

Can a Lawsuit Help Combat Regional Discrimination?

In a comedy show about telephone scams staged during the 2017 Spring Festival Gala on Beijing TV, the voice of the skit's swindler had a Henan provincial accent. A lawyer from Henan has since filed a lawsuit accusing the show's director and actors and also the TV station of regional discrimination and harming the reputation of Henan people. The lawsuit demands the accused publicly apologize to Henan people and pay compensation of 1 yuan (\$0.16) for every person from Henan.

The director of the show explained that he played the part of the fraudster using his native Shandong Province accent, which sounds similar to that of Henan Province, as the two provinces share a common border. Some people therefore say the lawyer has overreacted and wants to attract attention by making a big deal out of the issue.

Some others, meanwhile, believe the case has aroused attention to the regional discrimination that does exist throughout China, particularly against people from provinces like Henan, which are the sources of large numbers of migrant workers. They believe people

everywhere in China should bear in mind that people from these provinces have contributed much to the prosperity of the nation.

A serious case

Pu Shaling (*China Youth Daily*): Many people think this lawyer is making a fuss about the show. Some even retort that, according to his logic, if the swindler speaks Mandarin Chinese, every citizen of China should be paid 1 yuan in compensation.

Actually, this lawyer knows clearly that he is unlikely to win the lawsuit. Some people say he intended only to stir up controversy. However, by doing so, the lawyer does not necessarily mean ill. He just wants to give publicity to what is, in his words, a kind of discrimination against people from Henan Province.

The lawyer, Zhang Huashan, said, "I often feel subject to ridicule for being someone from Henan, and sometimes, I feel strongly that it's discrimination. I filed the lawsuit to arouse people's attention to this intentional or unintentional discrimination, so that the whole society will become more harmonious. Either in daily life or in comedy shows, this kind of discrimination should be avoided."

Equality is an important symbol of social progress. The basic requirement for equality among people is no discrimination against each other due to gender, race, height, medical condition or place of origin. The public should not focus on whether or not the lawsuit is a publicity stunt; instead they should be more conscious of the issue of discrimination.

Yang Yinghe (*news.cjn.cn*): The lawyer filed a lawsuit against a comedy show because he thought the show damaged the reputation of people from Henan. His lawsuit has focused public attention on regional discrimination.

I have seen job postings that explicitly exclude workers from Henan. The comedy sketch has dealt yet another blow to the already strained nerves of Henan people on top of the discrimination they routinely encounter.

Widening gaps in economic status and culture easily lead to some people in wealthier areas feeling a sense of superiority, and consequently categorizing people from different provinces into various classes. However, in tandem with China's economic development, migration within the nation increased greatly, and the prosperity of any particular place has

resulted from the efforts of both local people and migrant workers. Any open, inclusive city should denounce the practice of regional discrimination.

We are glad to see that in large cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, access to social security and medical care, which locals take for granted, is also becoming available to people from elsewhere. This is very encouraging to migrant workers and people who have moved to these cities.

No matter what the outcome of the lawsuit, we should not take this case lightly. We need to understand what lies behind the dispute. The lawyer and the whole of Henan's population hope everybody else in China will give up their entrenched impression of the province and develop new, objective and fair attitudes toward Henan.

Overreaction

Zhang Nanzhi (*focus.cnhubei.com*): The lawyer, out of love for his place of origin, hopes to safeguard the reputation of the province and its population through his profession. In this sense, no blame is deserved. Nonetheless, he has overreacted to the comedy routine. After the lawsuit was filed, the writer explained that he had played the part of the swindler with his native Shandong provincial dialect, and the dialects of the two provinces sound similar in some areas. His explanation is persuasive. As everyone knows, the dialects along the border between the two provinces sound too similar to tell apart. Therefore, the accusation of damaging the reputation of Henan people may not withstand scrutiny.

This single case serves as a warning about the possibility of mistakenly raising accusations of regional discrimination. At the same time, suddenly it seems as though people in every province have been or are targets of regional discrimination. According to a "discrimination map" currently circulating online, people from different provinces can easily identify unbearable characteristics in one another and, thereby find targets of discrimination. In other words, regional discrimination ends up hurting everyone.

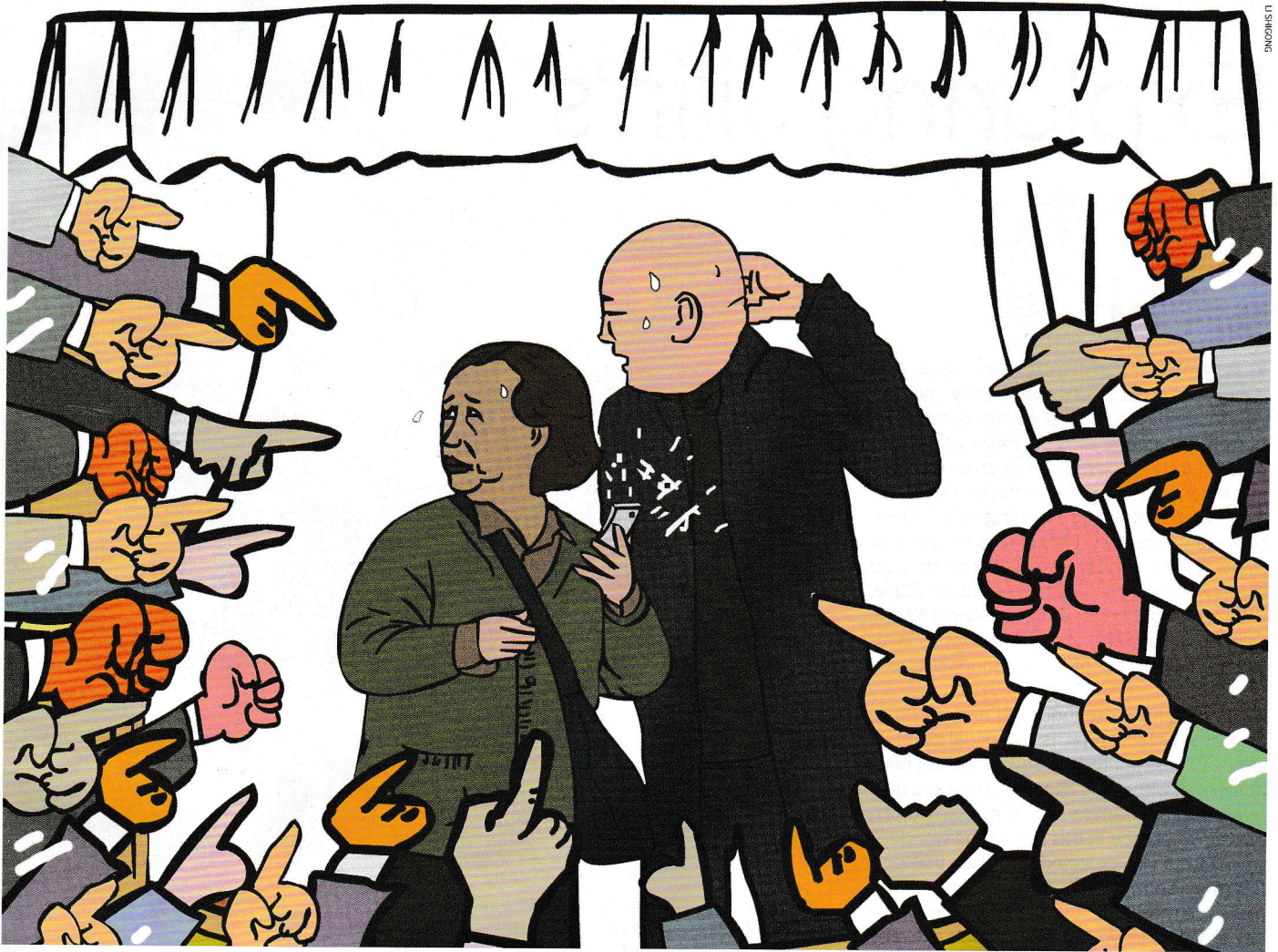
Stereotypes will not disappear overnight. By no means will they disappear through lawsuits. Sometimes, the more sensitive you are, the more vulnerable you are. Arguing with or even suing others for perceived discrimination will

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not help to eliminate discrimination, but will probably lead to a worse situation.

Dialects from northeast China often feature in comedy routines, but it is unheard of for anybody from the region to sue those involved for maligning local people's reputation. People who often confront so-called discrimination are supposed to downplay it instead of digging into the issue. They can choose to be tolerant and thereby possibly embarrass the people responsible or even make them feel guilty.

Regional discrimination can affect initial judgments about people who come from certain provinces or places. But, as far as specific individuals are concerned, their personal traits are what finally shape people's impressions, rather than their geographical identity.

Zhang Qing (China Youth Daily): Regional discrimination happens now and then, hurting people's feelings and affecting social harmony. We must oppose this trend. Comedy shows and other forms of art performance should also

refrain from reinforcing stereotypes. This case, however, where a lawyer from Henan sued a show's director, actors and TV broadcaster just because he heard the swindler in a sketch speak Henan dialect, denouncing it as regional discrimination, takes things too far.

In the comedy routine in question, when the swindler speaks in a Henan dialect, it only means that this particular swindler is from Henan, not that all people in Henan Province are swindlers. So, I can't see how this constitutes regional discrimination.

Actors often speak different dialects to impress audiences and make shows amusing. In this particular case, many people actually doubt the swindler spoke in a Henan dialect, because his accent was of a kind commonly heard in north China. People in Henan, therefore, need not get upset about the so-called Henan accent spoken by the swindler in the sketch.

My guess is that the lawyer intended to stir up controversy to make a name for himself, not

because he was actually upset by the comedy routine's supposed anti-Henan discrimination. As a lawyer, he must know he cannot represent the whole population of Henan and that the 100 million people in that province have not entrusted him to file the lawsuit demanding compensation of 1 yuan for each and every one of them. So, this is really a bizarre lawsuit.

Noticeably in recent years, some people have overreacted to what they perceive as regional discrimination. If anybody mentions their place of origin, they erupt in fury, scolding the person for regional discrimination and listing a string of famous figures and places of interest to try to prove their province's stature and embarrass the person. They behave in this way out of a sense of inferiority. Making a fuss of so-called regional discrimination can only strengthen this trend instead of removing discrimination. ■

Copyedited by Chris Surtees