resistance, too, from the students and also from other faculty. At best they were indifferent to what we were doing, and sometimes they would make jokes behind us, we heard from the students. You will sense that there is a lot of male chauvinistic culture there and you cannot talk to them at all because as soon as you start to talk there will be a fight. It's everywhere. Because there is no adequate respect for woman or gender equality. Some very serious, very tragic things happen, too. I know it's not just feminist or women's issues, there are a lot of issues to deal with in China--it's all interlocked. For instance, date rape in the legal system. There was no such thing as date rape or intramarriage rape, no legal concept. [As shown in the film there was a date rape case in China where] the mother of the victim said they were already separated they had broken up and there were some bruises on her daughter's body. Her mother was thinking there was some sort of violence involved, but with no concept of date rape, it is hard to convict the suspect. Just a few instances

like this make you feel like there are a lot of things to do.

In teaching women's studies and gender issues in China, actually I'm very patient, but still sometimes I am a little frustrated because you take it for granted that people understand the basics for being human, for being an educated person. And then one day you find out that your students--still very good students, very smart, very sweet--they just didn't have an awareness and you kind of have to start from ABC. [laughs] So that's one of the things that make me feel a sense of urgency.

**T:** How has this experience, putting on the play and then making the film and taking the film all over, the total experience of The Vagina Monologues, how has this changed you?

**S:** Me? It's kind of a reconfirmation of my fight for women's rights and gender equality and it's just part of my vision for a better life, very liberal, based on equality of all human beings. It's kind of a general concern, but still feminism and gender issues and the women's movement are one approach to get to that goal. It's a reconfirmation that what I'm doing, it's worthwhile, it's valuable. It's not just for myself--it's for my students, for all the people in the world or in China.

**T:** Well, I think that how connected you are is exactly what comes through as a big strength in the film.

**S:** And also remember the students there at the screening [at Illinois], they were talking about their experiences too. So it's really a very good thing to find people who are working for the same cause in different corners of the world.

**T:** Well thank you very much.

**S:** [laughs] No thank you. It was a very nice chat with you.

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