



*Women and children showing their cheerful smile in front of the camera.*

---

Women from the Village of Northwest China Began to  
**“Go Up against the Wind”**  
After Taking Up Square Dancing

---

by Project partner | 無止橋 慈善基金  
Chang Zhuqing | Project Officer of Wu Zhi Qiao (Bridge to China) Charitable Foundation

*Note from the Editor: When the new social norm became a ubiquity in the village, with all men leaving for the city to work, the women who have been left behind have to make their way in supporting the family. Their emotional health as well as their confusions and difficulties are however often ignored. Raising gender awareness and promoting gender equality have become key components in the development of the rural community. As such, community workers are experimenting with different ways to empower women, with square dancing as one of them.*

**Women from the village of northwest China began to “go up against the wind” after taking up square dancing**

Like most of the impoverished villages in Mainland China, Macha Village, which is located in the southern part of Huining County in Gansu, has been suffering from a chronic drought that has limited the development of its agricultural industry which, as a consequence, has caused the lack of domestic employment opportunities. With the rapid urbanization and industrialization of China, a large number of young workers have left the village to work in the big cities. This has left the village mostly composed of the elderly

and children, with women taking up the responsibilities left by men.

The women staying in Macha Village need to do most of the farm works in addition to the housework and taking care of the elderly and children. The increased workload leaves them no time to themselves and even leaves them in poor health. They are not very confident about being themselves and prefer covering themselves with headscarves all the time to avoid the strong ultraviolet rays

and the ceaseless wind linger in the area. Moreover, they seldom have contact with people from outside of the village, which leaves them too timid to make eye contact with strangers and not even daring to say hello with their broken mandarin. Yet, the desire to change their lives still shines through their eyes.



## Time to change: When square dancing enters their life



In 2016, on the occasion of officiating the opening of the Macha Village Centre jointly built by the Chan Cheung Mun Chung Charitable Fund and the Wu Zhi Qiao (Bridge to China) Charitable Foundation, two young volunteers from Hong Kong

introduced square dancing to the local women for the first time.

At first the women were too shy to participate, however encouraged by the community workers, they came to the centre more frequently and finally a few young women joined the dance.

Initially there were more people watching than people dancing, however after a few rounds, the women became more inclined to be a part of it. Other than joining the dance, the women had maintained the dancing room well, and there were

even some “leading dancers” emerged in the dancing group.

“We are very happy to dance at the activity centre. As long as there is a dancing session, it does not matter if it is raining or snowing we will be there,” said Dong, one of the most passionate dancers. Dong’s husband is a village doctor, thus she used to stay at home taking care of the elderly and children - typical of left-behind women who need to take up the responsibility of the whole household. Nonetheless, she gradually became the most reliable member in the dancing team.

## Square dancing changed the relationships of people in the village

Square dancing gave the women the confidence to form a women group, and to become more aware of their own individual abilities and value. At home, they actively sought support from their families and started to earn more respect and understanding. In the village, they brought square dancing to a variety of activities: fitness sessions, talent shows, festivals, village performance nights, birthday celebrations, weddings, and housewarming parties, to name a few. Even in the “grave relocation”<sup>1</sup> that was previously entirely undertaken by men, women started to take a role.

“This is where we learn to dance and also where we can help each other. This is our real home,” said Liu, another core member of the women’s group.



1. Grave relocation: a local custom in Huining, generally performed where bad luck, temporary burial, water damage or national construction generates the need to relocate ancestors' graves.

1
2
3

1. Women are getting vegetables ready for preservation in front of the community centre in Macha Village.
2. The volunteers from Hong Kong are teaching the local women square dancing.
3. The women bring their own dancing outfits and form a square dancing team.

Women from the village of northwest China began to “go up against the wind” after taking up square dancing

## Women in the village gradually take the stage during public community activities

The local women found happiness in square dancing and collectively came up with plans for the Women's Day celebration. On March 8th, 2017, the first Women's Day celebration in Macha Village planned and organized by the local women was successfully held. It was a joyful day with activities and games to which everyone is familiar from their childhoods.

The women said that no matter how hard their life is, they need to try to find some time for themselves. Organizing the celebration activities was also the first time that they realized women could also be in the public spotlight. Since then, they continued the momentum and held another three Women's Day celebrations consecutively.

The Women's Day celebrations also allowed the men in the village to look at the women with new perspectives. In the past four years, women became the leaders in a variety of celebrations, include Dragon Boat Festival, Double Ninth Festival, the New Year's Day and even Chinese New Year. Except being responsible for the catering and setting up the venue, they also perform dances and operas, even doing hair cuts for the old people and making them dumplings on their birthday. With a growing reputa-



tion, the representatives of the women's group are regularly consulted on important public affairs of the village.

The women had unleashed their newfound eagerness to learn new things. In addition

to square dancing and first-aid training, more than a dozen of women started to learn Qinqiang Opera from a few of years ago. They are so well versed and even got invited to perform at the national New Year's Eve Opera Gala in 2019.

## Working in the village requires perspectives from different genders

Increasing gender awareness and promoting gender equality are important principles that cannot be neglected in the development of a rural community. According to the latest statistics, there are 47 million women who have been left alone to take care of household chores in rural villages. Thus many organizations are striving to find more efficient ways

to develop the role of women alongside the village as a whole. One method to achieve this is through strengthening the working abilities of women.

How to vitalize and guide the unique roles women play in forming a healthy family and community ecosystem has already become the paramount goal when it comes to rural development policy making for national and local governments.

Women are a non-negligible force to improve the sustainable development and stimulate the domestic productivity of rural villages. How to mobilize local women in forming women's groups in order to raise awareness and recognition of their own abilities and extend it to the whole village is a direction worth considering in the future development of the local communities.

1 | 2  
3

**Keywords:** gender equality, female consciousness, community development, village mobilization, left-behind women in the village

Translated by Shuang Hibberd from the original version 《因为广场舞，这个西北农村的姐姐们也开始“乘风破浪”》

Edited by Emily Li | Designed by Tracy Ying | All photos by the author

### References

- 叶敬忠, 汪淳玉. 留守妇女如何走出婚姻困境. 中国妇女报, 2019-2-4. <http://paper.cnwomen.com.cn/content/2019-01/28/056503.html?from=timeline&isappinstalled=0>
- 古学斌. 幸福像花一样：一份中国农村文化、妇女与发展的实践记录[M]. 北京: 北京大学出版社, 2014.
- 民政部, 公安部, 司法部等13部门. 关于加强农村留守妇女关爱服务工作的意见, 2019-11.

1. Group photo after celebrating the first Women's Day together.

2. The women's group is holding a birthday party for the old people in the village.

3. Members of the women's group are studying and performing Qinqiang Opera on the stage.



Together we bring hopes,  
enrich lives and build for the future

**Chan Cheung Mun Chung Charitable Fund**

Address: 19/F, Railway Plaza, 39 Chatham Road South, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon, Hong Kong  
Email: [info@ccmccf.org.hk](mailto:info@ccmccf.org.hk) Tel: +852 2756 0828  
Fax: +852 2753 8434 Web: [www.ccmccf.org.hk](http://www.ccmccf.org.hk)