



Above: A bilingual label directs the performers backstage in Shanghai Qingpu Prison. — Ti Gong

Left: A prisoner, surnamed Rong (right), performs in the last scene of “The Dreamland” with another prisoner, who acts as his mother. — Jiang Diwen

Theater therapy project helps rehabilitate inmates of Shanghai Qingpu Prison

Tian Shengjie

“Hurry up! It’s your turn!” a Chinese prisoner surnamed Huang calls in English to several inmates from other countries who are backstage. The foreign performers quickly run to the sides of the stage with handmade props.

Recently, the original stage play “The Dreamland,” created by Shanghai Qingpu Prison over five years, premiered inside the high walls.

It was adapted from the real stories of criminals, showing their psychological journey from being lost to repentance, from redemption to gratitude. It attracted hundreds of people to watch, including social workers and staff members of local judicial bureaus.

The event was not a shindig but an act in a drama therapy project for correcting prisoners’ behavior and cognitive bias. It has also been introduced in many prisons in other countries, such as the United States and Britain. Some universities also have relevant courses for academic research.

The Qingpu prison is the earliest

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The sound of applause can cleanse their sense of failure and abandonment. They are labeled by themselves as ‘successful’ again.

Wang Shengluo

Police officer and director of the drama therapy project of Shanghai Qingpu Prison

prison in China to practice drama for rehabilitation, after it established the “ISUN Performance and Art Group” in 2011. More than 150 inmates from 76 countries have joined the group and participated in over 80 art productions, involving drama, dance and music.

The art troupe is like a ray of light for many prisoners, including Huang,

illuminating their once-opaque futures and giving them a new lease of life.

Huang is now a gentle, friendly person with a ready smile. It is hard to believe that he was the violent offender sentenced in his court verdict.

When he was young, he was tough and participated in a gang fight which caused someone to die. He then fled to the southwest of China out of fear of imprisonment.

During his following 12 years in exile, he married and started his own business. His newborn baby girl gave the fugitive the courage to face his past sins. He surrendered himself to the police in 2015 and longed to go back to his hometown and visit his family with his wife and daughter after he is released.

“I didn’t know what to do in the prison at first,” Huang told Shanghai Daily. “When I saw the art troupe recruiting, I signed up.”

Wang Shengluo, a police officer and the director of the drama therapy project of the prison, hesitated before accepting the Huang.

“The art group generally does not

accept violent lawbreakers because interpersonal communication is unavoidable during performances and rehearsals, which is a challenge for prison stability,” he said.

The troupe finally accepted Huang because of his good appearance and standard Mandarin, trying to give even violent inmates a chance to turn over a new leaf.

“At first, he sometimes argued with others,” said Yao Chenlingfeng, another police officer who was also an actor in “The Dreamland.”

“For example, the actors have short preparation time at backstage, but, as a stage manager, he can’t bear them throwing props around casually,” Yao said.

Many other inmates also continued their tempers and bad habits initially, such as disobeying discipline, arguing, or cheating.

To prevent the inmates from committing crimes again after being released, it is necessary to break the “endless criminal chain,” which includes bad speech and habits, as well as a misperception of themselves and the world.