



*Global Feminisms:*

*Comparative Case Studies  
of Women's Activism and Scholarship*

*Interview Transcripts: China*

*Language: English*

# Interview Transcripts: China

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**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: CHINA**

**Transcript of Ai Xiaoming  
Interviewer: Wang Jingling**

**Location: Beijing**

**Date: 2005**

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**Ai Xiaoming**, born in 1953, is a feminist literary scholar who publishes widely and has been active in developing women's studies curriculum and promoting women's rights. Professor Ai is the co-producer and director of the Chinese version of *The Vagina Monologues*, a play staged in China as one of the activities of the Stop Domestic Violence network. She was also involved in an important legal case that popularized the concept of "date rape." At the time of this interview, Professor Ai is Deputy Director of the Women's Studies Center and director of the Sex/Gender Education Forum in Zhongshan University, Guangzhou. She has recently taken on a documentary film project that aims to document women's grassroots activism nationwide.

Ai Xiaoming was interviewed by Wang Jinling, Zhejiang Province, Academy of Social Sciences.

**[Wang Jinling (hereafter referred to as Wang): In 2002 we interviewed you and discussed as a feminist, how you started your activities. At that time you mainly discussed this from the aspect of teaching.]**

Ai Xiaoming (hereafter referred to as Ai): Right.

**Wang: After 2002, aside from teaching, there were a great number of developments in your other activities. Could you talk about this a bit?]**

**[These first lines not shown in the video.]**

Ai: In 2003 our work made a lot of great progress. (Laughs.) That is because in 2003 we first had a rather tentative plan. We invited a famous Taiwanese feminist activist to the university, Professor He Chunrui.<sup>1</sup> She mainly is known as a leader in research on sexuality and feminism. So we invited Professor He and her colleagues to come to Zhongshan University to teach an intensive course on sexuality. From this intensive course, I then came up with the idea of turning this sexuality education into a kind of forum for discussion. He Chunrui's point of view is really provocative and encourages debate; you could say that she is rather radical. I feel that her attention to sexuality is what Women's Studies on the Chinese mainland lacks. Our Women's Studies research and teaching rarely discuss "sexuality." However "sexuality" is exactly one of the points that radical feminism has emphasized. The question of "sexuality" also includes many issues such as "oppression" and "liberation." In addition it pays attention to the many different communities of women with different sexual orientations and other disadvantaged groups of women, for example, the transgender and gay and lesbian communities. Its ideas about sex workers and views on the issue of pornography are also extremely controversial. Thus at the time I had hoped to have a forum for discussion where we could include all of these voices. At the same time this forum would enable us to engage in self-examination about areas where Women's Studies could be doing much more. So after we invited them to teach the course, we then embarked on a process of continually applying for funding so that we could hold a "Forum for Gender and Sexuality Education."<sup>2</sup> It probably took us a little over a half of a year to do this work. We also looked at different foundations. In the end we found out that Lingnan University had originally been a part of our school. The Lingnan Foundation, which is based in the United States, decided to invest in this project and they gave us support to hold a forum on sexuality education. This "Forum for Gender and Sexuality Education" included three different parts. The first part was to invite foreign women's studies scholars and foreign and Chinese feminist scholars to give lectures. Almost every month we held this kind of activity. The second part was to establish a resource center. The third part was to set up a web site. Thus, even before our funding arrived, when we knew that we had a possibility of assistance, we had already started to organize and set up the web site. Our web site

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<sup>1</sup> He Chunrui, (Josephine Ho), an expert on transgender issues in Taiwan, is the director of the Center for the Study of Sexualities at the National Central University of Taiwan.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Ai uses the term "Forum for *xingbie* Education" here. *Xingbie* in Chinese can refer to sex, gender, or sexuality.

was up and running last September – formally. Actually prior to this, we already started to operate the site on a trial basis. So we had it up and running in September. Up to this point, this year, we have already had more than twenty thousand visits to our site.

**Wang: Why did you call it the “Forum for Gender and Sexuality Education” and not “Women’s Education Forum” or “Feminist Education Forum?”**

Ai: Because we realized that the issue of “*xingbie*”<sup>3</sup> encompasses many different things. It is not only a woman’s issue. It also involves gay and lesbian issues, Queer theory. It also is not an issue that only involves the women’s community; there is also the issue of gender equality. This has appeal for both men and women. So, this is how we thought about this. Education about gender and sexuality could thus be relevant to all people. Of course our main target audience was people on our campus. Actually many of our students in the future will be working for some very important institutions in Guangdong.<sup>4</sup> They probably are the future of Guangdong – Guangdong’s policy makers and Guangdong’s important participants in social activities. Therefore we hope that before they enter into society and their work positions, they will be educated in gender and sexual equality and will undergo this process. In the future many of them will hold public service positions. When they must take on responsibility they will be able to initiate and promote progressive policies. On the other hand, this school itself also becomes a kind of resource for the community. It serves a very important role in the public arena in Guangdong Province. In many ways the school actually carries out many of the government policies. In various arenas where sex, gender and women’s issues are dealt with, I am practically also a person who carries out government policies and a resource for them because the media often asks me to offer my views on certain issues. If we promulgate this kind of sexuality and gender education on campus, when the students take up important positions and are asked to provide consulting services, they can have a gender perspective. Based on this kind of thinking, we named the forum the “Forum for Gender and Sexuality Education.” Moreover, in this Forum, we specifically created programs like “Gay and Lesbian Thinking.” We also hope that on BBS<sup>5</sup> gays and lesbian students – they call each other “friends” – will have an opportunity to openly organize their own communities within the Forum and put forth their ideas.

This work on the forum was basically what I focused on most of last year. When I think back, this marked a great change in my work. We held more than ten lectures and a resource center began to take shape. We promoted the web site; because we had a web site, we also had a media outlet. We organized a series of activities related to the launching of the web site. One example of this was the performance of “The Vagina Monologues” last year.

This play, “The Vagina Monologues,” was...It was on February 14, 2000 that this play first came to my attention. At that time the winter semester had already begun for schools in the United States. I was a visiting scholar in the United States at that time. The play

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<sup>3</sup> *Xingbie* in Chinese can refer to sex, gender, or sexuality.

<sup>4</sup> Guangdong Province is in South China, adjacent to Hong Kong.

<sup>5</sup> BBS is an online chat room.

was showing in the United States at that time; it was quite controversial. I saw the conservative party's newspaper, a campus report that was freely distributed. In these papers I read how the play was performed in various schools and saw the stage photos. There were also extremely sharp criticisms from the conservative party, quite a few of them. For example, it ran a full page about the on-going debate about this play in New York. I really thought this was very interesting. It was controversial, so it caught my attention. At that time when I was visiting the States, I was observing the gender cultures on American campuses. For instance, there were courses on campus that dealt with fighting the occurrence of rape. I realized that we did not offer these types of courses. At that time I was preparing to return to China and to offer a Women's Studies course. So I observed their Women's Studies classes and saw how they were taught and what was included in the curriculum. For instance they offered trainings in rape prevention but we did not have these. Later when I went to the bathroom – in the restroom there was a small poster that listed some phone numbers and some hotlines connected to hospitals. So when you went to the bathroom you could see these little posters which gave some very positive, useful information. Since the bathroom stall is a very private place, I feel that this is really an appropriate place to post this information. In restrooms, things like date rape on campus could happen to you; it may occur after you come out of the restroom. The poster gives you a warning and shows that you do have an outlet. You do not need to cry or to shamefully bury this inside of you. So I started to look for this play to read. In addition on line I looked for a series of discussions on date rape since I really feel like this is something that is very relevant to a college campus.

I feel that the culture of college campuses in the United States is one where you could have these kinds of discussions; there are very many positive messages. There are certain web sites that are open to the public such as survivor of rape support web sites. These web sites encourage people to speak out about their experiences and recommend certain books and reading materials which help women get past this very difficult stage in their lives. Included among these books is one about a woman who was home alone. Her husband was away on a business trip when the perpetrator came in through the window, raped her, and then ran away. In the beginning her husband showed a lot of understanding and sympathy for her. They went together to file the police report. In fact, though, they actually suffered from some injuries of which the consequences were very long term. In the end, her husband could not bear it anymore and they divorced. She was alone. Think about it. On one hand she had suffered from the rape and everything that this entailed, including the shame. In addition her marriage failed. Later she got up again and thought retrospectively about her own experiences. She talked about these experiences with other people and encouraged other people to talk about their own experiences. She really was an extremely brave woman and an example for others. There are many rape survivors who can protect and protect their own rights in this way. At the same time by having their voices heard they can expose these crimes. The campus culture in the U.S. provides this kind of education in many ways. They provide you with many places that you can go to ask for help and I believe these methods are really great.

I saw "The Vagina Monologues." The main theme of the play not only deals with preventing violence against women, but also with how women should understand their

own bodies and how they recognize their own desires. There are two different aspects of anti-violence. On the one hand you want to fight against violence, but you cannot teach asceticism, since this only takes you to another extreme and makes you consider sex and desire as something negative. I really feel this does not help women in any way. If we teach asceticism, then women who are in a relationship have even less power to take the initiative and may constrain their own natural needs. At the same time they inevitably turn into a sexual object.

The play “The Vagina Monologues” raises many different levels of issues. So I believe this is really quite good. In addition, as a play it was also rather successful. At the time in the United States – in North America – more than one hundred and fifty schools were showing performances of this play, so I bought the book. At that time I attended a class taught by a Ph.D. from the history department. The instructor did not talk about the play “The Vagina Monologues” during class, but the lecture dealt with how women regard their own bodies, and the relationships of the body, a woman’s identity, and her self. Since I am a literature professor, I looked at a lot of this information from the perspective of literature. From this class I really learned a lot about culture and history interlinked with literature. I myself paid special attention to how literature and art represent women and how they think about the female subject. After I came back I talked to my students about feminist art. I brought various volumes of books of painting back with me and spoke of these works. I felt that my students, especially female students, were really interested in this topic, since our curriculum did not include experiences like this – women’s bodily experiences. We had not really thought about whether we could put on our own performance. Really, we had not given this any thought. Last year Bu Wei<sup>6</sup> saw several performances. She also hoped that we might be able to participate in the “V Day” campaign, the worldwide campaign of performing “The Vagina Monologues.” These performances which occurred from February 14 to March 8 had already developed into a worldwide phenomenon. During this period from February 14 to March 8, women’s organizations used this opportunity to raise people’s awareness of women’s issues in the entire society and fight against violence against women. This had turned into a kind of global activity. In addition, through these performances, finances were raised which were used to support women victims of violence. This year the focal point was the support of Mexican women, especially women who had suffered from violence and those who were missing.

I really thought that she was making a good decision by coming to ask us to perform this play. We were appropriate for this kind of activity. (Laughs.) Yesterday you saw our performance – you can see that our students... Actually it takes the students some time to be able to really accept some of the theoretical aspects of this play. Among those students involved, most already have studied these ideas for more than two years. There are graduate students who are in their second year and third year. There are also some new students – undergraduates who are in their first year, but there are not many like this. At the very least, all of the students have had more than a year of studying feminism in different classes. As you can see from yesterday’s performance, all of the students

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<sup>6</sup> Bu Wei, a Chinese media professor and researcher, analyzes media use and its impact on marginalized groups.

performed quite enthusiastically. They were not only acting out lines in a play. They said the lines not because I asked them to say those things. But instead they were able to integrate into the performance their own feelings and enthusiasm. They were able to show how a woman in her life affirms her own desires, including giving voice, powerful voice, to women who have had unfortunate things happen in their life. Every time I watched their rehearsal, especially several parts in the play, I would cry. When I saw their formal performance, I also could not help but cry. Yesterday when I watched their performance I cried again. In my heart I think these students are truly remarkable and I am incredibly proud of them. This was performed from March of last year until this year, for more than a year. I really think this was a terrific activity. After I finished this project I really was rather proud of this.

**Wang: Were the people who performed in the play mainly students?**

Ai: Yes.

**Wang: How did you bring together performing in this play and the students' academic work? I mean, you got the students to engage in this play – including their performing and experiences. How did you integrate this with your teaching?**

Ai: Actually, as for teaching... the other day at a literature seminar at Tianjin Normal University,<sup>7</sup> I put forth an idea. When we were discussing pedagogy, I said, "I propose something that might be controversial. I call it "subversive teaching." Because I did not have an available concept to explain my thought about pedagogy, so I thought I could possibly approach this problem from another angle... So at the time I asked them: "We are here to discuss how to teach a literature class. But I want to ask what exactly is literature?" Fifty people could have fifty different opinions of what literature is. A "literary master" in your opinion might be someone who I vehemently criticize. Your "literary master" could be a conservative writer and your literary canon could be the nineteenth-century classics. But I could consider some twenty-first-century works as my canon, right? One person's favorite writer can be someone that another person cannot stand. "One person's delicacies can be another's poison!" (Laugh) How do we teach a literature class? In our students' minds there are a lot of contradictory ideas. One professor teaches that realism is our canon and another professor teaches that postmodernism should be our canon. What exactly is literature? What exactly can be called a classic? These concepts must all be thought about in a new way and redefined. Also, literature itself has an impact; it is a challenging process. It is innovative. All things that are innovative and all things that are worthwhile must challenge the past. Every writer challenges his or her predecessors. Balzac challenged his predecessor and Borges also challenges his. When they challenge their predecessors, they are also in the process of challenging what exactly is literature. Every truly creative writer or artist is actually also challenging what can be considered literature and what can be called art. In this age what are the limits or restrictions placed on literature or on art? How do we break free

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<sup>7</sup> Tianjin Normal University, originally named Tianjin Normal College, was founded in 1958. It was formed by Tianjin Teachers' Colleges for Vocational Studies and Tianjin Farmers and Workers Speeded-Up Education Middle School. It was formally renamed Tianjin Normal University in 1982.

from these limitations? Otherwise, we do not truly have literature or art or civilization. If we rethink about the definition of literature and art in this way, the next question is: how do we teach a literature class? I do not think there is a consensual reply.

Again for instance, it is also true that there are a lot of conflicts of cultural values among us teachers. In our school there was an incident in which a female graduate student was violated. Some professors in their exchanges with students said that this incident should warn female students that they should not date more than one guy at the same time. This is one kind of thinking. If female students discussed this with me, I would talk about how women's human rights were violated; as women, you should know your human rights and how to protect your human rights. Right? So how do you think that we should teach students? Therefore, we must acknowledge that I myself and we as teachers should know that our authority is not beyond challenge; it is not absolute. You are the same as the students. Who do you think that you are? You teach students, but they also teach you a lot. Right? That is to say, we are equal to students and we have to question the idea that students only wait to be inspired and enlightened by us. We used to believe this was correct, but this is not right. If the content of what we teach raises a lot questions, then we cannot use a pedagogy that is based on the idea that we are the authority. We cannot use this method to teach students. We must subvert the teacher-student hierarchy. We cannot say that we are the authority and they are the empty vessel into which we will pour our knowledge. Actually we must consider ourselves equal. The students bring their own experiences and you have your own experiences. You have your fifty years of experience and they have their eighteen years or twenty years of experiences. Your experiences are different. We could also say this is a kind of cultural difference. In other words we have two kinds of culture; one kind is a middle-aged culture and one kind is a youth culture. The students' youth culture is probably from the 1980s onward. During the period of reform and opening in China there have been a lot of influences that have come from abroad. We probably have the old culture of seclusion, the culture of autocracy, and the kind of culture that strangles individuality. Of course we also have a culture that demands liberation. These two different kinds of cultures both have places where dialogue is possible and definitely offer many instances which present contradictions. For instance I may tell a student that her rights could not be violated, but perhaps a male teacher tells her that her rights are not inviolable – for example, the teacher could say, “You have got to know such a good male student. You cannot break his heart and definitely cannot date more than one guy at the same time.” This is an instance of cultural conflict – between that male professor and me. We uphold a feminist culture; he has a masculinist culture. Our cultures face conflicts.

In this kind of situation, I think that we are different subjects in society. Different subjects should be having dialogues and negotiations. Therefore, when you arrive in the classroom, you can only say that in this special domain, I probably have read more books than you have. So I can only pass on this knowledge and some frameworks. But how will the students come to use these ideas and develop their own ideas? This is a process of negotiation that I as the teacher and the students work on together. So what does education actually mean? Education is supposed to eliminate ignorance; it is enlightening. But this process of enlightening and eliminating ignorance, as a part of the entire bigger process in cultural development, is something that young and old people

should do together. I believe that the students have their own areas of ignorance that must be removed and we have our own areas of ignorance that must also be removed. In fact our teaching also is a process of dialogue and negotiation. Based on this idea, I believe that the production and performance of “The Vagina Monologues” was also a pedagogical exploration. You study and learn using hands on process. When we were teaching the class in Tianjin, we also did some demonstrations for the teachers to see. We not only talked about Women’s Studies’ courses; we also used literature classes as examples of how teachers could enhance the level of student participation. For instance, you can turn a literary work into a visual work. If you want to do this, then during this process the students must do research and determine why the author would want to use this imagery. Imagine that I want to look for a way to represent this imagery visually. What type of visual image should I use? If I could choose between abstract and concrete images or between modern and postmodern images, what sort of choices do I make? If I may make a choice, I also will experience how the author’s creative process is also a kind of choice making. From the existing literary imaginations and from the author’s own training in literature, he/she will make a kind of choice. As you go through this process, you are actually experiencing this text and experiencing the process of the creation of literature. You are also studying what is literary production, what is a novel, and what is the structure of a novel.

When the students performed this play, in fact they were also studying and analyzing. This analyzing was done through performing. For instance, how does the student interpret this character? What is this character’s life like? This segment speaks of a pubic hair, and another tells of a young girl’s recollections. Another speaks of a child’s image of her vagina. Thus the students who are performing must consider what sort of reference this will have for different people from different cultural backgrounds. While older people might think of a vagina as a dirty, smelly sewer, a child might think of it as a beautiful snowflake. How are these cultural differences created and how does an author through his cultural lens imagine and create a set of metaphors? When you stand on stage and say this line you know that in your mind you are thinking of beautiful images. For instance the beauty of the dance that portrays the birth process – this “birth dance” was especially well done because we worked on this for a long period of time. The photographic and lighting effects are really amazing. So I feel that this segment was a rather perfect section. When the student does that movement, her hand extends from under her thighs, and her entire thighs turn into the design of a vagina. From a very traditional point of view, this would be considered pornographic, but if you switch your perspective, you could say that this is really sexy, beautifully sexy. But this type of beauty can only be appreciated if you think that sex appeal is beautiful. You have to have different cultural theories to explain this; you cannot use the traditional cultural ideas to offer an explanation. In addition you cannot explain an image in isolation. If you stop for several seconds within the imagery, you may consider it as pervert. But if you watch the whole dance for several minutes then you will come to realize that it is expressing a baby, which comes out from the birth canal. In the birth canal the baby gropes around to find its way out; it struggles. It must find a life path in order to enter into the world. The mother suffers physically during this time, but she is creating an extremely beautiful life for this

world. Through the dancing and the accompanying background music, we can experience the complete process of birth.

In the past how did we represent the process of birth? We have represented this whole process as something quite terrifying. Recently I saw a live broadcast of childbirths on China Central Television. There was a husband who fainted in the birth room and there were some other husbands who did not dare to look. These kinds of images... What kind of message is this? Are we creating terrifying memories? I really oppose this kind of representation. In fact why do we turn the birth process into something that gives us terrifying memories? Moreover we duplicate this image so that men will stay far away from the birthing process, because it is considered so scary that a man will be terrified and his face will turn pale. What is this creating? We are isolating women's experiences. It is isolated to the degree that she becomes like an animal and her birth experience becomes an inhuman experience, inhuman suffering. Therefore during this time the husband wants to leave her; he does not want to participate and he wants to stay away from the terror. I really do not understand why we have to create this kind of terror, this kind of culture of fear! Actually I think this culture of fear places women in a hopeless position. We are able to see many different examples of this kind of situation. For instance, when the woman is having a difficult time during labor and her family members don't know how to deal with this, in the end to whom do they turn her over? They would leave her to a witch doctor or a charlatan that they find on the street or they would leave her to the hospital. Then what happens if she gives birth to a child who has birth defects? They either discard or abandon the baby. If the medical expenses are too expensive, they would get away without taking responsibility. As you are working on the production of this play you actually come to understand and analyze this kind of situation. This is actually a kind of learning process, a better process of studying. I believe from this process, the students have learned very many things. When I can see their performances I know that they have a true understanding of their roles.

**Wang: When you talked about “The Vagina Monologues,” there was a lot of discussion about sexual violence against women. Did this have any impact or was all of this linked to your work on the Huang Jing case<sup>8</sup> or for the White Ribbon campaign?<sup>9</sup>**

Ai: Yes, you could say that. As soon as I looked at the Huang Jing case, I thought the issue of sexual violence against women was really extremely obvious.

**Wang: How did you first come to know about the Huang Jing case and then later how did you become involved with this?**

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<sup>8</sup> Huang Jing was a primary school teacher. She died after her boy friend was trying to force her to have sex with him in 2003. The investigation and trial of this case have attracted a lot of attention and debates in society. Professor Ai Xiaoming was involved in the efforts to call for attention to date rape.

<sup>9</sup> The White Ribbon Campaign was first initiated by a group of Canadian men in 1991. They wore white ribbons to show their solidarity in the protest of violence against women. This campaign has been taken up in many countries.

Ai: Last year... Well, at the beginning I took actions during the period of the SARS<sup>10</sup> epidemics. Those who suffered from this illness were called “the kings of poison.”<sup>11</sup> I really felt this was unconscionably wrong. This was a very obvious example of discrimination. I felt that as a Women’s Studies person I have this kind of sensitivity since, to put it simply, Women’s Studies is against inequality and strives for equal rights. In fact inequality is not only something that only women undergo. Actually, there are many different kinds of inequality such as class, etc. Last year the newspapers publicly called those with SARS “the kings of poison.” This was not simply a kind of discrimination. Imagine that. At that time SARS was not well understood as an infectious disease. So people just really panicked. People rushed out to purchase salt, vinegar, and certain Chinese traditional medicines that supposedly could boost the immune system. The situation had deteriorated greatly. A SARS patient faced the worst: other patients had died; his relatives had died; he was struggling on the verge of death and just survived. But he still must bear the brunt of this kind of public humiliation. I felt this was a very serious problem. So I wrote an article titled, “Advocate Loving Care, Oppose Public Humiliation.” This article, which was published in the newspaper, specifically targeted the problem of discrimination against those people who were infected with SARS. After this was published, at that time the *Southern Weekend*<sup>12</sup> had a one-page editorial called “Comments on Current Issues.” Afterwards they said that for that year, this article was an extremely important article, which opposed discrimination against those infected with SARS. This of course was encouraging to me. Actually, in the past I had also had columns in newspapers, but those mainly were literary criticism and cultural commentary, not commentary on current events. This was a very encouraging experience to me. I then tended to focus my attention on news reports.

Afterwards, I read about the Sun Zhigang case. This was about a university student who was being detained in a holding cell and died there. The next day early in the morning, I wrote an article, and sent it to a newspaper office via E-mail. However, they immediately called me to say they were not permitted to publish my article – the reports on this incident were not allowed to come out. At the time I thought... So I published it on-line. In the article, I called on the People’s Congress and People’s Consultative Conference in Guangdong Province<sup>13</sup> and demanded a thorough investigation. In the article, I argued that since Guangdong Province had such a large immigrant population and a large floating population from the countryside, we must deal with the problem that they were discriminated against. The next day there were a lot of letters from the readers regarding my article, so I wrote a response and published it immediately on line. I felt the power of the internet to disseminate my message to a lot of people. Eventually there was a very big change in the policy and many intellectuals became involved in this issue. At the time we

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<sup>10</sup> Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. In 2003 there was a breakout in some countries, including Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

<sup>11</sup> The term “King of poison” is a literary reference to a type of character who used his knowledge of herbs and medicines to poison or harms others.

<sup>12</sup> *Southern Newspaper* is one of the most popular newspapers in China, based in Guangzhou, the capital of the Guangdong province.

<sup>13</sup> National People’s Congress is the highest legislative body of China. People’s Congress in each province has similar status and functions. The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference is a political advisory body in the People’s Republic of China. Each province has its own Consultative Conference.

were setting up a website. So our graduate students participated in the interviews. I specifically invited Sun Zhigang's family members to come to Zhongshan University. At that time I also wrote an appeal letter to the Vice President of the Political Consultative Conference and to the Vice President of the Guangdong Province Women's Federation. I knew her and this is why I sent it to her and did not send it to the President of the Women's Federation. She passed this on to the Public Security Department Director of Guangdong Province. I also gave this to the People's Delegate<sup>14</sup> of the district of Haizhou. This representative took this to discuss at the district representative assembly meeting. However, this incident did not take place in the area where we lived; it happened in the district of Tianhe. But my colleagues, friends, and students all disseminated this article within their own circle of acquaintances. It continued to spread to many different places. Afterwards many people who had been affected by a similar experience in holding cells talked about this on the webpage. I felt that what was moving were the experiences of ordinary people. It was not scholarly articles but the experiences of ordinary people that truly moved me.

I really think that many average people's lives and experiences shook up the entire country, including some intellectuals who demanded an investigation and discussion of this case in accordance with the constitution. If not for these appeals, which frankly depicted these people's heartfelt experiences, we could never have ended such horrific practices in holding cells. These stories of tears and blood really were too earthshaking to ignore. People learned of these stories through the internet. I feel that this affected our country by showing another face to the world. China also has to observe the international human rights laws and regulations which we participate. Among these there is a human rights document that specifically forbids torture. This incident with Sun Zhigang was an extremely obvious case of torture.

Therefore, the fact that these practices were stopped so quickly actually surprised me. I had never thought that the process would happen so fast and that this case would be handled so quickly. I think part of the reasons was because the information about this case was disseminated on line. I continuously monitored the happenings of Sun Zhigang's commemorative website. Everyday I looked at the developments that occurred in the case and in the end what the courts decided and how they handled the matter. When I was on the Sun Zhigang commemorative web site, I saw a message saying "Those who have helped Sun Zhigang, please help us and help my daughter." After I clicked on this link I saw Huang Jing's mother's letter of request for help. Then I read about what had happened to Huang Jing. As soon as I read this I knew this was a case of date rape.

When a rape occurs in a community, there must be a certain kind of culture that supports rape. Thus, you should analyze the cultural reasons that form the background for this kind of incident. So I then wrote an article. Afterwards, in July, Zhongshan University's medical examiner went to perform an autopsy of Huang Jing's body. At that time her cause of death was inconclusive because of a lack of evidence. We thought that they

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<sup>14</sup> A People's Delegate is someone elected by people to the district, provincial or national People's Congress.

would hold a court hearing immediately to definitively determine the guilty party in the crime of rape. So we analyzed the case and determined that there would probably be some debate in the courts. For instance, did penetration actually occur? Should penetration be used to determine guilt? Are the injuries from the rape important? Therefore I wrote an article called “Stop Phallus-Worshipping.” If you use penetration as the factor that determines guilt, then you are considering the problem from the male perspective. You are considering the degree of male invasion, because you define an act as rape only if the penetration is completed. However this is not how women experience rape. From that woman victim’s point of view, first her will was violated and she was psychologically injured. Next is the violence that she endured from the rape. The rape left behind scars on her body. Finally the act of rape directly caused her death. Now do you still need to discuss whether she was penetrated or not? What meaning does several centimeters of skin have? If you use a few centimeters of skin to determine if the rape was carried out or attempted and you do not take into consideration the fact that she died as a result of the rape, you are separating the act of rape and her death. You also have fragmented her body. The rape did occur. But because the penetration was not completed the suspect could walk away and the victim’s death could be determined as the result of heart disease. Therefore, at that time I predicted that during the court hearings this would be taken into consideration – whether she was penetrated or not. So I wrote the article “Stop Phallus-Worshipping.” But, we had not realized that after the Zhongshan University medical examiner made his report, the public prosecutor would not accept it. So this case continued to drag on. During this time, in November we invited Huang Jing’s mother to come to the university. I interviewed her for several hours. My goal at this time was to let other people hear the victim’s voice. At the time the media had a lot of articles that were titled such as “The mysterious death of the naked woman” or “the mysterious death.” These articles all sounded as if this incidence was some mysterious event, some strange story. I thought this was an extreme affront to the dignity of the person who had died. In addition, I also noticed that during this process, her mother as a family member had put in a great deal of efforts. But Huang Jing did not only have an identity as a family member; actually she was a teacher, was a public servant. Then, why did not her work unit come out in support of her? Why did not the teachers’ union speak on her behalf? Why did not the women’s organization come out in support of her? So by interviewing her family members we wanted to stress her role as a teacher and to highlight her public identity. Then, through the voices of her family members we hoped that we could bring her story to the public and to have more materials to analyze her case. On the one hand, a lot of the information that was made available through the media often was quite one-sided. Later I also interviewed the Zhongshan University medical examiner. The Director of the Zhongshan University Medical Examination Center is also the Vice President of Zhongshan University. He went to perform the autopsy himself and I purposefully interviewed him. I hoped to be able to present an expert opinion. In November the verdict for the case was determined. The prosecutor’s indictment had a very important revision of the original wording. The police version said that, “Huang Jing died during the process of what was described above,” which referred to the process of rape. In the prosecutor’s indictment the language was changed to “the above process of rape,” period. “And then the next morning because she was sick, Huang Jing passed away.” This turned the case into two different issues. I feel that the revision that the

prosecutor made had no basis. The police department is responsible for the investigation, so the prosecutor only looks over the case and submits it to the court. On what basis was the case revised? The prosecutor did not participate in the investigation so why did he change this part? When he changed this, he changed an extremely important logical fact. Then, we mobilized scholars to work on this together. Basically the case of Huang Jing was a galvanizing event. During the period when this case was investigated, we organized to write articles at every crucial point. Also this year on February 24 was the first anniversary of when Huang Jing was murdered. At that time there were continual preparations for the trial, but up to this point this still has not occurred.

We certainly wanted to show the facts to the public from a feminist point of view against sexual violence. Therefore, we had to engage in this kind of public education. Therefore, during the first anniversary of Huang Jing's death, we invited attorneys, Huang Jing's family members and the teachers and students from our school, and those from the South China Normal University and Jinan University.<sup>15</sup> Several of the professors who were involved in this case came together for a discussion. Bu Wei and Cai Yiping<sup>16</sup> from Beijing also participated. Later on March 7 at the Capital Normal University, Bu Wei and I wrote a notice of appeal for Huang Jing's case addressed to the People's Congress and the People's Consultative Conference, calling on them to take legislative measures. We wanted justice for Huang Jing. In the end about thirty-seven scholars signed this letter of appeal. Bu Wei really worked hard and put forth a great effort and she delivered it to the political consultative conference. Now they have created a legislative proposal; it is said that they have responded.

**Wang: Now you are continuously involved in different activities. According to the traditional views, activism is not what university professors should be involved in. How do you regard your identity as a professor who is also involved in social activism? Also in what way are you able to integrate the two roles?**

Ai: Actually, yesterday I was talking about this same matter with Huang Lin. Nowadays there are some people who use the term "public intellectuals." Could it be that there are "private intellectuals?" I think that an intellectual is an intellectual; you may say someone is an intellectual or not, but I do not understand why you want to make a distinction and use the term "public intellectuals." If there should be "public intellectuals," then there must also be intellectuals who are "not public." I really do not understand this. What does it matter what intellectuals are called? (Laughs.) Some people say that intellectuals should not be involved in social activism, but if you look back at history, modern history, the so-called intellectuals have also done many bad things, like the mass criticisms, etc. Isn't this a kind of activism? Isn't constructing ideology a kind

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<sup>15</sup> South China Normal University (SCNU) is one of the prestigious universities in China, a member of *Project 211* (one of the top 100 universities in China in the 21st century) and one of the key institutions of higher learning in Guangdong Province. Ji'nan University was founded in 1906 as a national university. It was later relocated to southern China. One of the oldest universities in China, it was also selected into the *Project 211*. It claims to have the largest number of overseas students in China.

<sup>16</sup> Cai Yiping is a journalist at the *Chinese Women's Newspaper*, the official newspaper of the All China Women's Federation.

of activism? However when you look at this from a certain point of view, our style of activism is different from the kind used in the past.

I think women's studies cannot be separated from social practice since women's issues and social activism are really closely linked. If I teach anti-sexual violence ideas, I cannot maintain silence about sexual violence in society. If you see how unfairly cases of sexual violence are handled in society, you would have no way to only teach theory in a classroom. How would you teach? You teach the students these ideas but the students may run into frustrating situations in society. I believe that Women's Studies and feminist academics have a goal. One important goal is to transform the society. Your scholarship should aim to transform society. Of course this transformation is also a cultural transformation that is enabled by passing on these ideas. Why do people discriminate against others? It is because he first has an understanding of another person. If he thinks that the other person is inferior, he can discriminate against this person. Then we maintain this discriminative understanding by raising it to a higher level through public policy and the law. This can then turn into an institution. This institution can systematically deprive you of your rights so that you are silenced. If I want to change this system, I must start to do this by changing how people think. If you want to change people's ideas then you must be able to analyze the ideas clearly. I have the ability to explain them very clearly. Many people do not have the opportunity for education, or are deprived of the opportunity for education. They do not have the means to speak out but we do. You must speak out and have your voice heard regarding public affairs. For instance, last year I continuously spoke out about the Huang Jing case. Also, last year in the Sichuan<sup>17</sup> personnel department there appeared the call not to "assign female secretaries to male leaders." I wrote three articles in a week. I feel that I must explain my reasoning clearly and thoroughly. I have to explain myself really well. Every time that I write an article I have to wait a period of time before I start. Although I am extremely angry, sometimes I have to wait until I feel that I have accumulated enough energy, like a volcano before it erupts. This finally forces me to write. If you want to write well you have to be able to use your energy and to be unusually focused. Only then can you write a forceful, powerful article. In the past I did not have this kind of strength. In the past for instance, I wrote academic articles. Or I wrote an analysis of an artistic work. Sometimes when I wrote I felt that writing put me in a relaxed state; when I wrote I was rather happy because I was able to express my own ideas. Some of the ideas you could use your imagination to express. But when you are looking at some idea critically, especially if this idea has a kind of legal support or a kind of institutional support, you must challenge it. When you want to challenge it you must adopt a kind of extremely tenacious attitude. I don't easily make myself enter this kind of mindset, since doing so is a very stressful process. Moreover you are like a train, because once a train sets out, it has to reach its destination. Once I start writing I have to continue to write until I am finished. That is why I have to wait for a period of time before I start writing. Once I get in this state of mind, I often do not eat and do not drink until I am finished. In addition I have to read what I have written over and over and check each and every word that I have written. But usually articles written in such conditions are powerful. Therefore, through this process of writing, I have realized that words, and discourses, are one kind of weapon.

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<sup>17</sup> Sichuan Province is in southwestern China.

**Wang: So you have successfully brought together your two hats of academic and activist. In reality, teaching is also a kind of activism. Activism has a lot of educational components within it. What ideas do you have for the future?**

Ai: I have a lot of ideas to explore in the future. It seems that there are more and more ideas. My friend has said to me: “What things haven’t you done? What haven’t you studied?” (Laughs.) Now I think that there are too many ideas. I myself won’t be able to examine them all. But, sometimes I think that there are so many ideas that I cannot give up now. Since I have made it to this level, I have certain power, and a certain kind of influence. Therefore, you can accomplish things that other people cannot, for example, applying for resources, writing a project proposal, striving for a bigger responsibility, and organizing a big event. Many of the people around me are still rather young and do not have as much experience as me. A lot of my friends are much younger than I. I realize that sometimes my role is unique and other people cannot take my place. So I think that there are some things that I just have to do that will benefit a lot of people. For example, I engage in applying for grants for our projects. In my department there are many graduate students and teachers in training. They constitute a large work unit and hence our work will potentially benefit a large targeted group of people. If you can make a good plan then a lot of people will benefit. Sometimes I have to make sacrifices.

**Wang: Can you talk specifically about the projects that you would like to carry out?**

Ai: For example, I would like to set up a women’s human rights education and training center. I went to Canada to study “International Human Rights Law.” Using the human rights framework to do women’s rights has a lot of strengths. In the past we looked at cultures. We looked at women’s rights from the point of view of cultural analysis. What was the problem with this? You must discuss cultural ideas repeatedly. Culture cannot change your way of thinking in a day, but rights are a different matter. Rights are guaranteed by law. Based on your culture you might not agree with the “equality,” but the concept of rights gives me equality. Thus you cannot violate my rights. I think it is very important to use the approach of “rights” and use “rights” as the foundation. Our rights are equal. Perhaps you do not approve of our equality. But it doesn’t matter if you do not approve. You can take your time to think about this. However, if my rights are infringed upon, then I certainly must use the mechanism of the law to protect them. Rights, duties, and responsibilities must be compulsory. Therefore, I hope to promote human rights education, to promote an international human rights standard and mechanism in our society. This year the concept of human rights was also written into the constitution. Now we have a lot of work to do. I hope to set up an education and training center. But our funding greatly determines if this can be realized. This is a big tentative plan. We are also preparing to set up a women’s rights media studio. I now feel that the media’s power to disseminate information is very strong. On the one hand, it turns our achievements into something that can be disseminated. After we recorded “The Vagina Monologues,” we have already showed it in Fudan University in Shanghai, the Tianjin Normal University, the Shaanxi Normal University, the Chinese Women’s University,

the Beijing Broadcast Institute<sup>18</sup> and all of the colleges and universities in Nanjing. It would be really difficult to take the whole acting troupe for the play to so many places that are far away. It would just be way too expensive. But, a DVD can travel easily! This transforms a cultural product into something that can be easily transmitted, via high technology, information technology. In addition visual images can strengthen the powerless people and elevate the awareness of the aesthetic values of our students' creative works. Perhaps there is a student who generally does not attract very much attention. When she stands on the stage, she does not stand out. But when she appears on the big screen as a character, then the sense of the beautiful thing that she is creating will be extremely intense and powerful. Students who have participated in the performance feel their own strength and beauty. This is an extremely valuable gift since it really makes them realize that they are powerful. Moreover our Women's Studies teaching materials also lack visual materials made in China. There are some people who know how to use technology but do not necessarily have good ideas and there are some people who have great ideas but do not know how to use technology. We have already specialized in the field of literature, and we have also been teaching theories of artistic movies. We should be able to bring together these advantages and make good media works.

This year we did the behind-the-scenes documentary of "The Vagina Monologues;" we also recorded the play. Although there are a lot of things that need to be perfected, we have the resources to complete this project; we have the ability to accomplish the product. I have tentatively showed several clips from "The White Ribbon"<sup>19</sup>. Originally this was only an activity that we recorded. I never thought that it might become an educational documentary film. Of course this was made possible by the creativity of the artist Hu Jie, whom we collaborated with.<sup>20</sup> He is able to make an activity look so powerful to people. I have played this documentary a couple of times and I feel that this film has very good educational effects. So I really want to fully utilize this piece. This year, I hope that in all of the universities in the whole country they can initiate a coordinated campaign to stop date rape and violence. If we can complete "The White Ribbon," then I plan to send it to 50-100 national institutions of higher learning. Each school on November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, will show this documentary, hold a discussion, and initiate some kind of small activity, regardless of how small it is. For instance, we can include such things as telling stories, drawing pictures, making posters, or submitting essays to our website. Or after watching the film, we can discuss what forms date rape has in our society. How do newspapers disclose this kind of incident? What sorts of things can we do to stop this type of violence in society? I feel that if we can do something even as small as these, it is enough; I will have already achieved my goal. I believe that this matter is rather pressing.

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<sup>18</sup> Fudan University is one of the most prestigious Chinese universities. The Tianjin Normal University and Shaanxi Normal University are universities that mainly train future teachers, located respectively in the city of Tianjin in northern China and Shaanxi Province. Beijing Broadcast Institute, now called Communication University of China, is devoted to the cultivation of high-level talent and scientific research in the fields of radio, television, film, network, publication and new media.

<sup>19</sup> She is referring, here, to her own film.

<sup>20</sup> Hu Jie, an independent filmmaker, consciously uses documentary film as a means to challenge official Chinese historical narratives while providing visual details in order to, in Hu Jie's own words, "remember history."

Therefore, I hope that through the film “The White Ribbon”...In this film, we respond to violence in action. So by disseminating this film we can spread the idea that women’s rights are human rights and that human rights are inviolable – women’s rights to make their own decisions are inviolable. I hope to disseminate these ideas. At the same time, I also want to promote education to solve conflicts, especially emotional conflicts. Students need to have some skills to be able to handle conflicts and to avoid possible further injury. Actually, the perpetrators or those who commit violent acts, the male students, in that moment lose control and resort to violent behavior. For him, he may regret his behavior but it is too late. His family also suffers because they lose their son and this male student has also destroyed his own future. In an instant he has destroyed two people and two families. This also causes serious harm to society. I want to educate the students that we cannot use violence and we must adopt non-violent methods. We should try to solve problems through negotiation. We must educate about transforming violence and find a good way to solve conflicts. When something happens, filled with indignation, you lecture about how women’s rights should not be violated. However you have not given him a means to solve this conflict. When this happens he says, “I am in such pain. What should I do? My feelings are hurt. What should I do?” You must provide him with some means. Thus you must educate people about both of these aspects. We are all quite deficient in teaching these two aspects. This is precisely the question which I am raising. In addition, I also hope that we are able to further spread this activity. “The White Ribbon” aims to appeal to male students and asks them to join us in fighting against violence against women. On one hand I speak from the female students’ point of view and advocate for female students’ needs and rights. On the other hand, I also want to appeal to male students. I want male students to participate and to protect women’s rights. This is my idea for the activity that I hope we can accomplish this year.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: CHINA**

**Transcript of Chen Mingxia  
Interviewer: Shi Tong**

**Location: Institute of Law of the Chinese  
Academy of Social Sciences (Beijing)**

**Date: September 6, 2005**

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**Chen Mingxia**, born in 1948, is a researcher at the Institute for Legal Research of the China Academy of Social Sciences. Active in promoting women's legal rights, Professor Chen was one of the leaders who initiated an anti-domestic violence project which eventually developed into the first large scale women's NGO in China, Stop Domestic Violence. Until recently, she headed this first national women's network. She has also played an important role in gender training programs for legal scholars nationwide.

**Shi Tong: Professor Chen, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. First I would like to ask you to talk about your understanding of feminism: *nuquan zhuyi* or *nuxing zhuyi*.<sup>21</sup>**

Chen Mingxia: This is a very interesting topic. I personally do not think that *nuquan zhuyi* and *nuxing zhuyi* have any essential differences. I feel that as for me, I am more willing to use the term *nuquan zhuyi*. Possibly this is because I am involved with the law. I believe that *nuquan zhuyi* strives for rights for women. Moreover striving for rights for women does not imply that women must take away men's rights, but instead women should strive for rights that they ought to have. In the past women were stripped of their rights. So as feminists, women must get up, and strive for their own rights. Through the women's movement and through all kinds of activities women should fight for and obtain the rights that they should have; and sometimes the campaign has to be done from the top down. To put it in my simple and direct way, I feel that *nuquan zhuyi* is a kind of set of ideas or practices that aim to struggle for rights that women deserve. You may call it an ideology, a movement, or a set of theories. I believe that it is a process, consisting of theory and practice. This is what I feel that *nuquan zhuyi* is. However there are many different kinds of feminism. This is because of different national histories and conditions, different social contexts in which feminism emerges, and differences in terms of group and class. I do not want to spend too much time talking about these differences here; we are all familiar with this. People who are involved with feminism, both those that invoke *nuxing zhuyi* and *nuquan zhuyi*, are all very clear about this and they understand this sort of situation. So I do not want to talk too much about this issue. This is my view.

**Shi Tong: Then do you consider yourself a feminist (*nuquan zhuyizhe*)?**

Chen Mingxia: Yes! I think I am a feminist. I do not avoid this question.

**Shi Tong: How have your background when you were growing up, the path of your life and your work experiences influenced your understanding of feminism? What were some of the earliest things that caused you to think about feminism?**

Chen Mingxia: Well, I feel that if I am going to talk about this, there are a lot of things that had an impact on me. I was born into a very feudal family.<sup>22</sup> For instance in my

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<sup>21</sup> There are two terms that can be translated as "feminism." *Nuxing zhuyi* is literally "female-ism" or "feminine-ism." This translation emerged in the early twentieth century but reemerged in the 1980s. Some believe that this term has less political but more biological connotations than *nuquan zhuyi*. *Nuquan zhuyi* is literally "woman- rights-ism" Since *quan* can mean both rights and power, the term can be interpreted as the "ism" of women's power and rights. In history, the Chinese Communist Party has defined *nuquan zhuyi* as bourgeois, because of the potential conflicts between gender struggles and class struggles. In contemporary China, this term is primarily used to refer to Western feminism and often conveys a negative image of a men-hating woman hungry for power. For this reason, many Chinese feminists avoid calling themselves *nuquan zhuyi zhe*. See Ping-chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok, et.al, eds. *Chinese Women Organizing* (2001) and Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* (1999) for detailed historical reviews.

<sup>22</sup> The official discourse and the Chinese public often use "feudal China" to refer to the pre-1949 era

grandfather and my great uncle's families, basically girls were not permitted to attend school. I have heard my older sisters and mother tell this story about the time when my older sisters went to school. Prior to liberation, before 1949, students had to wear school uniforms. Therefore, if my grandfather came to visit Beijing from our hometown, my mother would take out the Chinese dress that girls traditionally wore and wait in front of the main entrance to the house. So when my sisters returned home from school, they could change their clothes before entering the house. We were born into this kind of family. If we had guests come to visit, we followed a very strict etiquette. When guests came we were not allowed to be around. If we poked our head in – wham! We would be slapped and forced to go away. Although I was born and grew up in this kind of family, my mother was a person who always strove to excel. In her view, all girls should be educated and should be independent. In traditional society originally women did not have names, but my father chose a name for her. Therefore she was a woman who had her own name and she felt that women must be independent. She encouraged my oldest sister to study medicine, and this sister became a doctor. My second oldest sister became a teacher and my older sister had already started to get involved in underground activities for the Communist Party; she joined an organization associated with the Party. She liked the fine arts and she wanted to study fine arts. However at that time this was not permitted; actually studying fine arts was firmly opposed. But, in the end, she overcame the obstacles and studied art. Why do I bring up this example? Despite the fact that we were born into a feudal family, because our mother was very independent and strong, she also wanted us all to be independent and strong. Therefore in this sense, the idea that a woman should be independent and have self-awareness emerged in me when I was very young. But in terms of approaching feminism, or embracing feminism – either *nuquan zhuyi* or *nuxing zhuyi* – and being engaged in these kinds of activities, I think there are many factors that have led me to this. For instance, from the time when I was young I participated in a lot of social activities. I had the idea that women should be independent. Later I studied the law and I have been engaged in matters involving marriage and family law, which gave me opportunities to know many women and research the changes and some issues regarding the family. Therefore I feel that these also have had some relation to my acceptance of feminism.

**Shi Tong: When did your feminist ideas first begin to emerge?**

Chen Mingxia: I think this was probably a bit later. In the beginning, because I studied and practiced law, I thought that the law was fair and it was just. I felt that the law was the incarnation of justice. But, because I do marriage law – as I came to more deeply understand and research marriage law – I came to learn more about many disadvantaged groups. Especially after 1990, when our legal institute established a human rights research center, I was in charge of research activities regarding women's rights at the human rights research center. Since then I gradually embraced some feminist ideas, because I came to have a better understanding of women, and also a better understanding of the various aspects of society. Since 1990...well, since the end of the 80s, after the

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(before the People's Republic of China was established and a socialist system was created). People often use this word to describe a family where women are not respected or their rights are ignored.

implementation of the policy of reform and opening,<sup>23</sup> many problems concerning women reappeared. At that time we conducted a lot of investigations, and the marriage law was revised and the Women's Law<sup>24</sup> was drawn up. In this process, I started to pay more attention to the issues that women faced. In addition to this I worked on women's human rights. Therefore I started to study these kinds of issues.

**Shi Tong: You mentioned a moment ago some topics that you are interested in, some activism that you have participated in. We know you have many substantial achievements. Would you say that your scholarly research and activities are feminist (in the category of *nuquan zhuyi* or *nuxing zhuyi*)?**

Chen Mingxia: I think perhaps this was a process. In the very beginning, I looked at things mainly from the legal angle, and tried to protect women's rights, protect citizens' rights, and protect women's family rights. In the beginning I am afraid that this was the perspective that I looked at things. Or I looked at things from the point of view of human rights in general, which included women's rights. But I feel that there was a process from that stage to looking at things from the perspective of women's rights and women's human rights as well as doing gender analysis, which means using a feminist approach (that of *nuquan zhuyi*) to analyze problems and issues. There was a process.

I think that prior to 1995,<sup>25</sup> I was unfamiliar with the concept of gender; I was not clear about it. After 1995 I came to know this word. What was this concept called gender? What was the gendered method of analysis? How does one have a gendered perspective? Only after the 1995 World Conference on Women that was convened in Huairou, Beijing did I start to know this kind of idea and this kind of view. But I probably did not truly embrace the concept of gender or this kind of approach until after I started working in our anti-domestic violence network – or the anti-domestic violence project. From the end of 1999 to 2000, when our project began to develop, I participated in our first gender training for the project. This project required that each person in charge of a part of the project had to have gender training. If we did not take this course we were not permitted to be in charge of the smaller projects within this anti-domestic violence project. So I was required to get this training. So only after this training did I begin to have a truly feminist perspective and feminist ideas.

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<sup>23</sup> Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has adopted the policy of “reform and opening” to build more effective political and economic systems.

<sup>24</sup> Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China: Adopted at the Third Session of the Fifth National People's Congress on September 10, 1980, and amended in accordance with Decision Regarding the Amendment (of Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China) passed at the 21st Session of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress on April 28, 2001. By Women's Law, Chen Mingxia is referring to the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women.

<sup>25</sup> The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and the NGO Forum on Women were held in Beijing in September 1995. At the Fourth World Conference on Women, representatives from 189 different countries agreed that inequalities between women and men have serious consequences for the well-being of all people. The conference declared a set of goals for progress of women in various areas including politics, health, and education.

**Shi Tong: Do you think that in 1995 your scholarly research and activism had these two kinds of points of view, two different points of view?**

Chen Mingxia: Yes, I think that there were certain differences. But I cannot say that they are two absolutely different approaches. I do not think anything is absolute. But I feel that only after the 1995 World Conference on Women did I begin to pay attention to using gender as a method of analysis. Only after becoming involved in our project did I truly use a gender approach to some issues. I think basically this is how this came about.

**Shi Tong: What do you feel is the difference from using a gendered point of view to look at issues and the legalistic point of view that you held before?**

Chen Mingxia: You are asking me what is the difference with the traditional legal point of view? I feel, well, of course there are differences. When I deal with the law, I can now use the method of gender analysis to analyze the law. That is why we established a Research Center for Gender and the Law. This gender and law research center was established because during the course of the many projects we had found that in the law there exist a lot of gender blind spots. The so-called concepts of “fairness” and “justice” actually apply to abstract humans. But, there are men and women. But the law takes man as the standard. The law made by men based on men’s standards governs the entire society. But the whole society is composed of men and women. I think that in the past I could not have had this kind of point of view. Yet, after this, I think that I had this kind of perspective. Our Center attempts to analyze some of the gender blind spots and flaws in the law from a gender perspective so that we can help to make our law better serve both men and women.

**Shi Tong: How do you see the relationship between scholarly research and activism?**

Chen Mingxia: I think that theoretical research and practice should be unified. But as for me, this is a change that did not occur until when I was about sixty years old. Prior to this I basically was engaged in theoretical research. Of course my theoretical research was very closely related to practice. Since I do substantive law, this is different from working on pure theory. I work on substantive law, like the Marriage Law and Women’s Law. The Marriage Law and the Women’s Law, for example, are all very closely related to practice. For instance from the beginning of the 1990s I have done research concerning the problems related to the implementation of the Women’s Law and how to make improvements. From the beginning I set out to protect women’s interests; I studied issues concerning women and women’s rights, or to say, our earlier approach was to say “we set out to protect women’s rights.” But I underwent a very big change when I accepted the concept of gender (I started using this after the 1995 World Conference on Women). In other words, I realized that it was not our research that would protect the rights and interests of women. But, instead we should use the gender perspective to analyze our laws and we should use this perspective to research social issues and research women’s issues. Therefore we came to realize that we should not adopt a condescending attitude. Instead we should stand with women, empower women, and study and solve women’s

issues together. I think this approach will make huge differences. It will enrich my own research. In other words, in the past we focused on theory and we also seemed to attempt to “make connections between theory and practice.” However, that kind of “making connections between theory and practice” is fundamentally different from the feminist approach that I am adopting now. Now I stand among women as a woman, and research and solve our problems in society. In this way we will gain freedom and greater consciousness of our rights and solve our problems. I feel that this should be very different from only using a legal perspective. Therefore now I think that those of us who do this kind of work have a high degree of gender sensitivity. For instance, throughout our anti-domestic violence project we all took a gender perspective as a fundamental starting point during the whole process. Because of this, things that we discussed and wrote were extremely different from the things written by people who did not have this point of view. Therefore, I think that our theoretical research and practice are closely connected. As women, based on the differences of women and certain situations that women face, we can better study issues concerning women. In other words, I feel this is something different.

**Shi Tong: Could you cite an example, an actual example of the significance of engaging in activism?**

Chen Mingxia: Give an example – take for instance, our anti-domestic violence project. From June 2000, we have worked on this project. This project encompasses fifteen small projects; one, for example, is an oral history, and another concerns legislation. I do not work on the oral history project. This is one of our projects that fall under the umbrella of the larger anti-domestic violence project. They interview women for this project. In the interview process the interviewer and the woman who is the victim of domestic violence reflect on her experience of violence together. In the meantime the conversation enables the interviewee to reclaim her rights. Through the process she not only will be able to recognize that being a victim of domestic violence is not her problem – in the past these women often thought that they were to blame. Moreover she will be able to stand up and oppose this kind of violence. In the end, some people, who were interview subjects, became volunteers for the anti-domestic violence program. Therefore I feel that this process tells us there is a very big difference between the two approaches: you stand in an observer’s standpoint and research these women or you stand with them together to research women’s issues. In this way we empower ourselves and we all raise our consciousness. This is our own process. I think this is an example.

Moreover, we also have held many trainings. For instance we have carried out trainings for victims and lessons for abusers. I think this process also involves introducing men to feminism or revealing to men how harmful domestic violence is. This allows him to recognize that actually he himself is also one kind of victim. What kind of victim is he? He lives in a kind of male-dominated society. This kind of masculinist culture and male control are harmful to him. They cause many problems such as the inequality between men and women, the notion that men are superior and women are inferior, and so on. After people see issues in this way, we can move towards a society of equality, of gender equality. That is the goal of our project.

I can talk about another example in our attempt to have some kind of intervention in the legislative process. I have participated in this work and I am one of the main participants. We came to realize that our laws must reflect the idea of gender equality. Take the female victim of domestic violence for instance. A woman who has been abused over an extended period of time takes matters into her own hands and kills her husband. How do you protect this kind of woman? How do you ensure that during her trial she has the rights that she should have and she receives a less severe sentence? Also for instance the application of theories like “oppressed woman syndrome” in our project will give us a gender perspective in our legislative process when we consider laws concerning evidence collecting, the definition of evidence, providing protection and stopping domestic violence. Thus we can propose innovative legislative ideas that have a gender perspective. We have already offered some suggestions on the anti-domestic violence legislation to the National People’s Congress.<sup>26</sup> This draft was already submitted to the Tenth Session of the National People’s Congress Legislation Committee. This kind of process and this kind of work are accomplished because we have employed such notions and (feminist) ideas. Therefore we could organize the experts and accomplish these actions. I think this is a good example. But in the past...I think the time period before the 1990s, we simply upheld the notion of “fairness and justice” for the abstract man in the law.

**Shi Tong: How does participating in these kinds of scholarly research and activism influence or affect you personally? In what ways have they changed you?**

Chen Mingxia: Personal transformation... (She laughs.) I feel that of course I personally have undergone a very big change. First, I feel that I have changed from a person who originally did not have a gender perspective. Or you can say I used to consider defending women’s rights as a very simple process. Or you could say that I changed from merely sympathizing to – using a social worker’s term – I changed from “sympathizing” to having empathy. And then I changed from having empathy to a kind of true involvement. Instead of viewing these women as so-called subjects whom we must help I came to realize that we all must work together to solve problems that exist within the women’s movement. We should theorize this work and attempt to bring fundamental changes in terms of promoting women’s rights.

As for me, I feel this is a really great process. I think that this process has a lot of significance for me. In the past I was only a law person. But now I have been transformed into a new law person with a gender perspective and gender approach. Therefore I feel that this is very important for me. This is one aspect. Also, I changed into someone who is much more accommodating. Although I seem to be a person who talks fast and is easily agitated, I think that my work has made me more tolerant. Through my change to embrace feminism, I feel that I am now better able to collaborate with others. Moreover I especially advocate the idea that all women should unite. Because I think that people used to have the notion that “women” are a weak community. Of course women are definitely not weak. Historical reasons have resulted in their disadvantaged position. I do

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<sup>26</sup> The People’s Congress is the legislative body of the People’s Republic of China.

not intend to talk about this now. However it does seem that the issue of women's disadvantage, especially in terms of political participation, is very prominent in our country. But I think that even though we are at a disadvantage, it is not true that we do not have any strength. But what about these strengths? All women should unite. Therefore if you ask me what I have to say about the future, for example stopping domestic violence, I would call on all people to unite. All women and all those who oppose domestic violence should unite and together maintain our wonderful lives. So my big change was that I began to look at things in a much more open way. I think that I have become much more able to embrace different points of view. Some people say that feminism is very radical and is intolerant, and so on. However I believe in the opposite. It was after I embraced a gender perspective that I became more able to accommodate differences and better understand the multiplicity of views, collaborating with more people and with those who hold different points of view. I think this is an important change in me.

Also another change that I underwent was in my way of thinking. I believe that women should come together better. Women's NGOs also should unite and work with everyone in society, including men, in order to achieve women's liberation, or, in order to build a more civilized and progressive society – in the current rhetoric of the communist party and popular way of putting it, to build a “more harmonious society.”

**Shi Tong: What types of changes have your scholarly research and activism brought to the organizations that you were involved in, for example, your work unit<sup>27</sup> or some projects that you have worked on, like the anti-domestic violence project you discussed earlier? Can you speak a bit more concretely about some of the changes?**

Chen Mingxia: Our anti-domestic violence project began in June 2000. I could be considered one of the initiators of this project, but I was not the earliest organizer. I think that the initiator of this project was a group, which was composed of several people. Our initial participants were many people from different organizations. This brought together experts and scholars from the fields of philosophy, law, sociology, social work, medicine, journalism, psychology and so on. The people in charge of each sub-project were either scholars above an associate professor's rank or women's activists. We gathered together to do the work of opposing domestic violence, which was carried out in 15 sub-projects. This project currently has already entered its second stage. I was a coordinator in the first stage. The so-called “coordinator” is the person who coordinates all of the various people's efforts. You could say that as a coordinator I devoted a lot of effort and energy to the project. But I think that working this hard was really worth it because while doing this work I learned many things. I learned about all kinds of things and many issues related to fighting domestic violence. In addition I learned how to be a leader, learned how to be a better leader of an NGO. In English you call this person a “leader.” Moreover I learned how to better coordinate and to better see the whole picture and think about each aspect of what needed to be done, how to encourage collaboration among women's non governmental organizations, and also how to encourage collaboration and improve interactions between NGOs and the government. I think my work enriched my life and I

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<sup>27</sup> “Work unit” is the literal translation of the Chinese word for “workplace.”

studied many things. Therefore I think that when I have the opportunity for some down time, I certainly want to produce some very good research on women's NGOs, and research on how women's or even how all kinds of NGOs are contributing to the construction of a democratic society, a civil society. In addition I would like to research how NGOs interact with society and the government, how they promote a progressive, civilized, and democratic society governed by the law. Because I am involved with the law, I want to research this. It is too bad that currently I do not have time to do this, but I think that I should study this.

This is for my personal development. As for our organization, I think that due to the development of our project, we had a very big impact on combating domestic violence in society. We have 15 sub-projects; and when these projects were being established, they were very sensitive. We had to overcome many obstacles in order to establish these projects. I am not going to discuss this process now since we do not have enough time. After we established these projects, our fifteen sub-projects all had a very tremendous influence on society. For instance, later we worked together with the Women's Federation<sup>28</sup> and on China Central television<sup>29</sup> Channel Six – a channel that has a very high viewer rate – we aired an anti-domestic violence program. On this channel, we had a “project ambassador” in these short programs that aimed to promote an anti-domestic violence position in order to maintain our beautiful lives. This aired for a month – think about what a tremendous influence this had on society!

### **Shi Tong: On Channel Six?**

Chen: Yes, on Channel Six. Also for example we have made anti-domestic violence street signs, which also has a very tremendous influence on society. If you want me to talk about the benefits of this project, I have to say that it has been very useful for society. This could be a way of encouraging people to change their ideas since it will help them realize the harmful ramifications of domestic violence and that domestic violence is a social malady that should be eradicated. In this sense the project had a great impact on society. Therefore I feel that these projects were all very good, but I do not want to talk about what I, as an individual, have done, because as I said earlier, the founders of this project were a collective and there were several NGOs participating as well. From the very beginning we all felt that it was very important to emphasize coalitions between various NGOs. Many NGOs have joined in our network. We currently have already developed our network members in twenty-four provinces, cities and autonomous regions<sup>30</sup> throughout the country. Our network members include the Women's Federation, members of the Association of Legal Studies,<sup>31</sup> research institutions, and

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<sup>28</sup> The All China Women's Federation is the largest women's organization in China. Its network reaches down to the basic local administrative level and has played an important role in promoting women's rights and gender equality. Scholars and activists disagree on whether the ACWF is a non-governmental organization, because it has strong official ties and status.

<sup>29</sup> The China Central Television is a TV station run by the government. Its programs claim a large viewer population in China.

<sup>30</sup> There are several “autonomous regions” in China, where ethnic minorities live.

<sup>31</sup> The Association of Legal Studies is a national organization in China. Its members consist of legal scholars and research institutions.

even members from local communities, such as the local police station, public security bureau, and the Bureau of Civil Affairs.<sup>32</sup> Therefore such a wide network system certainly has a very good influence on many levels of society. This group of people has very strong ties; we are bound together. I am only a coordinator, but as a coordinator I work with everyone in order to complete this project in the best possible way. I think the reason why we could be so devoted is that all of these people who work on this project have embraced feminism (*nuquan zhuyi* or *nuxing zhuyi*).<sup>33</sup> We are all willing to make contributions and sacrifices for this enterprise. This is a kind of public enterprise. Sometimes we use the time in the evening from 9:00 to 11:00 to hold a meeting or even sometimes find time on Saturdays or Sundays. Yet no one complains. So I think that in this process I have benefited greatly. This group of people is all really great; working with them makes me very happy.

**Shi Tong: You are very humble; you don't want to talk about your own contributions. But I would still like you to evaluate your work in this anti-domestic violence project.**

Chen Mingxia: The work... Well... I was a coordinator and now I am the council president. Currently, during the second stage of the project, I am the council president. This, I should say, is a reform. This reform has a price – in China under this kind of environment, or you could say in an environment where for a long time dictatorship prevailed, if we want to establish a council system our work might temporarily be negatively impacted. We had some costs associated with this, but I feel that these costs have been worth it. This new system allows us to experiment with a kind of democratic management style, a kind of transparent NGO management style. I think this is really very important. If you ask me about my contributions or what I have done, let me just say that I have set an example for others. First I am willing to make the necessary sacrifices, because I love this kind of work. I believe that women must make certain sacrifices in order to achieve women's liberation, or for women to achieve independence and development as well as equal rights. As women we must make certain contributions and love this kind of work. I deeply love this kind of work and I am willing to make contributions for this enterprise. I have done some work and I am willing to work for this. This spirit probably has to some degree influenced some people. In addition I think I am accommodating. When we are all together, it does not matter who I work with, I am able to get along with them and work with them. I think that society is composed of many different kinds of people. This is something that I have come to know through my studies. Originally I was not so accommodating. During this process of over ten years, I realized that I have many shortcomings and problems. But what is important is that I want to keep learning. Therefore I feel that through the process of doing this project or the process of studying feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*) I have not stopped learning new things. I am willing to study very hard and learn from the people in my project, from each person

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<sup>32</sup> The Bureau of Civil Affairs oversees administrative management on the community level, grassroots organizations, relief and welfare programs, services to the military, and so on.

<sup>33</sup> Chen Mingxia keeps mentioning these two terms together to refer to “feminism,” because among Chinese feminists there is no consensus on the translation of this term. See footnote 1 for a detailed explanation.

responsible for a sub- project, from people of other countries, and from everyone that I work with. I think I can learn many valuable things from them. Thus if you ask me what sort of contributions that I have had, perhaps in these aspects I have been of some use. In addition, I am able to draw everyone together. Perhaps this is because of my age. I am not the oldest among the participants in this project but I am rather old compared to many of the others. Therefore possibly colleagues are willing to work with me and do these things together. If you want to speak of how I have contributed to this project, then I should say that I have been useful in bringing everyone together.

**Shi Tong: You mentioned a moment ago that your anti-domestic violence organization underwent a reform; your individual role also went through a transformation, from a general coordinator to later becoming the council president. The organizational structure has also undergone a tremendous change, from the system of “project management committee” to the council system. Can you talk a bit about the significance of such transformation?**

Chen Mingxia: I really think this is very significant. For this NGO, the new system separates the management and the decision-making bodies. In this way, I feel that the management level can better carry out its work. They can better implement some of the council’s decisions and goals. This separation makes supervision easier and makes transparency possible. Our project has from the very beginning been upholding several principles: transparency, democracy, and equality. We want to have these principles. So if we separate the two, we could be more transparent, and thus let everyone better understand this process. Of course this kind of reform has its costs; by this I mean it takes a period of time to make adjustments. Originally every management committee member concurrently managed a sub-project. We would hold discussions, make decisions and then execute the plan. But now the organization operates in a different way. Now there is a management level; sometimes it takes time to get things done, because the council cannot directly make decisions on certain matters. The council makes decisions and the management carries them out. The management level has undergone its own transformation in terms of personnel. Sometimes the new people are not necessarily very familiar with the process and this can possibly cause delays. I think this whole thing is a process. If we can do a good job of reforming the mechanisms and make good selections for all of the personnel, I think this reform will have great significance. I think this is especially helpful for transparency and is helpful to the democratic decision making process. I think it will benefit us. But perhaps acting completely according to the methods that foreigners use is not necessarily appropriate for the Chinese situation. Therefore I think that we are in the process of exploring. We are exploring and debating.

**Shi Tong: What sort of role did you play in the transformations that took place in the anti-domestic violence project?**

Chen Mingxia: I am also one of the advocates in favor of these changes. This was what our management committee collectively decided. We all thought that we should manage this NGO in such a way that we would have a democratic style. We believe that our network should not only work to combat domestic violence; at the same time we also

want to show how to operate a women's NGO in China. We had discovered that within a women's non-governmental organization some problems also existed. Thus we thought we should explore how women's NGOs and all NGOs in China work to help build a democratic civil society. In a democratic civil society grassroots NGOs should play a major role. Therefore we also wanted to explore what this kind of grassroots organization should be like. So we thought we should take this step. Thus our management committee collectively decided that we must make a transition. We wanted to change the original system in which the management committee managed the projects as well as got involved in decision-making and execution, and was both in charge of funds and operation. We wanted to change this whole process into a council system. The council members should all be volunteers, not in control of any funds but have the power of oversight. We hoped this new system would enable the NGO to function better. This was decided collectively. If you ask about my contributions, then I would say that I helped with the coordination and operation during the transformation. Of course we also learned some lessons, for example how to select people. In the beginning we still were not clear about how to do this, so we did not do too much recruiting work. Thus we recruited people who were introduced by those we knew. Doing it this way might not bring the most efficient or the best candidates for certain positions. But after a little while, we now already have a formalized recruiting body, which consists of people from all levels in the network. Council members, sub-project leader, and network members of specific projects join a recruitment team to recruit people for the positions of director, director assistant, and assistant director. Currently this system has already been built up rather well, and it operates quite smoothly. They have started to operate with few problems. So I think this was a cost that needed to be undertaken if we wanted to explore this kind of non governmental organization, a democratic or in other words, a feminist organization or a very democratic transparent non governmental organization, we must pay a price. It may take half a year, a year or even two years, but I think it will be worth it because it is good for the future development of the organization. Therefore we think that this process is necessary. Now we can say that the procedures for the anti domestic violence network have already become standardized. From now on, the network, president, and the council will continue to change. The president will change and the council members will continually be supplemented with new people when the older members leave their positions. Thus, there will be a continuous renewal. This should be a very big advantage to the development of this organization. At present, the anti domestic violence network has regularized its operations.

**Shi Tong: As an individual, and as a person in charge of this organization what sorts of difficulties did you face during this process? In what ways were you deeply affected?**

Chen Mingxia: Difficulties and how was I affected? I think that as a non-governmental organization, an organization like ours... What this kind of non-governmental organization does cannot be narrowly defined. Instead we are an organization that deals with a comprehensive body of work such as combating domestic violence. Moreover, all of us are people who all have some other work; basically everyone has their own careers. Thus, we are all extremely busy. So I feel that is rather difficult to bring everyone

together to work. This actually is quite difficult. Possibly because I am a bit older, everybody takes good care of me. Now as soon as I call them to convene, they come together. But if it was not like this, I think that it would still be rather difficult because they all have their own matters that they have to deal with. China has not formed a very big middle class. Most of us are still in the position where “If I did not have this job then I would have no way to sustain myself.” So these people must first complete their own official duties at work, before they can do work for the non governmental organization. I feel this is very difficult. How can you mobilize volunteers so that they become actively engaged in NGO activities? I feel that this is a rather prominent difficulty in our work. Moreover, I think that women’s NGOs – other NGOs might be the same – work on a very specific issue, but ours unites many non governmental organizations to do the special work of combating domestic violence. In this situation, because each organization has its own aspect of work, the question of how we can get united and build good connections with each other in order to operate better, poses certain difficulties. Although we have had some achievements, I still feel that we have not done enough. So in the future, we need to strengthen this aspect. As for me personally – actually it is not only me; other people perhaps also feel this way. Everybody is different; people are different. They are interested in different things and have different ideas. To unite people with different ideas – to do this kind of work requires a great deal of effort, and I feel that this is difficult. But we still get things done and you could say that we have some successes. But, nevertheless, this is still a rather large problem. People have to deal with conflicts. This can occur at any time. So we still need to do some work in this aspect.

**Shi Tong: How do you think that you can overcome these difficulties, especially at the organizational level?**

Chen Mingxia: I think at such times, since everybody embraces gender and a gendered perspective, we should be able to analyze these issues. Think about it. Society is diverse and people’s ways of thinking are also very diverse. Thus we should attempt to seek common ground while maintaining differences. We should look at the good qualities of others. We should combine our strength on the basis of our commonalities while keeping our differences; we should develop the good things. We should gather together to do things. In any case I basically persist in advocating this attitude and urge everybody to try to seek common ground while maintaining his or her differences. We all should work harder to find the good qualities in others. Moreover I think that at the leadership level, those people who are in charge of each sub-project should be tolerant. We found that currently within our project there are also some leaders who disagree with each other. So we had to tell everybody to seek common ground while maintaining their differences and to also look for the good qualities in others. I think that this should always be the direction that we try to pursue. That is to say that I feel that feminists (*nuquan zhuyizhe* and *nuxing zhuyizhe*), as people who struggle for the rights and interests of women, should all be especially magnanimous. I think it should be like this. Only in this way can we then all come together.

**Shi Tong: “Seeking common ground while maintaining differences” is a principle that you and the network members hold, right?**

Chen Mingxia: I think so. Moreover I think that we should all be tolerant. Tolerance is very important. Since everybody is different, I think everybody should be tolerant. We should see the good qualities in each other. In this way we will all be able to get along better.

**Shi Tong: What type of relation does this network have with other women's organizations?**

Chen Mingxia: Other organizations – our network has many organizations within it. What are you referring to?

**Shi Tong: Outside of the network, for instance, are groups like the Women's Federation.**

Chen Mingxia: In terms of organizations outside of our network, I think that in our relationship with the Women's Federation, we try to maintain independence while seeking collaboration. I think... currently overseas there are many different views. They think that the Women's Federation is both a governmental institution and non-government organization.<sup>34</sup> But I think that it does not matter if the Women's Federation is governmental or non-governmental. The All China Women's Federation from top to bottom is composed of six levels of networks. These six levels of networks could greatly help our anti-domestic violence project. Moreover, the Women's Federation is also a women's organization. Thus we should cooperate with the people there. Therefore in our network, the leader of the All China Women's Federation's rights and interest department is a special consultant. Various levels of the Women's Federation are members of our network. We have made it very clear to the All-China Women's Federation that we are not out to compete with the Women's Federation for work; we want to help the Women's Federation with their work. I made this point very clear to the officials of the Women's Federation. Of course this possibly is because I am senior in my age so it is somewhat easier for me to say such things. I said to them that we wanted to help them and we all should do women's work together. But we have one point that we are very clear about. We may ask them to be a consultant or ask them for other support, but we still must maintain our principle of independence. In other words, we insist upon our ideas and our principle of independence. Based on our ideas--feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*) or the idea of gender mainstreaming—together we can collaborate in many aspects. Therefore we have really good relations with the local Women's Federations. Basically the Women's Federation is willing to work on our project and also willing to help us with our work. In some places our network's operating center is located in the Women's Federation. So we work together. The Women's Federation is very willing to work for women. What we do is to spread the idea that it is not that we are to protect or liberate women; instead all women liberate ourselves together. At the same time that we are helping these women, we also empower ourselves. The Women's Federation thinks that this is a very good

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<sup>34</sup> Chen Mingxia is mainly talking about the All China Women's Federation. ACWF calls itself an NGO; but because of its close connection with the central government, especially in terms of administration, personnel and funding, many argue that ACWF is not an NGO.

thought. Take for instance the Hebei Province<sup>35</sup> Women's Federation. We feel that we can work really well with the Hebei Province Women's Federation; we can discuss our work with Wu Meirong.<sup>36</sup> They have done a very good job. Qianxi County of Hebei province and some others are areas where I have carried out projects. Yu Guixin<sup>37</sup> has transformed from a person without gender perspective to a member of the gender working group and takes the initiative to carry out gender trainings there. This is a very good example to illustrate my point about the relationship between the Women's Federation and us. Not only the Women's Federation, but also all NGOs are all our allies if they are willing to do work to combat domestic violence. Our allies can be found everywhere. Because of this we are better able to do our work.

Also for instance we have to consider how to work together with the community and the government. In Hunan Province's Furong District, our network member, the district magistrate, took the initiative to propose the establishment of a "zero domestic violence community." We told him that establishing a so-called zero domestic violence community might not be very accurate. I said that he should explain the "zero" part of the term of "zero domestic violence community." They embraced our suggestion, because we carried out trainings. In the end, they explained that the meaning of "zero" is that "zero non-intervention." That is to say if we have to intervene in all instances of domestic abuse. This result was very good and our ideas were reflected in the final outcome. Their government accepted the ideas and conducted the work very well. Therefore we have friendly cooperative relations with others but continue to uphold our ideas and our principle of independence. Therefore I think that with the government we have a kind of interactive relationship; we have coalitions with other NGOs. I think that in this way we are better able to spread the idea of gender and feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*).

### **Shi Tong: Do you think there are conflicts?**

Chen Mingxia: Conflicts... I think these are unavoidable. We have a lot. For instance, I will tell you about a very small example. For instance, in some of the communities, which are our experimental sites, when a place to lodge complaints is located inside a judicial office<sup>38</sup> or is located in the local government buildings, then who is the main person in charge of this place? Generally speaking its leading official should be the Women's Federation or women's representatives who are in charge of women's work. But oftentimes they will call on a male official from the local government. In this sort of situation we need to point out that this is a conflict. At such moments we must bring up the problem. This is an instance of conflict. We have to clearly express our point of view. If we are not able to have a woman to be the director of this place, then at the very least the assistant director has to be a woman. Moreover this person should be the deputy director. You cannot only ask her to take the responsibility; you must give her a

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<sup>35</sup> Hebei province is in northern China.

<sup>36</sup> Wu Meirong is the assistant director of the Department of Women's Rights and Interests at the Hebei Women's Federation.

<sup>37</sup> Yu Guixin is the president of the Qianxi County Women's Federation.

<sup>38</sup> Judicial offices are an institution of the lowest level in the Chinese judicial system. There are currently over 40,000 judicial offices in local communities in China. Their main functions are to solve legal disputes, provide legal services, educate citizens about laws, and so on.

corresponding powerful position. This is our effort to strive for power, because people are an important factor in putting ideas into practice. Take for example women's participation in politics. Inside the Politburo<sup>39</sup> everyone is male. Can their decision-making truly incorporate women's perspectives? Obviously this is not possible. Thus our effort to obtain positions for women is really a matter of principle.

Therefore these conflicts are likely to happen. Also for instance in training, we have to think about the underlying principles of these trainings. We call our style the "participatory style." There are many different kinds of participatory styles. I am not saying that you cannot hold classes or large lectures. But when we think about how to balance large lecture and participatory, face-to-face training, we must represent our fundamental principles. We can sometimes stretch the rules in order to solve problems, but our principles must be upheld. Therefore conflicts also exist in such instances. Conflicts also could happen when we try to decide on the approaches of our work or the time of training—because time determines the content of our trainings. Although conflicts do not always appear, at the time of disagreement we need to have a good discussion.

**Shi Tong: How do you feel about the outcomes of these kinds of negotiation and struggle?**

Chen Mingxia: I think there has to be a process. Sometimes it is good; sometimes it is done well; in some areas it is really good. For instance in our community, the urban communities, we are doing very well. Perhaps sometimes the result is not ideal, but I think that this takes a process. Since in China we are accustomed to the top-down approach, this kind of process is inevitable. Our project has only been in operation for several years. Therefore I think that there still needs to be a process. We can understand this process is necessary but it cannot always be like this. We must persist in our views.

**Shi Tong: You work at the Institute of Law at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. A Center for the Studies of Gender and Law has been established there. What sort of role did you have in this organization?**

Chen Mingxia: Right, we established the Center for the Studies of Gender and Law. The Chinese title does not use *shehui xingbie*;<sup>40</sup> we use *xingbie*<sup>41</sup> in our name to be brief. In fact it should be the Center for the Studies of Gender and Law. In terms of how our center was established, I should say that the majority of the people who work at the center are members of our anti-domestic violence network. To tell you the truth, the initial establishment of this center was really because of the anti-domestic violence project. During the process of developing the anti-domestic violence project, we found that many aspects of our work involved legal matters. As soon as legal problems are concerned, it is very difficult to move forward with our anti-domestic violence agenda.

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<sup>39</sup> Chen Mingxia is referring to the Politburo of the Communist Party of China. It consists of 19-25 people. Collectively they oversee the Communist Party and thus the most important political decision-makers.

<sup>40</sup> Chinese translation of "gender."

<sup>41</sup> In Chinese, *xingbie* can refer to "gender" or "sex."

Take for instance the issue of “using violence to resist violence.” Many women who have used violence to resist violence receive an extremely heavy punishment – the death penalty or a postponed death sentence. Some simply have been executed and some have been sentenced to life imprisonment, etc. The sentences are very severe. According to the existing criminal law, this is a punishment that is deserved; the woman killed her husband. The woman, for instance, who had been abused, is unable to collect evidence. Domestic violence occurs in the home; it is hidden from public view. So how do you provide evidence? These are all very difficult questions. How do you punish the abuser? How do you stop domestic violence? Our country does not even issue protection orders. Therefore in the process of combating domestic violence we discovered things that were lacking in this aspect of the law. First, there was no special law that dealt with this. Second, the existing law could not protect women who were victims of domestic violence. The existing law does not address the so-called crimes that are a result of the victims’ resistance of domestic violence. So in this kind of situation, we ask why it is like this. It is because our laws do not have a gender perspective; they lack a gender point of view. There is gender-blindness. Therefore we deeply felt that it was extremely important to have a gender perspective in the law. When you look at the bigger picture, you realize that it is not only an issue of domestic violence. The entire civil law, the criminal law, economic laws and regulations, and the societal laws, and so on all lack gender perspective. This made us to think about studying the relationship between gender and law. Embodied in all of these problems is one issue – the lack of a gender perspective, or gender blindness. We thought that it was necessary to research these kinds of questions and to examine our laws. We have also found that in the legal domain, currently there are many female students who are studying law, and we also have many women working in the legal domain. There are quite a number of female attorneys and female legal researchers at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. But women’s positions are very low. There are only a miniscule amount of female judges and among the leading lawyers there are very few women. A lot of female law students are unable to find suitable work. Exactly what is underlying this kind of situation? Therefore at this time, we contemplated establishing such a center. This was not my personal invention. It was a group of people, who now constitute the center, and created it together. Of course at first it was the women legal scholars; we got together and thought about these issues. Then fortunately our president of the Institute of Law strongly supported this endeavor. Our president of the Institute of Law was a man but he very was extremely willing to support us to establish this center to research the relationship between gender and the law. This is how we established the Center for the Studies of Gender and the Law. The Center was established in September of 2002. In the past two or three years – a short period of time – I feel we have already done some very significant work. We have already conducted a lot of lectures on gender and the law and have held a training class. Fifteen universities from all over the country have held their first introduction class in feminist legal studies. We also want to further the process of examining the law. The work that we are currently doing has already received quite some attention from society and legal circles.

**Shi Tong: Could you talk a bit about how you see the feminist (*nuquan zhuyi*) movement on the Chinese mainland?**

Chen Mingxia: How I see feminism on the mainland? Actually, to tell you the truth, since we work with the law, originally we did not pay much attention to feminism (whether you call it *nuquan zhuyi* or *nuxing zhuyi*). Like I said a moment ago, it was only in the 1990s that I started to slowly pay attention to this. It was not until after the 1995 World Conference on Women that we became more involved. But it was when we started to work on the project, the anti-domestic violence project, that we came to truly learn about it and understand it. Our group, this group of people in the legal field, did not have a clear understanding of the concept of gender. But I think that feminism in China, *nuxing zhuyi* or *nuquan zhuyi* ... What shall I say? Are you talking about the influence it has had on China?

**Shi Tong: I mean on the Chinese mainland-- for instance the feminist impact of the anti-domestic violence network?**

Chen Mingxia: Do you mean mainly our work?

**Shi Tong: Like your activism and your scholarly research-- for instance the anti-domestic violence network.**

Chen Mingxia: I do not think that I agree with your way of asking questions about what influence I personally have on feminism on the mainland. I do not like this question.

**Shi Tong: No, that is not what I mean. I am asking about the organization that you are working in.**

Chen: Oh, our organization.

**Shi Tong: Yes, your organization.**

Chen Mingxia: If our organization has any influence on feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*), let me use the case of our anti-domestic violence network to talk about it. I think that this network has been useful in promoting the development of the Chinese feminist (*nuquan*) movement in both theory and practice. Our network not only does some actual interventions but we have also done anti-domestic violence research, an investigation of attitudes of citizens and judicial personnel of the situation of domestic violence in China. Based on this survey we produced some scholarship. In addition, during the process of our intervention, our real-world intervention, we have theorized the method of collaboration among multiple institutions – our proposal of the anti-domestic violence legislation fully reflects this. The fact that the results of our work have appeared in this draft<sup>42</sup> should be considered as an increase in its impact. At the same time we were able to bring in a feminist point of view, and gender ideas and method of analysis in our proposal. We also brought forth a feminist interpretation of legislation. Therefore you could say that this kind of theoretical achievement in legislation should have definitely been a contribution to both feminist theory and practice. I think that the anti-domestic

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<sup>42</sup> Chen Mingxia is referring to the draft of the legislation against domestic violence in China.

violence project and network have made a contribution. It facilitated the development and impact of the feminist movement in China in terms of targeting violence against women, especially anti-domestic violence.

As for our research on gender and the law, I think that no one in China had done it before. When we started this work and gave our first lecture, what sort of challenges did we face? They were the challenges from male legal experts. They would say such things like: What? You want to take account of gender in the law? This is ridiculous! What you are trying to do is irrational and has no rational analytical basis. They even brought up questions like these. I am not exaggerating our accomplishment. We were the first to do this kind of thing in China – the first to introduce gender into the law. In China, feminism – *nuquan zhuyi* or in the popular term, *nuxing zhuyi* – had already entered the disciplines of history, philosophy, and literary criticism. But no one had addressed the issue of gender in the law. But our Center for the Studies of Gender and the Law has already introduced this concept into the law. Moreover in the very short period of two or three years, we have already offered numerous lectures on gender and the law. We published a book that is called *The Studies of Gender and Law Forum*. Our forum has already trained very many people and has influenced many people. Moreover currently there are teachers from fifteen universities who are exploring these issues with us. Therefore even though we cannot immediately establish this discipline, the discipline of feminist law – we do not call it feminist (*nuxing zhuyi*) law; we call it “gender and scientific studies of the law” – I believe that one day we will be able to do this. This would have tremendous significance, because a very important point of the protection of women’s human rights, or you can say protecting men’s and women’s human rights, is the incorporation of such ideas in the law. The law is a very important tool. If the law does not ensure gender equality but remains only a law for men, it cannot possibly bring about the equality of men and women. And the ability to safeguard human rights, including truly safeguarding women’s human rights and men’s human rights, would not possibly be realized through such a law. The law is drawn up by people and is established in order to protect people’s human rights. Therefore the law should reflect the demands for rights of both men and women. So we should bring gender consciousness into the law so that it enters the mainstream. Thus I really feel that the study of gender and the law is extremely important for China.

**Shi Tong: How do you see the future of the Chinese feminist movement on mainland China?**

Chen Mingxia: The future? I think... I prefer using the term “gender equality” than saying “feminist movement.” I think China is a country where the doctrine of “men are superior and women are inferior” has prevailed for five thousand years. Feminism in the west has been demonized. Actually there are many different schools of thought and many developments in feminism. I think that one of the best aspects of feminism is that feminism dares to criticize itself. Feminism has grown through the process of self-criticism. The development of feminism is characterized by diversity. I think that this is precisely one of the reasons it is great. Therefore I appreciate feminism very much. However, how do you bring feminism from the West and develop it in China? I hope...it

does not matter if you call it *nuquan zhuyi* or *nuxing zhuyi*. No matter what you call it, I hope we can all unite, that everyone can have the same goal, and that peoples' points of view can be different. But we must work hard in order to make contributions to gender equality in China. We should adopt various angles and use different methods of analysis in our efforts to realize gender equality in China, working within the Chinese context and fully taking advantage of the unique conditions in China. China often is ruled in a top-down manner. Therefore I hope feminists (*nuxing zhuyizhe*) could creatively take advantage of the realities in China, integrating the top-down women's liberation framework and the bottom-up women's movement. In this way the work for gender equality will develop better. Thus we will be able to better protect the rights that Chinese women ought to obtain, realize the true equality with men, and at the same time create our happy life together, with men and women equally working together. This is my wish for the future.

**Shi Tong: Finally I want to ask you, in what ways have international feminisms influenced you as an individual and also your organization?**

Chen Mingxia: I think that the influence has been tremendous. If you ask where our ideas initially came from, it is probably from overseas. Some feminists might claim that they have created it. But I still think that these people were influenced by outside ideas in the beginning. Of course there were also some ideas from within our country, since feminism (*nuxing zhuyi*) in China had existed since a very early time. Today we are not here to discuss history, so I will not talk about it. However, if we look at history, women in the May Fourth Movement<sup>43</sup> and even the women pioneers a thousand years before the May Fourth Movement had sought to defend their own rights and have their own awakenings through their own efforts – for example, my mother influenced me by instilling in me the spirit of self-strengthening and independence. I think in terms of pursuing something like modern democracy, western feminism has had the biggest influence on us. It does not matter which school of thought; all have some good points that we can take from them. Therefore when we are talking about what has been influential for us, both the anti-domestic violence network and the Center for the Studies of Gender and Law have been tremendously influenced by western feminism. For instance our anti-domestic violence network has organized many activities to invite overseas colleagues to introduce how they carried out anti-domestic violence projects in their countries, as well as some of their experiences. We can take what is relevant and then discuss it. Our feminist legal research has been more influenced by scholars overseas. This was because China did not have any research in this aspect at all. Therefore we invited many overseas experts to talk with us. When we went overseas we also made a lot of contacts with foreign scholars; so we have learned many things and we are still learning. We want to write teaching material. Our teaching material will first introduce western feminism. Then it will move to how we can carefully examine our laws and develop our theories. I think this has great impact on us. I still remember that we first became involved in the anti-domestic violence project because in 1998 we went to India to participate in a conference. Violence against a

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<sup>43</sup> The May Fourth Movement was an anti-imperialist, cultural and political movement. Growing from a student demonstration that took place on May 4, 1919, the movement began a patriotic outburst of new urban intellectuals against imperialism and traditional social and cultural forces.

woman violates women's rights to life and health as well as violates women's human rights. Before that event, we understood that domestic violence, violence against women, was a violation of women's human rights. But this is also a violation of a woman's right to life and right to health. Although we had heard this before, we really did not profoundly understand or recognize this. But our trip to India really had a huge influence on me. It was precisely the group of people who went to India, who when they came back, began to work on the anti-domestic violence project. Moreover in 1999 we went to Sweden to learn about their experience of combating domestic violence. At that time there were also people from the All China Women's Federation who went with us. We wanted to find out such things as how they organized, how they developed, and how many projects they worked on. The plans that we later developed were all influenced by what we learned in Sweden. Thus, I think that overseas feminism influenced us. And as for the research on gender and the law, we frequently were in contact with our overseas colleagues, so I should say that they were influential in this aspect also.

**Shi Tong: What sorts of contributions have we made to global feminism?**

Chen Mingxia: Us? In terms of activism that we are engaged in, I feel that it should have made contributions.... After all, we are a member of a big global family. The development of Chinese feminist theory should also be a part of the international women's liberation movement and the global feminist movement. Since we are part of it, the fact that we have developed such projects from scratch should of course be considered a contribution by itself. We are late to the scene; they are the trailblazers. But even though we came late to the scene, we still have made very big contributions. First in terms of a comprehensive campaign against violations of women's rights, for instance, domestic violence, we have made huge contributions. We have become a collective organization that does grassroots work to combat domestic violence. I think that this has enriched the content of the feminist movement. As for global feminism, China has provided a unique experience. This is an approach that has unified grassroots work with top-down methods. Moreover, our research about gender and the law has filled a space in the Chinese feminist movement that was previously blank. Perhaps this does not sound humble, but I feel that our Center's work on this aspect should be considered as having filled in the blank in terms of China's role in the international feminist movement. So I feel that the things that we do at our center are a kind of contribution to the international feminist movement.

**Shi Tong: Thank you Professor Chen. I have asked you all of the questions that I prepared. Is there something that we have not covered that you would like to talk about?**

Chen Mingxia: What else should I say?

**Shi Tong: Are there things that you still want to talk about?**

Chen Mingxia: Things that I especially want to address? I have not given this a lot of thought. Because I was answering your questions – whatever you asked I answered.

**Shi Tong: Now you have time to freely talk about whatever you would like.**

Chen Mingxia: Actually I think that if needed, we could speak a bit about a good point of our anti-domestic violence network. As an NGO in the feminist movement, we have indeed achieved the goal of uniting many organizations to work hard for our common goal. Our organization is especially successful at attracting local Women's Federations to work with us. They are very enthusiastic. We all felt that it was really good to be involved in this work. Therefore I feel that this clearly illustrates that Chinese women really need feminist ideas – *nuquan zhuyi* or gender theories. In my view, we should not think these ideas are purely “foreign.” I think that Chinese women's work to empower women from below and inspire people to empower themselves is indeed embraced by women and welcomed by women. Therefore as we do this kind of work at the same time it arouses this kind of spirit in women. Some people blame women and say that people in dreadful situations must have caused this themselves. I think this view actually does not attempt to awaken women's subjective consciousness and spirit. Therefore I think that the idea of gender can awaken these sorts of things in women. I do not know if you pay attention to this or not, but the participatory style of our gender trainings is more effective at the grassroots levels. The higher the levels that we get to do the training for, the less popular this style is. So what do these examples illustrate? This style is a good way to cause people at the basic levels to awaken their consciousness and pursue democracy and rights. Thus, this kind of work is better received at the grassroots levels. Therefore I think our work illustrates the necessity of this kind of approach. Only when you can mobilize people at the basic levels can you work better.

**Shi Tong: So can we say that you are creating a model with Chinese characteristics?<sup>44</sup>**

Chen Mingxia: So I feel that in China, when you want to develop trainings and so on, you have to have Chinese characteristics. If you use one approach to work with a lower level, you have to change your approach when you work with high levels. When you work with even higher levels, you have to change your approach again. Thus, I think that we cannot say that western ideas are not useful in China. Absolutely rejecting them is not right. But because of some unique features of China's culture and conditions, in China, we have to have a Chinese way of doing things. I feel that this is very important. So feminism in China, *nuquan zhuyi* or *nuxing zhuyi*, must be based on China's own experience. But no matter what, you must know some of the basics of feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*). So I think that we have to read and grasp some things in feminism. This is what I wanted to say. Moreover I still want to emphasize my special appeal to everyone. It does not matter if you call it *nuquan zhuyi* or *nuxing zhuyi*. We should amicably sit together and hold really good discussions about these issues and explore them. We should not be divided by factions or borders. We should all sit together and research the issue of gender equality, women's issues, and societal issues. We should seek solutions with various approaches. This is what I call on everyone to do and what I hope for. When we all have academic

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<sup>44</sup> In China, people often use the term “Chinese characteristics” to emphasize the uniqueness of the Chinese experience or some work that reflects the Chinese experience.

discussions we may have different points of view, but our studies of practices should hand in hand advance together.

**Shi Tong: Especially in activism?**

Chen Mingxia: Right, especially when we are doing practical interventions and activities we should unite. We may have different points of view about theories. But we should be collaborating in our actual work. We should advance our movement together. While advancing our movement, at the same time our theory will become more mature. So this point is very important and something I really hope that will happen. Because I am getting old, I will not always be able to do these things. Eventually I will have to retire.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: CHINA**

**Transcript of Gao Xiaoxian  
Interviewer: Wang Zheng**

**Date: September 26, 2005  
Translated by: Kim Dorazio**

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**Gao Xiaoxian**, born in 1948, is Secretary General of the Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family. Trained in history and sociology and working as an official in the Shaanxi Provincial Women's Federation, Gao has been a pivotal figure in establishing this influential non-governmental women's organization that has managed many research and activist projects that focus on empowering rural women in the west region of China. Gao has also been involved in rural development projects, particularly concerning rural girls' education and rural women's political participation.

Gao Xiaoxian was interviewed by Wang Zheng, historian of Chinese women's and gender history. Professor Wang teaches at the University of Michigan, where she is also a researcher at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

**Wang Zheng: Xiaoxian, I would like to ask you... You have carried out many different activities in Shaanxi and have done numerous non-governmental projects. I would like to know more about how you first came to be engaged in these kinds of feminist activities.**<sup>45</sup>

Gao Xiaoxian: Hmm, this probably is related to my own experiences. I was one of the “class of 1977”<sup>46</sup> university students. That is to say, I was among the first class of students to take the college entrance examinations that were reinstated after the Cultural Revolution.<sup>47</sup> So when we graduated and received job assignments,<sup>48</sup> most of us went to... Well, because at that time the government emphasized “the four modernizations” of its cadres—that is, to become more revolutionary, more knowledgeable, more youthful, and more specialized, the first class of university students to graduate after the Cultural Revolution was all assigned to various party and government organizations. This was how I came to work at the Women’s Federation.<sup>49</sup>

**Wang Zheng: So when did you begin to work at the Women’s Federation?**

Gao Xiaoxian: It was in 1982... January of 1982.

**Wang Zheng: The Shaanxi Women’s Federation?**<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Here Wang Zheng uses the Chinese term *nuquan zhuyi* to refer to “feminism.” There are two terms that can be translated as “feminism.” *Nuxing zhuyi* is literally “female-ism” or “feminine-ism.” This translation emerged in the early twentieth century but reemerged in the 1980s. Some believe that this term has less political but more biological connotations than *nuquan zhuyi*. *Nuquan zhuyi* is literally “woman- rights-ism” Since *quan* can mean both rights and power, the term can be interpreted as the “ism” of women’s power and rights. In history, the Chinese Communist Party has defined *nuquan zhuyi* as bourgeois, because of the potential conflicts between gender struggles and class struggles. In contemporary China, this term is primarily used to refer to Western feminism and often conveys a negative image of a men-hating woman hungry for power. For this reason, many Chinese feminists avoid calling themselves *nuquan zhuyi zhe*. See Ping-chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok, et.al, eds. *Chinese Women Organizing* (2001) and Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* (1999) for detailed historical reviews.

<sup>46</sup> In the summer of 1977, college entrance exams were offered for the first time since the Cultural Revolution began some eleven years before. Thus, this class was unique in that entrance to a university was extremely competitive and the age of students varied greatly.

<sup>47</sup> The Cultural Revolution (Abbreviation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution) is often dated 1966-1976. According to a Central Committee resolution adopted on June 27, 1981, the Cultural Revolution was carried out “under the mistaken leadership of Mao Zedong who was used by the counterrevolutionaries Lin Biao and Jiang Qing and brought serious disaster and turmoil to the Party and the Chinese people.” This official view has since become the dominant framework for the Chinese historiography of the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>48</sup> Under the old system, the government would assign job positions to university graduates.

<sup>49</sup> The Women’s Federation recruits college graduates through this channel of assignment. The All China Women’s Federation is the largest women’s organization in China. Its nation-wide network reaches down to the basic local administrative level and has played an important role in promoting women’s rights and gender equality. Scholars and activists disagree on whether the ACWF is a non-governmental organization, because it has strong ties and official status.

<sup>50</sup> Shaanxi is a province in central China.

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, the Shaanxi Women's Federation. Since I was among the first group of college graduates in history to be directly assigned to the Shaanxi Women's Federation, the Women's Federation really regarded me highly. The officials there assigned me to an extremely important post – an administrative position in the office where I was responsible for drafting some work reports and speeches for officials. I therefore had the opportunity to see various counties' Women's Federation documents like investigations, study reports, and so on. In 1982 the Chinese countryside responsibility system<sup>51</sup> had just started. The entire society was undergoing enormous changes. The Cultural Revolution had lasted for ten years and the countryside had many new issues to deal with. For instance there were the issues of the buying and selling of women in marriage. At the very beginning...When it happened, women would refuse to marry, and some would run away, and so on. So I came across many incidents like these. As for my personal experience...Well, during the Cultural Revolution...People in my generation who have experienced these ten years have too much of a sense of responsibility to society. Originally when I entered university I wanted to do research in the social sciences. I hoped to advance the process of the democratization of Chinese society or to make contributions towards political reform. After I went to the Women's Federation my dream of doing research was changed. After I read a massive amount of documents that dealt with real world problems, I felt...Because I still wanted to do research, I chose to...Since sociological studies were restarted in China at the time, I wanted to study marriage and family, to do research on women's issues from the point of view of a sociologist. Thus, this was the starting point. During this process there were several very important opportunities. One was in 1984 when I went to the Chinese Women's Cadre Managerial Institute...

**Wang Zheng: Oh, the Women's Cadre Managerial Institute.**

Gao Xiaoxian: The Chinese Women's Cadre Managerial Institute used to be called the Chinese Women's School for Women Cadres. At that time they were preparing to change to a college for professional training, but they lacked teaching materials. Therefore they selected some people from each province to compile teaching materials. So I had the chance to...Because I was interested in women's research, I took the initiative to apply to participate in this group that would compile teaching materials. In 1984 I stayed in Beijing for a semester, from March to July. This semester marked my transition. In the beginning when I entered the Women's Federation, I was mainly interested in marriage and family issues, maybe because at that time the new Marriage Law<sup>52</sup> had just been promulgated and many new issues regarding marriage emerged. So, these six months of study marked a transition for me. I had the opportunity to look at some of the research on Chinese women from the 1930s, like the works of Shen Junhui.

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<sup>51</sup> The responsibility system was a practice, first adopted in agriculture in 1981 and later extended to other sectors of the economy, by which local managers are held responsible for the profits and losses of the enterprise. This system partially supplanted the egalitarian distribution method, whereby the state assumed all profits and losses.

<sup>52</sup> The new Marriage Law. The first Marriage Law in China came into being in 1950. Since the 1980s it has been revised.

**Wang Zheng: Right.**

Gao Xiaoxian: Shen Qunhui and also Liu Wang Liming.<sup>53</sup> I read all their books.

**Wang Zheng: Right, right. These are part of the Women's Federation's archival materials at the Chinese Women's Cadre Managerial Institute.**

Gao Xiaoxian: We had to make a compilation of teaching materials for college level training; there was nothing already in existence. So we got together all of the historical materials and looked at them. This included Luo Qiong,<sup>54</sup> things she wrote from the 1930s and 1940s, and in the 1950s.

**Wang Zheng: Did you also look at works written by Liu Wang Liming?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, we also looked at Liu Wang Liming. After reading these materials I felt that the 1980s Chinese women's research did not surpass that of the 1930s. At the time I also read Bebel's *Women and Socialism*.<sup>55</sup>

**Wang Zheng: It was also available to you?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, we read a lot of sources. The result of my brief study of the Chinese women's research from the first half of the twentieth century was that it stimulated my interest in women's research. I began thinking: Why after so many years of the women's liberation movement...before we came to read these materials, generally speaking we used to adopt a simplistic Marxist view on women and thought that the inequality between men and women was a kind of class issue, right?

**Wang Zheng: Right.**

Gao Xiaoxian: We learned it from Engel's *Origin*.<sup>56</sup> Then we believed that the cause of inequality was that housework was not socialized because production had not reached a high level. This was how we theorized this issue. When the 1980s arrived, these theories were all insufficient to explain the complex issues that we faced at that time. It

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<sup>53</sup> Liu Wang Liming (1896-1970) returned to China to participate in women's liberation movements after she graduated from the Northwestern University in the United States. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, she was elected as a committee member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and one of the early leaders at the All China Women's Federation.

<sup>54</sup> Luo Qiong (1911- ) became a leader in the Chinese women's movement in the 1930s. After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, she was elected to the People's Political Consultative Conference and she was a leader at the All China Women's Federation. She has written many important works on the Chinese women's movement and women's issues.

<sup>55</sup> August Bebel (1840-1913) was a German Socialist leader. At a congress at Eisenach (1869) he was instrumental in founding the German Social Democratic party, which he later represented in the Reichstag and which he led for many years. Among his writings is *Women and Socialism* (1883, tr. 1910), which was highly influential among German workers.

<sup>56</sup> Gao Xiaoxian is referring to Friedrich Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884).

stimulated my interest to again think about these issues. This was how I came to have an interest in researching women's issues.

**Wang Zheng: Then what did you do after you studied in 1984?**

Gao Xiaoxian: After I came back from my studies in 1984... it was interesting. Those who are familiar with the development of China during the reform period, during these historical twenty years, know that around 1984 the reforms in the Chinese economy began to expand from the rural areas to the cities. Along with the start of reforms in urban areas, new issues concerning women appeared. The enterprises that were recruiting workers did not want women. Female college graduates could not find jobs. In this kind of social environment, the All China Women's Federation also started to consider women's research. In December 1984 the All-China Women's Federation held the first...

**Wang Zheng: Theory...**

Gao Xiaoxian: Theory seminar. The director of my office participated in that seminar. After she came back, she gave me the complete set of articles. I was extremely happy because the Women's Federation was beginning to pay attention to these issues. I discussed with my boss whether Shaanxi Province could also hold this kind of seminar. At that time the Women's Federation was undergoing organizational reform and the All-China Women's Federation had established a research institute. As a result various provincial Women's Federations followed suit. In January 1985 the provincial Women's Federation also implemented organizational reform and established a research unit. I was then appointed to be the assistant director of the research unit.

**Wang: Oh, who was the director?**

Gao Xiaoxian: The director was rather old. She probably thought... First of all I was interested in researching women's issues. I probably never told you this. Prior to this... I still wanted to carry out research even after I went to the Women's Federation. So I used the opportunities during my trips to the countryside to do some investigations and to write something. Therefore in 1984 I attended the first session of the seminar on family issues that the journal *Family*<sup>57</sup> convened. They saw that I was interested in this research and had also already published an article. So when they established the research unit, I then became the assistant director for the unit.

**Wang Zheng: This was your first official title, right?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, my first official title. After I assumed this position the first matter that I did was to talk with my boss about whether or not we could convene a women's theory...

**Wang Zheng: Seminar.**

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<sup>57</sup> Gao Xiaoxian is referring to *Marriage and Family*, a journal published by the Chinese Research Association for Marriage and Family and supervised by the All China Women's Federation.

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, a seminar – “Reform and Women Seminar.” I also wanted to establish a women’s theory research group. After the Cultural Revolution the Chinese social sciences wanted to correct past mistakes and foster prosperity in research. At that time I guess that you were also in China?

**Wang Zheng: Yes, yes.**

Gao Xiaoxian: New disciplines established all kinds of academic associations. In the 1980s when we entered the Women’s Federation, cadres were relatively old; most cadres there were senior in age. There were very few young people. The knowledge structure was relatively homogenous. Also, there were very few people who had gone to college. Therefore women’s research could not be established with only the personnel from the provincial Women’s Federation cadres. We had to look outside. So we wanted to create such an association. My boss initially agreed. We still had not started officially to make arrangements or call for research papers when I noticed that Nankai University<sup>58</sup> would offer a methodology training class in the field of sociology. I wanted to go. After all, my training was in history and studying sociology on my own would not have been the best way for me to learn. It was better for me to have some training in this field. So I went to talk to our leading official. She was very smart. Also her own daughter wanted to participate in a similar training program in literature, but her boss would not let her go. Her daughter was very upset. Maybe because of this experience, my boss probably felt that a leading official had to be open-minded and supportive. So she agreed to let me go.

For six months I took the training at Nankai University. It was very good. I came to know many good scholars from overseas, including sociologists. At that time they lectured about theories of sociology. There was one whose name was Cai...Cai Wenhui,<sup>59</sup> a Chinese-American; she went from Taiwan to study sociology in the U.S. There was another who taught research methodology whose name was Lin Nan.<sup>60</sup> He was also a Chinese-American. Scholars like Fei Xiaotong<sup>61</sup> all came to give lectures in our class.

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<sup>58</sup> Nankai University was founded in 1919 by famous patriotic educators. It is in the city of Tianjin, one of the biggest cities in China. The University has produced batches of prominent talents such as late Premier Zhou Enlai. In 2000 the State Ministry of Education signed an agreement with Tianjin Municipal Government to jointly establish and develop Nankai University. Since then, Nankai University has been listed among universities that are of great importance for developing in the 21st century.

<sup>59</sup> Cai Wenhui is a Taiwanese sociologist.

<sup>60</sup> Lin Nan is a well-respected sociologist, who currently teaches at Duke University. He also held the position of the director of Asian/Pacific Studies Institute at Duke. At the time, he taught sociology at the State University of New York (Albany).

<sup>61</sup> Fei Xiaotong (1910-2005) was a well-recognized scholar in anthropology in China. He was an academic who wrote on topics including Chinese peasant life, countryside societies, rural economies, countryside construction and ethnic minorities. After studying at Yanjing and Qinghua Universities in the early 1930s, Fei traveled to England where he studied with Bronislaw Malinowski and wrote the book *Peasant Life in China*. This book brought him a doctorate from London University, and he was elected a fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute. He returned to China in 1939 and became a professor at several universities. He was the Honorary Chairman of the 8th Central Committee of China Democratic League, Honorary President of the Chinese Overseas Friendship. His lifelong intellectual endeavors won him international acclaim, including the Malinowski Prize from the International Applied Anthropology Association, the Huxley Memorial Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute in London in 1981, the

**Wang Zheng: Oh, really? This was in 1985?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, 1985.

**Wang Zheng: And you took this training for half a year?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, half a year. A very good study in methodology. Soon after I returned to my work, I began to make preparations for the research association. During this time, I came to know Li Xiaojiang.<sup>62</sup> In 1984 I already read Li Xiaojiang's article in *Wei Ding Gao*.<sup>63</sup>

**Wang Zheng: Where was it published?**

Gao Xiaoxian: *Wei Ding Gao*.

**Wang Zheng: Oh, *Wei Ding Gao* is a publication?**

Gao Xiaoxian: *Wei Ding Gao* is an internal publication with restricted circulation. In the 1980s the people who paid attention to the social sciences liked this publication. The ideas in this publication were slightly ahead of their time. Some things that were not considered suitable to be openly published were first seen here. Li Xiaojiang's article published there was the best-written one that I had seen in the area of women's research.

**Wang Zheng: What was the topic of the article?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Now I have forgotten. I think the article was regarding Marxism...

**Wang Zheng: Was it about Marxist women's liberation theory?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Oh, right. I think it was. In the 80s she published her earliest two articles. One was published in *Marxist Research*<sup>64</sup> and the other was published in *Wei Ding Gao*. At the time I went to the Chinese Women's Institute....

**Wang Zheng: The Women's Cadre Managerial Institute.**

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Asian Cultural Prize from Japan in 1993, and the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 1994.

<sup>62</sup> Li Xiaojiang was one of the first scholars in the 1980s who started rethinking women's issues and feminist theorizing. As one of the founders of the discipline of Chinese (mainland) Women's Studies, since the 1980s, Li Xiaojiang has been carrying out the pioneering work in the wide field of Women's Studies. Through her efforts, the first series of western feminism articles and rethinking works on Marxism about women's liberation were published. She has been engaged in institutionalizing Women's Studies in academia and establishing women's NGOs in China, and has made outstanding achievements in education, academics, and women's development.

<sup>63</sup> *Wei Ding Gao*, literally meaning "rough draft," was a journal in the 1980s where important intellectual debates had been published since the beginning of the reform era.

<sup>64</sup> *Marxist Research* is an important academic journal that presents scholarship on Marxism. It is published by the Institute of Research on Marxism, a branch of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Gao Xiaoxian: When I went there to study, I brought that issue of *Wei Ding Gao*. At that time Luo Jing did not agree with Li Xiaojiang's article. But when I came back and was making arrangements for our seminar I wanted to ask Li Xiaojiang to participate, so I wrote a letter to her. In this letter I talked highly about her article and told her that we wanted to hold such a seminar in Shaanxi and invited her to participate. Then...Because of my study at Nankai University, the seminar was postponed; I did not start preparing for it right away. To my surprise, she invited me to attend her summer seminar in 1985. I went to that seminar as soon as I returned from Nankai University. At that seminar I met Du Fangqin<sup>65</sup> and a group of people from Shanghai...

**Wang Zheng: This was in 1985, right?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, July 1985. At that seminar I met a group of people who were all really enthusiastic about research on Chinese women. Everyone was really excited and we talked about our ideas. Then after I returned from this seminar, in 1986, our own "Reform and Women's Issues Seminar" was held.

**Wang Zheng: Did people from the whole country come to participate in this seminar?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, from the whole country. At that time this seminar was one of the most influential conferences throughout the country in the 80s. Because of this seminar a lot of people went through a transition. For example the inspiration for Tan Shen's<sup>66</sup> feminist thought started from there. During the time of this seminar, she was staying with Li Xiaojiang.

**Wang Zheng: This was in 1986?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, 1986.

**Wang Zheng: What month was this?**

Gao Xiaoxian: June, I remember it was June 8. On June 8, the seminar was held.

**Wang Zheng: The seminar was called the "Reform and Women Seminar"?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, the "Reform and Women Seminar." Wang Xingjuan<sup>67</sup> went and so did Liu Dalin.<sup>68</sup> Liu Ying,<sup>69</sup> a sociologist, also went. Liang Jun<sup>70</sup> was also there.

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<sup>65</sup> Du Fangqin is a prominent gender historian and feminist scholar in China. Currently she teaches at the Tianjin Normal University of China, where she holds the position of the director of the Women's Studies Center.

<sup>66</sup> Tan Shen is a sociologist whose research interests are focused on women.

<sup>67</sup> Wang Xingjuan is a prominent activist who created a women's anti-domestic violence hotline and has organized many activities to promote gender equality in China.

<sup>68</sup> Liu Dalin is a retired professor from Shanghai University. He pioneered the field of sexology in China. He also opened China's first sex museum.

**Wang Zheng: Altogether how many people attended?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Altogether there were more than sixty people.

**Wang Zheng: More than sixty people. How did you send out invitations?**

Gao Xiaoxian: I put out a widespread call for papers inside the province. Those from outside of the province heard about it and asked to come. Within the province, we called for papers. If a paper was selected, then we invited the author to come. Also we specially invited several people. For example we invited Li Xiaojiang, Liu Dalin, and Deng Weizhi.<sup>71</sup> We also invited Liu Ying – altogether there were four of them. We invited them because we felt that Shaanxi's research was not very strong. We just came to know each other. The seminar had two keynote speeches in the morning. They each lectured for a half an hour. Then their paper was read out and there was a small group discussion in order to.... At the time I did not know that was called keynote speeches; I just hoped that these would raise the level of our seminar. But the effect was surprisingly good. There are a couple of reasons for our success. Li Xiaojiang lectured first; not only was there good feedback from researchers, but even our newly appointed Women's Federation chairwoman thought it was very good. Our new chairwoman came from the legal field; she did not have much experience in the Women's Federation. Suddenly she felt enlightened and knew how she should start her work here and what she should work on. This seminar impacted the Women's Federation. Oh, Tong Xin<sup>72</sup> came, too.

**Wang Zheng: Tong Xin came, too?**

Gao Xiaoxian: She came as a student in sociology. There were also some people from other Women's Federations, like Hebei, Jilin, and Shanghai.<sup>73</sup> From Huangsha of Shanghai, the Shanghai Association of Research on Women – their secretary general came as well. They talked about how they would organize their conferences better when they returned. In addition the All-China Women's Federation also had representatives there. This was really a good seminar, very good; it felt like a mobilization meeting.

During that seminar we established a research association called the “Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family.” Why did we choose this name? Because in 1982 the All-China Women's Federation already had a Chinese Research Association for Marriage and Family; it also had groups on the provincial level. In addition the All-China Women's Federation was in the process of establishing a research institution for women's

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<sup>69</sup> Liu Ying is a prominent sociologist in China, who has done a lot of research on women. She used to hold the positions of senior researcher and director of the research program on family at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

<sup>70</sup> Liang Jun worked at the Women's Federation's Women's Cadre School before she retired. She has been actively engaged in research on women and activism.

<sup>71</sup> Deng Weizhi is a prominent sociologist currently teaching at Shanghai University. He is also a committee member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

<sup>72</sup> Tong Xin currently teaches sociology at Peking University.

<sup>73</sup> Hebei province is in north China, near Beijing. Jilin is in the northeast.

theories. As you may well know, in 1984 when we gathered in Beijing to compile teaching materials, there were a lot of debates about what term we should use to call the field. We could use *Funu xue*, or *Funu lilun*, or *Funu yanjiu*, to refer to Women's Studies.<sup>74</sup> The All China Women's Federation used *Funu lilun*. So we thought we could have a name that would correspond with the two research units of the All China Women's Federation. It was always the same group of people that were enthusiastic about this kind of work.

**Wang Zheng: Which two units are you referring to?**

Gao Xiaoxian: The first is the Chinese Research Association for Marriage and Family. The other one is what the All China Women's Federation was preparing to establish, a research institute for theories on women. In December of 1986...no, in October of 1986 the All-China Women's Federation held for the second time a seminar on theories. They had a preparatory group to make arrangements for the research institute. At that time I was a member of this preparatory group. I remember Zhu Chuzhu was there and there was also a man, a very active male member – I can't remember his name now. Three of us were from the outside. There were also some officials from the All China Women's Federation. So we created this preparatory group for the purpose of establishing this research institute. But it took many years since 1986 for them to carry out the project. It was actually established after Liu Bohong<sup>75</sup> and some others took over. The preparatory group has not carried out much work since 1989.

Well, this was why we had such a long name for our association. At that time the research association... when it was established, we realized that in the mid 80s there was a great deal of issues concerning women; a lot of real life problems had emerged. At the time there was a lot of interest among us as to how to study these issues, how to find the causes so that counter-measures could be made and we could influence government decision-making. We hoped that through policy intervention we could solve these problems. For example I remember in the 80s I investigated the emigration of women from Shaanxi province; it was actually research on the kidnapping and selling of women. We also studied the conditions of working women's dual roles and burdens, and the impacts of the implementation of the responsibility system on rural women. We did this kind of research in the 80s. But the problem we encountered at that time was...Along with the many internal organizational reforms in the government, the Women's Federation as a mass organization became independent; before then its offices and budget management were within the provincial government. Thus it had difficulties trying to raise its own funds. Around 1986 the Shaanxi Province Women's Federation had established several organizations like us. There was the Association of Women Intellectuals, Association of Women Journalists, the Research Association for Family and Education, and us. Around the year 1986 our provincial Women's Federation established four organizations.

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<sup>74</sup> *Funu xue* literally means “the study of women;” *Funu lilun* means “theories about women;” and *Funu yanjiu* means “research on women.”

<sup>75</sup> Liu Bohong is a researcher at the All China Women's Federation and former director of the Research Institute of Women's Studies at the ACWF. She was also interviewed for the Global Feminisms Project.

**Wang Zheng: The provincial Women’s Federation organized all of these groups?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, different departments of the provincial Women’s Federation were involved in organizing these groups. Because the provincial Women’s Federation’s funds were limited, in 1987 there was a stipulation that money from the provincial Women’s Federation could not be used for these affiliated organizations. These groups had to be self-funded. At that time our funds were extremely limited; there was no funding for research projects. We held training classes and lectures in order to raise a little money for our activities. The research association went through this process from 1986 to around 1993. Because we did not have any money, our self-positioning was to become a platform where members could find some opportunities for exchange. In 1989 we held a women’s salon, in March, I think. We had two meetings. The themes were... at the time the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the May Fourth movement<sup>76</sup> was approaching, so one theme was “Chinese Women’s Liberation and the May Fourth Movement.” We wanted to discuss the relationship between the May Fourth movement and Chinese women’s liberation. Then the second topic of discussion was “Sex and Commodity Culture.” We had this topic because we felt the impacts of commoditization.

**Wang Zheng: Oh, “Sex and Commodity Culture.”**

Gao Xiaoxian: Right. Because at that time commoditization caused new...take for example what happened in Hainan<sup>77</sup> at the time. In order to create an environment for reform and opening, they wanted to sacrifice a generation of women. We wanted to carry on a discussion of this issue and to put forth some of our own views. But... we met once in March and once in April, and then...

**Wang Zheng: June 4<sup>th</sup>.**

Gao Xiaoxian: June 4<sup>th</sup>. I was called “a liberal” because of this salon.

**Wang Zheng: Oh, this salon became a problem for you.**

Gao Xiaoxian: It was an example of liberalization. Therefore in 1989 and 1990 I underwent political examination.

**Wang Zheng: Within the Women’s Federation system?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Right. An investigation team came from outside of the province.

**Wang Zheng: Did they come especially because of you?**

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<sup>76</sup> The May Fourth Movement was an anti-imperialist, cultural and political movement. Growing from a student demonstration that took place on May 4, 1919, the movement began a patriotic outburst of new urban intellectuals against imperialism and traditional social and cultural forces.

<sup>77</sup> Hainan is an island province in southern China.

Gao Xiaoxian: There were two or three of us. I was one of them. Later this... in the beginning my career as an official at the Women's Federation looked pretty good. (Laughs.) In 1986 our seminar was very successful. Something that was a side effect of this was that my boss suddenly recognized my administrative abilities. After I came back, in October 1986 I was called to the office to be the director.

**Wang Zheng: So you worked as the director of the provincial Women's Federation office?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, yes.

**Wang Zheng: At the same time you also held the position of research director?**

Gao Xiaoxian: No, not at the same time. She had hoped that I would go to work in the office but I said I did not want to do this. I liked doing research. The conditions that she gave me were very generous. I could bring my research to the office; I could bring work related to the research association to the office; and I could even bring my reference materials to the office.

**Wang Zheng: Really?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, the conditions were good, because they wanted me to work there. Possibly this was because she thought I could write well and because the office director was supposed to produce a lot of documents. Eventually I was not good at it. I was not good at... This director should know how to coordinate. But I was not good at coordinating. So I was not a good office director. In 1989 when organizational reforms took place, I returned to the research unit again. At that time I was still considered one of the few rather competent young cadres at the provincial Women's Federation. I could soon enter into the reserves of the provincial party committee organization department. But the 1989 political examinations ended my official political career. Not only did my political career end; as for our research association, we were not allowed to change sessions or carry out any activities.

**Wang Zheng: So the research association could not carry out any activities?**

Gao Xiaoxian. No. Therefore after 1989 the research association was rather quiet; we only did a few activities.

**Wang Zheng: But at that time you were still the assistant director of the research unit?**

Gao Xiaoxian: In 1989 I returned to the unit as the research director.

**Wang Zheng: Director.**

Gao Xiaoxian: We were not allowed to proceed with the research association. What did we do during that period? I gathered “Forty Years of Statistics of Chinese Women.” This information was from 1949 to 1989 and was accomplished with several young people.

**Wang Zheng: Were these national statistics?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, national statistics. In name this project was jointly conducted with the All-China Women’s Federation research institute, with Tao Chunfang.<sup>78</sup> But actually I led our own people and accomplished the work. It made up for the previous lack of work in this area. Afterwards we made a picture album, “Forty Years of Shaanxi Women.” In this way I should say that I returned to the field of history briefly and wrote something. This should be regarded as the first stage of my research.

My interest in women’s research was actually based on two points. One was a realistic need for this type of research. Reality continually put forth various issues and problems. Dealing with these kinds of issues, our generation had a sense of social responsibility. Moreover, this interest in women’s issues had something to do with my experiences when I was growing up. I am our family’s eldest daughter; my father is the only son in his family and my mother is the only daughter in hers. Although at home I was often spoiled, my mother had to work, so when I was three years old my parents sent me to their hometown so that my paternal grandmother could take care of me. My paternal grandmother also really loved and doted on me. However, because this was the Guanzhong countryside,<sup>79</sup> she always would say to others “My son does not have any children.” At that time, I was almost old enough to attend elementary school. Hearing my grandmother say this kind of thing would make me feel a bit strange. In my little mind, I was wondering: Why were girls not considered children? In our family there was not only me; I also had two younger sisters. So, altogether there were three daughters.

**Wang Zheng: Oh, three daughters.**

Gao Xiaoxian: She always said, “My son does not have any children.” Therefore since I was a kid, I began to... Well, I became quite sensitive to gender. But I also grew up with a strong desire to excel. That is to say that I felt that I needed to out-perform boys; I wanted to be stronger than boys. I didn’t like it that my grandmother was saying that kind of thing as if girls were not children. From elementary school through university, I did rather well in school; I always did well. When I was ready to graduate from middle school and attend high school, I had a small problem because of my father’s history.<sup>80</sup> I could not attend a key middle school<sup>81</sup> and instead went to the provincial girls’ high school because my test grades were always very good—my middle school was a key

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<sup>78</sup> Tao Chunfang, a sociologist, is the current director of the Research Institute at the All China Women’s Federation. She used to be the vice president of the Shanghai Marriage and Family Research Union.

<sup>79</sup> Guanzhong is a region within the Shaanxi province, where the province’s industries and agricultural sector are concentrated.

<sup>80</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, a person’s family members and family background often affected his or her educational and professional opportunities.

<sup>81</sup> A key middle school is designated by the educational department of the local government for its outstanding teaching and ability to send its graduates to prestigious universities.

school, the Xi'an Middle School; it was very good. From a co-ed to a girls' school – I did not like it. I think girls' schools at the time were rather tedious; education was very rigid. Did you know that during the Cultural Revolution—during the later period of the Cultural Revolution I was working on educational reform? I chose an interesting topic—researching the history of girls' schools and exploring how in the future we could change the learning environment at girls' schools.

**Wang Zheng: The model for teaching.**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes. Therefore I... perhaps subconsciously my brain paid attention to women's issues. So after I came to the Women's Federation, I unconsciously paid special attention to social issues and wanted to do something about the situation.

**Wang Zheng: Then, what university did you graduate from?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Northwest University.<sup>82</sup>

**Wang Zheng: You graduated from Northwest University's history department.**

Gao Xiaoxian: Right.

**Wang Zheng: Then you were assigned to the Women's Federation. Did you object to this assignment in your mind?**

Gao Xiaoxian: At that time I did not want to go to the Women's Federation. So why did I go to the Women's Federation? This is an interesting story. Initially another girl from our class was assigned to the Women's Federation. Their recruitment official was very experienced. As soon as she met this girl, she said they did not want her; she asked if there was a female student in the class who was already married. I was the only female in our class who was already married. This person was my father's old colleague and her younger sister and I went to the same high school. I was a good student in my high school, and had a little bit of fame. She probably had heard of me. So as soon as she saw me, she wanted me to come there. My teacher had a talk with me. I was told that if I didn't go to the Women's Federation, we would lose a quota in Xi'an;<sup>83</sup> one of my classmates had to be assigned to somewhere outside of Xi'an. So I should help keep the quota. She also said that I could work on the history of the women's movement. The Women's Federation had an office that worked on the history of the women's movement. So I said, since I would not be able to teach at a university, going to work on the history of the women's movement was also a very good opportunity.

**Wang Zheng: But you really wanted to be assigned to a university?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Right. So I thought working on the history of the women's movement at the Women's Federation was good since I could not enter a university. Just after I arrived

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<sup>82</sup> Northwest University is in Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi province.

<sup>83</sup> Colleges in big cities received a certain quota for assigning its graduates to jobs in these cities.

and reported to the Women's Federation, they held a big commendation meeting. At the time I told them that I needed to go to Xianyang,<sup>84</sup> because my original work unit was in Xianyang but the paperwork had not gone through. So my boss asked me to do an interview of someone who had an exemplary achievement during my trip to Xianyang. I agreed; I had to go there anyway. When I returned from my trip and wrote up the material for them, they saw that my writings were very good. They insisted that I stay in the office instead of going to the research unit. They wanted me to remain in the main office. So there was this episode. Actually this turned out very good. I came to know a lot of things that were going on in society. For example, today we would read about women fleeing from marriage and tomorrow we would have to deal with a group of women who collectively committed suicide. There was also the trafficking of women. So I got to see many of the problems that you would not be able to see in the media.

**Wang Zheng: You learned about these things through your research work?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Through investigations and through internal governmental news dispatches. I was able to look at all of the All-China Women's Federation internal news dispatches. These had a great impact on me and made me feel... Well, personally, I did not have much exceptional experiences of men and women's inequality, but I did have two: The first was the attitude of my paternal grandmother since I was very young. The second was when I was on the job market. I got married in the countryside. When recruitments started, in Qianxian County, I was considered exceptional in our study of Mao Zedong's works; I was well known in the county and the province. At the same time I was very good at sports. I was the captain of the county women's basketball team. In order to keep talented athletes in the county they assigned me to work at a food supplier company in the county. Prior to the time when massive recruitments took place, I had already been there for six months. I usually participated in practices and games. I had a little bit of fame in the county. When the recruitment began, I did not want to work at the food supplier company anymore. I wanted to leave. But when the county office for sent-down youth<sup>85</sup> recommended me to the Weihe power plant, they did not want me because they learned that I was married. They very firmly rejected me. Since I was fairly popular in the county, the county office told them "If you all do not want Gao Xiaoxian, then you will lose the quota for thirty new workers." The result was that they continued to reject the recommendation for more than twenty days.

**Wang Zheng: Because of this?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, because of just me, they struggled against the county office for twenty days. In the end, because the time to recruit workers was almost over, they were afraid that their recruitment would...

**Wang Zheng: That they would not be able to recruit?**

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<sup>84</sup> Xianyang is a major city in the Shaanxi province.

<sup>85</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, a lot of educated young people were sent down to cities to rural areas to work and live with peasants. They are called "sent-down youths."

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, that they would waste their quota. So they eventually accepted me. Look how unreasonable these people were! Then they went to the Qianxian County to pick up the new workers.

**Wang Zheng: From the countryside?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, they only let me return to Xi'an. They let me go by myself there to report to the job.

**Wang Zheng: Just because you were a married woman?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Because I was married they feared I would be a bad influence in my new job. Oh my gosh! In my life, I had never come across such an awkward matter. I always strove to excel. I was always the students' leader, even when I was playing basketball. My self-respect was really injured. It was only because I was married, but there were also some men who also were already married. They did not have any problems. In these two instances I really felt gender discrimination. But I was still not very struck by this kind of phenomenon. After I went to the Women's Federation and saw those things, only then did I really realize that China was still a country where men and women's equality had not been realized. Only then did I feel that I had a responsibility and a duty to promote men and women's equality. But at that time I had not come to know many western theoretical works. In college I studied history and was interested in the history of the international labor movement. At the time my graduation thesis was about – you might find this funny – I wrote about the thoughts of Bernstein and Kant.<sup>86</sup>

**Wang Zheng: Oh, a philosophical topic.**

Gao Xiaoxian: Because I thought paying attention to... At the time I thought about why we live in this world. I felt... A lot of Chinese liked talking about Hegel. I felt sometimes people would use all means to achieve their purposes. At that time I was somewhat interested in Kant. So this experience gave me some training in the history of philosophy. When I was doing research on women in the early 80s, I was still using Marxist frameworks. I liked the "two- production" theory<sup>87</sup> and was also interested in Marx's theory on "alienation."<sup>88</sup> Therefore I used Engels' "two kinds of production" theory to study the Chinese...

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<sup>86</sup> Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932): German Social Democratic Party leader and main instigator of the "revisionist" version of Marxism. He set out his views in a series of articles for Kautsky's *Die Neue Zeite* in 1896 and 1898 which later emerged into his 1899 treatise. Bernstein denied the inevitability of "class conflict," the theory of increasing concentration of capital and the sudden collapse of capitalism. As a result, he argued that Marxist socialists should pursue a more practical, piecemeal movement towards a socialist state within a parliamentary democratic context. Bernstein stressed the "idealist" side of the Hegelian dialectic which he felt Marx had abandoned too quickly. Later on, imbued with neo-Kantian thinking, he stressed the ethical side of socialism more and more. He was not a fan of the labor theory of value or the abstract nature of Marxian economics. (Source: History of Economic Thought website)

<sup>87</sup> Engels in his work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, points out that there are two kinds of production in human society: the production of material resources and the production of human beings themselves.

<sup>88</sup> Marx developed this concept in his analysis of labor and capitalist society, in *Economic and*

**Wang Zheng: Gender inequality in China?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes. The reason why men and women are not equal was understood as the society's failure to recognize the production of human beings. So I was among the first in China who suggested Reproductive Funds.<sup>89</sup> This should be regarded as the first stage of my work. Then I think, as for me...

**Wang Zheng: When did you undergo this transition?**

Gao Xiaoxian: As for my transition...If you could say that I had a little bit of theoretical breakthrough during that period of time, that was because... In 1986... I don't remember her name...she was at the Jiaotong University.<sup>90</sup> Her name was...

**Wang Zheng: Zhu Chuzhu?<sup>91</sup>**

Gao Xiaoxian: Zhu Chuzhu held a training class in the Jiaotong University. She invited that American – what was her name?... I visited her once. You know her – that population scholar.

**Wang Zheng: Oh. Susan Greenhalgh, wasn't it?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes that was her.

**Wang Zheng: Oh, so you met her in 1986?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, Zhu Chuzhu also participated in the "Seminar on Reform and Women." Our seminar. She invited that...

**Wang Zheng: Susan?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Susan held a "Women and Development" seminar here. This was inspirational in my theoretical development. Then...It helped us rethink "what is 'women's status'?" We have to differentiate between women's conditions and women's status. Because if we don't make this differentiation, we feel that in reforms... At that time I came across a lot of Western scholars who asked me: "Has Chinese women's status decreased?" I questioned why they asked this question and whether it was a good way to frame the question. They also think that we are not friendly or have political ambitions. When we differentiate these two concepts, the effects are much better. We can

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*Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844.* The main aspect of alienation is the separation of work or labor from the worker, and separation of the products of labor from the worker.

<sup>89</sup> The establishment of Reproductive Funds was the result of Chinese feminist operations. Local governments would keep a certain percent of tax revenue as "reproductive funds" for women to pay for their pre-birth checkups, maternal leaves, delivery, and so on. Local governments manage it.

<sup>90</sup> Jiaotong University is a university in Xi'an.

<sup>91</sup> Zhu Chuzhu is an economist teaching at the Xi'an Jiaotong University. She has done research on population and labor and women's reproductive health and culture.

use it to influence policies concerning women, as a new framework. For example, we started to look at the control of resources. Right? We have had a different perspective. But at the time, we only... Well, it was only a broadening of a way of thinking at the time. We also began to know, for example, what impacts the socialist system in the former Soviet Union had on women; it was a double-edged sword. She talked about frameworks. First she introduced what is “development.” Then she introduced the Dependence Theory<sup>92</sup> and the World System Theory.<sup>93</sup> Then she spoke about the development of capitalism and women, and socialism and women. This really broadened my way of thinking. These were some of the Western ideas that I came into contact with in the 80s. In fact, the transition in my research was related to that conference in Tianjin in 1993.

The second stage of my transition was.... Actually, it was at this conference that I came to know the concept of gender the first time, which is a really great analytical tool. During that same time I met Tan Jingchang.<sup>94</sup> I was right in the process of drafting the Principles on how to implement Women’s Law<sup>95</sup> in Shaanxi province. I thought this was a good opportunity. We should promote this kind of legislation. Now we have an opportunity to promote a law. How could we do the job better? But I did not have a legal background, so I consulted her. She said that I could hold a training class, or do a project. Only then did I come to know what exactly it means when you say “project.” She also told me that I could apply to the Ford Foundation. So I said that would be good. Later I did apply to the Ford Foundation.

**Wang Zheng: Prior to this time you had never applied for external international funding? You had gotten all of your funding for your activities from the Women’s Federation?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, all of the funding came from the Women’s Federation. In 1992 I applied for a small project. That was...

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<sup>92</sup> Dependency theory is the body of social science theories by various intellectuals, both from the Third World and the First World, that create a worldview which suggests that the wealthy nations of the world need a peripheral group of poorer states in order to remain wealthy. Dependency theory states that the poverty of the countries in the periphery is not because they are not integrated into the world system, or not ‘fully’ integrated as is often argued by free market economists, but because of *how* they are integrated into the system.

<sup>93</sup> A theory proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein. Wallerstein began as an expert of post-colonial African affairs, which his publications were almost exclusively devoted to until the early 1970s, when he began to distinguish himself as a historian and theorist of the global capitalist economy on a macroscopic level. His most important work, *The Modern World-System*, appeared in three volumes in 70s and 80s. Wallerstein rejected the notion of a “Third World,” claiming there was only one world connected by a complex network of economic exchange relationships – i.e., a “world-economy” or “world-system,” in which the dichotomy of capital and labor and the endless accumulation of capital by competing agents (historically including, but not limited to nation-states) account for frictions. This approach is known as the World Systems Theory.

<sup>94</sup> Tan Jingchang, whose English name is Sharon K. Hom, is a legal scholar teaching at New York City University.

<sup>95</sup> Gao Xiaoxian is referring to the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women.

**Wang Zheng: a reproductive health project?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, a reproductive health project. This was a smaller project that I applied for, which fell under the All-China Women's Federation big project. This project was rather small – I only received ten thousand yuan to carry it out. However, for me this was a very good training. During that project I came to know... This was a qualitative research. My advisor had trained me in the qualitative research method, and also feminist research approach.

**Wang Zheng: Oh, who trained you?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Hu Youhui from Taiwan trained me in feminist research methodology. Zhu Mingruo<sup>96</sup> from Australia trained me in qualitative methods.

**Wang Zheng: So when you carried out that project in 1992 they offered trainings?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Right.

**Wang Zheng: This was training for the project personnel?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, they wanted to train the project personnel. The Women's Federation called for applications; we had to compete. Because I have a background in the social sciences and I received training in Nankai, I stood out among applicants within the Women's Federation system.

**Wang Zheng: So you were selected.**

Gao Xiaoxian: Not only was I selected; moreover, I really impressed Zhu Mingruo. Later in 1994 – no, it was 1993 – when Bai Mei<sup>97</sup> asked her to train some people for the Women's Federation and supported three officials to study abroad, Zhu Mingruo insisted that I go, because she thought I was...

**Wang Zheng: At that time Zhu Mingruo was invited by the Ford Foundation? The Ford Foundation invited her?**

Gao Xiaoxian: The Ford Foundation assigned her as an advisor for us. Then they sent us out. The people in the Women's Federation system did not know foreign languages. So because she was a person of Chinese descent... Therefore foreign language... language would not become an issue... She invited us to go to Griffith...

**Wang Zheng: In Australia?**

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<sup>96</sup> Zhu Ruoming (Cordia Chu) is the director of Center for Environment and Population Health at Griffith University of Australia. She is also a WHO consultant. She is an expert in reproductive health, health policy, population, environmental health, etc.

<sup>97</sup> Bai Mei (Mary Ann Burris) was the project officer for the Ford Foundation in China at the time. She actively supported the development of Women's Studies and women-related works in China.

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, Australia. I stayed at Griffith University for six months. That half of a year was also very good. We delved deeper and deeper into our project and discussed it in great detail. We did numerous revisions and a lot of research very carefully. That was really a good training in the qualitative method of research. It was then that I began to know... Well, while in 1985 at Nankai I had quantitative methods training, now in 1994 in Australia I had qualitative methods training. I think using qualitative methods is more suitable for feminist research. At that time I felt that I could not make a breakthrough if I would only use quantitative methods; I could not rely only on quantitative methods any more. At this point... I was not familiar with the issue of reproductive health. But I saw that we had to learn to use qualitative methods of research in this training and I thought it would open up a new space for my work. So I applied and participated. I was fortunate to come across such a great opportunity.

**Wang Zheng: So this was in 1992 when you first came to know feminist qualitative research methods.**

Gao Xiaoxian: This allowed me to listen attentively to women's voices and take women as the focal point. I started to learn about all of these concepts. We also began to know that researchers must have equal dialogues. We also must be aware of our privileges as researchers...

**Wang Zheng: Powerful position...**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, we began to learn about concepts such as "power relations." In 1993 I attended this class, and I started to carry out a project for the first time.

**Wang Zheng: So after the conference at Tianjin Normal University, you worked together with Tan Jingchang.**

Gao Xiaoxian: She suggested I hold a training class for the drafters of the Legal Principles for Implementing the Women's Law. So we asked Tan Jingchang to invite some people in the country who practice law to help us with the training. Twenty-six provinces and municipalities<sup>98</sup> were involved in drafting these kinds of Legal Principles for their own provinces. But in each province it was the People's Congress and the Women's Federation working on this. They all lacked a background for this kind of work, so I wanted to hold a class for the whole country. At that time I had just come back from Manila; I remember it was in November – I think it was the 20<sup>th</sup> or so.

**Wang Zheng: This was 1993?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, it was November 1993. I came back from Manila. The time schedule was extremely tight. So I persuaded... The Ford Foundation processed their paperwork very quickly. They told us they could not wait for the materials to be mailed; we could

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<sup>98</sup> There are four Municipalities in China. They are large cities directly administered by central government.

first fax the material to them and start the project as soon as the project was approved. However the All-China Women's Federation would not allow us to do this.

**Wang Zheng: So what did you do?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Then, I had a discussion with the Women's Federation leaders. We decided that we could not hold the training for the whole country, but we could hold one for the western part of the country.

**Wang Zheng: Do you mean only Shaanxi Province?**

Gao Xiaoxian: No, the western part of the country – ten provinces in all. The Women's Federation did not allow us, so we held the training under the auspices of the research association. We drew the support of the People's Congress Legislation Committee, because the People's Congress is the legislative body; and moreover, because our president was a member of the People's Congress Legislation Committee.

**Wang Zheng: The Shaanxi Province Women's Federation president was a member?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes. So because of this it was rather easy for us to hold the training.

**Wang Zheng: This was the first activity that you held after June 4<sup>th</sup>?<sup>99</sup>**

Gao Xiaoxian: This activity made me feel that the research association had a much bigger space to act in than did the Women's Federation. This is one of the ideas. I think we could utilize it. In addition, in 1994 I went to Australia and saw many activities that overseas women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were involved in. This allowed me to once again reexamine myself: What is the purpose of doing women's research? The feminist research methodology says that feminism does not purport to be objective. Feminism acknowledges that it has a purpose for research, which is to promote men and women's equality. Right? I think in terms of promoting gender equality in China... during my investigation for drafting our provincial Legal Principles for Implementing the Women's Law, I realized that creating legislature is only one aspect. I saw that in reality even when we had the law, many women still could not depend on the law in order to protect their rights. They need... disadvantaged groups need support, services, and help. I realized that only doing academic studies is not enough. In addition, research funding is a problem as well; this prevents us from organizing large-scale research projects. One advantage of Shaanxi province is that here are many institutions of higher learning. If we could begin to organize these women intellectuals, and use their knowledge to provide services for disadvantaged groups, this would be a very good path for us. This could enhance the bonding among people within the research association and make it more cohesive. So when I came back from Australia in 1994, I turned in my second project proposal to the Ford Foundation. I wanted to establish a women's law research and service center. At that time the Ford Foundation wanted to support projects related to Women's Law in Beijing and they did not have enough money to support us. Afterwards

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<sup>99</sup> This is used to refer to the Tian'anmen incident in 1989.

I stumbled upon an opportunity. I knew of the American Global Fund for Women<sup>100</sup> so I applied there. They agreed and provided me with eight thousand dollars, which eventually funded the women's hotline at the beginning of our project.

**Wang Zheng: So your personnel were the same that participated in the research association?**

Gao Xiaoxian: By that time the research association had already changed a lot. Think about it – ten years had already passed. We started in 1986 and this was already 1996. Moreover after 1989, a lot of the core members from the research association had already gone to the south.

**Wang Zheng: Oh, they left.**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, most of the core members were not there anymore. Very few core members remained and even they were also... So we looked to recruit people publicly in society. We were so surprised that more than two hundred people applied. Then the candidates went through the interview process, which included psychological testing. At that time I was in the United States. In 1996 I was at your...

**Wang Zheng: You were in Santa Cruz.**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, I was in Santa Cruz. The assistant director of the research association was handling this matter. We had so many people who were interested. There was a problem. Operating a women's hotline requires... I remember when I was visiting you, you and others reminded me that a hotline also involves the issue of discursive power. The kind of discourse that you use for hot line counseling is a very important question. Later working there as a director, I discovered this was a very prominent issue. I thought we had to do something about this and began to look for funding again. The Asia Foundation<sup>101</sup> contacted me and said they had some funds for projects on women. So I started another project to train consultants for the hotline so that they would cultivate gender sensitivity. Starting from the hot line... As an NGO this organization started to gradually provide meaningful services. In 1996 there was the hot line; in 1998 the legal help center was established; in 1999 a small gender training group was started; in 2001 the domestic abuse and prevention special counseling line was established. At the same time there was also work on development in the countryside. I had been researching rural women for a long time. At the time some foundations had asked me to work on some rural development projects. I actually felt that in the past I often went to the countryside to do research. But when I finished my investigation and left, I always felt sorry that I was there merely for research purposes. Now this kind of rural development project

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<sup>100</sup> The Global Fund for Women is a grant making foundation supporting women's human rights organizations around the world working to address critical issues such as gaining economic independence, increasing girls' access to education and stopping violence against women.

<sup>101</sup> The Asia Foundation is a non-profit NGO committed to the development of a peaceful, just, prosperous and open Asia-Pacific region. The Foundation supports programs that help improve governance and law, economic development and reform, women's empowerment, and international relations.

would definitely benefit the countryside; of course I was willing to participate. Therefore we began to do rural development projects. This is how our organization developed. We started our first project in 1993 and by 1999 we had established a legal center. We always... We were concentrating on projects that would directly provide services for women. At this time we still did not understand how to operate an NGO. The research association did not change sessions; nor did we have elections. I was pretty much operating the organization myself, as the secretary general. I used my “brand name” to apply for projects. But as the number of projects continued to grow, the distribution of available resources within the organization became less even. For instance the hot line was especially poorly funded; it did not have much funding. Learning a lesson from the hotline, we began to create a legal support center. When I applied for the project, I wanted to make it a two-to-three year project, with at least 200,000 to 300,000 yuan in the budget each year. So this project is well funded. This is the problem caused by the uneven internal allocation of resources at the time. At this time I came upon an opportunity. It was in 1999 when I went to Britain to participate in the Chinese Women Organizing seminar.<sup>102</sup> At that time...

**Wang Zheng: This seminar was held at Oxford University?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Right. We had a main theme for discussion at this seminar: Are the resources for NGOs in Beijing and outside areas in China at the same level? Among large NGOs... Not all women’s organizations were feminist organizations. For example, there were some religious women’s organizations. Right? When we talked about the power relations between these groups, for the first time I came to realize that the types of philosophy, concepts and principles that we use to run an organization are also very important. The critical spirit of feminism and its subversiveness should also be manifested in the construction of a feminist organization. A feminist organization should challenge the hierarchical structure and elitism of masculinist organizational culture. There was another discussion at the seminar, about an interesting phenomenon; it made me reconsider some things. We talked about what had occurred to Henan<sup>103</sup> – in the mid 80s they were very active but in the 90s totally collapsed.

**Wang Zheng: Right. It totally collapsed.**

Gao Xiaoxian: This was not a normal phenomenon. Therefore I wanted us to think about how the organization could bring a group of people together so that we could accomplish things, instead of relying on one person. If this one person failed, the whole organization would fall apart. We need to learn a lesson from this. Therefore, after I came back in 1999, our organization started to work on how to transform our structure so that it would promote more participation, be more democratic, and more sustainable. During this time Xu Wu gave me a suggestion that we should perform an appraisal of the past few years of our project. Then we could again formulate our future strategic plan. So I gave ...At that

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<sup>102</sup> This was a workshop-conference held at Oxford University, joined by both Chinese and Western feminist scholars.

<sup>103</sup> Henan province is in central China.

time the project officer from the Oxfam Hong Kong<sup>104</sup> really had a lot of experience; he also gave me very good suggestions. In 2000 with financial support from the Oxfam Hong Kong, we hired a coordinator, who assisted us in formulating the organization's five-year strategic development plan. This process took about six months, in which we had approximately more than forty meetings. That process was extremely tedious, but it was also extremely helpful.

**Wang Zheng: Who did the Oxfam Hong Kong hire to help you?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Um they invited...who was that?...Zhou Yanzhu.

**Wang Zheng: Where was she from?**

Gao Xiaoxian: She was from Hong Kong. She had a lot of experience with development organizations and non-governmental organizations.

**Wang Zheng: Then she came and worked with each of your departments...**

Gao Xiaoxian: She was a coordinator.

**Wang Zheng: All of your departments participated?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes. The departments worked on their own but also collaborated. At first we had a training session on how to do planning. We discussed the external environment first. Then we discussed the strong and weak points within our organization as well as the opportunities and challenges that we were facing. Then we looked at what these departments should aim to do and could do for the next five years... I really felt that this whole process was very good. This forced everyone to seriously consider what sort of organization the research association should be. What kind of relationship should each small group have with the research association? What type of organizational mechanism should we have? Finally we all came together to determine our strategic goals for the next five years. Five of them were related to the guiding principles and directions for our service. The sixth concerned our organization, that is, "to improve the internal management mechanisms and explore ways to create a women's organization with a participatory, democratic and sustainable model."

This plan for the development of our research association, in retrospect, was actually.... I think this field consists of mainly three circles. At first we completely emphasized Women's Studies. For example, we participated in Du Fangqin's 1993 conference<sup>105</sup> and the 1997 Nanjing conference. Basically whenever there was a conference we always sent people to go. We wanted to be able to bring our own voices, and present our own

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<sup>104</sup> Oxfam Hong Kong is an independent development and relief agency based in Hong Kong.

<sup>105</sup> Du Fangqin is a prominent gender historian and feminist scholar in China. Currently she teaches at the Tianjin Normal University of China, where she holds the position of the director of the Women's Studies Center. Gao Xiaoxian claims that it was at "this conference that I came to know the concept of gender the first time."

research results. So at that stage our focus was mainly in the area of research. From 1996 we started to carry out some projects. Especially after we carried out rural development projects, we entered into the development domain. We were... I think in the development domain and providing services, our organization was different from the majority of organizations – most people in our organization were scholars who had the ability to do research. We carried out our research... In terms of methodology we called our research “practical research;” I learned it from feminist methodologies. Before we do a project we design a theoretical framework. Our projects aim to have some kind of intervention. During the process we continually evaluate our projects and make necessary adjustments. Finally in the end we have to evaluate the achievements of our work. This then further enriches our theory. This is where our Shaanxi research association is different from some pure development organizations. When we engage in countryside development projects we pay special attention to the question of gender and development; there is the issue of how to localize theories. We have made a lot of explorations and we have written a series of articles about this. In this domain we promote the mainstreaming of gender. We have also provided trainings for many organizations and international agencies. We don’t have the statistics... I am not sure... But the other day they roughly counted and found that in the past several years we have given more than two hundred trainings.

**Wang Zheng: Gender trainings?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Gender and development... these kinds of trainings. We have done a lot of facilitation work.

**Wang Zheng: In Shaanxi province?**

Gao Xiaoxian: In Shaanxi province and in other provinces.

**Wang Zheng: Other provinces?**

Gao Xiaoxian: We held trainings with international agencies. We have gone to Lanzhou, Inner Mongolia – actually I just came back from Inner Mongolia. We have been to Sichuan, Hefei, Guangzhou, and Beijing. We have really held a lot of trainings. This work is in the development field.

Within our own organization, we all talk about... Well, very early on within the development domain we discussed the issue of mainstreaming gender. But how would we mainstream it? I think there are a lot of organizations that only pay attention to labels. They only care if your project design pays attention to women; they only require we include this kind of content in the project proposal. But how do we integrate gender in our projects so that during the process of the projects we can truly... we can pay attention to women’s strategic gender interests instead of short-term interests? How do you really achieve “empowerment?” We have to keep exploring in practice. Our own project sites, such as Danfeng and Ningshaan, have created some good models for different organizations to study and observe. So in the development domain in the country, in terms of “gender and development,” our organization can be considered quite successful

and thus well known. This can be seen as our contribution to the field. In the development domain, I think... the issue of power relations is emphasized. That is to say, this field emphasizes participation, emphasizing that all related interest groups should participate in the process of project design. It has trained us, both in terms of approach and concepts. Therefore within our own organization, all of the significant matters are openly discussed; everyone participates through discussions. As soon as we establish how to proceed, everyone works together to implement the plan. We were slightly ahead of the times in our management style of a NGO within China.

When did our domain start to move from development circles to non-governmental organization circles? This was in 2002 or 2003. At first we only paid attention to internally constructing our organization. We only hoped this organization could continue to operate successfully. In 2003 with the onslaught of SARS<sup>106</sup> ... April 20 was probably the turning point of the crisis. The Health Ministry publicly talked about the pandemic. At the time we were doing a project in Shanyang. We realized we could not get around in town. We postponed a lot of trainings. So we thought we could write some articles – we had been asked to write about our work. Eventually when we returned to Xi'an, SARS also appeared there. The media kept reporting the panic – here salt was sold out and there masks were sold out. We realized that SARS had transformed from a public health crisis to... we felt that if it was not handled well, it could become a social crisis. In this time, as a NGO how could we serve as a bridge between citizens and the government, mobilizing the people to work together with the government to deal with this difficult situation? We spent five days, an entire five days to formulate our plans. We planned, designed and found funding for a set of three big posters and posted them everywhere in all communities in Xi'an. These posters had a huge impact and were very beneficial. The media said that we handled a matter that the government should have been responsible for. I feel that during the crisis as a NGO, a feminist NGO, we generated... I think that society was able to see the strength of NGOs and the role that NGOs could play in society. After this incident, we realized, in our experiences, that we have the responsibility to promote a mature civil society in China. As civil society in China matures, we wait for the legal system and the legal environment to continue to improve. How will it improve? You cannot sit back and wait for the government to do it for us. In the same way that the women's movement promotes gender equality, on our own we have to take the initiative to handle matters. Only after you have taken the initiative can you encourage others to also get involved. So we should work on building our capacities within NGOs, and we should facilitate the building of grassroots NGOs. At the same time we also move towards creating networks among NGOs. For example in 2000 in Xi'an, we initiated and helped create the Chinese Gender And Development (GAD) network. We have also organized a Shaanxi NGO network, a study network. Now we are preparing a NGO network in the northwestern region. We are currently discussing our second five-year plan; we hope to play a more important role in the northwestern NGO network. We also participate in a network with Beijing.

**Wang Zheng: We should continue to talk but we need to change the tape.**

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<sup>106</sup> Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. In 2003 there was a breakout in some countries, including Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Gao Xiaoxian: Oh, I am talking too much.

**Wang Zheng: No you are not. Let's change the tape.**

(They change the tape. The second part of the interview)

**Wang Zheng: Now how many people are involved with the research association?**

Gao Xiaoxian: The research association currently has nineteen or twenty full time staff and about one hundred and twenty members.

**Wang Zheng: So a full time staff of about nineteen and more than one hundred members.**

Gao Xiaoxian: We also have some people who hold jobs at other places and also work for us.

**Wang Zheng: So more than one hundred members. Are they from everywhere or mainly from Shaanxi Province?**

Gao Xiaoxian: We also have some volunteers – maybe there are more than one hundred volunteers. Some volunteers are also members. Only after volunteering for more than two years can volunteers apply to become a member. Therefore more than half of our volunteers are not members.

**Wang Zheng: Do members have to pay membership dues?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, they pay membership dues.

**Wang Zheng: How much does it cost?**

Gao Xiaoxian: It costs fifty yuan per year.

**Wang Zheng: You just mentioned a moment ago that in the northwest you wanted to develop a local network. Was this because Shaanxi already had this network?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, a network has already been established in Shaanxi.

**Wang Zheng: So then you want to focus on the northwest area. How did you plan to establish this in the area?**

Gao Xiaoxian: In comparison, the NGOs in Gansu, Xinjiang and Ningxia were still rather small, and rather weak. Recently we are in the process of working with Lanzhou University's Center for Research on Sustainable Development. We applied for a project to build capacities of non-governmental organizations in the northwest area. This is a

two-year project. By providing a series of trainings we hope to provide these NGOs with some channels to build their capacities. Of course this does not involve only trainings. They can also come to our organization to get practical experience. Some of the university students volunteered for us. We train them to have a better understanding about how NGOs work in China and gain experience. Then after they graduate they may choose to work at a NGO as a career.

**Wang Zheng: You have opened positions to university students from around the country?**

Gao Xiaoxian: We look at their abilities. For two years we have already attempted to establish a program where we have university students do internships. This year they also applied to be volunteers. Our work place has limited space. Now we are working jointly with several other NGOs. Together we are looking at how to establish a base for university student interns. The amount of students we can take in now is limited.

**Wang Zheng: Are you receiving interns from all over the country?**

Gao Xiaoxian: No. Just at Xi'an. We receive students from Northwest University and Shaanxi Normal University. They come as interns. This year we accepted someone from another province. She stayed here for two months. She was from Hefei, as a volunteer. So this is an idea. Another idea is... A lot of new NGOs have not officially registered; nor do they have accountants. They do not have much experience in managing funds. So we are thinking about providing some grassroots NGOs with financial consultation; if they request it, we may also help them with managing finances. Currently our organization has a very good reputation among NGOs, because we manage our finances very well. Our accountants are very experienced. These are some of things that we will carry out.

**Wang Zheng: Because you have done a lot of different kinds of work in this area, you might not be able to discuss all of them in the short time we have for this interview. There is one thing in particular... I know that among your many projects, one has lasted a long time. That is the "Red Phoenix Project." Could you speak a bit about that project?**

Gao Xiaoxian: The "Red Phoenix" was a product of the 1995 World Conference on Women. In August of 1994 I had just come back from Australia. The Shaanxi Province Women's Federation convened a conference for Women's Federation presidents from ten regions and cities in order to discuss how to welcome the 1995 World Conference on Women. At that time many different ideas were brought up. But none of these ideas encouraged wide participation. They would only involve a small number of people. The 1995 World Women's Conference was to be convened in Beijing. I thought that such a grand meeting should be able to mobilize all women; especially women who had previously been marginalized – we should encourage them to participate. Shaanxi is a big agricultural province. Rural women occupy a large proportion of the population. How could we facilitate the participation of rural women? All of a sudden I thought ... I had

been carrying out rural development projects for a long time and was very familiar with rural women. The Shaanxi folk culture history is long and glorious. Rural women are very skilled and talented in numerous ways. For example they make paper-cutouts and embroidery. When I made the Shaanxi women's picture album, I collected from everywhere a lot of... . At the time I contacted some folk artists; I knew they were really amazing. Therefore I thought about whether I could use their embroidery to create a large quilt. In Shaanxi women's history, there was a tradition of making embroidered quilts that were given to temples. They are called "Hundred Flower Tents." So I asked: Could we organize these women to embroider a large quilt? I was not sure exactly how big it should be. I quickly borrowed a calculator to make some calculations. If they made five inch by five inch square patches, then a four by seven meter quilt would need to have 1,008 patches. We could call it the "Thousand Flower Tent." I spoke to our Women's Federation president about my idea. I asked her if we could mobilize women in the entire province to make this. The president thought this idea was really very novel and she supported me. So I started to look for people to design and plan this project. The whole process really was extremely interesting. We started from the design to buying the cloth, to cutting out the pieces, and so on, until in the end when the embroidered quilt was finally finished. The embroidered quilt used more than a dozen different colors of cloth to make the base. Then they put together the image of a soaring red phoenix with its wings spread. It symbolized the Chinese women's movement; also it symbolized the spirit of Chinese women.

At first I had wanted to donate it to the United Nations because I had seen many gifts that had been presented to the United Nations. Before the quilt was completed, I saw published in the paper the success of the auction of the red lanterns that used to hang at Tian'anmen. They were sold for several million yuan. I thought when this Thousand Flower Tent was completed it would without a doubt be an absolute treasure. Think about it. Over one thousand rural women worked together to produce this traditional embroidered quilt. How remarkable! It would have an incredible amount of artistic value. In addition, it was created in the atmosphere of holding the World Women's Conference. I thought, could we sell it and make some money to do some projects for women. Prior to this we had always applied for funding from overseas foundations. We always used others' money. When would China also have its own foundation? I looked forward to the time when we would have our own foundation. If we could sell it for a good price, we could establish a foundation. Then we could use its funds to do things. So we wanted each embroidered square to be a high-quality piece of work.

Actually we made it twice. The first time... At the time I went out of town on a business trip, for a Women's Federation conference. So the assistant director supervised the work. She didn't explain the idea clearly to the lower level Women's Federation officials. So those people thought they were supposed to embroider some famous labor models' images. They turned in the work. This work can show women's participation, but it doesn't have much artistic value. The colors were not right, either. So I told them we could not use it. I took some people with me to a lot of fabric factories to look for cloth. Initially I thought cotton would be ideal. But we could not find cotton fabrics in many colors. So we settled with silk. But silk is too soft. We then contacted a factory, having

them make liners for the patches. We had to take the patches to small shops and have them perfect the patches. Then we sent for one official from each of the ten regions and took them to the museum of folk art. We showed them the designs and asked them to find old women who knew how to make traditional embroidery. These old women could embroider what they liked the most and give us their best products. So this was the second time. When the patches were put together, it was beautiful. Later we invited some experts to look at it. Experts of folk arts saw it. It was very difficult to accomplish. Each step was hard. It was so big. Do you know how we put together the patches, more than one thousand pieces of them? One of us was reading the design, telling us where to put patches of different colors. Other people carried the big piles of cloth, grouped in different colors. We cleaned the floor. We knelt on the floor to make it. The designer stood higher to check if the patches were put together correctly. When we put the patches together, we had to number them. We made one square meter first, and then another. Finally to sew them together, we had to take them to a factory. I told them this was made for the World Women's Conference. They did not charge us. It was difficult work to piece them together nicely. One whole year – from designing to the end.

**Wang Zheng: Where did the funds come from?**

Gao Xiaoxian: We garnered some support.

**Wang Zheng: Oh, with support from society?**

Gao Xiaoxian: We asked companies to donate some money. There was one company that wanted us to hang up their name on the quilt, but we did not want to do this. This company agreed to support, but they wanted to hang up their name. I said, this is a gift from women of the whole province to welcome the World Women's Conference. We can't hang up your name; it is odd. So we contacted the assistant deputy governor of the province, a woman governor. We told her about the project. She was moved by our project. She said, I will put you into contact with a company; they won't ask for hanging up their company name. She found a company for us. She also told the finance department to give us more than 100,000 yuan. The factories did not ask us to pay. In this way, it was accomplished. By the time Beijing held the World Conference on Women, we still had not sold it in an auction; so we displayed it there. People could see it; it left a really good impression on people. After we came back, we took it to an auction house. They did not have a lot of experience; the first time it was not sold. However, it was the news that this work was not successfully auctioned that attracted a lot of attention. People were asking, a propitious number for a cell phone, or a good license plate number for a car could sell for several hundreds of thousand yuan. This was a treasure with immeasurable artistic value because so many women had worked on it. It was truly a treasure; there would not be another one like this. Those women who made the embroideries were in their 70s or 80s. When they pass away, young generations don't know how to make this kind of embroideries. There would not be another piece of work like this. Why did not someone who was affluent have the eye to buy it? Finally this news of the failure to auction it came out; it was the second day after the news came out

that some people came to buy it. They knew the base price; so they bought it according to this base price.

**Wang Zheng: How much did it sell for?**

Gao Xiaoxian: 350,000 yuan. The auction house fee was ten percent so we made 315,000 yuan.

After the World Conference on Women I took a leave and returned to Linping – this was the place where I worked as a sent-down youth. I came across an incident: In the neighboring village a young woman had been admitted to a university but she did not attend because her family did not have enough money to send her. Her mother told her, “You cannot attend university this year, but next year we will sell apples and then you can go.” I thought, this county is not too far from Xi’an, but there are girls whose families are too poor to send them to college! I passed on a message to that young woman. I told her that she should contact me. Then I went to talk to a Women’s Federation cadre from the town: can you go to that village and pass my words to that girl? Tell her to come to Xi’an and contact me; I will help her.

This incident inspired me to take on the “the Red Phoenix” project. At that time our educational system was under transformation; they had just started to collect tuition. The school expenses were not that much at that time, maybe two or three thousand yuan but this still prevented some girls from attending college. I thought if the costs were too formidable for the kids to attend university, then some of them would give up their hopes of attending school. So I thought that maybe this money could be used to support education? The money from the red phoenix embroidered quilt was used to create a project, with the name the “Red Phoenix Project.” I thought this name also had something to do with Chinese culture: in our culture people always say, “hope that a son will grow up to be a dragon and a daughter will grow up to be a phoenix.” The name of “red phoenix” indicates the nature of the project is to help young women become successful. This is how the project was started.

At that time the interest rate for deposits was quite high. I remember it was about 10%, or 15%. In a year we made almost thirty or forty thousand yuan in interest. This would allow us to support ten students. Each of them would be given one thousand yuan per year. Four years in college would cost four thousand yuan. During the first year we sought to make it big in scale, so we supported twenty students. The message was passed on to many regions and towns. We required that the applicants must come from poor families. That means, the family has to be in a rural area and its income below the poverty line in China. To our surprise, we had more than one hundred and fifty applications. We looked at the applications. The experience of each of them in their efforts to seek education was extremely difficult. Finishing high school really was not a very easy task for them. Now they wanted to attend university and they just did not have the means to do so. So what would we do? I told the president that we should hold a press conference and see if the media could help us out. The result was that as soon as the media broadcast this situation, people began to call us and donate money. And the

reporters helped us to look for companies that would also donate. The first year we supported more than eighty students. It was a success...

**Wang Zheng: Businesses were making contributions.**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes companies began to do this; there were four companies that the reporters had put us in contact with which donated money. Each of these four companies supported ten students. Then there were also small donations from society. Altogether this allowed us to help more than eighty students. The first year was the most difficult. But we managed to send these students to colleges. This inspired me. We did so much in the first year. Then people would know about it in the second year. We had to carry this on little by little. But this process was really hard...

**Wang Zheng: The first year of this project was in 1996?**

Gao Xiaoxian: In 1996 we helped more than eighty students. I remember – there were eighty-four students, or maybe eighty-five. The second year we supported more than sixty students. Each year we had to rely on the media courage and this operation was... This is expensive. So I thought about how we should publicize this. Each year we tried to think of different ways to attract funding. The first year we targeted the media. The second year we sent a letter to many companies; we found the list of all companies of medium and large scale in Xi'an and sent a letter to them. The third year we set up a web page. In this way we publicized it every year. But gradually, we discovered that when these girls came from the countryside and went to the city, they were not only short of money. They also faced a lot of pressure because they were poor. Their self-esteem was impacted by poverty, because...

**Wang Zheng: The disparity between the urban and the rural areas?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, this disparity made them...for many of the students this was quite psychologically stressful. There could be some unhealthy emotions that caused them to... Compared to the city students, they never completely felt at ease to enjoy university life in the same way. Therefore I thought that this project had to do something more. So we started to look for funding in order to hold gender trainings and raise their gender consciousness. I hoped that through raising their gender consciousness that these young women would come to realize that being impoverished was not an individual's problem. Instead it is a cultural and a systematic problem. We also hoped that they would return to their hometowns and make contributions there. Moreover I also hoped that the "red phoenix project" could transmit compassion and raise society's sense of responsibility. I hoped that after these young women graduated and were employed for five years that they could then themselves subsidize a university student. During this process, I could see them grow and mature. In 2000 we held a farewell party – "The red phoenixes of the new century take off" – for the first class of graduates. The students organized this by themselves. They chose a group responsible for the preparations and they arranged the program themselves. They hosted the party themselves. They only invited a male student

to co-host. At that time, when I saw their program, Ning Huixia<sup>107</sup> and I could not stop my tears. We saw them growing up and we knew them so well. We remember when their fathers and mothers brought them to our office, they did not have very much self-confidence and they would often shrink behind their parents. But in 2000, they performed a modern dance and developed and directed their own modern drama. They hosted their party. I really felt that they had grown and matured. So this process was really... Oh, we also helped them create a newsletter. They could publish their own writings there. The “Red phoenix project” has always been managed quite strictly. The selection process for the students was also extremely competitive. So throughout this project we have not had any scandals. Our reputation continues to get better and better. Therefore our influence had gradually spread. Even the Central TV Station reported on this. The influence has been widely spread. Now we have some people who regularly contribute money, including my personal friends, such as Dorothy Ko and Gail Hershatler.<sup>108</sup>

**Wang Zheng: Now the project has been transferred to the Women’s Federation?**

Gao Xiaoxian: In 2004 I left my position as the research association director. Therefore I have passed on “the red phoenix project” to the next director. Her name is Ban Li. She used to work in the publicity department; she has strengths in publicity. Moreover, when I was doing the “red phoenix project,” I was not able to devote all my energy; our organization could not spend too much on it. Besides it I had to lead the association. Then Ban Li came. She may have two better strategies in terms of publicity. I think she has been quite successful. First she mobilized all kinds of media forces. In addition she combined the “red phoenix project” and the Women’s Federation work in a much better way. When I was in charge of it, we were independent; we did not use Women’s Federation’s resources. Why? Because I had always hoped that we could enlarge it into a women’s foundation outside of the government. This was my dream. I hoped that this foundation, once it was created, would not have too many ties with the Women’s Federation, because there could be some administrative intervention to impede its independence. Therefore I kept its independent status and hoped to operate it as a non-governmental foundation. However, without financial support from the Women’s Federation, we had a lot of difficulties. Right? Ban Li has inherited the success of our earlier work and a good foundation. Moreover she has done a good job in publicity. In addition the president of the Women’s Federation is using their resources to carry on this project. So nowadays they support more students.

**Wang Zheng: You have talked quite specifically about some aspects of your NGO. Could you talk more broadly about NGOs... Not necessarily only your organization... Could you say something about how you see the future of women’s NGOs in China? And also what sort of relationship do women’s NGOs have with the Women’s Federation?**

Gao Xiaoxian: I will talk about this in two parts. Women’s NGOs from the 1995 World Conference on Women onward have grown quite early in Chinese NGO circles. Also I

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<sup>107</sup> Ning Huanxia used to work at the “red phoenix project” office.

<sup>108</sup> Dorothy Ko and Gail Hershatler are both gender historians in the U.S.

should say that their development has been quite good. But it is not the most successful; it does not compare to environmental protection NGOs. After the environmental protection NGOs started, they developed rather quickly. In the past several years they have put forth a joint effort. In promoting environmental protection initiatives to the government they have done a better job than women's NGOs.

**Wang Zheng: Why do you think that this is the case?**

Gao Xiaoxian: I have not analyzed this in depth. Perhaps this would be a question worth researching. Environmental protection NGOs have done some great work in terms of initiating actions.

**Wang Zheng: It has entered the mainstream media.**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, they have some people working in the media. But it was more than that. For instance there was the situation with the Nuijiang Dam.<sup>109</sup> This was something that many NGOs worked on together. There were also a group of very influential scientists that worked in these groups. I think... I don't know; I have never analyzed this. But, this is the situation. Currently women's NGOs are divided into several different types. The one kind is the one that you are familiar with. Usually they are in universities, doing academic research. Right? Research institutions are not necessarily counted as NGOs. A true NGO must be independent and publicly registered as an NGO. A university research center is more an agency that falls under the university structure. It has its own organizational model, in terms of funding and personnel. In terms of grassroots women's NGOs, I don't think there are many new ones. This is a problem, which they currently face – unlike environmental and development NGOs, which have a lot of new grassroots organizations. Most of China's women's NGOs are all from the 1990s. They came about because of the 1995 World Conference on Women. These past several years there have not been many new NGOs. This is something that I am rather worried about.

**Wang Zheng: Right, we have noticed this problem too. For instance at the “95 + 10” meeting,<sup>110</sup> when you look at the participants, basically most of the people have been around for a long time. They are all influential figures.**

Gao Xiaoxian: There is a group of some new people. It is possible that there is a problem with the mechanisms; it was difficult for new people to participate in that conference. In China in the past two or three years there has been a tendency of rapid growth in the

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<sup>109</sup> Under the pressure from the environmental NGOs and the public, the Chinese government postponed the controversial project of building the Nuijiang Dam in the southwest.

<sup>110</sup> In the year of 1995 the UN World Women's Conference was held in Beijing, China. Five years after the Beijing World Women's Conference, in a 23rd special session of the United Nations General Assembly, “Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century” reviewed the progress the world has made towards achieving the goals set out by the Beijing conference. This conference has come to be known as the “Beijing +5” conference. The delegates made further agreements to continue carrying out the initiatives of the 1995 women's conference. In the year of 2005, they held a similar conference called “Beijing +10.”

development of NGOs in general. There are two phenomena... I think there are many new ones, small ones, which have appeared. I went to Gansu province... I have been to Guangdong to help with the capacity building of NGOs in the southeast; I have participated in meetings organized by NGOs and the mainstream institutions. I have seen a lot of small ones....

**Wang Zheng: Women's NGOs?**

Gao Xiaoxian: No, I mean NGOs in general. There are a lot of them. I am talking about the tendency for NGOs in China.

**Wang Zheng: Which kind of NGOs? Those that deal with environmental protection?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Environmental protection, development, and disabled people.

**Wang Zheng: Oh, disabled people.**

Gao Xiaoxian: We should call them “mentally challenged” people, not “disabled” any more. There are organizations that help mentally challenged people and children, social welfare, and senior citizens. Many kinds of them. This is my impression. I feel that the NGOs in China are developing pretty well. This is one point. The other is that I feel that we have just begun to talk more about NGOs’ internal management and capacity building, such as management mechanisms, training the leaders, fundraising, financial management, etc. These years many facilitating agencies for NGOs have appeared, for example, in Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou.

**Wang Zheng: Are these being done by Chinese agencies?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, our own NGOs. Their mission is to build up NGO capacities and a good NGO system.

**Wang Zheng: Overseas foundations do not do this kind of work?**

Gao Xiaoxian: No, but their funding often comes from applications to overseas foundations. But the people are....

**Wang Zheng: They are working on building the NGOs abilities and skills.**

Gao Xiaoxian: Right. They have established some organizations of this kind. There are a lot of seminars that deal with NGOs. So there are a lot of conferences on the issue of NGO networking. In the past my e-mails basically all were related to the projects of the research association and to our own activities. This year I discovered that I have received a lot more emails from overseas NGOs. I have to participate in various networks. For example, now seven organizations are initiating – we are one of them – a dialogue with the government; this is taking place in Beijing. This is meant to be a

networking that focuses on the relationship between the government and NGOs. Not long ago we held the first conference in Nanjing. Then each of these seven organizations will take turn preparing for and organizing conferences and seminars.

**Wang Zheng: A national network, a NGO network?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, a national network.

**Wang Zheng: This is not only a women's network?**

Gao Xiaoxian: No, it is not a women's NGO network. As for women's NGOs, we have a project called, "Six Organizations Building Women's NGO Capacities."

**Wang Zheng: Did they meet in Beijing?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, they met in Beijing. Very soon this year they will hold the second meeting in Henan. This is something that we are coordinating. With international organizations we organized a "Shaanxi NGO study network." In addition to all of this, many different places have asked us to provide trainings in the building of NGO capacities. Therefore I think that NGOs are very active. In comparison women's NGOs are relatively weak. They have not seemed to catch up with this...

**Wang Zheng: Tendency for development.**

Gao Xiaoxian: Yes, they cannot seem to catch up with the NGO development tendency. The same situation exists as it did in the end of the 90s. I do not know the reason for this. I also have not given it much thought.

**Wang Zheng: Then how do you see the future... For yourself. Apart from carrying out a lot of work for the research association's local network development, which you talked about a moment ago, what plans do you have for yourself?**

Gao Xiaoxian: I have been looking for opportunities. I want to pull back in the research association from the leadership position, because I still want to do some research. I criticize myself for this, but I think my attachment to research still exists. I would especially like to do some research on women's history. The 1950s – I have collected a lot of materials for that historical period. After the 1980s I personally experienced much of what was going on. I myself participated in the whole development of women's studies, development projects in rural areas, and the development of NGOs. I wanted to think about these experiences as a historical subject and do some research. I have many dreams about the research that I could do. Currently the only problem is that I do not have time to do it. Perhaps after I retire from some of my positions, then... Honestly, I can't say when I can retire from these positions. But I am preparing for it.

**Wang Zheng: If you pull back from many of your current responsibilities, do you think that the research association will operate the same as when you were an active part of it?**

Gao Xiaoxian: Now the research association has a set of internal mechanisms that are already established. I think even if I am not around, they will still do a great job. In the research association I know I play a kind of psychologically stabilizing role. Temporarily there is not another person who can replace me. So I cannot give up all of my responsibilities at once. I have told people that I regard the establishment of the Shaanxi women's research association as one kind of research, one kind of innovation; it is a case in the whole process of political democratization in China. Through its growth, we have experienced all kinds of opportunities, challenges, and obstacles and our own agency. Thus, in and of itself, it can be considered a research paper that I am writing in practice. I hope that I am able to write it well. Since we have already achieved so much, I hope that we can successfully accomplish it. If this was purely individual interest... Now I work too hard. My daughter criticizes me and says that I overlook my health. My workload is too heavy. So if it were purely individual interest, I might have already given up. But I think this article is still not finished. I am still not at the point of where I am near completion of this paper. This is how I think about it.

**Wang Zheng: Thank you very much.**

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: CHINA  
PARTNER ORGANISATION**

**Transcript of Ge Youli  
Interviewers: Zhang Jian and Shi Tong**

**Location: Guangzhou, China  
Date: December 22, 2002  
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**Ge Youli**, born in 1962, is the China Country Director for the Global Alliance for Workers and Communities in Guangzhou. Prior to this, she worked at the Ford Foundation and later as a Program Officer at the United Nations Development Program in Beijing on issues of gender equity, poverty alleviation, micro-finance and community development. In this capacity, she became involved in many feminist projects in China, including translating feminist texts, running gender training sessions and organizing professional women's groups. Her publications include contributions to *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers*, Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok, and Cecilia Milwertz (eds.), 2001; "Violence against Women, a Global Issue," *Life Monthly* 68 (November, 1998); and "When Girls Grow Up, They Have to Get Married?," *Feminist Studies* 22, No. 3 (Fall 1996). Most recently, Ge Youli is involved in defending the rights of migrant workers.

**Zhang: First I want to know how you see your sexual identity.**

Ge: I unequivocally believe that I am a woman.

**Zhang: Woman?**

Ge: Yes.

**Zhang: Is this kind of physiological identification a kind of sex that is opposite to men or another aspect of an idea that acknowledges this kind of identity?**

Ge: I think that sex, this concept, has two ways of understanding it. One is our so-called physiological sex. As for myself, my physiological sex is without a doubt female. In addition there is also a socially created conception of sex, “gender.” I think that when using the concept of “gender” I am also a woman. However this concept of gender is in contrast to concepts of gender in traditional society. That is to say, in my understanding (of modern society) the concept of gender includes behavior, value, and thoughts. My understanding about gender differs from traditional requirements for women. I continually explore these ideas. But there is one point that is extremely clear. I think at the very least, I have differences with traditional concepts of gender and sex, behavior, and towards traditional women’s beliefs.

**Zhang: So, could we call you a "new woman?"**

Ge: Yes.

**Zhang: What term for feminist, *nuquan zhuyizhe* or *nuxing zhuyizhe* best describes you?<sup>111</sup>**

Ge: I think I am a *nuquan zhuyizhe*. So in my last answer I wanted to explain... what kind of role should women take on in society or what kind of role should they take on in their families? They should have a new... a recognition of themselves, have their own judgment and beliefs and their own pursuits. I believe I am motivated by this kind of goal. Moreover, I think this kind of goal should include equality for the two sexes and women’s independent societal identity. This has become a goal for all of us to pursue... I

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<sup>111</sup> Both terms can be translated as “feminism.” *Nuxing zhuyi* is literally “female-ism” or “feminine-ism.” This translation emerged in the early twentieth century but reemerged in the 1980s. Some believe that this term has less political but more biological connotations than *nuquan zhuyi*. *Nuquan zhuyi* is literally “woman- rights-ism” Since *quan* can mean both rights and power, the term can be interpreted as the “ism” of women’s power and rights. In history, the Chinese Communist Party has defined *nuquan zhuyi* as bourgeois, because of the potential conflicts between gender struggles and class struggles. In contemporary China, this term is primarily used to refer to Western feminism and often conveys a negative image of a men-hating woman hungry for power. For this reason, many Chinese feminists avoid calling themselves *nuquan zhuyi zhe*. See Ping-chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok, et.al, eds. *Chinese Women Organizing* (2001) and Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* (1999) for detailed historical reviews.

think that if you have this kind of idea of women you are a feminist (*nuquan zhuyizhe*). I am working very hard for these goals so I feel that I am a feminist. (*nuquan zhuyizhe*).

**Zhang: You think that you are a feminist...when did such feminist ideas or goals begin to emerge?**

Ge: I remember – it was probably in 1996. I wrote down a sentence and gave it to my friend. She was my friend and also my colleague. This sentence summarized our relationship and the evolution of the influence that she had on me. The sentence I said to her was that you have changed me from a natural feminist into a conscious feminist. That is to say, she changed me from a spontaneous feminist into a conscious feminist.

**Zhang: What do you mean by “spontaneous feminist”?**

Ge: I was definitely a spontaneous feminist. I felt that I did not have a very clear awareness but I had a very intense feeling of oppression. As a woman, I experienced a feeling of being oppressed; I experienced a kind of depression; I experienced a kind, a certain kind of feeling of unfairness. But I did not have the words and the ability to express this. (She is quiet.) I found myself in a state of being oppressed. I have had this kind of feeling of oppression since I was young. Moreover I think that this kind of feeling of oppression is one which is part of the life experiences of being a woman.

**Zhang: Can you talk a bit about your experiences when you were growing up?**

Ge: If I look back at my childhood, actually, this kind of feeling of being oppressed started as a kid. At that time my family was perhaps representative of a typical family – two kids, one boy and one girl. My brother and I were four years apart. Because my mom was a professional woman, when we were small, she did not have a lot of time to take care of us. So she took my older brother and me to Shanghai to live with our grandparents. My grandparents were both very old fashioned so they treated my brother and me completely differently. At that time I was probably only about three or four. How did they treat us differently? My brother could play outside all day long. Once school started, as soon as he came home, he could play outside. But my grandmother always restricted my outside playtime. Also, she made me go with her to buy groceries in the mornings. At that time life was very difficult. Since we lived in the city, if you wanted to buy enough vegetables and meat, you had to go to the market at four in the morning to wait in lines. Despite the fact that I was really young, too small to go and buy things on my own, I could still hold a place in line. If I went with my grandmother at four in the morning, I could stand in line in front of the vegetable stall. She could then go and stand in the meat line. After she finished buying meat, she would come and take the place that I had been holding for her in the vegetable line. I remember that when I was four or five years old, every day at three or four in the morning I would go with my grandmother to the market to stand in line and hold a place for her. My brother never had to do this kind of thing. After we came back from the market, my grandmother would ask me to help her clean and prepare the food. As I got a little older, she wanted me to learn how to sew and make clothes, stitch, thread a needle, etc. Later I could do very

basic needlework. My grandmother felt that only by learning these kinds of skills could a woman have the possibility of being desirable for marriage. She made me study these things when I was four or five. I felt this treatment was really unfair. Another example I can think of how we were treated differently concerned eating. At the table, my grandparents always expected me to be self controlled. That is to say, I should be sure to allow others to eat first and to eat the best foods. She taught me that this was considered to be a person's virtue. So I should allow the elderly of the house and others to eat first. However, they never made my brother do this; on the contrary, they would always put the best foods in my brother's bowl.

I still remember the incident that was the most extreme example of being treated differently because I was a girl. One time we all went out together. My grandmother said, "Why don't we go out for ice cream!" which, during winter for us kids, was a rare treat. I excitedly went with them. To my surprise, my grandmother bought my brother an ice cream, but bought me a four cent popsicle.<sup>112</sup> I was really angry so I asked her why I did not get an ice cream, too. At that time an ice cream cost about twelve cents while a popsicle cost about three to four cents. She just said that of course he should have a rich, creamy ice cream because he was a boy. I will never be able to forget those kinds of feelings of being treated unfairly.

I also feel my brother was at ease with being treated like this. I probably will never be able to forget his obliviousness and unconscious acceptance. He never called into question why his little sister had a popsicle, but he got to eat an ice cream. When I recall that time, I still feel no pleasure in eating a popsicle in winter. I was definitely affected by this experience because each time I think of this incident, I feel a kind of hurt. I definitely do not have good memories of this. This hurt is partially because my grandparents so openly treated me differently.

My brother completely accepted this. He felt that this was natural; after all, he was a boy. He did not think that he was four years older than me and as my older brother, he should take care of me. But he did not and that day he just calmly ate his ice cream. I regretted for many years that at the time, I did not throw away the popsicle. But I loved to eat too much, so I was humiliated, yet I ate the popsicle. After eating it, I have always regretted it. Why did I accept that kind of treatment? I still ate the popsicle and since that time, have felt regret every time I eat a popsicle. At that time I thought that I did not have any strength of character; I had no strong will. I should have thrown the popsicle away to show my grandmother that I was upset and that I absolutely could not accept being treated like that. But I did not because kids love food too much. (She laughs.) During that time we often went hungry and did not have enough clothes to wear, so even being able to eat a popsicle in winter was still a luxurious treat. So I still ate the popsicle. (She laughs.) For many years after that incident, I was upset with myself.

That kind of experience made me feel very lucky that I did not grow up at my grandparents' house. Once I started elementary school, I returned to live with my

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<sup>112</sup> Although in the United States children might choose a popsicle over ice cream, in China at this time, ice cream was definitely a more valued treat than a popsicle.

parents. My parents were from the generation who were educated after liberation. More or less, they had a new perspective. My brother stayed with our grandparents and received their unending devotion and love. When I returned to my parents it was like I became an only child. Actually my parents did not have a chance to treat me differently than my brother or discriminate against me. So I received their full affection. At that time, I experienced real love and caring and remember this as a very happy period in my life. I stayed with my parents continually until I graduated from high school and went to college. As a kid, I really had a carefree childhood. At that time we did not have any academic or test pressure and my parents really loved me. My grades were pretty good and I had a rather outgoing personality. I thought that as a girl, I did not experience overt oppression. Today as I recall this time period, I think that I was pretty carefree. Also I did not feel inferior to boys in any way. So I still had a kind of self confidence and a feeling of self pride.

However, I think that when I attended university I was oppressed again. (She laughs.) Dating in college brought me a kind of depression and confusion. Most girls had boys trying to date them. Having boys like them became a kind of recognition. But I was not particularly well liked by the boys. (She laughs.) Maybe it was because I was too bold and too unconcerned about dating. And on top of this, I was not very attractive. I felt that guys were indifferent to me and rejected me.

**Zhang: Was this in any way related to your studies?**

Ge: It did not have anything to do with my schoolwork. Actually I was not a very outstanding student. I attended six years of university, four years for my undergraduate degree and then two more years of graduate work. During these six years of school, I was very depressed and had a really negative perception of myself. However at that time I did not understand. I just thought that this was my mistake or problem. It was because I was not pretty or because I was not gentle or caring enough to attract boys. So I was continually dissatisfied with myself. Boys did not treat me well, but I also had a negative perception of myself.

**Zhang: Did this kind of negativity come from the way boys spoke to you, or...?**

Ge: It came from their eyes.

**Zhang: The way they looked at you.**

Ge: Yes, it came from their attitude towards me and the way that they treated me. Maybe I felt that as a woman, I did not have any value. Moreover, I was an extreme case. I was the only girl that I knew at the time who was not pursued by any guys. I always felt confused; I never had guys ask me out on dates. If I was ugly, then... but it seemed that other girls who looked like me had dates. This was my big concern during my time as a young adult. I thought about this a lot but could not come up with an explanation. I could not help reaching the same conclusion that I was in this situation because I was not attractive enough. So I felt even more strongly that it was unfair. Why

did a girl's value only come from her looks?

Of course there are two problems with this kind of thinking. First, actually women's value does not come from men. At the time, I did not realize this point. I thought that if I did not have a man trying to date me, then I was worthless. Second, why is a woman's value so closely related to her appearance? I thought perhaps it was not only about my appearance, but also about my personality. I studied myself and reached the conclusion that perhaps I was not warm enough, was not flirtatious enough, or was not caring enough. I continually searched for flaws in myself; I even thought about changing and trying to cater more to what men wanted. Of course, first, I was not successful at changing and second, I could not cater to any man. (She laughs.) This kind of self-negation and self-repression was to a rather severe degree. So today I still have a deep scar in my heart that I have not been able to completely rid myself of.

**Zhang: What are you referring to? Did you ever take the initiative...**

Ge: No, I did not ask guys out because I felt I could not. More importantly, I was never taught how to approach guys or flirt with guys. (She laughs.) I also did not know how to seduce men. In addition, at that time most people thought that a "good girl" would not chase a guy. (She laughs.) I still wanted to be a good person. I also felt that I did not have those kinds of capabilities. Seemingly this was a skill that you had to be born with. So, first I did not dare to; second, I did not know how. So that was my situation. (Pause.) So actually my sense of inferiority had already been formed. It took away my courage to be pro-active. At that time I just thought that I would passively accept my fate. If a man tried to date me, I would guarantee that he became the world's happiest man. Really, I would go so far as to swear that those guys were all blind; I was such a good person. Actually, as a human being, I believed in myself. I felt that I was very kindhearted, very friendly, and also very smart. Also I had my own ideas and way of thinking. But I did not know why these values were not appreciated. Actually, these guys had not seen my real value. So in my heart I pledged that I would make the first guy to court me the world's happiest man. (She laughs.) I quietly swore this to myself. (She laughs.) Actually what I think should be stressed is this kind of emotional condition. Since I did not have gender consciousness, I was confused and suffered greatly. This was very depressing and negative and was really harmful for a girl as she is growing up. Why should women have to deal with this kind of social and psychological pressure? Isn't this really unfair to women! I think that men who had a similar character and appearance as me would feel very differently. At that time there were not any boys who were interested in dating me. But many girls told me that if I were a guy, they would definitely want to date me. I have always been rather social and friendly so I have often been the glue that holds groups together. I always had a lot of friends; all of them were girls; none were boys. So I thought that if I were a guy, I would really be popular with girls. Why, simply because of my gender, was I treated so differently in society and human relationships? Why is this happening this way? I started to ponder this question but I had no answer and no conclusion. It was in this mixed up state of mind that I graduated. (She laughs.)

**Zhang: Until 1996, you...**

Ge: No, I graduated in 1988.

**Zhang: No, until 1996 when a friend said something?**

Ge: No, in 1988 I graduated. Then I went to the Ford Foundation to work.<sup>113</sup> At Ford, I started to do development work. This kind of work was really important because it sought to bring a gender perspective to the process of development. So I got to know “gender,” this kind of method of work and this concept. Then I was exposed to feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*). Why do I say that my friend or my colleague had such a big influence on me? For a time, we worked together at the Ford Foundation. She was my boss, Mary Ann Burris. I was her assistant. Together we worked on a project that dealt with women’s reproductive health. This gave me the opportunity to begin to learn about feminist theory. I wanted to understand “gender” and wanted to know how to use a gender approach to do development work. So first I needed to understand the theoretical background of feminist theory (*nuquan zhuyi lilun*). I started to read books. When I was reading, I realized that I wished I had discovered this concept earlier.

**Zhang: Did you read books in English or Chinese?**

Ge: Chinese. Most were translations.

**Zhang: Translations?**

Ge: Yes, translations. Afterwards, I made some new friends. These friends were all Western women, including my boss, Lisa, and Sussie.<sup>114</sup> Later Lisa came to the Ford Foundation to work. We would continuously discuss what exactly our experiences and things that puzzled us were, and how we could explain them. Later I discovered that only feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*), this kind of explanation, would satisfy me. Moreover, its explanations really addressed issues that I felt were important and my concerns. I was convinced by the logic of this theory; it gave me the feeling of being suddenly enlightened. So I felt that as a woman it was as if I were born again and I could conquer the feelings of depression and negativity that I had experienced as a young person. I finally emerged from the shadows, from life’s shadows.

**Zhang: After you took these steps, how did you further develop? How did you personally and institutionally put these ideas into practice?**

Ge: My participation in work related to women’s movements was inseparable from my career. I was lucky enough to work at the Ford Foundation. Our responsibilities included promoting the development of local woman’s non-governmental organizations.

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<sup>113</sup> Here Ge refers to the Ford Foundation’s office in Beijing where Ge worked as an assistant to program officer Mary Ann Burris who was in charge of the program on women and reproductive health.

<sup>114</sup> Lisa Stearns joined the Beijing office of the Ford Foundation to work on the preparation for the UN women’s conference in Beijing.

Also we promoted women's theoretical research and the development of local women activities. Since I was doing this kind of work, I needed to study. So at the same time I also came into contact with some women's activists and some feminist scholars. Meeting them was part of my continual process of learning and improvement. Also, I organized a small group. It was in 1992 when we organized the East Meets West group.<sup>115</sup> Actually, it was Lisa (Stearns) who initiated the idea for this group. That year she was doing consulting work at the Ford Foundation. She was representing Ford to help China's non-governmental women groups make arrangements for the Fourth World Conference on Women. Lisa was an activist and a scholar who really understood the international women's movement. After she started this work, she came to realize Chinese women activists and theories about women in China lagged behind the West in terms of development of concepts and work methods at that time. Moreover, differences also existed in our understandings of the most pressing issues facing these women. Chinese women's understandings and western women's understandings were not the same. Thus, Lisa felt that a huge disparity existed. What should we do? At the time of the 1995 World Women's Conference, Chinese women would have to face the international women's movement. If we went to participate in the Conference with such a big disparity in understanding, we might have... actually it would be very likely that we could face conflict, misunderstandings or even feelings of disappointment. So we thought about what we should do. As a group of young women professionals in Beijing, what could we do? So I felt we should have a small translating group that could translate and introduce some western feminist theories and writings into China, two or three years before the Conference. This would allow Chinese women to learn about Western feminism: what they paid close attention to, what issues they explored, what kind of theoretical concepts as well as analytical frameworks they held, and so on. So we created a small group called the East Meets West translation group. This small group consisted of Chinese and foreign women; we were all bilingual. Every two or three weeks we would meet. Our main work was translation. But after we did the translations, we would also hold discussions, since translation is not only linguistic but also cultural and conceptual. In this process of translation, we discovered that many concepts did not exist in the Chinese language. So we had to figure out how to translate appropriately into language that Chinese women would understand. In other words, we had to figure out how to create a new vocabulary. Discussions about this issue took a lot of time. This process of discussion actually was a process of our self-development, and a process of learning from Western women about the history of social development behind these concepts. For example, when we came across the word "gender," we felt that it was a very difficult word to translate. We had to ask someone to explain to us exactly what "gender" meant. We had to ask people to recommend readings to us so that we could, at least roughly, understand the meaning of "gender." So, it seemed that we were only doing translation work. But, actually, it was a process of learning, of self-reflection and self-understanding. In the process of learning, as these new theories and ideas were continually introduced, we felt that suddenly we were becoming enlightened. In other words, we found these concepts – for example "gender roles," gender orientation, gender relations, gender power relations, etc. – were like keys that released us from the things

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<sup>115</sup> This is a small but very active organization made up of professional women in Beijing who have been involved in many projects translating feminist scholarship between Chinese and English.

that held us down. They allowed me to truly look at myself, as a woman, my position in society and what kind of relation that I had with men. How should I reevaluate this kind of relation so that I would not lose my own guiding principles and my values? We slowly raised this kind of consciousness. So I believe this was a process of personal development. There were many people who participated. Our group had activities from 1992 to 1999, no, until 2000. Eight years. Our members were constantly changing, but usually we maintained about twenty to thirty people. When we started, we only had about fifteen people. Members introduced their friends into the group, and we also went out to recruit women who shared our goals. We maintained our group for seven or eight years. The long-term members have all become the leaders of their own women groups or governmental institutions, or have become leading feminist scholars. For example, Feng Yuan, Bu Wei, Liu Bohong and Zhang Lixi <sup>116</sup> were all members of our group. Today they have already become experts in this field or prominent leading members of individual organizations. Of course I am not saying that only because of the East Meets West group,...that is not what I mean. I think that at the time we created a learning environment, a kind of environment for the free exchange of ideas, and ...(Pause) and that this process positively influenced the self-development of each member.

**Zhang: How many Western books on feminism did your group translate?**

Ge: We did not translate books; we translated articles—most were not strongly theoretical but all were truly feminist. We translated numerous pieces. They were all published in Chinese women's journals, all kinds of women's journals.

**Zhang: What role did you play in this group?**

Ge: I was always the one who got everyone together. In the beginning, it was Lisa and I who planned this group. Because we were in existence for seven or eight years, the group's members came and went. I am the only person who participated from the very beginning until the end. Moreover, during these seven or eight years, I was the organizer of the group for at least six or seven years. As the organizer, I planned discussion topics for when we met and chose what kinds of articles to translate. Actually, the translations were not only from English to Chinese; we also had some translated from Chinese to English. Later, the East Meets West group also provided translation service to other development projects. For example, we helped Chen Mingxia<sup>117</sup> and her group in Qianxi

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<sup>116</sup> These women have all become prominent feminist activists. Feng Yuan, a journalist of the Chinese Women's Daily, has played a leading role in setting up the organization of women's media watch and gender consciousness training group. Bu Wei, a researcher from the China Academy of Social Sciences, has played the leading role in intervention against sexism in media and in the project of anti domestic violence. Liu Bohong, an official in the Women's Research Institute of the All-China Women's Federation, has led many research and translation projects on women, including translating *Our Bodies, Ourselves* into Chinese. Zhang Lixi, currently the Vice President of the Chinese Women's College, has also been in charge of many research and activist projects on women. Liu Bohong and Zhang Lixi were also interviewed in the Global Feminisms Project.

<sup>117</sup> Chen Mingxia, a scholar of law from the China Academy of Social Sciences, has been active in promoting women's legal rights. She is also a leading figure for the project on anti domestic violence. Prof. Chen was also interviewed in the Global Feminisms Project.

(in Hebei Province)<sup>118</sup> with a project related to The Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (abbreviated as the Women's Law).<sup>119</sup> They sought to educate women in the countryside about this law. They then compiled a seven-part pamphlet promoting knowledge about the law. Each part used cartoons and very simple words to explain the law and for example, rights mentioned in this law... This series was translated into English by our group. They produced the Chinese version and we translated it into English. Then after the World Women's Conference, the Ford Foundation had another project; they produced a book called *Responses and Reflections of Women*. More than one hundred women who had participated in making arrangements for the non-governmental activities were asked to write how participating in preparatory works for the Conference and participating in the Conference itself influenced their lives. This book was also one of our translations...from Chinese to English. At that time there was another small group called the "Sino-Canadian Young Women's Group." Our two groups worked together to translate this book into English. So we translated books, articles, and some small volumes, among other things. Our earliest translations concerned, for example, domestic violence. This was a very new concept for Chinese women. I am trying to recall... The topics covered domestic violence, and for example women's sexual rights, images of women, "mass media and women," women and the environment, etc. These were the kinds of topics that we addressed.

**Zhang: You brought up domestic violence. In your various activities, what projects related to this topic have you done?**

Ge: Yes. That was 1993 – No, that is not right. In 1998 Chen Mingxia, Chen Yiyun,<sup>120</sup> and I had an opportunity to go to India to participate in a symposium on domestic violence. After we came back from this symposium, we thought about it and wondered what "domestic violence" meant for Chinese women. Also, what was the current situation like for Chinese women? Actually we did not understand this issue very well at the time; we only felt that it seemed this phenomenon existed. So what kind of societal, psychological and political-cultural influence did this have on Chinese women? We then discovered that there were very few resources, very few research materials, and very little data on this subject. This was the first thought. Second we wanted to know how many kinds of mechanisms were available in China for responding to issues of violence, domestic violence, and how many of them were aimed at helping women and sought to reduce domestic violence. We were not very clear about this. We also did not know if these kinds of institutions existed. So I felt that maybe China should also have a domestic violence project. Together we established a plan of action. The process of making this plan was rather long. It was not like the three of us returned from the conference with a clear understanding of "violence" and then sat down to think what we should do and acted. It was not such a simple process. Actually, what we did was to

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<sup>118</sup> Hebei Province is in northern China.

<sup>119</sup> In 1992 China promulgated and put into effect the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests. It stipulates in concrete terms all aspects of women's rights and interests, including rights and interests in politics, culture and education, labor, property, person, marriage and family.

<sup>120</sup> Chen Yiyun is a sociologist who has been doing research on women and family.

bring together people from about twenty or thirty women's groups in Beijing, and brainstorm. We asked them to talk about, first, how they viewed "violence," and second, if we were to act against domestic violence, what exactly we should do. On a big blackboard we listed what everyone said, one after another. Then we put them in a certain order. On the list we had about seven or eight items that we thought were the most urgent. For example, I still remember, some pointed out that we had to be able to describe the situation of domestic violence in China so we needed data and research. So I said, ok, let's do research and data collection. Some said that we needed to raise people's awareness of domestic violence because this was still a topic that was not discussed. People did not recognize it as a problem and treated it as if it did not exist, but it did. So we should raise public awareness about domestic violence and therefore should work with the mass media. So we decided that our next urgent job was to mobilize the mass media and disseminate information about domestic violence. Thus we identified another activity. Some said that we must intervene on behalf of women, because we needed to make sure that when women were assaulted they could go to seek help. We discussed how the existing institutions such as residents' committees and local police stations might feel about "violence" and if they had mechanisms in place to combat domestic violence or stop domestic violence. We did not know. So we needed to first go and try to understand their working procedures. Second, we needed to see if it was possible to develop these necessary resources within the existent systems? Third, we needed to train them so that they would realize that domestic violence was not simply a marital dispute. They must understand that as police or a residents' committee member they should take on the responsibility to prevent violence. Therefore, we agreed that we wanted to mobilize police, raise their sensitivity and give them training. We also needed to mobilize judges and lawyers who dealt with these kinds of cases. Just like this, we made a list for action.

Women experience oppression, right? If a woman has high aspirations, her opportunities for a career, for education and for participating in politics would all be unequal to a man's. So, a woman could be very pretty but she could still in various ways be violated by or oppressed by men. Unless she does not have this kind of consciousness, then that is another matter. Also, let me tell you to what level Western feminists have already analyzed the relations between men and women. They have argued that the leering by men is a kind of exploitation and violation. If a woman is pretty, she is probably violated even more. Of course, men's indifference and rejection is also a kind of violation; so is that kind of staring by men, right?

**Zhang: Right.**

Ge: She is the object of more leering.

**Zhang: The way of looking...**

Ge: Gaze. The very act of gazing indicates an unequal relationship. A man enjoys his role as a subject who views you, the object. I think pretty women are violated the most. Pretty women are also subjected to the most sexual violations and improprieties. When

we get on the bus, perhaps men feel that they don't want to touch us, right? But how many men are there that might...(she laughs), towards a pretty girl, they will disrespectfully touch her, seemingly touching her unintentionally or rub against her a little. The probability of a pretty woman being subjected to this is higher. How can she not feel that she has been violated? Is she an individual with dignity? Who has the right, without her consent or approval, to freely touch her? So pretty women experience different kinds of oppression because of their beauty; rich women experience different kinds of oppression because of their wealth; powerful women experience different kinds of oppression because of their status. Here Wu Yi is the best example. If Wu Yi were a man, she could be in a loving relationship. Why, because she is a woman, doesn't she have the chance to love? Actually the probability of power, wealth and women's happiness have an inverse relationship but for men are directly proportional. Isn't this unequal for women? (Silence.)

**Zhang: Very good...**

Ge: So I think gender oppression is a general phenomenon; it definitely is not specific to a certain kind of woman. That is what has formed the foundation of feminist theory and feminist movements. If this was only an individual woman's experience, or even a certain stratum of women's experiences, I think that feminism would not have become an international tide. But for more than two hundred years, feminism has been an international movement that has been able to transcend the times, transcend national boundaries, transcend cultures, and transcend nationalities. It is because women experience sexual oppression and repression that transcends cultures, transcends classes, transcends races, and transcends nationalities and ethnicities. This kind of oppression is women's shared experience. This is also a fundamental reason for the women's movement and why it has become an international trend. So I think in the women's movement, we need to call for unity and emphasize pooling our efforts. Of course, women have multiple identities, and the multiplicity of our identities leads to different points of view and different positions in some movements. But I believe as a sex, we women have a common interest. This is the gender interest. I think it is this gender interest that forms the foundation for the women's movement in the whole world and that becomes the reason why we should be united to defy a current gender order and gender structure.

**Zhang: Did this kind of gender consciousness permeate your work or was it reflected or expressed in your work?**

Ge: Of course. I think that when I look back at my career experiences, during my five years at the Ford Foundation, I basically was in a learning period, studying and accumulating knowledge and understanding. In addition, I was also studying at the East Meets West group in my spare time. Actually this studying and my work supplemented and complemented each other. After I left the Ford Foundation, I went to the United Nations Development Office (in Beijing). At that time the UN Development Office...Actually this position was created for me. It was also related to women's movements. At the UN Development Office I had two functions. The first was to help

the United Nations make preparations for the Women's Conference. In 1994, I ... I think in June 1994 I entered the UN Development Office. At that time we still had about fifteen months until the Women's Conference. The UN also needed to help the Chinese government and Chinese women's NGOs prepare for organizing the Women's Conference. So they needed to establish a position, to add a position. Also at that time the UN mandated that in all of its institutions there should be a coordinator of gender issues. We called it a "gender focal point." Therefore, at the UN Development Office, I also had the function of being the gender coordinator. That is to say, in fact, at the time when I entered the United Nations I had two functions. The first was to help the Chinese government and Chinese organizations make arrangements for the Women's Conference. The second was in the UN Development Office to ensure the spirit of gender equality in our projects in China. My mission was to serve as the "gender focal point." As soon as I started, these were my two responsibilities.

I was able to get this position in large part because of my five years of experience with the Ford Foundation and my learning about gender consciousness in the East Meets West group. Later why did I call myself the "gender police?" Because at that time in the organization I was responsible for guaranteeing gender equality in our funded projects in China. What method did I use to carry out my task? At that time in the UN there was a committee that reviewed project proposals. Before we gave any funding to projects that involved the Chinese government, the UN Development Office representative, the government representative, and the work unit that was to receive the support would all meet to make assessments. We would assess the project, its economic benefits, social benefits, etc. I turned these meetings into an opportunity to exert my influence. So I went to every meeting and would look at the project proposal extremely carefully. I wanted to look at it and to analyze who would be the beneficiaries of the project. Were the beneficiaries men or women? In the course of the project was there a mechanism to guarantee women and men would equally benefit? Later, I discovered that if we did not have the kind of person like me to intervene, most of our projects would naturally benefit men. Since our partners often were government officials and government departments, many of our project activities were to send people to go abroad to observe and study or to attend research conferences. There were also projects that sent people abroad for short-term advanced studies, earning degrees, or studying certain theories or skills, etc. Think about it. The structure of the government itself was such that above a certain level there was a disproportionate number of men. If you did not have a fixed quota to guarantee women's participation, in the end the beneficiaries would all be men. At that time I thought that if development institutions like the UN neglected gender equality, its aid could inadvertently increase the differences between the two sexes. It not only would not promote social development in China, it could also cause Chinese society to become relatively backward. Since women are already disadvantaged, the aid must try to guarantee equality or even benefit women more. If you give more resources to the dominant sex, you will in fact have increased the disparity. Moreover, the UN's principle of equality includes class and status equality and gender equality. So at the UN's meetings, I would continually stress this view, i.e. if they did not pay careful attention to gender equality, in China the UN's aid would increase the inequality in Chinese society and gender disparities, instead of remedying the disparity or promoting the country's

development with equity and equality. So every time, I would calculate the numbers and calculate the distribution of the funds. Then I would firmly require them to consider my recommendation, stipulating in the proposal that women should constitute 30-40% of the beneficiaries. Of course this method was a bit rigid. Perhaps in your project proposal you could write that there should be, for example, in the work unit that receives support, ideally, women benefit no less than 50%. But we have to be practical. 50% sounds too idealistic because work units are often not half women. No matter how hard you try to select women, in the cases of specialized trainings and opportunities for specialists, women do not comprise fifty percent of the base for selection. Thus, setting 50% as a requirement is not realistic. So I would say there should not be less than thirty percent women. Perhaps there are only twenty percent women at this level of the work unit, so it is their responsibility to go and resolve this problem. If you are not able to solve the problem, it means that you do not have the qualifications to receive this support. This is one method of working for gender equality.

There is also another method. A United Nation's project usually has a set procedure of establishing a new project. This procedure is to invite some international experts to review and evaluate a project and collaborate with the Chinese applicant on the proposal for a project. In this kind of expert group, I would fight for adding a gender specialist. I was the only one who would very consciously bring up this kind of request. Moreover, I would try every possible method so that they would accept a gender specialist as a part of this assessment group, because she could bring in a gender perspective. As you are analyzing social problems, you need to have a gender perspective to look at them. Only then would your suggestions for policy change have a gender perspective, and only then could you advance the goals of gender equality. This was very difficult. I am not saying that I was successful every time. But at the very least, I was able to have my voice heard. So later I thought, haven't I become a police officer? I wanted to examine each and every project proposal and look at each and every one. Later this was to what degree? Let's just say that as soon as I began to speak, they would then say "women." (She laughs) They knew this woman would talk about "women's affairs" again. (Laughs.) But I did not care. Since you entrusted me with this mission and since the UN structure established this position, I wanted to fully develop its potential.

**Zhang: So did you feel the enforcement of this method was very effective? The outcomes?**

Ge: The results were not great, because the current situation was not satisfactory. I think the results were not very good. In some cases, you felt that they would not be able to implement the necessary conditions. For example, you wanted to have thirty percent women for a research and discussion group or a conference. But when they did not have that amount to choose from, what could you do? Meanwhile, to train a woman candidate it perhaps takes ten or twenty years before she becomes qualified as a decision-maker or a specialist in a certain field. So sometimes you simply could not make it no matter how hard you tried. I felt that sometimes we had to comfort ourselves with our small successes. Why did I stress the numbers? It was for future evaluation. It meant that the goal was written in the proposal but perhaps not accomplished. In the end they would

base their assessment on these things. So I think that setting a number could not guarantee its realization, but the goal did exist and had a certain degree of impact on the final evaluation of the accomplishments of the project. At the very least, the evaluation can say that this aspect of this project was not satisfactory. If you have this statement, you can let people know that this is a problem. But I also believe that you cannot use these numbers to change the situation. You cannot do this. You can only achieve two goals: the first is to raise people's consciousness. If you do not make this widely known at these meetings, people will not realize that this is a problem. Think about it – ninety percent of those sitting at the podium of a meeting hall<sup>121</sup> are men but people usually think this is very normal. When an observation group goes abroad to study an advanced technology or policy, ninety-five percent are men, but ordinary people do not think that this is a problem. Only by raising these issues will people realize that in fact, this is a problem. This will not solve the problem; this will only make people know there is a problem.

Also, perhaps, when the evaluation is taking place, it will deepen other people's... At the very least I have a guarantee. I assess projects according to the number I set in order to remind other people that this is a problem. I can only do this much. So, gender equality... well...

**Zhang: “The mission is mighty and the journey is long.”**

Ge: Yes. “The mission is mighty and the journey is long.” For gender equality “the mission is mighty and the journey is long.”

**Zhang: Aside from these aspects of your work, what other spheres have you influenced with a gender perspective?**

Ge: It is still interrelated with my work. One thing that I am proud of is... It was also when I was a project official at the UN. I grabbed this opportunity – there was funding available in the amount of \$30,000. No one had noticed this funding. Our headquarters had innumerable documents sent over to the branch offices. Here we often had \$200,000 and there we had \$500,000. They all were used for different projects. One time I suddenly came across...well, the UN development office had an extremely clear rule. We needed to consult with the Chinese government for all funding expenditures because we needed to have the Chinese government's agreement and approval. Only then could we...only then could the UN give the final approval for who would receive this money and how it would be used. But only this money was to build gender equality capacities, to build gender capacities in the UN structure and even in the UN organization's government collaborators in China. That was not a lot of money for this project – only \$30,000. So no one paid much attention to this. Of course because I am a gender...the gender coordinator, of course I noticed this money. The UN themselves could decide on how to use this money. So I thought this was an opportunity that I must grab, since all the other money you had to consult with the Chinese government. The Chinese government often felt that women's projects or gender projects were not really important. They had to deal with poverty, solve the drinking water problem, deal with environmental issues, and

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<sup>121</sup> Here she refers to any major event in China that would seat prestigious people or leaders on the podium.

decrease unemployment. These issues were given priority. Gender equality was never high on their list of priorities. So basically, most of our funding was used for projects that dealt with these so called problems of greater urgency. Only this \$30,000 could the UN allocate on its own. So I felt this was an opportunity. At the time I had to decide where such a small amount of money could be put to best use. I thought we should hold gender trainings, promote gender analysis and create training materials. Cultivating this kind of training ability in China was very valuable. So I immediately wrote a project proposal. I then submitted this project to our representative. Our representative was really busy attending to numerous tasks every day. So he was used to looking at the kinds of projects that had budgets of three million, five million, one million, eight hundred thousand dollars, etc. He basically did not know that this money existed. Second, he really did not have the time to look at my project proposal. So one day when he had a little time, I went and gave him my project proposal. He barely looked at it and said, "Ok, go and do this." He approved it and signed his name.

So then I started to plan. I did everything from looking for experts to finding teaching materials. I gathered every development organization's materials concerning gender and development that were in English. Then I chose some women to work with me whom I felt had feminist consciousness and had equality and development awareness. We formed a small team that included Wang Zuofang.<sup>122</sup> We then talked about translations and writings and decided the content of the teaching materials. Then we discussed the method of training. We worked together for about six or seven months to compile a booklet. As far as I know, this was China's first...the first Chinese manual of gender training. Why did I place special importance on this manual? It was because I wish...we.... For example this kind of UN development project, if you really want to achieve the goal of gender equality, you first need to raise the gender consciousness of the projects' participants and managers and make them pursue the goal consciously rather than merely writing on paper that the goal is to have thirty percent women. For if the project leader does not feel the need, (s)he will not take the initiative to think about methods to try to achieve this "thirty percent." So, I thought, if we could intervene early on in development projects, and through training, develop a gender sensitivity, it would make them realize that gender problems are about unequal social relations. Everyone would benefit from more just social relations. They could then become a more active... in taking action to initiate these kinds of operations. So at that time these people were who we thought of as our targeted training group.

Our second targeted training group was policymakers and officials. If they have a higher, better gender sensitivity and gender consciousness, when they make important policies they can take gender equality into consideration. For example, the retirement age in China is sixty for men and fifty-five for women. This is a blatant example of gender inequality. When they formulated this policy, the decision-maker definitely was not a person with gender equality consciousness. So what I am saying is that if we can strengthen the policymakers' understanding of gender equality, in the future we can prevent more of these kinds of blatantly unequal policies. So one of our target groups was government officials. We all compiled this set of teaching materials and in the

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<sup>122</sup> Wang Zuofang is a program officer of Oxfam who is in charge of funding projects in China.

process we also used this group of women who participated in the compilation work as our early gender training resources. Up until today, perhaps four or five years have already passed. This activity in China...now it has already become quite mature. I think this was another way of making use of my position at the UN. And this project was made with a very strategic vision.

With these \$30,000 we could have done something else, but we also could do this. If we want to achieve a lasting influence, I think that training in gender equality and spreading gender, this analytical tool, is extremely significant. So I am pretty proud of this. (She laughs.) This kind of gender training work has continued. The demand for it has continually grown. Later the training tools that the UN developed became other NGO's training materials. For example, later when we did the "violence" project, in which I was an initiator, I again stressed this point of view. All participants in the project are assigned with more than ten smaller projects. The core members and the managers of these smaller projects all must participate in gender training. Moreover, one of our theoretical foundations of our domestic violence project was also gender analysis. It became our analytical tool, our very foundational analytical tool and perspective. Everyone felt the same so later the "violence" project took full use of these training resources. For example, Feng Yuan and some others were extremely busy.<sup>123</sup> Later Shaanxi (Province) invited them; the northeast (areas) also invited them to present their materials. Anyway, I am not too clear on how other people see these training resources, but I know that they (the training group) are now in every part of the country providing gender trainings. At the very least, in working with domestic violence projects, we have a fundamental principle about taking these trainings. Anyone who has not taken gender training will not do development work and cannot start to work until they have completed the training. Also our trainings are divided into several times – it has been a process of progressively moving forward. When they do the trainings, sometimes they mould domestic violence and gender analysis together and develop new analytical tools and methods. I think this also has significance and value.

**Zhang: You just talked about domestic violence and establishing projects related to this phenomenon. After you listed the various aspects of domestic violence, what happened then?**

Ge: Well, then, after we made the list, the participants chose which activities they wanted to focus on. I asked them: Which one do you want to do the most? Which one attracts you or interests you the most? Since all of these groups were together in one place, we asked which aspects they wanted to be responsible for. Later the Capital Women's Media Watch<sup>124</sup> chose to focus on the media. Because they felt that their strength was raising media workers' domestic violence awareness and influencing mainstream media's coverage of violence, they took this on. Then, for example, another task was to provide about a hundred cases of victims of domestic violence. The Maple Women's Hotline<sup>125</sup> took this on. They thought they had strengths in this area. There was also a project that

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<sup>123</sup> Feng Yuan is leading a group providing gender training nationwide.

<sup>124</sup> This is an organization of women journalists in Beijing. Feng Yuan is one of the leaders.

<sup>125</sup> This is the first women's hotline in China, created in Beijing in early 1990s and led by Wang Xingjuan.

carried out a domestic violence investigation. This was a basic investigation to collect preliminary data and to summarize it in order to illustrate the situation of domestic violence in China. The Chinese Women's College<sup>126</sup> said they could do this. Our method of assigning projects and coming up with ideas was very democratic and a process where everyone participated. I feel a sense of satisfaction and am rather proud of the domestic violence project. Then, if a group wanted to take on the responsibility for a project, they had to write a proposal and then prepare how to carry out their plan. In the proposal they needed to address how much money they needed for the project. After we divided up the responsibilities, we decided to meet again on a certain day. After setting a date, every project needed to establish a contact person and to organize its members and delegate responsibilities. We settled on the time for the next meeting, for example a month later. At the next meeting each group would present a two or three page preliminary plan and a proposed budget at the meeting. This time not everyone came to meet; it was mainly the project leaders. I gathered them in my office to meet again. Then I collected all of the proposals and then went to look for money. This later became the basis of our application to the donors in four different countries. We drew up an application for funds that summarized these projects. During this process, everyone also... I myself felt that I was consciously sending out a message: feminism's most basic value, its most fundamental meaning, is that it challenges the current cultural order and challenges the current organizational and management structure, representing a new way of doing things which is different from conventions. Why do we want to challenge masculinist culture? Because this culture is not fair. It is a culture based on hierarchy, a culture of exclusion, a culture of repression. It suppresses a certain sex. So feminism is useful in that it subverts the old cultural structure and establishes a new cultural framework. I think within our movement and within our organizational behavior, we should consciously pursue a kind of mode that is different from the traditional leadership style, managerial style, or organizational style. What do we think this kind of mode should be? It is participatory, equal and sharing, and it does not include, rank, or control. So I think the domestic violence project has two significant aspects. One is that this project was the first to address the phenomenon of domestic violence candidly and explore Chinese anti-domestic violence theories and actions. The second significant aspect was that during the whole process of establishing, implementing and organizing the project, we attempted to create a new... something different from the traditional masculinist model. I believe that we are actively involved in establishing a new kind of culture. I believe that ultimately feminism must create a new culture. It will break with the old, traditional culture and create a new culture.

**Zhang: In your view, do you see this kind of new culture having a certain standard? Or is there a kind of model to emulate?**

Ge: No, I myself am not too clear about this point, because I haven't adequately studied theories about this. But I think the new culture that feminism pursues is anti-traditional and against all the things that dissatisfy and repress us, such as hierarchy, control or exclusion. I think at the very least I conceive a new culture as participatory, equal,

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<sup>126</sup> The Chinese Women's University is affiliated with the All-China Women's Federation. Many of its faculty are feminist activists who have been involved in many projects since the UN conference on Women.

harmonious, and fair. This kind of new culture will allow each individual to develop freely. It does not aim to control, suppress, or restrict a certain group of people. The biggest problem with a masculinist culture and traditional society is: in order to stabilize their rule, the ruling class suppresses, excludes, or controls some other social groups. This is an unreasonable culture. Women are victimized in these situations. We suffer from such suppression, control, exploitation, and exclusion.

Why do we use the structure to subvert it? I think...this new culture in my vision, a completely different culture, will be a kind of new culture that will allow everyone, men and women, to be able to completely develop and be completely free. Of course in our generation we will not be able to completely change the world. But at the very least, we can start from such small projects, from the process that we can control, well, not control, but manage. Another thing that caused me to strongly pursue this goal was that I have noticed a problem with many feminist organizations. As they pursue the ideal of equality between women and men, they disregard the pursuit of a kind of cultural construction. Maybe they are working in these kinds of projects to assist women or support women. But their managerial structure, managerial culture, and leadership are completely borrowed from masculinist culture; they have not changed in the slightest degree. Some are even more repressive and more exclusionary. That is why I think our practices of the women's movements should be gender conscious in all aspects; it is a kind of thorough, profound movement. I feel actually my, my contribution- really, this is not saying that I did anything- I feel I've made strategic contributions and this is my strong point. I believe that I am a person with vision, so in the initial stages I can add some principal ideas to a plan. I also have a personal characteristic that has helped me. I have the ability of persuasion. In my interactions with other people I can communicate my ideas with others and convince them so these ideas become a goal for other people as well. I think Chen Mingxia has really carried out her plans according to this goal. All the concrete things are completely their doing.

**Zhang: Personally, how do you see the current state of the development of feminism here in mainland China?**

Ge: I think it is still extremely weak, extremely fragile and we still have very little power. Many things are still in their very rudimentary stage.

**Zhang: What do you mean by “fragile?”**

Ge: It is fragile because it does not even have a legitimate space to exist. Nowadays mainstream society has turned a blind eye to us. We have not developed to the degree that they feel that they have to deal with us as a real threat. Once the mainstream culture senses a sort of threat, it is very easy for them to suppress us. This is what I think is “fragile.” We exist in a limited space. We lack funding, lack space to exist, and lack political legitimacy. Feminism is extremely, extremely fragile in every aspect. The fact that we can still exist exactly proves that we are very weak. Mainstream culture does not even consider us as a threat. If it feels threatened, it could easily eliminate us. I believe that our groups actually are no rival to the mainstream culture in a confrontation. So

feminism here is fragile, small and weak. But it is very progressive and it has a strong vitality. In the long term, because after all feminism represents a kind of...(pause) more vigorous... spirit and value, which is necessary for the development of Chinese society. I think that feminism's greatest value, the women's movement's greatest value, is pursuing equality and justice. I think for the healthy development of a society, these two concepts are indispensable. Actually this returns us to the earlier question about Chinese culture. Chinese society has five thousand years of history. Up until now you still cannot say that it is a fair, equal society; and pursuing freedom, equality and justice has not become our common goal. It is not our people's shared understanding and it is not our society's shared understanding. But it is hard for me to imagine how a society that is not fair, not democratic, not open and not inclusive could develop. How many people's creativity, individuality and passion have been suppressed and depleted in society? So, a... I think a society that is not equal, not free and not just is consuming its own energy. This society's biggest enemy is self-depletion. This kind of system produces this kind of self-depletion, by repressing and wasting human beings, wasting human resources.

So I think feminism pursues a kind of very progressive idea that Chinese society really needs. You cannot question its progressiveness. This gives feminism a life force. Perhaps this has not come out today but feminism is suitable for the needs of social advancement, especially Chinese society. So I think feminism in China is really valuable. The existence of these women's organizations in China is important for reconstructing a societal culture. But what is the present situation that these Chinese women's organizations find themselves in? They are in the earliest stages. Why do I say this? Now actually, the work of some women's organizations is service oriented and supports victimized, marginalized and weak groups of women. Many women's organizations still have not consciously begun pursuing equality, justice, and democracy. So now they are only service providers and are not very political.

But I believe that feminism is political. If we do not elevate it to the political level and the cultural level to...to win a greater space for us to exist, then we are doomed to be fragile, doomed to be weak and small, doomed to collapse at the first blow. Also I do not know if it has any future, because it only provides service and can be replaced by other service-providers. If you do not have a strong social idea and political idea as support and to give you perspective, you are only providing a service; you are just a service supplier. You are not providing for other people, so you do not have much value. What makes you different is that you target women to serve.

So I think the Chinese women's movement must have a vision, a long term vision. It also needs outstanding leaders. I believe that the Chinese women's movement, we activists, should have a kind of cooperative consciousness and a sense of mission. This mission actually is not simply to provide some services to one or two weak groups, but to ask what exactly is the historical significance of our existence. What exactly is our social and cultural significance? If we can reach some shared understanding about this mission, then it would be fine if we start from providing service. Moreover, the reality of today is that we can only do service. We can use service as a means of striving for our level of credibility, fighting for our existence...that is to say... to fight for our legitimacy.

I think now many women's organizations have actually taken service as their goal. They do not feel that service is only a means, so this is why I have said that I think now that China's women's movement is still in the beginning period of its early stages.

**Zhang: As you look ahead, do you have any tentative ideas or plans that you would like to put into practice?**

Ge: As for ideas and plans, I would like to continue to join forces with others who share our vision. We want to strengthen our unity. We want to reach a shared understanding. We have not been able to succeed in this basic point. Our current women's organizations are not united. Moreover they often compete with each other, and criticize each other, even to the extent that they sometimes cut the ground out from each other's feet. We do not have a shared understanding. Because we do not have a shared understanding, we compete with each other. Also we are not coordinated and do not work together to divide up what needs to be done. We are not in a system that allows each of us to exert our respective strengths. Because we do not have a shared understanding among us, we do not discuss these things.

So I think we need a leader to emerge. When everyone truly makes joint efforts, we will have a unified strategy. I am not saying that this "leader" has to be an individual; it could also be a collective, a collective of women that must have ambition, political vision and political strategy. They must be able to rally and unite our power and create a unified force, and also continually develop and strengthen our power. What means will we use? We should keep thinking and reflecting on this question. This reminds me of that Ford Foundation project, or my relationship with Women's Studies. The Ford Foundation once invited a Canadian scholar and me to do an evaluation together. In order for the Chinese women's movement to continue to deepen and strengthen, I felt that it would be strategically important to build Women's Studies in higher education, since this is a way of influencing a whole generation of women, with a totally new set of values. Of course I had already thought about... my own miserable experiences in college. If I had been able to study such theories in college, I would have suffered less, and would have spent fewer years in darkness. I felt that feminism is like a heavenly vision (*tianyan*).<sup>127</sup> It allowed me to have a new vision. It allowed me to recognize myself anew. It allowed me to give myself a fresh orientation. Feminism gave me self confidence. So I feel that we should give this opportunity to young women. We also should... go to women's colleges to train a large number of future colleagues and future activists. Because of our limited funding and ability, we must decide with which group of people do we have the most potential for making the greatest change? I think that we should target those in higher education. There is the slogan, "Fighting for the next generation." We should fight for the next generation of women against patriarchy. So in the assessment report that I gave to the Ford Foundation, we strongly appealed to the Ford Foundation to fund the establishment of Women Studies in China. At the time there were very few schools that offered good women's studies courses. There were few institutes and departments that

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<sup>127</sup> *Tianyan* is one of the five eyes in Buddhism, it can see things far and near, above and below, front and rear, inside and outside, and in the future.

could do this. I thought that this project would have a great social significance and significance for the future and that the Ford Foundation should give serious consideration to funding this. Later, fortunately, Ford Foundation accepted our suggestions and that was how Du Fangqin's project<sup>128</sup> got the support, to develop a women studies curriculum in China. Prior to this point, the Ford Foundation had not provided funding for developing new academic fields. They funded some policy research but not establishing new disciplines. Also, a rather large amount of money is required to establish a new academic field. The Canadian specialist and I both thought that in order for the feminist movement to develop, we must have a reserve of talented people for the future. Of course first of all, the most important thing is that this is a theory and a tool to liberate, to liberate women. I truly hope that thousands upon thousands of women can benefit from the same process that I benefited from. . Only by first having this kind of consciousness, can one make a choice in life. So we feel that perhaps we will still have our reserve army, despite the fact that today we are still small and weak. So that was another project that I had worked on behind the scenes...

I think today's young women face just as much confusion as those of our generation. They are influenced by the commercial culture. The degree of commoditization of women today is much more severe than what we experienced twenty years ago. If we do not use feminist theory to fight against the commercial culture, then the fate of women will be very tragic. If you tell a woman that she is pretty, she feels that she has capital. But actually, a process of expropriation occurs when her capital is realized. It is a process of her subjectivity being stripped away. She becomes completely objectified. How can we raise the consciousness of pretty girls and girls that are not so attractive...this kind of self awareness and subjective consciousness. Through this process women can take control of their life, take control of their fate, and not be manipulated by anyone, including commercial culture and those who hold political power. This is a very difficult task. We as women who want to reach the higher plateau must reach this level of consciousness. I hope that all women will be able to reach this realm and that all Chinese will all be able to reach this realm. Feminist theory provides a useful tool to encourage these young women to pursue this goal. It provides an opportunity and a useful tool.

**Zhang: How will this kind of new culture, in contrast to traditional culture, come to be embodied in your personal life?**

Ge: I think I am really very fortunate. In my own life, I have been very lucky. After I left my grandparents, I think my home life became rather happy because my mother was a person with vision. She was a professional woman and in my household the yin was actually stronger than the yang.<sup>129</sup> I think my mother had more vision than my father and

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<sup>128</sup> Du Fangqin is a prominent gender historian and feminist scholar in China. Currently she teaches at the Tianjin Normal University of China, where she holds the position of the director of the Women's Studies Center. She also leads the project funded by the Ford Foundation.

<sup>129</sup> In Chinese thought *yin* and *yang* are the two opposing but complementary principles in nature. While historically *yin* and *yang* were thought to exist together in one body and keeping the balance of the two was the key to one's health, *yin* was also used to refer to women and *yang* to men. Here Ge Youli is making a reference to assert that her mother was stronger than her father.

had more decision-making power, more ideas and more strength. I will give you an example. I was to decide which colleges I wanted to apply to before taking the college entrance exam. My father did not have an opinion and my mother told me to act in accordance with my own wishes and not to think about them or the family. Many parents would have encouraged their children to stay by their sides. In addition, my brother was already in Shanghai, so they only had me close to them. My mother told me that I should apply to universities based on my own preferences and not to think about what they would want. My father was unable to say this. The night that I filled in the form with my college choices, the two of them stayed in their room so I could decide by myself. They did not participate in my decision. It was my mother's idea that they should not try to influence my decision and that I should decide for myself. Later, I made a list of top-tier universities, none of which were in Nanjing; I only applied to these schools. At that time, for parents to not interfere and to allow their daughter complete freedom to choose a school that was far away was almost unheard of, but my parents gave me this freedom. I still remember how they saw me off. When we got to the train station, tears rolled down my father's face. My mother had a triumphant smile. I was off to pursue my own new life filled with boundless opportunities. My mother's face looked pleased and she had a kind of victorious smile and my father was quiet as tears fell from his eyes.

Of course my father is a rather sentimental...a rather sensitive man. So I grew up in this kind of environment. To tell the truth, generally there were not traditional gender norms in my home – I mean my parents' home. It was very different at my grandparents but it seemed as if I had a rebellious spirit. I never took those norms to heart, even if they forced me to do them. For example, after I finished sewing, I would forget how to do it again. I would not allow it to become an unconscious action. It was just something that I had to do, even though I didn't want to. If I did not do it, they would spank me, so I had no choice but to keep a stiff upper lip and do it. But after I returned to my parents, I was no longer controlled and repressed. I led a carefree life growing up. I think that my mother definitely was a woman with a vision. She had courage and insight and was daring. The kind of strength she had was certainly not any less than any man would have. So I...today...actually when I saw this project, only then did I think about my own home life and these two occasions. I completely forgot... it has been more than twenty years but since today you asked...that question caused me to reflect that my family was not a traditional family in a strict sense. This is probably the foundation for me to eventually accept feminism and become a feminist. Now I am very happily married. It is also because I have complete autonomy in my personal life.

**Zhang: Who was the one to make the first move in the relationship? (She laughs.)**

Ge: Well... (Laughs.) In the end a suitor emerged... (Laughs.) After that miserable... lonely, lonely seven or eight years I...

**Zhang: Patiently...**

Ge: After I endured seven or eight years of loneliness, this person emerged. I believe that this was fate; it would be very difficult to rationally analyze why I met this person.

He is very gentle and does not have any desire to control me. I take pride in my female friends' opinions of me. They say that I am the only person who they know who did not change after getting married. After they got married most of my female friends did not go out anymore. For at least four or five years, if you wanted to invite them to go out for drinks, see movies, or go to gatherings at other people's house and stay overnight, you would not be able to convince your married female friends go out with you. They can do these things when they are single or when they are not seeing anyone. But I still meet freely with my friends, and my husband... do you know what he will say to me? He tells me that if it is too far I should not return home that evening because he worries about my safety on my way home. He never tells me that I must come back before eight in the evening or not to go. On the contrary, he tells me that if it is too far or it becomes too late, then I should come home the next day.

**Zhang: Has he had any kind of gender training?**

Ge: No, no. I believe he is a... his... his disposition... he is a very gentle man. He is not the kind of person who takes pleasure in controlling other people or interfering in other people's lives. Perhaps this was fate. Actually when I started dating him, I had not yet become a feminist; I was still depressed. So, at that time I felt a little sad; good men did not ask me out. He was just a very ordinary guy. Only gradually did I realize his true value and now I feel that he is really an outstanding individual with a terrific character. He is not polluted by Chinese... traditional culture. This is really a rare attribute to find in a man who grew up in China. (She laughs.) His behavior is naturally gentle and fair and he would never control me.

So I feel very... very fortunate. This includes when I came here looking for work. I think every aspect of the job was quite...when I was about to graduate, I satisfied every aspect of the job description requirements, but then I saw the job was in Guangzhou.<sup>130</sup> When I found this job opportunity on line, he was laying in bed. (She laughs.) At that time the two of us were in the United States. I thought that I definitely should not consider this opportunity. Otherwise our household would not look like a household. I certainly was not thinking like a *xiao nu ren*.<sup>131</sup> But I believed the two of us should be together. When I went to the United States, my husband accompanied me. Meanwhile, I thought that it was a shame that I was going to have to pass up this opportunity. But my husband said to me, "If you like this job, you should not give it up because of me." So I said ok, I would try for the job. I started to write...write the application, started to send my résumé. I sat there while he lay on the bed. It was eleven or twelve o'clock at night when I discovered a work opportunity on line. Then I came back to China. We are still very much in love. Later many people would ask me, "Aren't you afraid he will cheat on you?" But I think a man with his kind of personality is not the kind pursued by today's young women, right? That is to say, perhaps from a traditional point of view, he is not a macho man. But I wonder what fosters that kind of gender notion that men should be

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<sup>130</sup> Guangzhou is the capital of Guangdong Province in southern China.

<sup>131</sup> The term *xiao nu ren* emerged recently in the discourse on femininity. It implies a feminine woman, who can be a career woman or woman with a full time job, but is preoccupied with domesticity and wants to emphasize her role as mother and wife.

macho, dominant, and self centered? And women are just their dependents?

So I think this was also fate – finding such a man. Actually when I was dating him, there was also another guy who was a Ph.D. student. At that time I lived at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences<sup>132</sup> by myself in a dormitory room. The Ph.D. guy often stopped by to talk to me, even though, in the end he never clearly told me how he felt. But, I knew that he had feelings for me. Every evening as soon as I got off work, he would come over to my dorm room to talk to me. At that time I was working at the Ford Foundation and living in a single room in the graduate student housing at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. People who lived there usually ate in the dining hall at night. But by the time I would get home from work, the food at the dining hall was sold out. So when the Ph.D. guy came over to talk, I would often be making myself instant noodles. He would already have eaten and then would come over my room to talk. So as I made my instant noodles, often adding two sausages, I would talk to him. He often said, “Your salary at the Ford Foundation is pretty high. You should go to a restaurant to eat. Why are you eating instant noodles?” My now husband would also sometimes come over to see me. He saw that I often ate instant noodles or only reheated leftover food. Although it was against the rules, I had a small electric burner that I hid in my room to use sometimes. He saw this and said “Let me make dinner for you.” Because my husband is ethnically Hui (Muslim), he did not like to eat at the dining hall. He said, “I make food for myself so making some for you is no problem. I know you cannot get back to eat dinner in the dining hall. So I am going to start making dinner for two.”

The contrast is obvious. Perhaps the Ph.D. guy today is already a professor or a scholar. But I think this really is not important for women. What is important is how your significant other loves and takes care of you. So of the two guys, I chose the latter. (Laughs.) I chose the one who made dinner for me. My husband is a very reliable person. He said that he would make me dinner and he did it everyday for more than a year until we were married. Then he continued to do it even after we were married. So today, even though my husband’s work and his accomplishments are average, his feelings toward me and his loving care of me have never changed, not even for a day. Moreover this kind of whole loving care meets my needs for space and my career development. He has never attempted to use his needs as a reason for me to abandon my needs. Thus, I think this kind of man is really valuable. I was very lucky to have met such a man. Moreover my husband is very handsome...(Laughs.)

**Zhang: Have you thought about women’s traditional roles such as preparing meals, doing the house work, being gentle, kind and considerate? Are they contradicting the subjectivity and autonomy of today’s women? If so, how should this be dealt with?**

Ge: I do not think there is a contradiction. Because things like preparing food, washing clothes, and doing housework are all necessary tasks for living. But we have two roles. We have a role in the realm of our personal lives and a role in the public sphere. As

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<sup>132</sup> The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is the national academy of the People’s Republic of China for the social sciences. It is an institution of the State Council of China. It was founded in May of 1977.

women, we have a responsibility to harmonize the roles of our personal and public lives, to fulfill these two roles. What I cannot accept is that because of the needs for women's roles in the private sphere, women must abandon their roles in the public sphere. This is unfair to women. No one has the right to force us to give this up. This includes people I love and people who love me. For example, now many people use love as a reason to make women give up many things. I do not think this kind of love is healthy; it is unhealthy and limiting. Now many women are confused by these kinds of things. They think that for the person they love, everything is worth doing. What kind of culture is this?! Why does our culture have to be built on the base of sacrifice? Why should happiness be built on someone else's sacrifice?

This again returns to how men and women in their personal lives bear ...together bear this responsibility, responsibility of domestic roles. What right do people have to push the roles and responsibilities of personal lives all on women so that men can completely devote themselves into the public sphere and make women sacrifice our roles in the public sphere. (Pause.) So in our families we must also pay attention to equality. Really it is this way – you should take on the responsibility to ensure an equal relationship. I believe that only when you have a fair relationship will you have a healthy relationship. Otherwise, women are oppressed. When I was young I still had the vain hope of love and a kind of illusion of romance; I thought I could be perfectly happy to sacrifice myself. But think about it – living a lifetime as a woman, then to the outside world you have not accomplished anything. Can a woman be perfectly happy this way? I do not think so. If a woman feels comfortable living like this, she has already been completely oppressed. Why did middle class women in the women's movement in America have that kind of "feminine mystique?" They experienced a kind of nameless depression and discontent. In the 60s, Betty Friedan and her group of feminists were middle-class women. They attended college, just like their husbands, but as soon as they had children, they stayed at home. Being at home, women then felt depressed. They could not clearly elucidate their feelings but they were not happy. They had money, security, guarantees and happiness, and perhaps their husbands really loved them. But they felt an indescribable depression, an indescribable force that stirred their hearts and minds. Until one day this thing burst free and was let out to form a new round of feminist movements in the 60s. Why did this occur? They wanted to find and return to their life space that they had lost, their public space.

As a person...we are social beings. We cannot completely separate ourselves from social life without feeling anything. If this kind of need is not satisfied but is repressed, of course we will naturally want to break free. This is also a kind of oppression. Our choices are restricted. The only reason is because we are women. It is not because we do not have capabilities. It is not because we do not have skills. It is not because we do not have vision. Isn't this gender inequality? A person who has dignity and self-awareness will without a doubt break free. She will definitely not be satisfied. Isn't this a forewarning of a new revolution? So I still want to call into question why a society would want to be built under a system that is not fair. Why do we demand a certain group of people, only because of their sex or because of their class...or because of their background, to give up, naturally give up certain things. Is this social justice? When

some people give up too much, isn't this a waste of people's intelligence and human resources?

Why does our society have to be built on this kind of irrational, unreasonable system? Why is it that some people's development is based on other people's complete lack of development? Look at some male chief executive officers, provincial governors, and county magistrates. Their advancements have been achieved at the cost of some other people's lack of progress. I want to question this mode of development. (Silence)

**Zhang: In your current work – in the current organization, have you introduced gender analysis?**

Ge: Yes, there is some but it is mostly done in many very subtle ways. Our work on the China project has not completely unfolded. Currently, the main aspect of our work is to provide training for factory workers as well as for factory managers, mainly managers in foreign investment enterprises. Now I pay close attention to our trainers. This group should be a balanced mix of men and women. In addition, our training materials should embrace the concept of gender equality. Another important point is who participates in our trainings. I want to show the factory management to see that if men and women can both participate in this kind of training, it will be beneficiary to the factory itself. There is also another point that is to our advantage. Eighty percent of the workers are women. Because we concentrate on the labor industry, eighty percent of the workers are women. So no matter how hard you try to block women's training opportunities, women still make up 80% of this labor pool. Thus, in the project that provides opportunities for workers' training, women workers have quite a lot of opportunities to participate. But in the project that provides training to managers, men make up more of the group. Factories generally are structured like a pyramid – the more you move towards the bottom, the more women there are. The more that you move towards the top, the more men there are. So this is a challenge for me.

Now I can only use my individual power to produce some sort of influence. For example, often when I come into contact with factory managers – high-level managers, I explain to them that in an industry with 80% women, it would be a very rational decision to have a reasonable proportion of female managers. Because women can perhaps better understand women's needs in work and in life. Maybe they can better communicate with female workers. Of course I only can use this kind of reasoning to exert a subtle influence on these factory managers. I want to battle this deeply ingrained sexism, but I know that the road I must travel is very long.

The principle of how I do things is that I do not deliberately create opportunities for myself. I merely wait for opportunities. That is to say, that I wait for opportunities to become ripe. But, when they do, I make the best use of every opportunity. That is why I think that I am not a person with wicked ambitions. In addition I do not feel sad when I have been marginalized because I do not have any huge desires. I do not have the desire for power. I do not have the desire for money. Of course, I wish for money but I will rely on my own hard work to get it. I would never take money from any of the projects

that I work on. In that aspect, I do not have the desire for money but I have a very strong ability to make money. For example, my salary for this job is very high. I am this kind of person. I would not deliberately pursue anything.

**Zhang: But you have been doing a lot of things.**

Ge: But all of these things are not purposefully done. Everything is because when conditions are ripe, opportunities have emerged. For example, I worked at the Ford Foundation for five years. My boss introduced me to the United Nations Development office. At the UN Development Office I naturally could accomplish these things and have these opportunities. Tony Saich<sup>133</sup> recommended me for a graduate degree at Harvard because I have made good use of these opportunities. Because I graduated from Harvard, I found this job. But none of these things happened because I purposefully pursued them. I do not purposefully pursue anything. But I believe that a person's hard work and a person's sincerity and earnestness will bring opportunities. If an opportunity presents itself, I do my very best. I think that this is my attitude in life and my way of doing things.

**Shi: I have a question that I'd like to ask. As someone who knows and understands China, how do you describe the kinds of resistance or conflict that western feminism faces in China? How do you see this? Second, as a forerunner in the promotion of Chinese feminism, what significance does this kind of work have for you? How would you evaluate yourself? How do you view yourself as a feminist?**

Ge: I think it is normal that feminist theories, when introduced to China, encounter obstacles. Why? It is because feminism wants to change the existing structure; it is this kind of movement and theory. As you can imagine, any kind of challenge to the existing order will meet with resistance. You cannot expect people who benefit from the existing order to happily give up some of their power. This challenge is also an ideological challenge. It is different from the mainstream Chinese ideology. So of course mainstream ideologists do not accept feminism. This is very normal because of feminism's revolutionary nature, political progressiveness and subversive qualities. Therefore when they get to know feminism, they turn pale with terror and start to resist it. So this exactly proves the revolutionary nature and the progressiveness of feminism as well as the power of this challenge and its subversive nature. So I think this is very normal... very normal. The implication of this kind of societal progress and this kind of cultural transformation is that many people must give up their benefits. No matter what, no one willingly gives up benefits which range from small things such as family relationships and gender relations, to big things like the country. So this is very normal. As for me, I will not abandon my goals because of these kinds of obstacles and resistance. Rather, I think that the very existence of this kind of resistance clearly indicates that feminism is valuable.

**Shi: Then, do we need to localize western feminism? (Laughs.)**

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<sup>133</sup> Tony Saich was the representative of the Ford Foundation's Beijing office. Currently he is a professor at Harvard University.

Ge: I discussed this in the beginning of this interview. I do not think this is necessary. Cultural and spiritual resources should not be categorized into different regions, countries, or ethnicities. My standard for judgment is to see whether it suits my needs or not. I am a free person. I have dignity. I have a valuable life. This is what I firmly believe about myself. So to decide what kind of theory or “ism” to embrace, I ask whether it is a kind of liberating power or a kind of suppressive power. If it can set me free, liberate me, allow me to realize my value, regardless of whether it is western or Chinese, I will embrace it. I believe that the needs for development, equality, and just treatment are instinctive; this is true for people in both the east and the west. So as I already said, why would I want to restrict my choices? I definitely would not reject feminism because it is Western. Moreover it is beneficial to my own individual pursuits. It is consistent with my values. Why would I want to give it up simply because it is Western. So in this sense, I do not think there is an issue of localizing feminism. I believe that a hope for the future existence of the human race exists and we share a most basic humanity. I definitely do not believe that some people innately tend to embrace oppression, inequality and hierarchy, self negativity and self rejection. If a person purposefully embraces this kind of “eastern” despotism and culture of hierarchy, it is because he has already been alienated by this despotism and culture of hierarchy. I do not think that is his humanity; his life essence or his conscious pursuits. If you give him an option, what do you think he would pursue? His choice for despotism and culture of hierarchy only comes when he is in a situation where there are no choices. Many people do not know that they do not have options. I want to have choices. Moreover, I am the subject of my own choice. So I do not restrict my own choices because I have dignity. I hope that this kind of choice is completely autonomous.

I believe that Chinese feminism faces the problem that it must consciously unearth its own resources and summarize its own thoughts and spiritual value. What I cannot agree with is that before we find out what we ourselves have, we blindly reject any outside resources. But I also think that it is very important for us to actively work on our own cultural resources and spiritual resources. But now this is not being seriously undertaken. More often people are using their energy to negate other people. I believe that this is useless. When I embrace the west, I am not in any way negating the values in our country. But you need to show them to me in a theorized, well-articulated form. Show me that this is a choice; let me do a comparison. Currently I have experienced my own country’s values as oppressive and exploitative. Do some theorizing, and like the Western feminist theories have done, show me a systematic and rich theoretical resource. Allow me to choose. Of course, I will choose the one that is better for me. The problem is that people have not done any of these things, yet they still negate others. Moreover, other people have spent two hundred years developing such a cultural asset, spiritual asset, and intellectual asset. Why do we want to negate this only because it is Western? Is this an honest conclusion? Is this an honest process; is it a rational process? This is what I want to question. I don’t think it is a rational process. I am not afraid of other people calling me a traitor because I think that I am rational. Moreover, I am autonomous. I have dignity and I am free. This kind of freedom includes being free of anyone restricting my choices. No one should label me. They cannot restrict me with

their label of nation, culture or territory. I think I am pursuing or embracing certain kind of ideas according to my essential needs for life.

**Shi: As you have gone through this process, how would you evaluate yourself?**

Ge: I feel I am very happy. I feel I am very happy.

**Shi: Becoming a feminist has made you very happy.**

Ge: Very happy. I am extremely happy. It is like I said – I am free and no one can restrict me. This freedom includes having a free body and a free spirit. Moreover, I am autonomous. No one can make me...no one can violate my will and force me to do something. I have the ability to be autonomous. Things that I do are all things that I am willing to do and that I want to do.

**Shi: As an individual who has facilitated the process of the Chinese women's movement, how do you see yourself?**

Ge: I am just a drop in the ocean. (Laughs.) I do not think too much about myself. I am just an active participant. I am even more a beneficiary. I am first a beneficiary; my benefits are that I was liberated. Then, because I received benefits, I participated, and became a participant.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: CHINA**

**Transcript of He Zhonghua  
Interviewer: Wang Jinling**

**Location: Lijiang, Yunnan  
Date: August 2005  
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**He Zhonghua**, born in 1937, is from the Naxi ethnic minority in Yunnan. A professor of literature, she established a women's studies center in the Academy of Social Sciences in Yunnan in the early 1990s. After she retired, Professor He set up a minority women research center in Yunnan. She has been involved in many research and activist projects, ranging from improving ethnic minority women's health in poor areas to empowering women to participate in rural development and community management.

**Wang Jinling (hereafter referred to as Wang): Today we have come to visit Professor He Zhonghua in Lijiang, Yunnan. Professor He, thank you for doing this interview with us. First, would you mind telling us your name, when you were born, and some of your experiences when you were growing up?**

Professor He (sitting, in ethnic clothing.): My name is He Zhonghua, and my ethnicity is Naxi.<sup>134</sup> I was born in 1937, during the Sino-Japanese War.<sup>135</sup> Up until the time when I was eleven years old, I grew up in a small mountain village called Shigu near the Jinsha River. My hometown was Gucheng. Only after I turned eleven did I return to my hometown, Gucheng in Lijiang. Basically I attended elementary school, middle school and high school in my hometown. Prior to fifth grade I was in Shigu and then from sixth grade straight through until I graduated from high school, I attended school in Gucheng, Lijiang. This region has been the main area that claims a large Naxi population. It also has many Han people. Those Han peoples, whose ancestors came to the area a long time ago, all wear traditional Naxi clothing and speak the Naxi dialect. They call us “the native people” and we call them “the Han people.” We live together in peace and harmony. So we have always all been extremely friendly to each other. This area also has very many other ethnicities. On the other side of the Jinsha River is the Tibetan ethnic minority area. Also on the side where Mt. Small Xiaoliang is, there are the Yi ethnic minority people. In addition the Bai people live in this area with us. In fact the environment is like living in a big family full of people from different ethnic groups. Because Lijiang is an area where a lot of Naxi people live, it has become the only autonomous county for the Naxi ethnic group in the whole country. The Naxi ethnic group’s autonomous county is Lijiang. In the past this area was called the Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County. Now after Lijiang has turned into a city, it is called the Yulong Naxi Ethnic Autonomous County. So I grew up surrounded by Naxi culture. My parents and all of my ancestors are all Naxi peoples. Thus, I have very strong feelings for the culture and many other aspects of our ethnic group.

**Wang: What did your parents do?**

He: My mother was an ordinary Naxi woman and lived on... Well, we lived in a small rural town. She mainly was involved in the small handicraft industry. Take a look – this thing that I am wearing on my back! This is my mother’s embroidery.

**Wang: Oh! How beautiful!**

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<sup>134</sup> Naxi is one of the minorities in the People’s Republic of China. The Naxi people generally inhabit in Yunnan Province, a province in the southwestern China. These people and their lands were integrated into China gradually since several hundreds years ago. The Han people, the ethnic majority in China, constitute about 93 percent of the population.

<sup>135</sup> The Sino-Japanese War, part of World War II, started in 1937 when the Japanese invaded China and ended in 1945.

He: My mother took care of me when I was young. She left this to me when she passed away. She made her living by making embroidery and selling small goods. As for my father, he went to the front lines in the war against the Japanese when I was one year old. So, I don't remember him. I have heard that he was a teacher at the village elementary school.

**Wang: So, you never even saw your father?**

He: Right, I never even saw him.

**Wang: So you were raised by your mother?**

He: Right, I was raised by my mom.

**Wang: Did your mom have a very big influence on your life?**

He: Yes, very big. I was born and grew up in a Naxi ethnic area that had Gucheng as the center. Starting from the period of the Ming Dynasty<sup>136</sup> this area began to be influenced by the Han culture. At that time we were ruled under the tribal chieftainship system.<sup>137</sup> The headmen's surname was Mu and the average people were surnamed He. Later we began to accept and take on Han culture. Then, in the first year of Yongzheng,<sup>138</sup> 1723, the border areas all changed from the tribal chieftainship system to the standard Chinese bureaucratic system. The central government sent officials to govern ethnic minority areas. So at that time these officials implemented the policy of "civilizing ethnic minorities with Chinese culture." It means they proposed that the native people "learn the Han written language and imitate the Han customs." In order to accept the Han cultural education, changes were made to some of our ethnic customs. We had to follow the Han customs.

So the culture was like this. Take for example my mother's Naxi ancestors. Since the policy of changing from the tribal chieftainship system to the standard Chinese bureaucratic system was implemented, ordinary people's children started to have the opportunity to go to school where they would be taught about Han culture. Also the imperial civil service examination system<sup>139</sup> opened opportunities for scholars to have an official career. My maternal family produced a Hanlin.<sup>140</sup> In the history of our Naxi people there were only two Hanlins, from the Yongzheng era to the early twentieth century when the examination system was abolished. There were also very many

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<sup>136</sup> The Ming dynasty, which lasted from 1368-1644, was one of the dynasties of imperial China.

<sup>137</sup> The tribal chieftainship or *tusi* system was a system of appointing national minority headmen during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties.

<sup>138</sup> The Yongzheng period of the Qing dynasty: 1723-1735.

<sup>139</sup> The Chinese imperial government held civil service examinations regularly to recruit bureaucrats from the educated. This was abolished in 1905, several years before the last dynasty was overthrown.

<sup>140</sup> Hanlin was the name used to call selected imperial students (who had passed the highest level of imperial civil service examinations) that entered the prestigious imperial Hanlin Academy. These *hanlins* were more likely to have a successful political career and therefore were highly regarded.

*jinshi*,<sup>141</sup> but I cannot remember the exact number. On my father's side, my great-great grandfather was an imperial student by virtue of special selection – through the imperial civil service examination system. In the past the Han peoples believed it was important to build marriage alliances with families of similar socio-cultural status. Thus, the influence of Han culture on the upper echelons of the Naxi people was very deep. My mother was born and grew up in this kind of environment. Well, my grandmother got married when she was seventeen years old; this was an arranged marriage. Her family took on the customs of the Han people and her marriage was arranged. Later, because she didn't give birth to a boy, my grandfather married several other women since he was the only son in his family.<sup>142</sup> Therefore my grandmother, who was left destitute, took my mother and my mother's younger sister to the waterfront area of the Jinsha River in order to make a living. Later, after my aunt, my mother's younger sister, got married, my mother and my grandmother lived together. Then I was born. My family was special since it consisted of three generations of women. My grandfather married concubines and they lived in his hometown, while we lived in the Jinsha waterfront area. After my mother got married, my father left home to fight in the war. Therefore my mother took care of my grandmother and lived with her. I also was a girl; so these women of three generations lived together.

**Wang: So your mother only had one child?**

He: She had given birth to a boy, twelve years before me. But, he didn't survive.

**Wang: So, in fact, it was only you.**

He: Yes, just me; I was an only child.

**Wang: So, since you grew up in this kind of environment, did your mother and grandmother have a big influence on your life?**

He: They had a tremendous influence. My grandmother had a really strong personality and was the kind of person who was always ready to defend the weak against injustice. Therefore, in her hometown, there are still stories told about her. When I was young my mother had to go out and make a living for us so my grandmother took most of the responsibility for raising me. Therefore I was taught about a lot of medicinal herbs and also many stories about the Naxi people. My grandmother taught me all of these things. Since the time when I was very young, I grew up being told Naxi stories. Therefore I learned of the Naxi culture at a very young age; my grandmother was my earliest teacher. But later, when I had not yet turned ten years old, my grandmother had to leave to take care of my aunt, the daughter of my grandfather's concubine. My grandfather had married several women in the hopes of having a son, but none of his wives had boys. Therefore my grandfather took a man into the family as his son-in-law<sup>143</sup> for that concubine's daughter. After she got married to him, they had a child. My grandfather's

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<sup>141</sup> *Jinshi* refers to successful candidates in the highest level of the imperial examinations.

<sup>142</sup> It was very important for a Chinese family to produce male offspring to carry on the patrilineal line.

<sup>143</sup> Traditionally when a woman married she would go to live with the man's family.

other wives all had already passed away and my grandmother was the only wife who was still alive. So he took my grandmother back in order to take care of the household. So from that time forward I lived with my mother. She really had the greatest influence on me. She was extremely honest, kind and very industrious; she was also very tolerant. All of her qualities have greatly influenced me. The other situation that had a big influence on me was the special composition of our family household. Basically my grandmother was a widow with a living husband; my mother also found herself in this situation; compared to that of a widow...<sup>144</sup> Thus, at that time my mother was bullied by other people in the clan, because she gave birth to a girl. If I had been a boy we would have had a very different status in the family. In addition she was looked down upon because my father was not at home. Later, I remember I wanted to attend middle school. Since my mother felt the Jinsha waterfront area was not very safe, she wanted to move back to our hometown but at the time they did not allow her to do so. They told her to wait until my father came back and only then would they allow her to return home. I always thought that they bullied my mother. At that time, I remember wishing that I had been born a boy.

(They change the location of the interview. He Zhonghua is wearing traditional ethnic dress and standing.)

He: During the time period when I went to elementary school, middle school and high school – before I went to college – I grew up in the Naxi area. So, even though we studied Han culture, we were immersed in Naxi culture in our surrounding environment. I grew up in this kind of environment and never really felt like I was different. Then I went to a college in Chongqing,<sup>145</sup> which is the present day Southwest Normal University. Before I was ten years old we moved from the Jinsha River's grand canyon area to the city of Gucheng. The move to the city really broadened my perspective and way of looking at things. Then, I moved from Gucheng to Chongqing. Chongqing was a place of strategic importance in the southwest and therefore further broadened my vision. From an intellectual perspective it was the feeling of moving from the edge of the well to the edge of the sea. Thus, I felt really happy and very lucky, since before the establishment of the new China<sup>146</sup> very few Naxi women had the opportunity to go to college. After all, this was extremely rare. So I was very lucky to be offered this opportunity to attend university. At the time the country was advocating the equality of men and women and the equality of the different ethnic groups. I directly benefited from these government policies. Therefore I was able to set foot in the treasured halls of academia. At that time I was a student in the Chinese language department and eagerly took in everything that I could. The Han Chinese culture is broad and profound and this rich wealth of knowledge excited me beyond belief. It also caused me to even more deeply love the big family of the Chinese nation. Meanwhile, historically ethnic minority areas were considered to be barbaric and backwards. Because the lack of a mutual

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<sup>144</sup> Their situation was often even worse than a true widow.

<sup>145</sup> Chongqing has been an important political and economic center of southwestern China. During the Sino-Japanese war, it served as the capital of the nationalist government.

<sup>146</sup> People often use "the new China" to refer to the People's Republic of China, which was established in 1949.

understanding in addition to some discriminatory government policies in the old times, people on the outside really had very little understanding of ethnic minorities. Although at the university the learning environment and the teachers were excellent and my classmates were all really good to me, sometimes they raised some questions that were so ignorant that I did not know how to deal with them. I really came to understand how little others knew or understood about ethnic minorities. So as an ethnic minority I felt I had a kind of sense of responsibility to my people. Since I had the opportunity to enter an institute of higher education, I must repay my people by helping others gain a better understanding of the real situation of ethnic minorities.

(They change the location of the interview. He is wearing ethnic clothes and sitting.)

Yunnan is a province in the border area that has many different ethnic groups. Twenty-six different ethnic groups, twenty-five of which are ethnic minorities, have lived on this land for generations. Each ethnic group has its own unique and rich culture. As I said earlier, these cultures must be made known to others. Therefore, there are many ethnologists and anthropologists in Yunnan province who are making such efforts. So, as a woman, I studied the cultures of ethnic minorities, with a special emphasis on the Naxi culture. This was because I was already quite familiar with Naxi culture. I felt that I was well positioned to study the language, culture and mentality of the Naxi people. Moreover, I also had the opportunity to enter the Chinese language department to study and this was another advantage. Therefore I took full advantage of my resources. I would count as one of the earliest people who paid attention to the cultures of ethnic minorities.

In my research, I felt that women have played a unique role in creating, preserving, inheriting and promoting ethnic minority cultures. However, their role had not been recognized. Therefore I focused my attention and research on women in ethnic minority groups. During this time, that is, for more than the past twenty years, I have traveled to nearly all of the ethnic minority border areas in the province. I would like to briefly introduce several of the ethnic minorities. (She shows some pictures.) These are the Yi people – all of these people live in Yunnan; these are the Tibetan minority peoples. Here are the Lusu people. All of these pictures were taken when I was doing research, so you can see me in there. These are the Jinuo people; these are the Pumi people; here are the Dai people, here are some Mosuo people of our Naxi ethnic group. There are also many other ethnic groups, but here I will not introduce them in detail.

(They change the location of the interview. He Zhonghua is wearing a black jacket.)

**Wang: Professor He, in yesterday's interview, you talked about how you came to pay attention to the cultures of ethnic minorities. Then you discussed how you came to emphasize minority women. Did you change your research focus through some projects?**

He: I myself went through a process when I changed from the study of ethnic minority cultures to that of researching minority women. In this transformation from studying culture to studying women, my focal point was women's culture within ethnic minority

groups. This was the period before the 1995 World Women's Conference.<sup>147</sup> I took part in...I wrote some articles. The earliest one was about the Naxi Dongba culture.<sup>148</sup> It illustrates the evolution of female worship in the Dongba culture. I examined the evolution from female worship to male worship as well as the changes in women's status in this process. I started from this project and then moved on to study other ethnic minorities, because there are similar cultural phenomena in these ethnic minorities. Even before the World Conference on Women, I had already participated in and helped organize the project of compiling a book series on women's culture in ethnic minorities in Yunnan. In total, there were more than twenty volumes in this collection. Basically each volume was dedicated to a different ethnic minority. I was a participant in this collective endeavor. After the 1995 World Conference on Women, I had a clearer understanding of many things. My own experiences paralleled this process. First in my own research on minority cultures I came to know many organizations. At that time some overseas foundations, like the Ford Foundation, sponsored some poverty projects and a forestry project. In the implementation of these projects, they required...they as sponsors required that one-third of the participants in the project must be ethnic minorities and one-third must be women. This was a special requirement. Therefore, the people in charge of these projects tried to recruit people like me – those that were both ethnic minorities and women – into the projects. During the process of participating in this project, my role was to continuously pay attention to issues like women's status and their roles in the forestry project. This is my research in real world projects. In the meantime, I conducted my research on culture as well. I went to the grassroots level to better understand the situation. At that time, this effort enabled me to step out of pure academic research and go to the grassroots level to learn about the basic conditions of women's lives in these areas. Looking at this from another angle, I felt that many of my resources, including the research materials and my research projects, came from them. Therefore I should repay these peoples in my research. I cannot regard them merely as the providers of my research materials or my research objects. Therefore, after I had this kind of experience, I gradually changed my focal point from culture to practice, which involved projects of ethnic minority women's development.

It was after the 1995 World Conference on Women when I especially felt the importance of women's participation in society. Thus, I applied for a project in this area at that time. The project investigated the participation and development of ethnic minority women in Yunnan province. That project involved more than a dozen ethnic minorities. So I went to visit many places. The investigation had a tremendous impact on me, both emotionally and intellectually. From this time forward, I could not help but become more engaged in this kind of work. I have basically invested all of my energy towards working on projects. When I had any free time I would reflect on what I have felt and what I have realized during the process and then wrote them down. This is basically what I did in the process. For these two years, I have become more involved in these processes. I have also personally developed where I came to understand that we should not consider ourselves

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<sup>147</sup> He Zhonghua is referring to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing, China in 1995.

<sup>148</sup> Like the Maya in South America, the Naxi developed a culture closely tied to religion, known as Dongba, and passed down a system of hieroglyphics by word-of-mouth.

as the messiah. Instead, we should share achievements, experiences and hardship with our sisters. I feel that we must look at things from their perspective; we should not be condescending. Right? This is extremely important. I really think that this is extremely important for my research. I have learned a lot in this aspect. Later I will discuss this issue a bit more.

Then... Well, my long-term examination of Mosuo<sup>149</sup> women was... From the very beginning of this research until the completion of the book, it took more than twelve years. In these twelve years, at the beginning I was still working. If my goal was to gain a higher title or academic post, then I should have published this book before I retired. This would have helped me gain a higher position. But, at that time I thought, since I was investigating the changes in the matriarchal system of the Mosuo people in modern times, a kind of cultural change that requires a relatively long period of time to investigate, I could not complete this project in one or two days. Otherwise I would not be able to grasp the true nature of the changes. Therefore I gave up these concerns and decided not to write. Instead, for many years I simply tracked the changes; every one or two years I went to visit my chosen research sites and the women there. So by the time the book was finished I had already retired. I had some friends who really did not understand why I decided to do things the way that I did. They asked me why I did not just write the book sooner. Actually, I did have a lot of research materials. At that time I felt that as a responsible researcher, I should not think about the individual benefits but instead should focus on leaving behind authentic research for the next generation. Now sometimes it is really a kind of consolation to me that the Mosuo people highly evaluate my work because of all the efforts I put in it. When young scholars go to Mosuo villages to do research, the Mosuo people tell them: "If you want to introduce our culture to others, please be careful. You should look at Professor He's book and write about us truthfully just like she did. The director of the Women's Federation for the Mosuo people<sup>150</sup> once spoke at a provincial level conference: People have written a lot of articles about us Mosuo, but it was only Professor He who really got to know us. She stood with us together and spent a lot of time with us; she helped us to say the things that we wanted others to know about us." Wow! I really feel this is the highest praise that I could receive. Although I have given up a lot of things, I feel...I can console myself in this way. But I am also not saying what I have written is terrific, because in no way am I perfect and after all, I have not lived among these people and also did not live in that area. So I acknowledge that there are still cultural barriers that I have not overcome. But, I recognize that the only thing that I can do is to work very hard at overcoming these cultural barriers. I cannot impose some monolithic ideas and frameworks on their culture. Right? Therefore, in order to understand what these women are thinking, what these women are doing, why they want to do things in the way that they do, I cannot look

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<sup>149</sup> Mosuo is an ethnic minority in the Yunnan area. It has maintained to some degree the so-called "matriarchy system." Mosuo people traditionally do not practice monogamy but "Walking Marriage." Women occupy a very special position in family and society because they define the family line and only women can inherit. Western scholars have been especially interested in studying the Mosuo family system, but Mosuo women believe that these scholars have not accurately portrayed their lives.

<sup>150</sup> The Women's Federation has a multi-level administrative network, parallel to the government administrative structure. Therefore, there is a Women's Federation for the administrative region where the Mosuo people inhabit.

at these things from my own perspective. I need to think about these issues from their point of view. Learning to see from their perspective was my greatest gain during the course of my research. So this is a... The most important aspect of my research was to pay attention to their development and changes. This is especially important in the time of economic globalization. In this kind of situation, we have to recognize that these ethnic minority areas do not exist in isolation like they did in the past. There have been a lot of outside cultural influences that have entered this area. Native cultures are facing unprecedented challenges. In this kind of situation, cultural adjustments and integrations are worth the consideration and research of social science scholars. I think that this time period, when a society is transforming, is extremely precious; therefore we need to pay particular attention to this kind of cultural phenomenon. This is the cultural aspect. Also when we look at this from people's point of view, both men's and women's communities are facing various transformations in ideas, roles and other aspects. They also face a lot of difficulties. So in the process of my research and projects, I deeply felt that there was the need to enhance woman's abilities. Women should first of all improve themselves. Like the old saying says, "If you want to work on iron you have to build yourself strong." Right? In addition women must actively participate. We cannot simply import outside ideas without taking into consideration our own experiences. I think this approach is too superficial.

So I did all these... In the last two years, I participated in the American Nature Conservancy's "Photovoice" project.<sup>151</sup> As for the original intent of the Photovoice project, it attempted to... The American Nature Conservancy and the Yunnan Provincial government collaborate to form a nature protection plan for the "Three Rivers Area"<sup>152</sup> of northwestern Yunnan. This area was especially precious because of the diversity of animals and plants and its dense multiplicity of cultures. Many things that have already

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<sup>151</sup> Photovoice is a community involvement concept which provides cameras and film to local people in order to document and communicate their environment and cultures. After selecting four to five villages interested in using Photovoice, The Nature Conservancy holds meetings to explain the project and selects volunteers from a range of ages in each village. Participants receive cameras, film and basic photography training. Over the course of a year, they capture images of their everyday life and work, religious rituals and family activities, with a focus on their interaction with the surrounding environment. At regular meetings, the groups share their photographs and discuss the issues and themes they illustrate. At the end of each project, copies of the photographs with their stories and themes are presented to conservation site planners, public officials, local communities and other stakeholders. The specific goals of the Photovoice Project are to provide a concrete way for local people to record what they value about culture and nature and to define how natural and cultural resources can be protected. It is well-suited to remote rural areas where people have had minimal access to education and few opportunities to give voice to their own, perspectives. The project aims to give communities a chance to shape policy. Villagers need a forum to have their voices heard in order to increase their stake in the outcomes of conservation planning. Finally, the project offers a process to document natural and cultural resources in a rapidly changing China. For additional information see the Nature Conservancy homepage: <http://nature.org/>

<sup>152</sup> The Three Rivers Area is recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage. Consisting of eight geographical clusters of protected areas within the boundaries of the Three Parallel Rivers National Park, in the mountainous north-west of Yunnan Province, the 1.7 million hectare site features sections of the upper reaches of three of the great rivers of Asia: the Yangtze (Jinsha), Mekong and Salween run roughly parallel, north to south, through steep gorges which, in places, are 3,000 meters deep and are bordered by glaciated peaks more than 6,000 meters high. The site is an epicentre of Chinese biodiversity. It is also one of the richest temperate regions of the world in terms of biodiversity.

vanished in other areas of the world still exist there, in terms of both nature and culture. Therefore in order to make a plan, cameras were given to the local farmers. They decided what to take photos of on their own; we did not tell them what sorts of photos they should take or not take. We told them the goals of the project. They would speak about their thoughts, their perspective and what they wanted to say through the pictures. After we did this, in my gender perspective, I felt this was a part of women's capacity building. Moreover, it can also be considered an attempt to enable women to directly participate in significant policy-making. This is the way that I look at this project. Well, today I am going to visit He Yunying – one of our “photographers.” She has taken some great pictures. Many of these pictures have been featured in some publications and magazines around the world. The Yunnan television station also asked her to come to the station to discuss some of her thoughts and feelings about protecting the environment. Feedback on this has been terrific.

(They change the location of the interview. He is wearing a black outfit and a native woman from Yunnan is with her.)

He: This is the Photovoice project. We began the project in 2002 and now it has already ended.

(Conversation in a minority dialect. Below is a summary of their conversation):

Gele Village of the Haibei Administrative District, Lashi City, Yulong County of Lijiang, Yunnan Province

Yunnan woman: After we participated in the Photovoice project, we came to realize the importance of protecting the ecological environment and to love our nature even more deeply. We not only acted on our own initiatives but also influenced people around us. When we took these pictures, we had a lot of thoughts. For instance, the fish stock has been depleted; this is partially because of pollution. After we applied agricultural chemicals we washed the bottle caps in the lake. This caused the water to become polluted. In the past we did not pay attention to this, but now we have come to realize that this is a problem. We gained confidence in ourselves through taking pictures. In the past things that we did not even dare to think about, nowadays we have the courage to take action. Now my family has contracted a part of a mountain where special mushrooms grow. During the course of a year we must live on the mountain for four or five months to take care of the forest. When we pick the mushrooms, we make a profit of about four or five thousand yuan<sup>153</sup> per year.

He: These are some pictures about protecting the environment that she took. These pictures have been highly praised in other places. And she herself... She has become more confident in herself.

(They change the location of the interview and are now in Yuhu Village.)

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<sup>153</sup> As of October 2006, the exchange rate is 1 U.S. dollar ≈ 8 yuan.

**Wang: Professor He, could you now talk about another project that you are engaged in here?**

He: This village is called the Yuhu Administrative Village. The project we are working on here is called the “Photographic Story.” Why did I choose this village? This village...for me... I have chosen it based on my experience and relations with this village. The first time I came to this village was in 1993, for a tourist development project funded by the Ford Foundation. So this is what brought me here for the first time. This village in the Lijiang dam area was very impoverished at that time. Its topography is quite high. Among the villages in the Lijiang dam area, it is the closest to Snow Mountain; it is a village under the foothills of the Snow Mountain. The area is quite poor because among other things, the soil quality is barren, the climate is rather warm and the altitude is quite high. In addition, although it has some natural resources, they were not wisely used. So there are many reasons that have contributed to the impoverished condition in this village. After all these years, the most drastic change is that it has found... This village is located within the scenic district of the Yulong Snow Mountain. Because of this, it has a lot of resources. So in this couple of years, it has found a good way to develop; that is tourism. And tourism has facilitated the development of the whole economy. For example, look at the houses. Their changes are really moving for me. Every time I come they seem to have changed and gotten better and better. Thus this is why our Photographic Story project takes place here. Our project uses the picture as a method. We give cameras to the local villagers and let them show how they want the environmental protection and community development to be done. Then the final goal is to prepare a plan for a comprehensive community development project.

**Wang: So through the pictures people could find their demands and explore their potential?**

He: Right, explore their potential. At that time, we thought...Well, I had participated in some projects carried out by foreign organizations. This time we ourselves are in charge of this project. From the perspective of researchers, we want to explore the way to localize some foreign methods and concepts. In addition, from the villagers’ perspective, this is a means of participation. This project and the Photovoice project are different in that the latter project was designed as an environmental protection project. The final goal of the project that we are doing now is to publish a handbook. We try to explore how to use photos as a method, using photos as a tool of research and a means to collect information. Moreover this kind of information comes directly from the grassroots level, from the field. Using this method, like we have for the previous two years, one thing that we learned is that when we as social sciences scholars do fieldwork in the country, we – for example I myself – always design some methods and questions that I want to ask. Then, actually the villagers are telling us stories that have already been framed by our minds. After we get their stories, we put them into our papers and practices and in this process they are filtered by our views once again. Right? In this way we are always the ones that take the initiative and the villagers are always passive. They are not participating as subjects. Now we want them to be the main subjects in the project, and

we want them to be able to express their demands and their wishes directly, and also reveal their own points of view.

**Wang: This would be especially important for women – in the past their voice was not heard.**

He: Mmm, when we were designing this project we had a principle for selecting our participants. We wanted an equal number of men and women, people representing the elderly, middle aged and young generations, and those from all levels of socio-economic backgrounds. We also wanted the composition of the group to be diverse; the village level cadres should not make up more than ten percent of our group and instead it was mainly composed of ordinary peasants. These people are those whose voice can hardly be heard in community planning, especially women – their voice in the public domain is not heard. So this time we want them to directly voice their opinions, through pictures. Moreover we pay more attention to the stories behind the pictures and how these women see things. So when we planned this project we especially emphasized the issue of gender consciousness. Therefore in a certain sense – yesterday I might have discussed this – they are direct participants in the planning for the entire community, the community development plan. Therefore essentially this is a way of promoting their abilities. Therefore I feel this project is representative. Why is it representative? This area originally was a very impoverished village. After the development of tourism, it became a rather wealthy area. It not only became wealthy, but also people's mental outlook improved. So it was not only an increase in people's income, but changes that occurred in many different areas. The people who participated in the tourism industry were both men and women. The most well-developed service was horse riding guides. Visitors ride on horseback and they are led by guides into Yulong Snow Mountain. Men and women, old and young, served as guides. The proportion of women was rather large. They directly participated in these economic activities. In the past women did housework and worked in the fields. That was their space of activity. Now they were engaging in the market. Therefore, their mental outlook in various aspects changed in a very big way. As we carried out this project, impoverished women gradually became more and more well off. Thus, within this project there were a lot of things that we felt were really worthy of further thought.

**Wang: I assume that there are also some local experiences.**

He: Yes. I have just discussed one of the reasons why I chose this village. That is the problem of poverty. We wanted to see how to make changes in an impoverished area so that it could slowly become better off. Another reason is that... I have mentioned it earlier. I feel a kind of emotional attachment to this village. I first came to this village when I participated in a project in 1993. At that time, the area was rather poor. At that time the government started to prohibit cutting down trees. This area is at the foot of Yulong Mountain and very close to the forest. Local people used to rely on lumber to subsidize the economy. Lumber became the main source of income for people's livelihoods. But, lumbering resulted in barren land and the agricultural products from this area were not very good. In addition it was hard to preserve the water and soil; it

mainly was sand and stones. Moreover there is the factor of global warming. Thus for many different reasons people's lives in this village in the Lijiang Dam area were quite impoverished. This made a very deep impression on me. Another deep impression was...From women's point of view, when we started the project of eco-tourism, we insisted on a gender perspective. So...At that time, the road looked nothing like its present condition. It was barely passable and the water was shallow. The road and water passage became one. Drinking water came from that area where people walk and horses pass. Therefore this directly impacted the quality of water in the area and the health of humans and livestock. There was also another problem – the water source area. We can go in a while and see the lake. In the lake there are salmon. People raise them to eat. Local people do not raise this fish; a work unit raises them. The abandoned fish, animal manure and other dirty things all flow into these ditches. Therefore these pollutants are a very big problem; the pollution is very bad. Therefore after the conclusion of our project, the project group used project funds to repair a canal. Several years later I went to this village and found the greatest change. The government allocated some funds to build direct pipes from the mountain that bring water to each household. Therefore their water is clean now. I am moved by the way the village looks now. In addition, I came here in 1996 after a great earthquake in Lijiang. During that time I also went there to help with disaster relief. Everything really was in terrible disarray. The dilapidated walls and crumbling buildings were a horrible scene of devastation. In the few years following this tragedy, you could still see the damaging effects of the earthquake. Many houses collapsed but people could not afford to have them repaired. This happened to a lot of families. But last year when I arrived, I simply could not believe my eyes. Oh my gosh! How could there have been such drastic changes? Therefore I have become very interested in seeing the community develop.

The final goals of our “photographic story” project were to publish a handbook and create a development plan in this community. This plan was designed to protect the local ecology; also it sought to protect and respect the cultural diversity of the area when deciding how to develop the economy and to raise the standard of living of the inhabitants. This was our thought. But actually it was not our plan but instead the plan that naturally came about after these photographers took the pictures of their community. From the exhibitions of their photos, all kinds of information were collected. Naturally the blueprint of a future plan for development came into being.

**Wang: Then different groups of people worked on this together?**

He: Right, we all worked together on this.

(They change the location of the interview. He Zhonghua is with a woman from that area.)

He: This woman's name is Li Jinxin; she has worked for nineteen years all together as a village cadre. The second time that I came here she had stopped working as a village cadre. Mrs. Li, how many years had you already stopped working?

Li: I had already stopped working for twenty years.

He: So twenty years later, the people in the village elected her again; they wanted her to work as the village party secretary. Then this time we asked her to become one of our photographers. I wanted to ask her to talk about how the changes had impacted the women in the village and also how she feels about the photography project.

(Conversation in a minority dialect. The following section is a summary of Li Jinxing's words. )

Li Jinxing, a Naxi ethnic minority from Yuhu Village (Yunnan Province Lijiang City Yulong County Beisha Township Yuhu administrative village):

“The photographic story” project is a very good project. In the past other people did not know what kind of ideas I had. Now through these pictures we can let the government know our opinions. Although I am not so young anymore, I can still do some things. I like doing this kind of work.

In the past our village was rather poor. Now the tourist industry has developed and our lives have improved; this has brought benefits for women. Here this region is half mountainous; the climate is horrible; and people have a difficult time making ends meet. The women had to go to Snow Mountain to chop down bamboo to make brooms in order to make a little money. This was physically demanding for women; it had also destroyed the ecology. Now they can make some money by leading horses for the tourists. This has not only increased their income and lessened the burden for women, but also has protected the ecological environment.

(They change the location of the interview to the canal.)

**Wang: Professor He, this is the canal that your project worked on, right?**

He: Right, right, right. This is it.

(They change the location of the interview to the Lijiang Research Association of Ethnic Culture and Gender.)

He: These are the core members of our organization. We worked together on some projects. Besides working on the projects, we have also done some theoretical research. Considering current and future development, we want the old, middle-aged and young to work together. We feel the happiest when our male colleagues are also represented and have participated. This person is the representative of our male colleagues. We also have other male colleagues. Moreover, our current and future research emphasis is using a gender perspective to look at such topics as ethnic minority women, the development of

ethnic minorities, natural resource management and environmental protection. In addition, while implementing the projects we want to continue to think about theories.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: CHINA**

**Transcript of Li Huiying  
Interviewer: Zhang Jian**

**Location: Courtyard of the Central Party School  
and Li Huiying's house (Beijing)**

**Date: March 12, 2004**

**Translated by: Kim Dorazio**

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**Li Huiying**, born in 1957, is Professor of Sociology and assistant Director of the Women Research Center of the Central Party School, a school providing training for senior level Chinese Communist Party officials. The Center is housed within the School, but runs as an independent unit. Professor Li is the major figure to promote gender related courses in the Central Party School and has succeeded in incorporating courses on gender studies in the official curriculum. In recent years her activism has expanded beyond the Central Party School to include the whole system of the party school by running feminist workshops for faculty from provincial and municipal party schools nationwide. Professor Li has also published widely on gender and public policy.

Li Huiying was interviewed by Zhang Jian from the Department of Women's Studies at the National Women's University.

**Zhang Jian (hereafter referred to as Zhang): Today I am very happy to be able to continue to carry on this oral history project. We hope that we will be able to discuss many different things with you today. These include: things that you have learned and achieved; throughout this process what sort of influence feminism has had on your work and life; how you have come to identify with and view feminism; what kinds of activities are being carried out by feminists; and how feminism has developed in China.**

Li Huiying (hereafter referred to as Li): When I received this interview outline, while I was reading it I was also thinking. It seems to me that these last several years I have continually been thinking about how to carry out projects and how to offer trainings. I have been involved in this kind of work. But I have not given much thought to when I first came to know feminism, or even when I began to like feminism, these sorts of thoughts. Moreover, from... Or why I began to develop an interest in feminism. I also have not thought much about how this has influenced my research and my life. Therefore, I feel as if you have given me an opportunity to reflect on my life once again, to think about why my life has developed in the way that it did and why I have become so interested in it. So I think that I should fill you in on some of my background information, including the circumstances that affected my life when I was growing up.

Actually, in terms of my personal development, I feel that I grew up in a “genderless” period. I feel that this is a huge difference with the young people of today. Currently it seems as if it is very important to have feminine qualities.

**Zhang: Can you say something about this “genderless period” that you just mentioned?**

Li: During the time period of the Cultural Revolution,<sup>154</sup> very little attention was paid to the sexual differences of men and women. Moreover, the prevailing idea was that this was a different time, and that men and women were the same. Whatever male comrades could do, female comrades could also do. Thus, male comrades were often used as a measure of how female comrades should also perform. You were not evaluated with a notion of sexual difference, but instead by the male standard. In this sense, many of the biological differences of women were in fact not taken into consideration. So during this period, men and women looked alike, including the colors of their clothes. At the same time, women’s biological particularity, for example, whether they should have special needs when they were pregnant, was easily neglected. Therefore, it was a time that did not emphasize gender and was obviously a time of degendering. Women like me who grew up in this time period never thought about, as a “woman,” how to be “feminine” or

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<sup>154</sup> The Cultural Revolution (Abbreviation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), often dated 1966-1976. According to a Central Committee resolution adopted on June 27, 1981, the Cultural Revolution was carried out “under the mistaken leadership of Mao Zedong who was used by the counterrevolutionaries Lin Biao and Jiang Qing and brought serious disaster and turmoil to the Party and the Chinese people.” This official view has since become the dominant framework for the Chinese historiography of the Cultural Revolution.

how to act in a feminine way, like today's young women. We would never think like that.

When I was growing up in the early 1960s, I felt that women did not want to wear skirts. Women who wore skirts were thought to have petty bourgeois tendencies. Thus we always wore long pants and long clothes so that we did not look like a girl. We must appear as if we did not have big breasts. Nowadays they must be emphasized. (Laughs.) There was nothing like that at the time. You just felt that breasts brought about shame and embarrassment. During this time period we had to think of ourselves as the same as men. This was revealed in everything from how we dressed to how we actually perceived ourselves. We did not want to call attention to our sex. And our biological particularities should also be overlooked or ignored. So when we were in school we all went to military training and agricultural labor.

**Zhang: In elementary school or in middle school?**

Li: I was in elementary school in 1965 and started middle school in 1972. In 1977 I graduated from high school. In 1965 the Cultural Revolution began and in 1976 it ended – ten years. Oh, from 1966 to 1976. Thus my early educational background and time period when I grew up must be viewed in the light of the Cultural Revolution. So generically speaking, including psychologically, we would not think how girls were different from boys. Not a bit, because of our environment. You felt the revolutionary passion. After high school, I wanted to go to a youth farm in Inner Mongolia, to be a sent-down youth.<sup>155</sup>

**Zhang: Where is your hometown?**

Li: Tianjin.

**Zhang: Tianjin.**

Li: Yes. I attended elementary, middle, and high school in Tianjin. During this time of the Cultural Revolution we educated young people were encouraged to go and work in the countryside. I feel that those kinds of revolutionary lofty ideals had a deep impact on me. So after I graduated from middle school, I especially wanted to go and work in the countryside. However, that year all of us were required to attend high school. If there were no such requirement, I think I would have gone to an Inner Mongolian youth farm without any hesitance.

**Zhang: That period...still Maoist, right?**

Li: I think so. Yes. The Maoist period ended in 1976.

**Zhang: 1976. Right?**

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<sup>155</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, many urban young people were sent to the countryside and remote areas to help with local development. They are called the “sent-down youth.”

Li: Yes. The big environment was like this. I had so many ideas then, influenced by the broad environment of the time. Of course at this time certainly not every person had an interest in doing this kind of work. Actually there were a lot of people who perhaps were unwilling to go and work in the countryside. But in my heart I felt that I longed for and admired it, as a result of education. I admired these kinds of heroes, those who enthusiastically devoted themselves to such work, who were noble. I embraced that passion, like in the books we read at the time, for example, *The Red Rock*, that depicted revolutionary martyrs who sacrificed their blood and their lives for the revolution. Those kinds of books could really be moving and inspirational. Also at that time some books came out like *The Songs of Ou Yanghai*. These books spoke of heroes' life paths and their actions. I felt that we could identify with these messages and that they resonated with our own beliefs. Moreover, in my heart, I always held a kind of idealism, such a noble pursuit. I felt that people who only thought about how to have a better life or how to acquire more material things only thought about self gain.

So, I felt when I was reading books like *The Dream of the Red Chamber*<sup>156</sup> by myself, I could not live a meaningful life; I couldn't find a sense of emotional belonging. That was like a room, no matter how big it was, it was empty. We despised the material but pursued the spiritual; we despised pragmatism but embraced idealism. In fact I felt that kind of spiritual inclination. So, I think this context of the Cultural Revolution shaped my experience before college.

Later on in my life how did I develop an interest in feminism? When I was about twenty years old, I was beginning college. In my family, I was the youngest. My mom and dad had five kids. I had two older brothers and two older sisters. At that time my mother loved to say that the boys and girls were all the same in our household. What she meant is that she treated us all the same and definitely did not regard boys as superior to girls. I also firmly believed that men were not superior to women. However, later some things happened. Our apartment was very small and at that time my older brothers and sisters were all about to get married. The older of my two brothers and both of my older sisters got married and moved out. When my remaining older brother got married we cleaned out one of the rooms in our apartment for him and his wife. Our apartment only had two rooms. At that time I was already twenty-one or twenty-two years old. My parents said we were all going to live in the other room, which was only eight square meters. (Laughs.) All of a sudden, I felt that my living conditions had been changed. Since the three of us were crowded into one small room, if you wanted to read a book or if you just wanted to do anything, you soon discovered that there was not enough space. Also by that time my brothers and sisters, who did not live with us, had kids. My mom used to take care of their kids in our apartment. Thus, the environment in our apartment was always noisy.

During the time when my mother was thinking about giving the room to my brothers or

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<sup>156</sup> *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is considered one of China's greatest novels. It was written by Cao Xueqin of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911); its story about the tragic love between the two main characters is well known.

sisters, she definitely did not consider whether her youngest daughter still needed a little space of her own. I did not need a big space, but did need a little space of my own. However, even this little space was taken away. Also, my brother probably felt that this was natural; because he was the son, he should get a room. Thus, I came to realize that if a person reached a certain age and had not yet married, then it was almost as if the situation would allow her no place. Since our apartment was very small, we put our cabinet on top of the bed. (Laughs.) Every day I thought about whether or not the cabinet would fall down. Since we needed to use every inch of possible space, the cabinet was fastened with a rope on the top over a lightweight folding bed. You would immediately discern that your space had become an issue. Thus I did not have space to study or read. The very basic conditions for that were not met. By this time I was already working. My work unit leader had been to my house during the New Year. He said, “Look at Li Huiying’s family’s apartment.” We did not even have space for a needle. This was because as soon as my sister-in-law had a baby, our situation became even worse. Think about how small our room was. They really felt the pressure.

At that time one’s work unit allocated all living quarters. So I went to my work unit and asked for a ten square meter room. In this way I could have my own private space. However the people at my work unit told me, “Get married, soon! We would apply for housing for you.” Thus, having a space of my own and getting married were linked together. (Laughs.) If you wanted to stay single, as an employee, your request wouldn’t be considered. Instead they only considered if you were married or not. So as you can see, after my older brother got married, I was crowded out and had no space of my own. When I went to my work unit and tried to resolve this issue, they considered my request based on whether I was single or married. They required that I get married as a prerequisite before I could apply for housing. So should I have tried to get married in order to get a place to live? However, I felt that first you must have some kind of emotional attachment to another person. If you did not love the other person, you could not get married just so that you would have a place to live and to solve the problem of having no space. So I immediately felt another kind of pressure. As someone who was single, I realized it was extremely difficult to have a space of my own since people used marriage as a way to judge you. Thus from this experience I discovered that in a person’s life there are many of these very difficult predicaments where you, yourself claim your rights. As soon as you had reached the age when it would be appropriate to marry, this touched upon or affected other issues. During this time how would you choose another person and how would another person choose you?

But in 1983, when I was still in such struggles, I felt all of China was undergoing change after the reforms began.<sup>157</sup> I graduated from college and went to graduate school. Then, when I was a graduate student at Nankai University, I had some strong feelings about being able to have my private space, my bed in the dorm. (Laughs.) This space is mine.

**Zhang: Did you get your undergrad education at Nankai?**

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<sup>157</sup> The Chinese government started to implement reforms in its administrative and economic policies since the end of 1970s. This is often called the “opening-up and reform.”

Li: No. At Tianjin Normal University.

**Zhang: Normal University?**

Li: Yes.

**Zhang: Which year did you go to college?**

Li: 1977, the year when college entrance examination was resumed. Admission through exams.

**Zhang: Did you work first and then go to college, or the opposite?**

Li: I went to the countryside before college.

**Zhang: Went to the countryside!**

Li: Yes. I went to college in 1977 after coming back from the countryside. After I graduated I started to work. I studied at the Department of Chinese for four years at Tianjin Normal University. Then, I was given a teaching position at the Tianjin Finance and Trade Cadre Management School.

**Zhang: The work unit that you spoke of earlier – was it the Tianjin School of Financial and Commercial Management?<sup>158</sup>**

Li: Yes. By this time I was already twenty-four or twenty-five years old. My work unit felt that I should first get married. Then they would basically solve my housing problem. Didn't this mean that it was the time that I should start thinking about getting married? But just at this time I tested into Nankai University. During this time I attended classes and also thought about the question of getting married. My classmates, who were all Nankai graduate students, all felt similar pressure. There were relatively few female graduate students. Nowadays there are many women in the Department of Chinese. But at that time in my class only about one-third of the students were women. I was only twenty years old when I first attended university in 1977.

**Zhang: Relatively young.**

Li: Yes. I was relatively young. Most of the other students were older than me, as much as ten years older than me. Some of the students attended university and their children at the same time attended elementary school. This was the situation. But during my college years, I felt that things were changing. I felt at that time that I should use of all of my efforts to study. It seemed as if during the past ten years, most of my time was wasted.

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<sup>158</sup> The Tianjin School of Financial and Commercial Management is now called Tianjing Institute of Financial and Commercial Management. It was established in 1985 to train cadres in financial management, accounting and business management. It is in the city of Tianjin, one of the four Municipalities in China.

So my desire to study was especially strong. When I was at university, there was a definite change that had already occurred in societal views. Society's demands for young women and young men were changing. Our differences reappeared. This was a big difference from the genderless period of the Cultural Revolution, when we were all just revolutionary comrades. Young women and young female students should have more of a kind of femininity. Women were supposed to be more emotional and use their hearts to think about things. More women also attended university. In the past it was assumed that more young men would attend university. Thus, I feel it is important to show the difference that came about during the time period of when I was growing up.

When I was a graduate student, it seemed as if the general atmosphere had turned so that there was special attention paid to the differences in gender. Specifically among male and female students, it centered on what guys thought were ideal characteristics for a partner. Male students seemed to feel that an ideal wife should be especially warm and friendly, pretty, and willing to rely on her husband. They did not want women who were especially career oriented. As you can see these requirements for an ideal wife changed from the time period before and became more and more emphasized.

Female students in my dorm used to talk. Most of us still had a desire and ambition to continue to develop personally. Even if they did not go on for their doctorate degree, they still held personal ideals and wanted to find work outside the home in the future. Moreover, most of them wanted to pursue their own careers. But in terms of relationships, we came to realize that we faced a lot of conflicts. Our own personal goals were often far from what guys envisioned for us in the future.

In our dorm at that time there was a woman who I got along with well. Her family name was Li, the same family name as me. She was a student in the history department and was two years further along in her program than me. So I started to read for my master's degree in 1983 and she had started in 1981. When I moved in to the dorm, she only had one more year before she graduated. At this time she was facing the question of whether or not she wanted to try and test into a doctoral program. She said that if she entered a doctoral program, then dating and being in a relationship would become extremely difficult. This was because most men did not want their wives to have a higher degree than them. She really wanted to enter the doctoral program but was torn about what to do. For two full months she struggled with this question of whether to try to test into a Ph.D. program or not. In the end she decided that even if she would not know what her future would bring, she still wanted to first get her doctorate.

So as you can see, I had already experienced a kind of struggle. As for me personally, I felt that I had to deal with the same kind of pressure and stress. We already had begun to feel some of society's requirements for women. But what we were taught since we were small, including the environment when we were growing up, gave us idealism and enthusiasm. However, you still felt a kind of weight – a kind of baggage that you had to carry because of your sex. I feel that having this kind of experience caused me to have an interest in a lot of issues and questions related to women.

Thus, this experience really made an impression on me. When I graduated with my master's degree I was already twenty-nine years old. I had started when I was twenty-six. I had begun to work when I was about twenty-five years old. My colleagues at my work unit were all very enthusiastic. They thought I was very warm and open and asked me what I was looking for in an ideal husband. Since I had reached my mid twenties, they thought that I should be thinking about these things. I told them that I did not have any specific requirements, except for one. I wanted someone who I got along with especially well. My colleague said that this requirement would make it difficult for them to find people to introduce me to. If I wanted, for example, a man to be a certain height or to have a certain academic background then it would be relatively easy to try and match me with someone. However, my request was difficult because she did not know what kind of person that I would get along with well. This requirement was very important to me since I saw a partner as a person that I would connect with on a deeper level. So it was an absolute necessity for me that we got along well together. Thus, I did not have any special requirements for his material or physical characteristics, such as his level of education, how tall he was, what he looked like, or his family background. My older sister insisted that I definitely must not marry someone from a peasant family, since our future together would certainly not be good. She thought his family would come to bother us and our home would eventually turn into a hotel for them. I thought that she was really shallow.

So you could say that I felt like I was a person who was especially idealistic. However when I look back on this time and think about how I was especially adamant about this point, I still feel that I was right. I thought even if I remained single for my whole life, I did not want to get married if I could not find someone that I liked, who liked me, and that when we were together we could talk and get along effortlessly. I feel that there is a certain aspect of my personality that makes it difficult for me to always go along with the mainstream. I am usually pretty resolute about things that I believe in. At the time my aunt used to say that I was independent and a person who made decisions by myself. (Laughs.) I believe that exactly because I have a distinctive type of personality and my own kinds of goals and pursuits that I found there were a lot of obstacles in real life. Perhaps this caused me to be concerned about these issues. Moreover, especially these kinds of issues, such as the dating process caused me to come into contact with various people.

So, in the end I feel that I can be very satisfied with the overall result. I held on to this way of thinking; if I could not find someone compatible, then I definitely would not get married. But I feel that I was able to find this in my husband. When we were dating, my husband did not have a Beijing residence permit. When other people looked at this situation, they urged me to be more practical. They said that since I had already found work at the Central Party School, I should try and find a person from Beijing. This would make things much easier for me in the future. However, since I viewed it as especially important, I was very stubborn about finding this characteristic in a partner. When the two of us would meet and talk, I would always have the feeling that we could keep on talking forever. Really, I think this kind of feeling is extremely important. By the time that I ended up getting married I was thirty-one years old, which you could say is

rather late. At that time there were some young women in Tianjin who would talk about me. They would say, “Look at Li Huiying; she still has not gotten married. What kind of person is so old and still has not gotten married?” And they would purposefully come to Beijing to visit me. That is to say that during that time I discovered that if you reached a certain age and were still not married you would have to put up with a lot of pressure. I truly felt that being single after a certain age really gave me a lot of stress. Being single required me to expend a lot of effort to get such things as my own space or my own housing. Being single also causes the people around you to look at you differently. However, I remained stubborn about my requirement for finding the right person for me. So looking back at my life, you could say that I am a rather idealistic kind of person. And I am very persistent about attaining the things that I feel are very important for me. Perhaps because of this, I later felt a kind of identification with women’s studies. I started dealing with these dating and marriage issues after I began working at the Central Party School.<sup>159</sup>

**Zhang: When did you begin working at the Central Party School?**

Li: I started in 1986. It was after I graduated with my master’s degree. At that time it was relatively easy to find work. When my classmates and I were together and discussed our future, we decided that we might all go to Beijing. So we all went to Beijing and checked out job opportunities. There was a great need for qualified people at that time in Beijing. So a lot of my classmates decided to come to Beijing. However, I still wanted to find work at a language university. Originally I had wanted to go to Beijing to find a university that had a library and a dining hall. This was because I did not want to have to make food. (Laughs.) So, as for me, feminism has a lot of things that are suitable to my personality. Since I really did not want to have to prepare my meals, a university that had a dining hall would solve my eating problem. A school with a library suited my need for books. So I hoped for these two conditions – and also one other. I wanted a school that had dormitories because I really needed some independent living space. Based on these three requirements, I felt that the conditions at the Central Party School were better than at the language institute. The language institute had a lot of books, but most of the books were in the field of language studies. But I needed social science and humanities books. Therefore I came to the Central Party School.

At the time when I first went to the Central Party School I was twenty-nine years old. When I was thirty, I started dating the man who later became my husband. We first met at a conference. When we began dating I realized that we had a lot in common. So I feel that I had a kind of feeling of love at first sight. This feeling was not based on how he looked but more on how well we got along. When we talked I felt that we had similar views on a lot of different topics. However if you looked at some of my classmates who had not yet married, perhaps their reasons for not marrying were different. So in this sense, I feel that I found the kind of person that I was looking for. Of course in order to

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<sup>159</sup> The Central Party School (abbreviation of the Chinese Communist Party Central Party School) is an educational institution that trains Chinese Communist Party officials of the middle and high levels. Faculties of the Central Party School are the main think-tank of the CPC’s highest policy-making body, the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau.

do this you have to pay a high price. (Laughs.) Sometimes when you think of our ideals, you have to consider the many problems you face. For example there were issues such as the problem of transferring his residence permit so that he was able to live in Beijing and the problem of finding a suitable job. Moreover at the time, I did not want to have a child. When your work unit allocates housing there are many conditions. For example, if you do not have a child, they generally will not give you a place to live. I think these issues are unique to China. They always consider such things like if you are married or not and if you have a child or not. If you do not follow the common practices of most people, then I have discovered that based on Chinese policies, you can be continually discriminated against. My experiences gave me a very deep feeling of this. I feel I had problems because I came from a genderless and idealistic time period to being overwhelmed by different treatment brought about by your sex and marriage. Living space also became an issue because of my sex and my marital status. All of these issues perhaps caused me to identify with women's studies.

**Zhang: When you went to the Central Party School in 1986, what kind of work did you do?**

Li: When I started I worked in the Department of Chinese. I was a teacher. After I went to the Central Party School, they told me that all of the new arrivals needed to do one year of training. For me this training was to work as a reporter for the *Central Party School Communications*.<sup>160</sup> The year that I spent training to be a reporter was really interesting. Later I returned to the Department to teach.

In preparation for the 1995 World Women's Conference the Central Party School planned to carry out some activities. I had a male colleague, who was also a teacher, who felt that I might be able to contribute to the preparatory activities for the conference. So we submitted a project proposal. This teacher was surnamed Chen; his full name was Chen Duansheng. I think at the time this teacher was already in his early fifties. He was very interested in new things and he was passionate. And he was male! So at that time he submitted a proposal about a project that was related to the experiences of women leaders. He wanted to interview about a hundred women leaders, especially those who had studied at the Central Party School. I was interested in such kinds of topics at the time and also had already written some articles. So he found me and asked if I would like to participate in this project. I thought that this would be a great opportunity for me. So, because of this project, I became involved in the World Women's Conference activities.

When I think about the influences on the course of my life, actually this was an especially important turning point. After we began this project we started to conduct some interviews. These interviews were different from the research that I had done before at the Central Party School. In the past I had done research by searching through newspapers and journals for pertinent information and then it would depend on me as to how I organized and wrote about the materials that I found. This was one way of doing research and was more of a kind of archival research. However this project required to us

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<sup>160</sup> *Central Party School Communications* is an internal paper of the Central Party School.

do interviews where we tried to delve deeply into many women leader's lives and experiences. Through these interviews I came into contact with many leading women cadres. I found the interviews to be extremely interesting. We would begin to talk and I learned of the joys and sorrows of their lives. At some point during the interview I would often have a kind of feeling that it was like I had entered the realm of their social lives and the world of the psychological aspects of being a female leader. After entering into these worlds, you discovered that things that you had previously believed or accepted and the realities of their lives were very different. In the past you would only see the especially impressive and public sides of these women. There would always be so many people circling around these women, for example when they gave a lecture or a report. However, when you would get to know the other sides of these women – the side that most people never saw – you discovered that these women had experienced many joys and sorrows that were never revealed in their public lives. So in this aspect, I discovered a new world. In this world, these women not only had some similar experiences and hardships as their male colleagues, but also more importantly, had certain experiences or faced certain situations because they were women.

I remember that at the time I interviewed a woman from the city of Nantong.<sup>161</sup> She was the leader of the mid-level court. She studied at the Central Party School in the class for leaders of high administrative levels. The Central Party School divided the students into many different classes. For example they had classes for officials at the governor level and officials at the provincial level. This woman studied in the provincial officials' class. When I spoke with her at this time, I really felt that she was very different from other ordinary leaders. When many of the leaders would be reserved; they made sure they paid attention to the “proper” parameters of speech. They knew what they should say and what issues they should not talk about. However, this woman was not like that. She was very willing to talk quite freely about herself and her experiences. We discussed many different issues, including how she concurrently held two positions. She was the leader of the mid-level court of Nantong City. In addition she was the Secretary of her Party branch. Thus she held two very important positions. When she took on both of these jobs she was extremely busy at her work. However she also had three kids at home. She also had been one of the educated urban youth who during the Cultural Revolution was sent to the countryside to work. It was during this time that she had three kids. Then she went to the city of Nantong. When she came to Nantong, it was the period of the “Four Modernizations” of cadres. These included becoming more educated and knowledgeable, involving more young people in government, specialization, and promoting revolutionary ideals. For the cadre regiments at the time this was an incredible change. In the past what was valued was being a model worker, not having a remarkable academic background. But at this time it was changing so now your level of education was important. So many of the cadres with college degrees started to be promoted. Anyway, this woman held these two positions and had three children. Her parents only had two daughters. So she moved to Nantong so that she could help to take care of her parents. Her mother and father were both considered senior revolutionaries. So she had a great deal of familial responsibilities. Her husband, who worked in the Public Security Bureau, was the kind of guy who felt that the woman should be responsible for all of the

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<sup>161</sup> Nantong is a city in Jiangsu province.

household chores; he did not help out. Thus this woman had a great deal of responsibility at work and at home. She continually had the feeling of being very stressed. When she spoke about this time, she talked about how difficult juggling all of these responsibilities was. During the week her work gave her a lot of stress. And, when the weekend came, she needed to take care of her three children and her parents. She was extremely stressed and exhausted since sometimes her household responsibilities and work responsibilities clashed. There was one time when for her work she had to go to do an inspection of the lower level county courthouse. During this time her father became seriously ill. She did not get back in time and her father passed away. Thus, she still has a guilty conscience about not being able to get back in time to see him. She told me that she is a good courthouse leader. Every time that she runs for election to the people's congress, she wins by a large margin. She is a good leader and a good Party Secretary. However, she felt that she was not a good daughter, nor a good mother. Her three kids all did not do well in school and she had no way of taking better care of them. In her heart she really suffered and had conflicting emotions.

So I got to know about her. At that time I thought Nantong was an interesting city. In most other cities there were very, very few women leading cadres. However there were more than ten outstanding women officials occupying important positions in Nantong. For example, the mayor, the courthouse leader, and the head of the department of transportation were all women. Moreover, they all performed exceptionally in their work. At that time I traveled to a lot of different places in Nantong to interview these women, including the president of the labor union. None of these women were "ornamental." They all performed their jobs well. In addition they all had good strategies at work. They knew how in their positions they could be a positive force in the process of reform in China, how they could promote reform, and how they could encourage China's development. I think that these women, as the leaders and organizers of their work units, constitute a huge contrast to women who were laid off and fell into an especially difficult situation.

Thus, by interviewing these people I feel that I came to appreciate and understand some of the special problems that women leaders face, especially those that participate in government. You could say that this was my starting point for entrance into women's research. However at that time I feel that it would be difficult to say that my work was intimately connected with feminism. Actually I had no background in the theory of *nuxing zhuyi* or *nuquan zhuyi*.<sup>162</sup> I only came into contact with these ideas because of my life experiences and because of the project that I worked on. Thus, at that time I did not know much about western theories.

**Zhang: You just talked about your life, your experiences when you were growing**

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<sup>162</sup> Both terms can be translated as feminism. *Nuxing zhuyi* is literally woman-ism. This is a new translation of feminism which emerged in the early 1980s. The term has less political but more biological connotations than *nuquan zhuyi*. *Nuquan zhuyi* is literally woman-rights-ism. Since *quan* can also mean power, the term can be interpreted as the 'ism' of women's power. Although the CCP claims gender equality as a basic principle, it has defined feminism as bourgeois. This term is primarily used to refer to Western feminism. These definitions are taken from Ping-chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok, et.al, eds. *Chinese Women Organizing* (2001).

**up, and things that you have learned from your work. What was the connection between feminism and your experience of interviewing many of those extraordinary women leaders and cadres?**

Li: You could explain it in this way. Only after experiencing certain things could you identify with or agree with feminist theories and ideas once they are introduced to you. Therefore I feel that only after having some sort of foundation can you move forward to appreciating the theory. These ideas would have been very difficult to accept if I did not first have this kind of foundation.

I believe I first started to know some foreign concepts of feminism at the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, including ideas and perspectives about gender. I feel that some of these ideas were only seen in China after the 1995 conference. For example the use of the term “gender” first appeared in the Beijing Platform for Action and the move to bring gender into the mainstream when making policy also came about at this time. So during this time I had a new idea. We had previously put emphasis on interviewing women, in order to understand the conflicts of their roles and the problems that they faced. This was a way for women to have a better understanding of other women. However I came to realize that the idea of bringing gender into the policy making mainstream could become a point where gender issues and state policy as well as its responsibilities meet. Thus I feel that there should be a way to incorporate this way of thinking into our work. We work at the Central Party School and the Central Party School has so many leading cadres. The way that these cadres administer policy can have an influence on women. So how could we make it so that when these cadres made policy they would also bring a kind of gendered sensitivity to their work? I believe that the 1995 Conference, including the Beijing Platform for Action, inspired me. At this time I began to be more familiar with the concept of gender.

Also at this time Ge Youli<sup>163</sup> still worked at the United Nations Development Program. She wanted to create a training handbook that dealt with gender and development. At the time even using the term “gender” was very new. In the past in these kinds of projects, we had always tried to apply foreign concepts or ideas to China. But then she wanted to write a handbook that was unique to China. We still incorporated some of the foreign ideas and concepts, perspectives, and even the main methods used. However, at the same time, we used cases and examples that were specific to China. We really tried to have this kind of handbook, which integrated western ideas and Chinese experiences. So I started to extensively read Western ideas about gender. When I first came into contact with these materials, the concept of “gender” impressed me mostly because I felt that the foundation for this concept is about “rights,” or “empowerment.” Having rights is a kind of power. According to China, power has two meanings. One is control. There is also another meaning, which involves agency – the ability to determine one’s own fate. So I think this concept has very rich meanings. I feel that gender is a kind of especially rich,

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<sup>163</sup> Ge Youli, a feminist activist, is currently the China Country Director, Global Alliance for Workers and Communities. Prior to this, she worked as a Program Officer at the United Nations Development Program on issues of gender equity, poverty alleviation, micro-finance and community development. Ge Youli was also interviewed for the Global Feminisms Project.

captivating concept. One of the main points that makes it captivating is that it teaches you the concept of rights. I want you to make sure you type this correctly in the transcript – I mean the character for “li” that is also used in the word for benefit. When you translate this character it has the meaning of “rights.”<sup>164</sup>

You can compare this concept of rights with our understanding of “rights” during the period of the planned economy. Actually at that time we also frequently raised the concept of male and female equality and promoted the idea that women and men had the same level of rights. However at that time, we really did not understand the connotations of having rights. Moreover, we would often determine the value of this concept instrumentally. In reality if the Party told us to do something then we would. Since China was liberated in 1949, you could say that women who have been struggling for their rights have had an extremely difficult time, since the concept of “rights” has been turned into a means to the end. But this time the concept of gender highlights “rights,” human agency and subjectivity. People should know what rights they have and then should struggle for those rights. I believe that at this time I came to have a completely different understanding of humans, including my understanding of women. In reality these two things – the concept of “rights” and the concept of gender – could be pursued separately in the West. In China during this time of enlightened culture, especially after the period of reform and opening, actually we often first learned about the concept of gender and then approached the idea of rights from the concept of gender. I feel this describes my own experience. When I first came into contact with the concept of gender, it already implied these two things. That is to say that the emergence of feminist thought in myself should be linked with this time period. I do not think that we can, as we did in the past, simply discredit feminism as something that only looks at the differences between men and women. Instead we should look at it in terms of human agency and power. So why don’t many women have power? Of course many men in China also have no power. When you compare the concept of gender in China to other countries, you will realize that perhaps there are many differences. In other countries it seems as if men have power while women do not. However in China in many aspects both men and women are deprived of power. Of course there are more instances where women do not have power.

Thus, this concept makes you reconsider a lot of the things that you had been taught in the past. I believe that these kinds of ideas broadened my way of thinking. So, when I looked at these problems and issues again I did it in a different way than I had in the past. It really causes you to reflect on many different issues, including phenomena that occur in everyday life. These ideas encourage you to examine how people lose their power and how they understand losing power. In China disempowerment is often treated as a virtue. This is true for both men and women, and maybe more true for women. It is considered a kind of good thing, a kind of virtuous thing. This is because Chinese culture teaches the concept of selflessness. However this idea of selflessness overlooks people’s rights. Our culture highly praises the good mother...the kind of “virtuous wife and loving mother.”

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<sup>164</sup> In Chinese, “rights” and “power” (*quan li*) consist of different Chinese characters but they sound exactly the same. Li Huiying is trying to clarify which word she is using by discussing the different meanings of two characters that both are pronounced as “li.”

However implicit in this depiction of women is the disregard of people's basic rights or the complete obliteration of them.

So I feel... Well, at that time we participated in the All China Women's Federation's project called "Mass Media and Women." They asked me to do the part of this project that examined the representation of women in television series. When I looked at these famous figures, some of my background learning influenced me. That was the concept of "rights." When I approached this project I could no longer identify with the romanticized version of the good wife and loving mother. In my heart I have never had interest in such things as preparing meals. However, at that time I still probably felt that self-sacrifice was a good thing. Self-sacrifice – the revolutionaries' spirit of self sacrifice – was a concept that I could identify with myself. Nowadays I no longer identify with this. I think many traditional representations of mother should be rethought and reexamined. We should also critically rethink the image of the "strong woman." Actually, the image of the "strong woman" contains more of a sense of independence. How do we view these women? In reality the media promotes the ideal of the good wife and the loving mother, while the image of the "strong woman" is played down.

So what are the problems with these images if we look at them from the perspective of "rights?" We can discover many things in the media. I think popular media has undergone an extremely great change in the thirty years from the 1950s to the beginning of the 1980s. Thirty years ago, the media emphasized the "gender-neutral." Currently, the media emphasizes "returning to tradition." This "returning to tradition" contains many depictions of women, including for example Liu Huifang.<sup>165</sup> These types of women are greatly liked. How exactly do you understand this kind of representation?

So I think that there really are many things that need to be reexamined. Moreover there are many media phenomena that are very interesting. For example they depict differences for a man and a woman who are both in leadership positions at their jobs. Once they date and then get married, they behave differently. Generally the man is made to give up some money. He would say, "I have money. I will buy you a house. I will give you a whole lot of money to spend." Thus the man is supposed to provide the wealth. But in the case of a woman figure, once she starts to date and gets married, she is often depicted as giving up power. She would give up her position to her partner in order to demonstrate their love for each other. A woman boss would willingly give up her position to her man and become his supporting figure. Such depictions do not necessarily reflect what really occurs. For example, that woman called A Chun in the TV series "Beijingers in New York." She lets Wang Qiming have her position and supports him. So men give up their riches while women give up their power. Why do they create these kinds of differences in the media? In reality... Well, I read the novel by Cao Guilin from which the TV series was adapted. He doesn't depict their relationship in this way. A Chun and Wang Qiming are represented as such by the TV series. So their interaction reflects the male director's imagination, about what the ideal man and ideal woman should be. Why is such a difference created, whereby the man gives up money and the

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<sup>165</sup> Liu Huifang was the protagonist in a Chinese TV series called, *Yearning*. She embodied many of the traditional Chinese virtues.

woman gives up power? The more money that he gives you, and the more money that you accept, the greater your dependence on him. When you give up your power you actually give the man a kind of control over your decisions. Moreover you become his...how do I call it... You take on a supporting role to him. This is still guided by the idea that “men lead while women obey.” So if you look at this from the point of view of power, you will discover that there are numerous phenomena in one’s life that are worthy of reexamining in a critical manner.

Because of issues like this, the idea of feminism really grabbed my interest and attention. So back in 1995 we wanted to create a Women’s Research Center. Before then, many of us simply wanted to do something in practice. Thus in 1995 a few of the female teachers and I together requested that the school establish a women’s center. After receiving the approval of the school, we established the Central Party School Women’s Research Center.

**Zhang: Which year?**

Li: 1995.

**Zhang: 1995.**

Li: Yes.

**Zhang: Is it still in the Central Party School?**

Li: Yes.

**Zhang: What is your position in the Center?**

Li: I am an assistant director of the Center and am in charge of research. Of course... I think that we are an NGO that operates within the Central Party School. Actually we do not have funding from the school. Basically if we have interest in doing a project then we try and do it. At that time I moved from the Language and History Department to the Department of Social Science, because the Department of Social Science had a sociology teaching and research unit. Institutionally, we were able to establish the Women’s Research Center as an affiliation to the social science department. In addition in the sociology teaching and research unit we could specialize our research on women. At that time I also felt that the courses that I taught in the Literature and History Department were further and further from my real interests. I wondered if I could find a place to focus on women’s studies. So based on these considerations I changed to the department of social science. So one reason for my transfer was to establish the Women’s Research Center and the second was that I could focus on women’s research. Since the World Women’s Conference was also taking place in 1995, other people thought this was understandable that I did this because I was following the trend. However, a few years later they would ask me, “Why are you still doing women's studies?” They seemed to feel that since the 1995 conference had long been finished and that the trend to study

women's issues had ended, I should move on. Sometimes the student discussion occurred after work, my colleagues would introduce me saying, "This is a teacher from our work unit, assistant professor Li Huiying. She researches women's issues." After this introduction many of the students laughed. Why were they laughing? They seemed to ask, "Why do you need to specifically study women?" My feeling was that society still did not understand the contents of women's studies. As for me, since the 1995 Conference, in these past several years, I have been critically thinking about many questions.

Later, I think it was in 1998 I wrote an article that was published in our school's journal, *Study News*. The name of the article was "I Do Women's Studies." I wrote about how I felt about my work. I wrote that during the several years that I had been doing women's studies, although my appearance had not changed, I had experienced incredible change in my way of thinking. I said that such works allowed me to better understand many different things, including myself. I believe that actually feminism is not only a subject of study, but also a kind of humanist spirit. It encourages people to remake themselves and thus it is action-oriented. So feminism can have a very big influence on people's personalities. When I started to learn about feminism, I also at the same time came to know many women's studies researchers in the circle, or you could say, feminists.

I remember in 1996 I went to Henan to attend a conference. It was organized by Li Xiaojiang.<sup>166</sup> The conference centered around how to develop women's studies in higher education. At the conference Li Xiaojiang was the major presenter and she talked about research methods she used and the content of her research of several years. We all engaged in a lot of discussion and this was very inspirational for me. Of course Li Xiaojiang was one of the earlier people to learn about women's studies, and she had some creative ideas. Later we went to visit feminist scholars in Hong Kong and South Korea. We spent some days with Hong Kong scholars. I believe there were several activities that left a very deep impression on me. I feel...I not only heard some new ideas but also learned how they organized activities, how they managed their affairs, how they exchanged ideas, etc. I learned a lot, such as equal participation and self-reflection. After I participated in the Henan conference I did not sleep well for many nights. This was because I had learned many things at the conference that were very exciting. It made me think about many things. I was just too excited to go to sleep. When I attended graduate school I was a student in the Chinese department. At that time I went to some conferences on literary theories, cultural theories and aesthetics. However none of those conferences had moved me in the same way that the conference in Henan had. The Henan conference really shook me to the core. Why did I have this kind of feeling? Why did the conference touch me so deeply? I think it is because many of these Chinese academics were integrating their academic research with their own personal lives and experiences. Thus, for many, doing women's research was not only an intellectual pursuit, but also a personal pursuit. I think in these people I could see such a pursuit, a spiritual pursuit. Once feminism turns into something inside of you, a life pursuit, it will

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<sup>166</sup> Li Xiaojiang is one of the first Chinese scholars to study feminist theories. Teaching at Zhengzhou University, she initiated and participated in many important conferences and research activities concerning feminisms in the West and in China.

be extremely powerful. You come to realize that feminism is very different from many of the generally accepted ideas and norms. I feel that feminism is very valuable. It enables a person to transform from being instrumental to actively self-empowering. In the past we were all accustomed to doing what we were told. In short, we lived in a big group environment. We acted according to the way of the thinking of that group environment. However, I now think about how to take the initiative to struggle for things we want. This is especially true in the field of women's studies. At that time at the Central Party School, the students did not take this kind of research seriously. Many people around you do not understand you. Then you have to struggle to create some activities because you will realize that if you do not take the initiative you cannot accomplish things. When you struggle you must expend a lot of energy. However you will feel that you have changed the way of doing things. You are no longer a person who waits for other people to tell you what to do. Instead you become a person who takes the initiative to actively pursue a goal that you think is valuable and accomplish it.

So in 1998 at the Women's Center we offered a gender training for the Party School's classes for young officials. The content of this training...when we submitted the course proposal, we were asked, "What is gender?" "What is the point of offering this kind of training?" We met a lot of difficulties. No one would pay attention to what we were proposing. So I went to find Li Qiufang,<sup>167</sup> who worked at the All China Women's Federation.<sup>168</sup> I told her what I was thinking and that my goal was to promote men and women's equality, our basic national policy. I thought we could find a point where Chinese discourse and Western discourse could meet. (Laughs.) Later I began to critically think about the relationship between our national policy of men and women's equality and the concept of gender. Perhaps this was a question that was worth thinking about. But if you try to promote something, you will find that an individual's power is quite limited.

Then maybe you could try to utilize the governmental...mainstream discourse, but insert the spirit of the concept of "gender" into it. Perhaps the strategy for the development of Chinese women and foreign women has many differences. In other countries you can directly say your opinion. There is nothing wrong with new ideas, right? There is a space for this. However in China, if you do not use the mainstream language then you will face many difficulties. Actually we did use the concept of gender. But we asked the Women's Federation to write a letter, saying that they were willing to work with us at the Central Party School Women's Center on such training. So when we took the letter with us to the Central Party Department of Research and Teaching, they read the letter and felt that the idea was fine because the Women's Federation was involved. The Women's Federation's participation gave us greater legitimacy because it was seen as an institution within the official mainstream and it was considered trustworthy. Because we were only

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<sup>167</sup> Li Qiufang has spent much of her career active in the China Youth League and the All-China Women's Federation. She is currently the Secretary of the 8th Session Secretariat of the All-China Women's Federation.

<sup>168</sup> Founded on April 3, 1949, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) is a mass organization dedicated to the advancement of Chinese women of all ethnic groups in all walks of life. ACWF is a multi-tiered organization with local women's federations and group members at every divisional level of government.

a NGO, they might have felt suspicious about what we were trying to achieve. So during the process of promoting this activity I realized that we still needed to solicit support from a recognized official organization and promote our goals with its collaboration.

In reality what we use is the concept of gender. Actually we used feminist discourse in our trainings for the Central Party School's leading cadres. This goal was reached in this way. I realized through this process that you can accomplish things by taking the initiative instead of passively waiting for orders. Working in this way will bring life some very fresh things. You could change yourself into a much more proactive person, a person with agency. I feel that in this aspect that feminism stresses activism. Feminism is not only a theoretical concept; it encourages you also to take action. For me this includes...in 2000...how we acted to introduce a gender curriculum, including women's studies classes, into the graduate program at the Central Party School. In 1999 we succeeded in getting the permit to create a M.A. program in the department of sociology. Now we could recruit master's students. At this time we thought about how to successfully bring gender training into the sociology department's graduate curriculum. So I proposed we create a subfield, "gender and public policy." In this way we could recruit some master's students who specialized in gender studies. These seven or eight master's sociology students are required to take all of the courses. In this way we can introduce many gender theories to the students. I think that those of us who engage in women's studies actually have a very important responsibility to spread these ideas in China.

So at that time we wanted to do this. But we encountered the problem of explaining the meaning of "gender and public policy" to people, especially the concept of "gender." At that time the head of my department called me and asked me what exactly was "gender." She found the usage of the word "gender" was extremely new; she had never heard of it before. So I tried to explain this concept to her. I said that currently this new concept was emerging outside of China and this was a big intellectual tide in the world. Women's studies courses were already being offered in a lot of different countries. So in this sense, if we could offer women's studies courses, we were going to lead the intellectual trend. (Laughs.) At the time I felt that we were doing well. Because our sociology curriculum was new, we had to, as individuals, insist that we move in this direction, and insist on including the women's studies courses. We had several rounds of debates about the question of whether this course was necessary and whether we should incorporate it in the curriculum. Fortunately, we had the women's research center and also a few teachers that were focusing their attentions on these kinds of issues. We became a powerful force that pushed for including women's studies courses in the curriculum. We tried to overwhelm them with the sheer force of our convictions. (Laughs.) The number of teachers in our group definitely helped to convince people. So because of our persistence and hard work, we were successful in setting the required courses and the subfields of our graduate program. I believe that the reason we were successful was because of how diligently we worked toward this goal. In the traditional sociology curriculum there absolutely was no kind of course like this. However after we took this action we were able to incorporate our course. So up until this point, in the three classes in the sociology department, we have made them take women's studies

classes. One of these classes is the master's curriculum, the curriculum for graduate students studying for a higher degree.

We also have graduate students who work as public servants and also take classes. They are all above a certain administrative rank. They can take some classes here and pass a test in order to attain credentials in sociology, however they will not obtain the degree. These people all currently work and are all leading cadres. In this two-year program, they take weekend classes. In class, we integrate social policies and the contents of gender theories. Another class that we offer is independent studying with advisors, available for officials with higher ranks who also work while attending graduate classes. They are provincial level cadres. Thus every six months they attend one session. Gender and Public Policy is technically an elective course in their curriculum, however they almost have to take this class. This is our "Chinese characteristic."<sup>169</sup> Although it seems to be an elective course, we actually make it required and insert the gender contents into the program. So now we currently have students studying gender in several classes.

So I think that we are integrating research and teaching like this. During this process, a lot of...well, you are facing this kind of situation: on the one hand, in order to understand what gender is and what feminism means, you have to skim through a large amount of foreign books and materials. On the other hand, you have to consider the best way to present this information so that Chinese students will accept these ideas. What exactly is the situation in China? Gender theories are always located where Chinese and Western culture collide with each other.

Thus, I feel that one of the great things about feminism is that it can give you a broad space to think. Feminism includes many different streams of thought and many different points of view. Thus, I believe that this is really inspirational for us. In terms of the concept of gender, I think it can be analyzed on many different levels. Discussion of gender often brings about the question of whether you can bring these western ideas to the Chinese situation. I think that it is absolutely necessary to bring some of these international feminist ideas into Chinese culture. Especially important are the foundational theories and basic methods. By "theory" I do not mean western theories. Associating "theory" with the West is...well, this way of thinking itself already treats China as isolated. In reality feminism in the Third World, in developing countries, is very popular. I am talking about the kind of internationalized feminisms. In this aspect, feminism is actually theorized experiences of women in many different countries. I believe that in this sense, feminism is very open, and feminism itself is constantly developing and changing.

When you come to know these theories and then teach them in a class, you should not only teach others' ideas as they are. It is better to take these ideas and make them relevant to the Chinese situation. So when we teach feminism we always need to consider how to meld the two together and how to decide what to teach. Moreover,

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<sup>169</sup> *Zhongguo tese* in Chinese. It literally means "Chinese characteristics," often appearing in official language to describe the uniqueness of Chinese experience and their exploration in Chinese socio-political policies. Li Huiying here uses it jokingly.

currently, as feminism develops in China, this also involves rethinking western feminisms. Well, now, I feel...I am thinking that Chinese feminism from the early 1990s to the present, for the most part has been a period of translating and borrowing outside theories. This has been a continual process and it is very necessary, since if you do not introduce foreign works and theories, you may never really understand what other people are doing and talking about. So we must bring them in. Only by doing this can you then begin to compare. You have to see which theories are universal and which perhaps have to be adapted to the Chinese situation. I think Moser<sup>170</sup>... she talks about “triple roles.” She asserts that developed countries and developing countries are not the same. In most developed countries the sexual division of labor is strongly evidenced: men are in charge of external matters, while women are in charge of the home. However in developing countries being a woman does not imply only one kind of role. Most of these women do not only stay in the home. Women in the Chinese countryside are definitely like this. So many women’s studies scholars have gone to many different countries to do research. They then discover that there are different phenomena in different areas of the world. In China, an agricultural country, I think there are many phenomena that clearly reflect the differences between the developed versus the developing countries. For example, in the West, there is often an emphasis on the sexual division of labor. Why? Because it is everywhere in life. But scholars don’t pay much attention to the marriage system, patrilocal system. However in China the institution of marriage, especially in the countryside, is very common. Moreover the patrilocal marriage system has enormous impacts on many rural Chinese women. It affects the problems of land allocation and education. Many people think since when women get married they become part of the man’s family, it is not worth it to spend so much money educating women. In this way women’s education is connected to the institution of marriage. If you look at western feminist theories they do not often address some of these issues, since generally the man and woman form a new family separate from both sides. In addition in most western countries the urban population is very large while the population in the country has shrunk greatly. However, China’s population is still largely rural. Thus we face different problems or issues than these western countries.

So I think during this process you can see that while we are borrowing from the experiences of others, we are not mechanically imitating these other countries. Instead we take their concepts and ideas to analyze and understand China’s situation. In this process we continue to learn about foreign theories and analyze, reconsider and digest them. We have done a lot of this kind of work. Currently more and more scholars have come to realize that during this process...we need to take into consideration the distinct characteristics of China. We should not use the distinct characteristics of China to completely reject feminist ideas in other parts of the world. However, as I have said we cannot only imitate feminisms of other countries, but instead have to use them to analyze and better understand many of the problems that we face in China. I believe that currently there are many people involved in this kind of work, using this kind of method and fundamental principles of feminism to analyze and understand many of the phenomena in China. I think if we can further develop our work like this, we will

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<sup>170</sup> Li Huiying is referring to Caroline Moser. Her article is titled, “Gender Planning in the Third World” and can be found in Wang Zheng and Du Fangqin, eds. *Selected Works on Gender Studies* (1998).

perhaps find explanations or analyses for many of the issues that are distinct to China. Thus, this is a really important step in the process. However I still feel that we have only just begun to explore this and it appears...I think we haven't done enough yet.

Of course there are people who are actively exploring. For example Professor Du Fanqin<sup>171</sup> and her colleagues have attempted to introduce "gender" into the research on women's history in order to see how the gender structure was created in China. Moreover there are other kinds of projects, including work on domestic violence. We have to see, what a foreign developed anti-domestic violence program is like, what the Chinese situation is, and what needs to be changed to be useful for the Chinese situation. Also, we have to think about which ways to deal with this situation would be most effective. I am afraid that in these cases we really need to localize foreign theories and practices. Localization and internationalization are always interactively linked. In this aspect, I actually think that those who were involved with the previous period of research and work on Chinese feminism have done this quite well. Of course, even in the later stages of Chinese feminism, this kind of mutual learning from each other's experiences...well, people now really emphasize this. It is not only reading some books that were published overseas and feeling they are remotely "foreign." Instead, there are many exchanges and conversations that occur in such places as international activities or conferences. Even this interview in which I am now taking part is the result of international cooperation. Right? So I think China is continually integrated into the international feminist movement. Moreover many Chinese women's studies scholars overseas such as Professor Wang Zheng<sup>172</sup> often in this field...have facilitated many international activities and really promote exchange. I really believe that these kinds of works are very beneficial.

But I think...well, in terms of the next stage of our work, I think there will be a lot of interesting insights if we, on top of our earlier study, examine many of the things that are specific to China and analyze them at a deeper level, including the issue of patrilocal marriage which makes the identity of women unstable. Even at that time when the slogan of "men and women's equality" dominated and the Communist Party advocated the so-called "women's liberation," you still could find that this problem had a deep impact on women. I have a few examples for you. Outside of China, feminist scholarship often uses examples of women workers to demonstrate the impact of industrialization on women. However, because of the marriage structure in China, people recognize a woman's identity and value based on the private domain. So this illustrates the instability of the identity of "women." There are many things within this phenomenon that are worth examining.

Another example. In the history of the Chinese revolution, how did revolutionary women disappear? There were many women in the Red Army. But during the Cultural Revolution, we often talked about...we often invited aged former Red Army heroes to

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<sup>171</sup> Du Fanqin is a professor of women's and gender history at the Center for Women's Studies, Tianjin Normal University.

<sup>172</sup> Professor Wang Zheng teaches at the University of Michigan. She is a historian of Chinese women's and gender history and a researcher for the Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

give talks. In my impression, they were all men; there were no women Red Army heroes. Why was this group of women erased from history? Later many women's studies scholars have done a lot of analyses. I think this is really valuable. They also found some of these women revolutionaries and interviewed them, asking them to talk about their life experiences. Initially these women identified as female Red Army soldiers. Then some of them got captured by the enemy in battles. Some of them were forced to marry enemy soldiers. Therefore we see their identity changing, from women Red Army soldiers to anti-Red Army...

**Zhang: Historians have found these women revolutionary soldiers. If we don't go interview them, they will really disappear.**

Li: Right. Exactly. See...at the beginning she was a female revolutionary soldier. Then she was forced to marry an enemy soldier and became a part of the family of the enemy.

**Zhang: Yes.**

Li: So how do we define her identity? Such an experience...if it happened to a male Red Army soldier, it wouldn't be a problem. He would remain a revolutionary, after this unfortunate suffering. But the woman soldier would be treated differently. Her identity would change, because it would be decided by men...

**Zhang: Her identity would be determined by men.**

Li: Yes, her identity. This kind of phenomenon is rare in feminist scholarship elsewhere. But it exists here. How do you determine her identity? This tellingly shows that in the old marriage system, in this aspect, women's rights are absolutely violated. And this marriage structure in the countryside dictates that as a matter of course when a woman gets married she leaves the family home and she becomes a part of the man's family. This is extremely deeply rooted in people's way of thinking. So I believe that feminist research, especially with gender theories, can unearth some of the roots of this issue. In the past everyone always shouted "men and women are equal" but in reality we never really understood the fundamentals of gender inequality. There are two fundamental issues, gendered division of labor and the marriage system. The former has been fully investigated in western women's studies research. The second issue, the marriage structure, can be researched thoroughly by examining rural Chinese culture. I even feel... well, think about some of the experiences in my own life. For example since I was not married my work unit would not allocate housing for me. Actually many work units do not even give housing to married women; they expect that the man's work unit will provide the housing. What are the roots of this issue? Of course there is a connection with the marriage structure. The marriage structure, this way of thinking, is such a fundamental problem. I think in Chinese culture, it has far-reaching impacts. These aspects of Chinese culture especially need to be thoroughly investigated.

The marriage structure not only affects how land is divided and a woman's identity, but also affects a woman's access to education. Recently I spent some time in Guangdong

province. When I was giving a class to leading cadres there, I suddenly realized something. In China people often say that the quality of the people in the countryside is low and that women's quality is low. What does the "quality of women" mean? It refers to their cultural level. If you look at "cultural level" in this sense, you will find in many instances that it is often true because only 59% of rural women have graduated from primary school. But more men are able to finish middle school. Women's "quality" is lower than men's, if evaluated in this way. But why is this the case? The first reason is that the state does not do enough to provide obligatory education. The state has shirked its responsibility in this aspect. The second reason is found within the household. The parents must decide whom will be most beneficial to invest their assets in. Thus, usually there is an inclination to spend the money on the boy children since in China the boys are supposed to take care of the parents when they are old. The parents depend on their children to take care of them in their old age. Since the daughters generally become part of the husbands' families after they get married, the parents must rely on their sons. Thus, naturally there is a tendency to invest their resources in the boy children. There is also the issue of the gendered division of labor. What is the point of a girl child attaining a lot of education when in the future she will only do house chores and take care of the children? Thus as you can see when taking these various things into consideration, there is a strong tendency for families to invest in their sons. In reality, women's educational level is low as the result of her very basic rights to education being stripped away. A low quality among women indicates that girls' basic rights to receive education have been violated. The problem of "low quality" needs to be addressed from this perspective. This right to education is not guaranteed. This has a very intimate connection with the marriage structure.

Therefore I think in China that these two root problems must be eradicated. Moreover there must be a guarantee of women's basic rights. I think the concept of "rights" in China is extremely important, for cultural enlightenment or for democratic politics. It is extremely important for a citizen society. Thus I think in China feminism will be very useful in promoting the country's development. Of course actually I have always thought that the development of feminism in China, the whole idea of democratic politics, and the citizen society in China should all form as a joint force. I think this kind of integration does not pose any problems to feminism. However many male scholars pay attention to the idea of democratic politics and a citizen society but reject feminism. They do not see that feminism has many shared aspects with these two concepts. I think this reveals male scholars' limitations and demonstrates a lack of thoroughness. If they want to be thorough in promoting social change, then they should also promote women's rights. Because of the concept of "rights" present in feminism, I believe feminism also has something else important to offer, i.e. "empowerment." Feminism brings to light the relationship between men and women. They believe that at the root is the issue of control and being controlled. I feel that gender theory is very insightful. But this kind of thoughts in our...in my teaching, I realize that it is often not understood or recognized. When we talk to people about it, they don't know how to use it and they cannot approach problems from this perspective.

We once asked our students to write about the responsibilities of birth control. When I introduce this assignment I tell them that actually men and women should both have responsibility for birth control. But for the most part women are responsible for this. So why is it that in 90% of all birth control cases women take the measures? Why is it that a very low percentage of men take on such responsibility? Family planning policy requires that after having one or two children, you must take care to prevent future pregnancies. At this time who takes on this responsibility? In most instances the woman must shoulder this responsibility. How do we understand this problem? When students look at this issue they often say that this is because men do not have knowledge in this area. They may think that men often do not understand birth control and assume that birth control means castration for men. Well, ignorance might be one reason. However, women's knowledge of reproductive health is often even less than men's. Many people know little about reproductive health. So why are women expected to take on this responsibility? What is operating on a deeper level? Men have more power and control than women. Women have more obligations and men have more power. Thus many of these responsibilities are given to women. What is operating on the deeper level is a kind of power relation, a relationship of control and domination. However, most people do not come to realize this.

I think the concept of power...if we can deeply analyze many of the phenomena in our lives with it, we will find it to be very subversive. You may discover why many of these problems have encroached upon your rights. Why do some people only have rights but no obligations while others have obligations but no rights? In fact many people have not given much thought to practically how power relations have affected their lives. However it is very important to realize this. Once you recognize the significance of power relations, you may have new findings. For example, now we stress a market economy. According to market economy theories, many workers rush to areas where they can make the most money in order to earn money. This is the force of the market, of profit, and of money. There is also another kind of force, which is also actually a kind of power of control. Sometimes this is a kind of administrative power. Sometimes it is the power that is present in the relationships between people. This kind of power is displayed or manifests itself differently in different groups of people. For example, as urban women, educated women, we do not have the same experiences as rural women. This is because women from the city lack the experience of how your social stratum is related to the issue of power. Of course we also have regional differences. All these aspects have...Actually power relations, often implicit and thus not recognized, operate in all kinds of issues important to people's lives.

I pay attention to the ways things are represented as well. I still remember there was one time when the All China Women's Federation held a conference. This conference was co-hosted with the *People's Daily* newspaper. The head publisher from the *People's Daily* attended. At that time we hoped to publish the contents of this conference in the *People's Daily*. We hoped to use the media influence as a way to spread our voices. At that time when I looked at the articles I felt uncomfortable with one heading. It said, "Strive to develop your social position..." No, it said: "Strive for a higher social position with your contributions, and strive for development based on your abilities." (Silent)

What did this actually mean? This was in a series of articles we wrote at the time. What this heading says is that currently women's social position is low, which illustrates that their contributions must also be low. Read this in another way. It says that your social status is low because your contribution is low. If you have made many contributions, should not your social position be high? If you are competent then would not you have also have a high level of development? Doesn't this blame women? In reality you will find that in life women, including women from the countryside, often put forth a lot but receive very little. However there are some people who put forth very little but receive a lot. Why is this the case? It is because when natural resources are distributed, there is an implicit power. If I control this power, I can cause some people who do little work to receive a lot, and some people who do a lot of work to receive a little. The situation in the Chinese countryside illustrates this. Is it true that rural people contribute very little? But they receive so little. What is in operation is the power to control resources. Its functions are prominent in China. Of course it happens in other countries as well; but I think it is especially true in China. An invisible hand is operating behind the curtain. But people often overlook this fact. They only think that she receives a little because her quality is low; if we could only raise her quality then this problem can be solved. Why is it hard to raise her quality? Because this woman is not provided with resources. In fact, whoever controls these resources has the implicit power. I do not believe that this is only an issue between men and women, an issue of men controlling women. Actually there are many levels of control.

So I think this concept really has subversive power. By using these ideas to analyze many of the issues in China you can make some unique discoveries. Thus, I believe that the future development of Chinese feminism lies in analyzing Chinese phenomena with these theories. This process of analysis might even bring about some new concepts and new frameworks. Outside of China I have come to see two different types of scholars. The first kind believes that it is important to research a problem and then publish a research paper, which they hope will influence people's way of thinking. The second kind takes what is written in various research papers and then creates new analytical frameworks. For example, there are many development projects in England which pay particular attention to creating usable analytic frameworks.

I think Chinese feminism should also be concerned with the second aspect. We should continually investigate issues in everyday life, and then create some analytical frameworks that people can use to examine issues. Traditional gender ideas can be found everywhere, having permeated into every nook and corner of our lives. This requires us to not only investigate these issues but also to gradually change people's way of thinking. Thus we still have very many things to do. If we can do this deeply and thoroughly, I think this will be China's contribution to the international development of feminism.

So as for me, the next step... Well, as an individual, this is how my path has proceeded. I think I have strongly identified with feminism deep in my heart. Actually the problem of terminology, that *nuquan zhuyi* has been changed to become *nuxing zhuyi*, illustrates that the environment for Chinese feminism is not good. (Laughs.) It (*nuxing zhuyi*) has

actually demonized feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*).<sup>173</sup> Thus I think sometimes when we have a chance, for example in the classroom when we are teaching or giving training, we must take the opportunity to state clearly what the concept of feminism embodies. Nowadays I feel that the bigger environment works in our favor. In other words, in China we are currently experiencing the process of the change from a society that only takes economic concerns as central to a societal model that realizes that people are the most important. You can see this transformation in such cases as now there is attention being paid to farm workers' retirement funds. In the past as we were developing our economy, these types of issues were pushed to the side. Now there is attention being paid to them. They are linked with many issues of rights and are already being brought to people's attention. I think we are in the beginning phase of this process, including possibly the gradual move to more democratic politics. However, perhaps this process is bringing about some changes to the space of feminism. Moreover feminism may provide a special contribution to China by facilitating social changes.

Thus I think to make fundamental change, we have to use a feminist perspective and maybe multiple perspectives. Recently... Well, in the past there was a period of time when I especially focused on issues of gender. Now I feel that I am placing "gender" together with many other areas in order to avoid being too limited. For example I have been looking at such things as social policies, social psychology and social work with gender. I believe that looking at things in this way perhaps will enrich the contents of gender studies.

### **Zhang: Interdisciplinary...**

Li: Right. My approach is interdisciplinary instead of treating gender and other questions as separate topics. Dealing with these topics separately does not allow us to discuss them as thoroughly as we should. The contents of people's lives actually spread into many fields of study. What I mean is that when you adopt an interdisciplinary approach, perhaps you will be able to provide more insights. So I think that having a multi-disciplinary background helps people to analyze and recognize problems and issues. It is not like... I remember a feminist scholar Friedman who wrote an article called "Transcending Gender."<sup>174</sup> In her literary criticism of women writers and women's literature, she discusses a new theory of gender boundary. In her discussion she stresses multiple identities and multiple perspectives and even the interconnectedness of

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<sup>173</sup> Currently there are two translations for the English term "feminism," *nüquan zhuyi* and *nüxing zhuyi*. Ping Chun Hsuing, et. al, eds. in *Chinese Women Organizing* (2001) define *nüquan zhuyizhe* as woman-rights-ism person, or feminist. Since *quan* can also mean power, the term can be interpreted as the 'ism' of women's power. Although the CCP claims gender equality as a basic principle, it has defined feminism as bourgeois. In the Chinese Communist Party's discourse since the 1920s this term can have negative connotations associated with bourgeois values. This term is primarily used to refer to Western feminists. In contrast *nüxing zhuyizhe* is woman-ism-person, or feminist. Literally the 'ism' of the female sex, this is a new translation of feminism that emerged in China in the early 1980s. This term has less political but more biological connotations than *nuquan zhuyizhe*.

<sup>174</sup> Li Huiying is mistaken in the title of the article. She is referring to the article, "Beyond Gynocriticism and Gynesis" by Susan Stanford Friedman. This can be found in Wang Zheng and Du Fangqin, eds. *Selected Works on Gender Studies* (1998).

gender with class and other multiple identities. I believe this kind of approach is very important and necessary. But you cannot cast aside the importance of gender. So I think we can approach problems from an interdisciplinary perspective.

In addition we must make every effort to spread the ideas of feminism. In China I really think perhaps this is a kind of activism. In the process of spreading feminism, including our teaching and participatory training classes, we are not only spreading a way of thinking. Actually during this interactive process, you find out how the society reacts to these kinds of thoughts. Why does it have this kind of reaction? What exactly are some of the difficulties that we encounter here? How do we keep making adjustments? We need to think about these issues and spread feminist ideas through this interactive process. These past few years, both in teaching and giving trainings, I really think that both sides have benefited. If you turn back and think, you will reconsider some questions, including the concept of “gender” and “men and women’s equality.”<sup>175</sup> China since 1949 has been using the phrase, “men and women’s equality.” Many people think “gender” is a western concept. But actually the concept of “men and women’s equality” was something introduced from the west. It became very “Chinese” only because the state has used it for a long time. So how do we understand this? I think concerning this there are important questions that are worthy of analysis. One thing that should be looked into is what “men and women’s equality” means in the west? Another thing that is important to examine is what sorts of changes occurred after the idea of “men and women’s equality” came to China?

You can use “men and women’s equality” or use “gender.” There are some people who feel that “gender” is a western concept. I think this shows a kind of narrow mindedness or a lack of knowledge in this area. However I think we should clarify the terminology; we should even perhaps understand the contexts of these terms. I think during the early period of liberation we often talked about “men and women’s equality.” We also talked about “rights.” But we actually did not understand what these concepts implied. We could not really understand gender like we can now. At that time we often said “men and women’s equality;” we would scream over and over “men and women’s equality.” However in actuality we looked at men and women as being the same instrumentally. But we now look at this issue from the perspective of “rights,” and we see “men and women’s equality” very differently. So I think these two concepts of “men and women’s equality” and gender share many things. However, the concept of “men and women’s equality” has its limitations. By using the concept of gender we can unearth many of the roots of the instances of inequality. In this sense, “gender” provides unique insights. I think in this aspect there are still many important issues to ponder.

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<sup>175</sup> “The equality between men and women” (*nan nu ping deng* in Chinese) has been promoted in the Chinese official discourse since the establishment of the PRC. For a long period of time, this slogan illustrates the Communist Party gender view that women and men are same and thus they should be treated in the same way despite their biological differences. It is used today by some people as the equivalent of “gender equality.” It has been written into laws as one of the basic national policies in China, since the former President Jiang Zeming spoke about it at the Fourth UN Women’s Conference in Beijing (1995).

So this kind of reflection...After this kind of reflection, we also need to consider the state of the situation in China. I think because of national differences, Chinese people and foreigners develop different strategies. However, when humans reach a certain level of development, I believe that there are in fact very many things that are common to all people and are not distinct according to national boundaries. So I think there can be many shared things such as ideas and concepts, principles, and some of the basic methods used. However perhaps there are some differences in some of the specific tactics that we employ. For example, the 1995 World Women's Conference was held in the Huairou County of Beijing. Jiang Zemin, the Party General Secretary, made a statement that the state had always been advocating the policy of "men and women's equality." (Laughs.) His speech was very interesting. He was not talking about international exchange; instead he was saying that China was already performing well in this area as we had always insisted. This reflects an important point of difference. Basically his language was that of the mainstream state discourse; it was a traditional way of thinking. However, when we introduced "gender" we already had learned a lot of meanings of this concept. What is the difference between "gender" and "men and women's equality?" So we could develop a strategy. Sometimes although we use old terminology, we have given it new meanings. Recently I was asked to lecture in Guangdong. The title of my lecture was "How to Implement the Basic State Policy of Men and Women's Equality." Later they asked me how I would use the concept of gender in such a talk. Actually I think we shouldn't consider "gender" merely as a concept; instead we should understand its meanings. For example, the central part of the concept of gender is the issue of rights. There are two fundamental parts in this concept. The first is the structural problems of gender. Actually when you discuss "men and women's equality" you can add this. I am not very sure but I feel that in the west this problem of how to discuss this does not exist. You say whatever you want to teach. However, here, we have to pay attention to our strategy when we discuss gender. The strategy is to avoid causing rejection of a new culture. We should try to give new meanings to the existing mainstream language that has been accepted by the state. We should place gender into the content of our talk. I believe that in this aspect we need to develop more of these kinds of tactics. I do not think this is a compromise on our part, because if we don't use this strategy, our thoughts wouldn't be accepted. It will be a gradual process. During this process you definitely want to put into your talk the essence of gender theories. Otherwise I am afraid that the concept of gender in China will come to a premature end. We must think about our strategy.

**Zhang: So in the classroom, especially when you give lectures to the party and government cadres, no matter if you use "men and women's equality" or strategically use and teach about "gender," have you been challenged?**

Li: Yes, especially in the class for young and middle-aged leading cadres. When this class first started we discussed what is gender, and that included in this concept is the pursuit of men and women's equality. The students said "men and women's equality" meant that men and women are all the same. This was how they understood it. Therefore, they believe that Chinese women already have achieved a very high position in society. So the students often challenged me by saying these sorts of things. Every time someone raises this kind of opinion, we will try to read his way of thinking – try to understand his

perspective. Then when we come back to the classroom discussion, we will try to clarify the issues for the students and correct the misunderstandings. So for example, this time when I went to Guangdong to give lectures, I tried to address quite a few of the misunderstandings regarding the notion of “men and women’s equality.” (Laughs.) Because this slogan has been used in China for so many years, there are quite many misunderstandings regarding it, for example, the notion that “men and women are all the same” and that their physical strength is also the same. This is just a ridiculous interpretation of “men and women’s equality.” Our understanding of “men and women’s equality” does not have these kinds of connotations. I would talk directly about the equality of rights. We question how to understand the concept of rights, how the “equality of rights” manifests, what are basic rights and what are rights to develop. When you talk about “men and women’s equality” in this way, you are not repeating the old discourse by using this term with its old meanings. Then the students will realize that within this old rhetoric they can still find new meanings and there is still a lot of work to be done. This enables them to skip over the original way of thinking. Thus, I think that when students challenge me, this actually helps me to eventually know what I need to clarify. It helps me to discover exactly what are their areas of misunderstanding that I need to address in the class and how I should do this. We have to let them know the true meanings of a concept, or what kind of meanings we should give it. Thus, I feel that during the process of being challenged by the students I am afforded an opportunity for self-reflection, self-criticism and self-improvement.

**Zhang: We know that you do research on gender and social policy, and that you pay special attention to social policy. Up until the present what kinds of difficulties do you feel exist when we try to introduce the concept of gender and its ideas into policymaking? How much have we accomplished?**

Li: Integrating gender theories into policymaking... Well, I think since social policies are made by policy makers, we can try to convince these people. But since they make the call, it is extremely important for these policy makers to have gender consciousness. In China the conditions for women’s interest and pressure groups to have a direct impact on policymaking are still not ripe. So under these kinds of circumstances, the importance of policy makers is even greater. Thus it is extremely important for these people to have an understanding of gender issues. Of course I think this completely does not undermine the importance of the many women’s groups currently in China. These groups use every kind of channel to influence policy makers so that when policies are made but overlook or violate women’s interests, they can express women’s interests. Meanwhile, I think we need to hold gender trainings for many leading cadres. Thus in this aspect, our goal is to not only become a part of some discipline but also influence extensively the trainings for many leading cadres at the party school. In the beginning these classes are electives and make them available to more people. Later we hope to make them required courses... I think relatively Guangdong province has promoted this quite forcefully. They have the “one hundred lectures” program to promote the state policy of “men and women’s equality.”

**Zhang: Where in Guangdong? In the Party School?**

Li: The program was jointly promoted by Guangdong province's Party School, Women's Federation, Organization Department, and the Propaganda Department. They had an opening ceremony for the program of "One Hundred Lectures Implementing the Basic National Policy of Men and Women's Equality" – one hundred lectures to make the national policy of men and women's equality known to all.

**Zhang: One hundred lectures?**

Li: Yes, a hundred lectures. Our first target was the leading cadres. That is to say we put forth great effort so that government officials and policy makers would know that we have this kind of national policy and what sort of contents this policy contains. When these people perform their official responsibilities in the future, they would take into account the spirit of this national policy. But I think there are also limitations to this approach. Actually this year is the All China Women's Federation's year of "Promoting the Basic National Policy of Men and Women's Equality." That is to say...

**Zhang: Who initiated this?**

Li: The All China Women's Federation.

**Zhang: The All China Women's Federation?**

Li: Yes, right. In fact the Women's Federation is putting a great deal of effort into publicly promoting this policy. In Guangdong, if you now look at Guangdong satellite television programs, they have long aired a public service announcement which states that: "Men and Women's Equality is a basic national policy that facilitates our national development." This program was quickly approved.

**Zhang: They have done a good job.**

Li: Yes, they really have.

**Zhang: What about CCTV?<sup>176</sup>**

Li: Well...It depends on how the All China Women's Federation has promoted this and how they have pushed the Department of Organization.<sup>177</sup>

**Zhang: This also requires a strategy.**

Li: Yes, the tactic is how we go about convincing people, letting people know that the national policy of men and women's equality really exists – there are five national basic policies, not four. It really depends on how we proceed. If publicity fails, integrating

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<sup>176</sup> China Central Television is a state-run television network.

<sup>177</sup> This is an internal division of the Chinese Communist Party, and therefore is not formally considered to be a Chinese governmental agency.

gender into policymaking will only become empty talk. So I think the work of informing people is really important. At the same time, we can also consider bringing forth some legislative proposals. In fact in our country, women are facing many problems, but from the government's point of view, these are not issues. However, there are some other problems that are somewhat linked with the problems faced by women. For example, the problem of the sex ratio of newborn babies is worsening. Currently the disparity in rates of boys compared to girls is increasingly large; it has reached 118:100, according to official statistics. Since girl babies are not preferred, the girls are often abandoned. This situation has reached a very serious state. Officials have realized that in the future when these boys grow up and want to get married, they will not be able to, since there will not be enough girls to marry. The monogamous marriage system will collapse. They certainly consider this a problem. If they do not solve this problem, it will cause many, many social problems in the future. So when baby girls are abandoned, it was not initially considered to be a problem. However, later officials have come to fear that some social problem may arise...

**Zhang: These officials' perspective is still the male perspective. They approach the "women's question" from the male perspective, like what happened to "releasing bound feet."**

Li: Right. Right. They always approach problems from a man's point of view, from the state's point of view. When we talk about this, we can explain to them from their point of view. Why is this phenomenon taking place? Since this situation is not good for men, only by protecting women's rights can they minimize the occurrence of this problem. They are actually connected. Thus, we guide them to think from a different point of view. So this time, a representative proposed solutions to this problem. One of them is to advocate the basic national policy of men and women's equality. In this way this issue can be raised and then steps can be taken to improve the situation. This includes such issues as the marriage structure and the contents of the local rules and regulations which often violate women's rights to choose where they live after getting married. We should strive to work to eliminate these types of practices by making such legislative proposals.

**Zhang: You just spoke of the particularity of the issue of women's participation in government. This is something that you began to give attention to even prior to the 1995 World Women's Conference. As we begin to reconsider the problem of lack of women's participation in government in China, what differences have you found? I mean how differently do you look at this issue today compared to the way you understood it before you got to know feminism?**

Li: Before I learned about feminism, I probably looked at women's issues more often in terms of the problem of the "double-burden" for career women. After I came to study feminism, I have come to realize that this role conflict actually is linked to the gendered division of labor. Perhaps when we trace back to the causes of these issues and uncover some of the real roots of the problems, we realize...In the past you might have felt sympathy for many of the female leading cadres since being in this position gave these women a lot of stress. However now we know that we should try to solve this problem

by looking at the gendered division of labor. This is not only a problem with an individual woman, but instead is a problem with social opinions and even our government policies. So now when you look at these women, you not only feel sympathy, but you also find these women both “modern” and “traditional.” These women themselves are quite contradictory. In terms of challenging many traditional ways of thinking and the gendered division of labor, they are modern; however, many of these women have a very weak sense of rights. We pay special attention to this issue of rights and find these women lack a sense of rights; they still only follow orders. Of course perhaps it is possible that they have many difficulties in their particular position, which demands them to behave in a certain way. They are both traditional and modern. In terms of challenging the gendered division of labor, they also demonstrate a lack of resolution. They feel that they should, in addition to being a modern leader to challenge tradition, they must also work to be a good wife and a caring mother. To sum up, these women often identify with many traditional ideas. Thus, this gives these women a lot of stress. They need to think how during this process they can free themselves from such pressure and become less psychologically restrained. How can they thoroughly challenge these traditional ideas? In these aspects we still have a lot of work to do. I believe that perhaps this problem still encompasses many other issues within it. Moreover, when examining this problem, you cannot only look at these women. You can see that our society and system support what these women think and do. There are so many dimensions to this problem. Looking at the problem in this way, we realize that changing these women’s way of thinking is not the only solution; we have to not only change their ideas but also seek to change many of the systems in our society, government policies, and even customs that are related to this problem.

So I think gender theories really have the potential to challenge many of our traditional ways of thinking. It does not allow us to limit our vision to one aspect of the problem; it tends to subvert many aspects of our everyday life, the fundamentals of our everyday life. Thus, when we pursue feminist goals, we may discover that this is a very difficult process. However, if we do not do this in a feminist way, in many cases you can only touch the surface; we will never be able to make necessary fundamental changes. After having shouted the slogan of “men and women’s equality” for so many years, we find actually not many fundamental changes have been achieved. Why? Because the roots of many problems are not touched and consequently the problems wouldn’t be truly solved. So I think by truly embracing the concept of gender we will...It sharpens our vision and makes us realize that there are many root issues. Of course to solve the problems from their roots is much more difficult. But we must insist on this. Otherwise...Well, look at history. It is really amazing how traditional gender ideas persist and come back. Why? Because the issues at root are never touched. Nowadays, many young women think returning to tradition is trendy. History is fragmented. Thus, I even more deeply feel the necessity of promoting gender consciousness.

**Zhang: Do you even have the feeling that you have a mission to accomplish?**

Li: Yes, I really think that my feeling right this moment is a sense of responsibility. I feel that there is something that sustains me and drives me in life. This feeling is different

from the feeling of merely considering my career as a teacher. I feel great! I like this feeling! (Laughs.) There was one time at a conference when the speaker asked the audience to raise their hand if they were feminists (*nuquan zhuyizhe*). However, no one raised his or her hands. This is because this concept has been demonized in China.<sup>178</sup> This also happens elsewhere, but in China it is even worse. Feminists are portrayed as men-haters who think of men as enemies. I think this view is caused by the fact that not many people have a real understanding of gender theories.

**Zhang: Now, do you consider yourself a feminist?**

Li: If you consider a feminist a person who pursues women's rights, then I am. I seek to advocate human rights for all but I think women's rights should not be overlooked and they should be guaranteed. In this sense, I am a feminist. However if you think a feminist is a person who believes in a theory that oppresses men or views men as the enemy, then I am not. Of course I believe that those who demonize feminism do not really understand feminism. I think currently there are not many people who really have a grasp of feminism in China. So I feel that because I understand feminism, I identify with feminism in my heart. So in China when people assume that because you are a feminist you want to bring down men, you must first clarify your position to them. You must first tell them what you are actually talking about and then what you personally advocate and stand for. However, perhaps you will not have very many opportunities that will allow you to explain so much. (Laughs.)

**Zhang: Thank you very much.**

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<sup>178</sup> Currently there are two translations for the English term "feminism," *nüquan zhuyi* and *nüxing zhuyi*. Ping Chun Hsuing, et. al, eds. in *Chinese Women Organizing* (2001) define *nüquan zhuyizhe* as woman-rights-ism person, or feminist. Since *quan* can also mean power, the term can be interpreted as the 'ism' of women's power. Although the CCP claims gender equality as a basic principle, it has defined feminism as bourgeois. In the Chinese Communist Party's discourse since the 1920s this term can have negative connotations associated with bourgeois values. This term is primarily used to refer to Western feminists. In contrast *nüxing zhuyizhe* is woman-ism-person, or feminist. Literally the 'ism' of the female sex, this is a new translation of feminism that emerged in China in the early 1980s. This term has less political but more biological connotations than *nuquan zhuyizhe*.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: CHINA**

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**Liu Bohong**, born in 1951, is Deputy Director of the Institute of Research on Women of the All-China Women's Federation. Liu has played an active role circulating feminism in the Women's Federation system by leading many research projects on women and gender. Since the 1995 UN conference in Beijing, she has been one of the major figures promoting gender-awareness in the Chinese government system. She has participated in formulating national programs that implement the 1995 UN Platform for Action. Liu's narrative illustrates a significant historical period in which the official women's organization has been experiencing meaningful transformations.

**Chen: Professor Liu, would you please speak about some of your experiences when you were growing up, as well as how some of your ideas that you engage in your research were formed? How have your personal experiences affected how you approach women's studies?**

Liu: Sure. First I would like to talk a bit about my childhood. The development of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and I had similar experiences. The PRC was founded in 1949 and I was born in 1951. I grew up in a military family. When I was little my parents were away a lot of the time so I was taken care of by the military's nursery and then went to the military's kindergarten. After kindergarten I went to the military's elementary school. The environment when I was growing up was that of a collective, that of a big revolutionary family. In my kindergarten a lot of the kids' fathers and mothers were in the military fighting in the Korean War. Therefore, the parents were all away most of the time, so in our kindergarten it seemed like a big family.

Now that I think back, having this kind of experience when I was young has taught me a lot of things. My younger brother has a child. My younger brother and his wife worked overseas for a long time. My nephew has complained to them and said, "Why didn't you take responsibility for me? You chose to give birth to me so why didn't you raise me?" During the 1970s and the 1980s China's diplomats or Chinese officials who were stationed overseas were not allowed to bring their children with them. Thus, I have talked with my nephew about how I felt growing up and tried to get him to understand why his parents acted like they did. I told him that although he complained about his father and mother giving birth to him and not raising him, I felt grateful that after I was born, my father and mother did not raise me; instead they sent me to the nursery school, then kindergarten, and then to a boarding school. I was in boarding school from elementary school straight through high school. Thus, the way my nephew and I think about the issue is different. Perhaps the reason is that the times and the kinds of education are different. At that time we all led a revolutionary way of life. We did not complain to our fathers and mothers, because we respected them and admired them. We knew they had a far greater responsibility to carry out. Compared with raising us, their responsibility to society was definitely more important. At the same time the army pragmatically took their situation into consideration. By providing an educational system to raise us kids, the army reduced the familial responsibilities of the army personnel. I really fondly remember this time in my life. It has given me very many things that have already become an integral part of my life. What are these things? They are the sense of responsibility toward others and society and the inspiration of many heroes. Some of these children's fathers and mothers sacrificed their lives for our country in the Korean War and could not come back. Thus the kids raised in this environment all considered each other to be brothers and sisters. Teachers and staff, whom we called "aunties," took special care of these children, those kids that we now speak of as the children of martyrs. They were treated better than kids who did not lose their parents. The teachers raised them with care as if they had been their own kids. People had an immense degree of respect for these martyrs who overcame hardships and fought valiantly and who

sacrificed their lives for their country. Their children should be doubly treasured and loved. When we were young we often sang a song. The lyrics were, “Aunties are like our mothers; we will listen to what they say.” It was really like this at the time. The auntie at the nursery would tell me stories. Even now, as soon as I close my eyes, I can remember this time. Let me tell you a special little story that shows how much they cared for us. In the early 1950s we did not have a refrigerator but in the summers we loved to eat cool tomatoes mixed with sugar. Our aunties would cut the tomatoes, mix the sugar, put them on the plate, put the plate in the bucket, and attach a string to the bucket so that they could lower the bucket down into a well. They used the cool temperatures of the well to cool the tomatoes. When it was time for our meal, they would pull the tomatoes up from the well and give them to us to eat. At that time we all thought the icy cool tomatoes mixed with sugar tasted especially delicious. Now living conditions are much better and if you want to eat cool tomatoes mixed with sugar, you can just put the tomatoes in the refrigerator. I do not even know if this is something kids these days still think of as a treat to eat. More than forty years have passed by, but each time I eat icy cool tomatoes mixed with sugar I still think of Auntie Zhu Yanzong from the nursery. In the revolutionary cradle, we thought of all of our small friends like brothers and sisters. Therefore after I grew up, I have always advocated the spirit of collectivism and heroism. I truly love the kind of feeling described in a famous song of the time: “as the sun sets on the western mountains and the rosy clouds fly, the soldiers return to camp from their training field.” I like feeling that I have a common goal with many others, the strength that comes from uniting as one, and the kind of friendships that were as intimate as ties between sisters and brothers. Personally, more or less I have a kind of loyalty to friends, and am always willing to share their joys and sorrows. Perhaps the reason is because I learned this from my parents’ generation. They sacrificed themselves to protect others. I especially admire the heroism and the idealism of the times.

**Chen: Do you think these things had any influence on your engagement in research on women?**

Liu: I feel these things influenced me by fostering my sense of social responsibility. I remember when I was a kid, my father and mother explained to me why they had to join the revolution. They had to struggle in order to create a new China. Now when I visit my father’s grave, I often wonder if my father and his generation knew how corrupt many cadres are nowadays – that the results of their struggle would be this kind of present day situation. Would they still have bled and sacrificed for this? I asked my mother this question, and my mother said that they still may have. I think that her answer reveals the idealism of a person from their generation, self-sacrifice and persistence. This has actually profoundly affected me and I do not think this same spirit can be found in kids these days. When SARS<sup>179</sup> affected China, everyone raced to get away instead of helping others. We now struggle for gender equality. Actually our ideals are similar to those of our parents. During their time they fought so that poverty-stricken people would gain control of their own lives. Today in our struggle, we hope that all people – men, women, old people, and children – can lead dignified lives by having the protection of basic

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<sup>179</sup> Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. In 2003 there was a breakout in some countries, including Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

human rights.

**Chen: Do you think that the gradual influence of heroism and idealism that affected you during your childhood provides you with an important background and foundation for what you strive for in your work today?**

Liu: Yes, I think it really had an important influence on me. In addition, another lesson I learned from this time period was the kind of persistent spirit that people demonstrated in their studies and in their efforts to overcome any sort of difficulties. After 1949 when the new regime was established,<sup>180</sup> they did not have any experience in building a country. In fact they had to overcome many unexpected difficulties. So they studied extremely diligently. For me, this was very important. I am a so-called experienced, knowledgeable expert, but I never had that many opportunities to study. Actually my ability to overcome obstacles in order to study was something that I learned from them.

**Chen: Could you talk about how you first got involved in the area of gender equality and the things that you have learned or obtained from being involved in this field?**

Liu: My employment history is very interesting. Actually I never thought that I wanted to be involved in women's studies. In the past, I always had worked in more mainstream sort of professions. For example, I was a worker and a soldier. From a traditional point of view, the Women's Federation<sup>181</sup> is not a mainstream governmental institution. In the time of my parents' generation, people who worked in the Women's Federation were all the wives of leading cadres. For the most part they did not have any sort of specialized training or expertise. They merely assisted their husbands in dealing with "women's problems." Therefore when I was young, in fact, I looked down upon these officials' wives. I thought that they did not get their position based on their own skills, but instead depended upon their husbands' authority and status for their positions. When I was young my life goals did not have anything to do with working at the Women's Federation. But then later why did I choose to do research work in the Women's Federation? There were many different and complicated reasons. However, fundamentally it was my own choice.

During the mid 1980s I was pursuing a graduate degree. My research focused on the history of socialist thought. In 1986 a period of criticizing "bourgeois liberalization" started. Prior to this, following a reform and opening-up policy<sup>182</sup>, the country embraced the spirit of "seeking truth from facts," and was concentrating on undertaking tasks that had been previously neglected. China had made an extremely monumental historical turn for the better and we felt like we had tremendously bright prospects for the future. We had broken through the ideological confinement and ended the historical disaster of the

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<sup>180</sup> The People's Republic of China was established in 1949 after the Chinese Communist Party army defeated the Nationalist Party and toppled its government.

<sup>181</sup> All China Women's Federation.

<sup>182</sup> Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has adopted the policy of "reform and opening-up" to build more effective political and economic systems.

Cultural Revolution.<sup>183</sup> At that time we students were very excited and had chosen some innovative topics for our research papers. But as a result of the campaign against “bourgeois liberalization,” research topics that concerned the reform of the political system were all “shot down.” In order to avoid suspicion, the majority of my classmates wrote papers that focused more on history. I found out that although studying about women was marginalized, it was the kind of research question that would not be rejected. Thus I focused on the thoughts on the equality of the sexes by three important thinkers – Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen.<sup>184</sup> Now that I look back, I realize that at that time, complex political factors caused me to inadvertently begin theoretical research on gender equality and to develop a strong interest in it. The political environment of the time did not encourage people to talk about humanitarianism, human nature, or human rights, but it was acceptable to talk about women and the rights and interests of women. Possibly this was because at the time society did not think of women’s issues as being very important. Studying women’s issues would not be considered to bring about dangerous political thinking. Thus, a space for gender research was created in this way. I really unintentionally entered into this area of study.

After I chose this research area, my teachers and classmates all felt deeply sorry for me. This was possibly because I was a rather good student who had some influence in the school. Classmates commented on my choice by saying, “the good steel has not been used for the edge of the knife.” They also gave me advice saying, “Bohong, you should not study women’s issues in order to evade the responsibility of research on the reform of political systems because of the temporary political environment. What a pity!”

Later in my life, I received similar suggestions. Bu Wei<sup>185</sup> and I had worked together on “Research on Women’s Images Portrayed in Chinese Commercials.” Our paper was accepted by the North American Chinese Sociologists’ Association<sup>186</sup> for their annual conference. Some people suggested to me, “Your research has some new ideas and no one else is doing this kind of research in China. If you could apply these approaches and

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<sup>183</sup> The Cultural Revolution (Abbreviation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), often dated 1966-1976. According to a Central Committee resolution adopted on June 27, 1981, the Cultural Revolution was carried out “under the mistaken leadership of Mao Zedong who was used by the counterrevolutionaries Lin Biao and Jiang Qing and brought serious disaster and turmoil to the Party and the Chinese people.” This official view has since become the dominant framework for the Chinese historiography of the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>184</sup> Saint-Simon: Henri de Saint-Simon is reknowned as the founder of the "Saint-Simonian" movement, a type of semi-mystical "Christian-Scientific socialism that pervaded the 19th Century. Saint-Simon envisaged the reorganization of society with an elite of philosophers, engineers and scientists leading a peaceful process of industrialization tamed by their "rational" Christian-Humanism. Charles Fourier: 1772–1837, French social philosopher. From a bourgeois family, he condemned existing institutions and evolved a kind of utopian socialism. In *Théorie des quatre mouvements* (1808) and later works he developed his idea that the natural passions of man would, if properly channeled, result in social harmony. Robert Owen: 1771-1858, was a Welsh socialist and social reformer. He is considered the father of the cooperative movement.

<sup>185</sup> Bu Wei is a researcher and professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Science (Media Research Institute). Her research focuses on gender and mass media, feminist theories and activism, education.

<sup>186</sup> Abbreviated as NACSA. NACSA is a North America-based global network organization of sociologists of Chinese and non-Chinese ethnic background. These sociologists not only are based in the United States and Canada but spread across China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and elsewhere.

your efforts to analyzing politics and economics, you would have a tremendous influence on society.” They also felt bad for us.

However, since that time, twenty years have already passed by. My former classmates and colleagues as well as some very influential scholars have changed their attitudes. They use a different phrase to evaluate the research that I do. They say I have “hit the mark by a fluke.” They have also started to realize that the issue of gender equality cuts into and affects many other areas of study. I think this is an important space and a place to enter into the realm of Chinese politics.

We can take a look at the development of Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Actually it has been very difficult to develop worker’s NGOs, for instance, the trade union as a top-down institution has had difficulties, even though China has signed the “International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights”<sup>187</sup> and the “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.”<sup>188</sup> These agreements include such things as the right to organize and the freedom of speech. However, the government does not hinder women’s organizations in the same way and allows women’s NGOs to be established. In fact, women’s NGOs are some of China’s earliest NGOs and they are one of the three most powerful types of NGO in China. The three most powerful groups include women’s NGOs, NGOs which help the poor, and NGOs engaged in environmental protection. My own research experience reveals that actually, there is actually a space of “civil society” in China. Although this term may be inaccurate and this space is not institutionalized, there is a grey area and we happen to work in it.

In this area, we can research women’s rights – that is to say human rights, basic human rights. These include women’s political rights, economic rights, cultural rights, the right to receive an education and also bodily rights. Of course it is not as if as soon as we start research in these areas we can achieve all of these things immediately, but we can slowly have influence in these areas. Our struggles surrounding these issues are related to China’s overall progress. For example, women’s rights in marriage and family and the right to protection from domestic abuse and sexual harassment were considered extremely sensitive areas. Also, there is the problem of the rights of female prisoners. All these issues were initially brought up as women’s rights issues. Since women should have these rights, all citizens should have these rights, including disabled people, rural people, senior citizens and children. Actually women’s research is an avenue to getting to many of these issues. Therefore, like I said before, my friends and classmates now think I have “hit the mark by a fluke.”

In this aspect, China’s women studies started to explore these issues earlier than the more

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<sup>187</sup> The UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) is the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of this Covenant by its States parties.

<sup>188</sup> The UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966. The UN Human Rights Committee is the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the Covenant by its State parties.

mainstream research fields. China's first NGO international conference was held in July 1999 at the Beijing Friendship Hotel. At that time groups did not dare to be called a non governmental organization. Instead they were called non-profit organizations (NPO). But the women's NGO international conference was held at Oxford University in June 1999. Generally people think that women's qualifications were quite low so naturally women's research must be rather mediocre. But I feel women's studies in China has been influenced by the strategic visions developed internationally; our research is not necessarily slow and shallow compared to mainstream research. We use gender to analyze public policies. We look at the procedures and principles that have been used to formulate public policies in China. Then we analyze how to examine, evaluate and revise them. People are still used to thinking that a policy influences all people in the same way, that government policy making represents all people, and that the government may effectively evaluate whether the policy is good or not. We use gender to analyze the policies and provide feedback to the government, which reveals that policies may affect different segments of the population in different ways. It should not be the government (the policy-maker) but instead the people affected by the policy or a third party (independent evaluator) that evaluates the policy. Let me give you another example. When discussing the problem of the serious imbalance of the sex-ratio of new-born babies in China, the government cannot help but accept the gendered analysis of this issue. They cannot merely regard it as a Chinese tradition whereby boys are favored, or only regard it as a purely technical question of analyzing amniocentesis to determine the sex of the baby or not. When you use gender to analyze this issue, you can see that it is a problem at the level of the social system. We have been liberated for so many years, yet traditional ideas still play a role in our policy formation. This particular problem has some material and systematic bases, for example, policies of land, property, marriage and even basic-level election in rural areas. If young women do not have the right to vote and instead get married and are represented by their husbands' vote, then they would not be qualified to be voted as community leaders; nor would they have the real right of inheritance or property rights. If girls encounter difficulties in education, employment and marriage, why would anyone ever want to give birth to a girl? Thus, by using these research techniques we have come to see that currently China's social policies have much deeper implications, things that were invisible to us before. My classmates joke that I "hit the mark by a fluke." However, in terms of the depth and extensiveness of scholarship, my academic choice did bring me many opportunities.

**Interviewer: What are some of the things that have deeply impressed you after you entered the field of women's studies?**

Liu: The discipline of women's studies is rather new to us, and honestly I myself entered into this area quite late compared to those who started in the 1980s. When I came to this research institute, it already had very many specialized researchers. More than a third of the people at the research institute today came here before I arrived. But I think my work attitude and the result of my work may have made a difference. Now young people choose to work here because the environment has improved. As for my generation, during the Cultural Revolution, we did not have many opportunities to study. Probably most of us had been to the countryside to work, to the factories, or to the army. We

regarded these experiences as valuable for us and assiduously learned from these experiences. This fostered a kind of character in us. We would not wait to take action only when external conditions allow; instead we would simultaneously study and work. Therefore it also caused us to treasure each and every historical opportunity. We actively participated in all kinds of intellectual activities within and outside of the country. This in and of itself has had an exponential degree of influence. The more you participate in these activities, the more ideas you will come up with. The greater your resources, the greater your opportunities are. On the other hand, the more you hesitate, the fewer the opportunities you will have. Thus your attitude eventually determines how much intellectual wealth you can accumulate. This kind of diligence and hard work have created for me a lot more opportunities and varied experiences than many other people.

**Chen: Could you tell us about some of your most memorable experiences?**

Liu: At the end of September 1993 I changed careers and ended my service in the army. Two months later I was especially fortunate to be able to participate in the Asian Pacific Women's Non-governmental Forum, which was held in Manila, Philippines, in November 1993. This was one of the regional constituent groups which helped to prepare for the Fourth World Conference on Women. I remember, at this forum, there were representatives from nineteen non-governmental organizations, and also twenty-four representatives from the Chinese non-governmental committees to the Fourth World Conference on Women in China. So altogether there were forty-three representatives from mainland China. That was the first time China's non-governmental organizations appeared in front of the world. The vice chairwoman of the All China Women's Federation at the time, Huang Qizao,<sup>189</sup> announced at the meeting that the All-China Women's Federation was China's largest women's non-governmental organization. This announcement sent shock waves throughout the meeting. Some people supported this view while others doubted its claim. I was a witness to this historical event.<sup>190</sup>

After I came back from the Philippines, I started working on China's non-governmental organizations' committee for the Fourth World Conference on Women.<sup>191</sup> I took the post of the forum organization department vice-minister and was one of the earliest people to begin preparatory work for the Chinese non-governmental forum. Arranging such a large scale conference was truly a challenge. This work gave me the opportunity to participate in some important international activities. For example, some of these activities included the 1994 United Nations Population and Development Conference in Cairo. There I attended the NGO Forum. In 1995 I attended the NGO forum of the United Nations Social Development summit meeting in Copenhagen. These were all a series of United Nations preparatory forums for the Fourth World Conference on Women. When I attended the Fourth World Conference on Women, I also had the

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<sup>189</sup> At the time Huang Qizao was the Vice President of the All China Women's Federation.

<sup>190</sup> Scholars and activists have been debating whether the All China Women's Federation should be considered a NGO or a governmental institution.

<sup>191</sup> The Chinese organizational committees had five subcommittees: the general membership committee, treasury committee, publicity and mobilization committee, security committee and non-government forum committee

opportunity to attend the governmental level conference as an observer from NGOs. An observer had a consultant status. Participating in the activities of the two sides allowed me to have a better understanding than most Chinese participants of the United Nations decision making mechanisms concerning women's issues. Actually this was the most important aspect of this job.

**Chen: How useful was participating in these various activities to your research?**

Liu: These activities had a tremendous influence on my research. They opened up my horizons and transformed my ideas. I will give you a simple example. Before I attended the 1993 Asian and Pacific Non-government Women's Forum, I had been influenced by our leader Deng Xiaoping<sup>192</sup>, who said, "Science and technology are the most important productive forces." During China's Cultural Revolution, we did not respect science, did not respect knowledge, and we attacked intellectuals. Therefore after the policy of reform and opening, Deng Xiaoping had to enhance the status of science and technology in society. I also regarded science and technology as an extremely positive aspect of our development. After I went to Manila and participated in a forum that addressed the topic, "Woman and Science and Technology," I learned that science and technology could also bring negative repercussions to women. At that time I was shocked, since this other way of looking at this issue was completely at odds with my previous education. Thus, we listened attentively to other voices at the forum and discovered that with a gender analysis, we could see that science and technology could affect women in many different ways. Science and technology is also a double-edged sword. It may benefit humanity and promote the development of women, but it may also exclude women from development. These different perspectives caused me to change my previously one-sided point of view. Thus the forum broadened the angle of my outlook and enabled me to look at development issues more comprehensively, more concretely, and more thoroughly.

Another example would be that in the past, I was not sensitive to gender issues in my research and work. I became accustomed to certain phenomena and did not think that they could be problematic. For instance, I only began to think about the issue of opposing violence against women, including domestic violence, at the Manila forum. After I came back from the meeting in Manila, we gave a report to the officials of the non-governmental organization committee. We asked for instructions on whether we should add such a forum. They said that perhaps this would not be appropriate. The officials' guiding principle was the same as the old one; that is, to demonstrate Chinese women's "great spirit" and the enormous progress that the Chinese people had made. At that time the official said, "We are a socialist country; our families follow the model of 'Five Good

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<sup>192</sup> Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) was a leader in the Communist Party of China (CPC). Deng never held office as the head of state or the head of government, but served as the *de facto* ruler of the People's Republic of China from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. He pioneered "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" and Chinese economic reform, and Maoists accuse him of returning the country to capitalism. Deng formed the core of the "second generation" CPC leadership. Under his tutelage, China developed one of the fastest growing economies in the world while keeping the Communist Party in tight overall control.

Families'<sup>193</sup> and promote the mutual love between the husband and the wife. Although socialist countries also have occurrences of wife beatings – we call domestic violence ‘wife beating,’ but that was mostly true in the former Soviet Union, where excessive drinking is culturally acceptable; people there get drunk and then hit their wives. China is not like this.” Thus, our first suggestion was not accepted. But as we got more involved in the preparatory work – after the Asian and Pacific regional forum we also had the European area, African area, North America area, and the West Asian area women’s non-governmental forum – the leadership also thought that China should have an “Oppose Violence Against Women” forum. Therefore, the non-governmental forum committee instructed the Chinese Women Judges Association<sup>194</sup> to organize a forum on “opposing violence against women.”

I remember, on March 8, 1995 when I attended the Copenhagen summit meeting we celebrated the March 8th International Women’s Day by participating in various activities which the conference held. Each person was sent a small pink mask. We all wore them. We also sang a song called “Look at the world through women’s eyes.” At that time some Chinese participants did not agree with this slogan and said: “The quality of women is so low – should we really trust women’s eyes? We should look at the world through ‘social eyes.’” Actually this slogan advocates a perspective. When we look at the world in the way that we are used to, from a masculine point of view, we may overlook the discrimination and inequality in this world. Therefore, we must have such a new perspective. If every person puts on “a pair of glasses” and looks again at the world, then we would be able to see that there are still many instances of inequality, inhumanity, violations of human rights and unfairness. Then we could change these things and the world would be more beautiful and magnificent. This kind of process has enabled my research to incorporate new perspectives and given it inspiration.

**Chen: In your opinion, based on your experiences, what sort of changes did this bring to the field of women’s studies in China?**

Liu: 1993 was a turning point in my life. I left the army and came to this research institute to work. In the past eleven years, both my field of research and the social environment have undergone a great change. There has been remarkable progress. The extent of this progress cannot be described simply using a few sentences. I will give you an example. After the Population and Development Conference<sup>195</sup> in 1994, I wrote an article. It dealt with how during this meeting the international women’s movement was

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<sup>193</sup> The “Five Good Families” Campaign: This campaign was introduced 40 years ago in the 1950s. This campaign, supported by similar activities such as to select model, harmonious and good families, has deeply involved families throughout society. Sponsored by ACWF, this campaign uniquely promotes cultural improvements in society.

<sup>194</sup> China Women Judges Association: Founded on May 7, 1994, the China Women Judges Association has 29 group members and 17,528 individual members. It aims to unite women judges across China to study the law, enlarge professional knowledge, improve the qualities and status of women judges, reflect women judges’ voices, and protect their legitimate rights and interests. It also publicizes the law and provides people with counseling services on the law.

<sup>195</sup> Liu Bohong is referring to the United Nations’ International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in September, 1994.

reconsidering the two sides of the way population policies affected women. At the meeting, I participated in a tribunal organized by women at the NGO forum in this meeting. We call it a mock court. It was a series of activities that took place over a period of ten days. I went every day to listen and came back later to write a summary of the proceedings and my thoughts on this NGO forum. In the summary, I especially introduced the international women's movement's reflection on how some countries' population policies had negative implications for women's health. For example, some countries (regardless of whether the country encouraged population growth or limited it) tried to implement population and development policies by controlling women's bodies. This harms women's physical and psychological health. The form and degree of this damage may not be recognized. Before I had never considered this problem, and thought that my country's population policies must benefit our people. Actually, at that time China sometimes used coercion and inhumane methods. Now when we hear about these methods, they sound ridiculous, just like how ridiculous the Cultural Revolution seems to us. Many people have seen the big slogans pasted on walls in the countryside, such as, "It would be better to have another grave than to have another baby born," "If you want to hang yourself, we will give you the rope; if you want to poison yourself, we will give you the poison." It was almost as if you had more than one child, you should die. It did not matter how you were punished; nothing could be too excessive. Some places organized "national policy teams" (family planning is the basic state policy) and they recruited some demobilized soldiers. It was like what the villagers used to say – what do the cadres at the local level do? "They instruct people to plant grass and grow trees and catch women pregnant for the second time." "They urge people to produce grain and encourage them to terminate their pregnancies." The people in these national policy teams were stationed in front of women's houses in the middle of the night. Pregnant women would usually hide during the day and return home at night. However, the teams of cadres were extremely vigilant and they only needed to see a light on in a house at night and then the national policy team would be sent into action. They would grab a woman who was several months pregnant, carry her off to the jeep, take her to the county hospital, induce labor and then tie her tubes. At that time we thought that in order to carry out the national population policy we had to adopt certain measures. Otherwise the population problem would become unmanageable. We only knew that if women gave birth to fewer children women's housework burdens would be lightened and they could participate more in society's development. This was true. But we realized that only looking at this issue from this one perspective was insufficient. At the international population and development conference, people emphasized that population development must first and foremost be humane and also improve the status of women. This encouraged us to think about how to formulate policies that would better suit the interests of ordinary people. How did you make policies that were first and foremost humane and paid attention to women's health – policies that did not treat people like livestock but instead recognized their humanity? Thus, I wrote this summary article and talked to some women officials about this. Later I heard that this was passed on to the upper levels of the government. The director of the national birth control committee of the time told the department director who was in charge of the science and technology aspect of the national birth control to speak with me. The department director asked me not to say things like this and that I should write about birth control according to the rhetoric of the United Nations

and the national birth control committee. I said that we were not accusing China of carrying out birth control policies while sacrificing the health of Chinese women; we wanted to be sure the government understood these matters so that they could improve policies.

The All-China Women's Federation was also very interesting. They have a place that receives letters of complaint and calls for help from the people. These complaints include surgeries for birth control that have resulted in the woman becoming disabled. This was all that the Women's Federation could do; they could not solve the problem easily. Now there has been progress. The country has formulated "The Population and Birth Control Law,"<sup>196</sup> and has also limited the administrative authority of the birth control workers. They may no longer tie a woman's tubes without her consent and the woman must also consent to any sort of surgery related to her reproductive health. Women now have the authority regarding matters of their own body and birth control. I really think this was very big progress for our country.

Since 1995, the birth control committee has improved its work. It tries to offer high-quality service to women and inform women of various options. They also asked me to be on the Expert Committee of the State Family Planning Commission<sup>197</sup> for their fifth and sixth sessions; I was the only representative from the Women's Federation. They also consulted with me on how best to do gender analysis of the quality of birth control service and how to implement policies that are women-centered and provide services of high quality. They also wanted to know what I thought about the serious problem of the sexual imbalance in the number of children being born and how I regarded the problem of gender equality with regards to birth control. Even though their understanding of the issues were not as deep as ours, they had made a very big change in how they viewed these issues.

Some people once asked me: "You have seen so many problems. Do you still have confidence in the government?" I replied, "Of course I have confidence!" I say so because I really have witnessed the government's progress and change regarding the issue of birth control. The government's population policies are taking account of the common people and transforming their perspective so that they now regard people as the most important aspect of policy making. I have said that the high quality of birth control services for women is equally significant as the system of "contracted responsibility linking remuneration to output" for farmers.<sup>198</sup> The government has introduced the

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<sup>196</sup> Population and Family Planning Law of the People's Republic of China: Adopted at the 25th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress on December 29, 2001. The "general provisions" says: this law is to bring "about a coordinated development between population on the one side and the economy, society, resources and environment on the other, promoting family planning, protecting the legitimate rights and interests of citizens, enhancing happiness of families, and contributing to prosperity of the nation and progress of the society."

<sup>197</sup> The two Expert Committees of the State Family Planning Commission hold cross-disciplinary discussion meetings and workshops on a regular and frequent basis.

<sup>198</sup> This system is called the household responsibility system. The household responsibility system was a contracting system that revolutionized agriculture in the early Deng period. Rather than contracting to large agricultural collectives, some local leaders began dividing up the land among work units or families and then sub-contracting production quotas to these smaller units. One particularly popular method was called 'contracting everything to family,' wherein families had to sell a set amount of produced goods to state

concept of reproductive health, has implemented high quality services for women, and is currently introducing the concept of gender. They have seen that if they do not take the gender perspective, they will not be able to solve the problem of imbalances in boys and girls birth rates. Part of this recognition can be seen in their campaign, “Love and Take Care of Girls.” Recently I also heard the news that the national birth control committee’s education department has been considering establishing the Gender Research Center of China under the Ministry of Civil Affairs. I would think that this would be first proposed by women’s organizations. However, I was surprised to learn that the government first proposed this idea. When I heard this news I was moved and touched. When they did not know anything about gender issues, sometimes they saw “gender” as threatening and sometimes they wanted to admonish me under the disguise of discussion. Now they ask me to take the position as a gender expert and academic consultant. They listen to our suggestions on how to improve their work. Of course not all of our ideas will be adopted. However, I feel that there really has been a significant change and huge progress.

**Chen: So you are saying, compared with other mainstream areas of study, doing research in women’s studies gives you a fairly big space to work. How do you handle situations where your research calls into question or is antagonistic to the generally accepted point of view?**

Liu: I think in terms of Chinese cultural tradition, which includes academic policies and ideological control, China really has a unique history and its own special characteristics. China is not a western democratic country; it is a socialist country where the party leads everything. Based on these circumstances, no matter if it is feminism (*nuxing zhuyi*)<sup>199</sup> or gender egalitarianism, in China this kind of work needs scholars who have conscience, ideas and intelligence, and who can make strategies and ways of operating based upon our national conditions within a scope of what the government and society will accept. Scholars have many ideas and suggestions and everybody probably uses all kinds of different methods, and thus, their results may also be different. As for me, I am the vice president of the All-China Women’s Federation Women’s Research Institute. Therefore I am one of the administrative officials of this organization. One of my greatest responsibilities is to promote the research results in the field of women’s studies so that

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officials at stipulated prices, but anything produced above these quotas could be sold at higher prices to other buyers. *Source: The China Handbook: Regional handbooks of economic development: prospects onto the 21st century, Hudson, Christopher. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997.*

<sup>199</sup> Feminism – Literally the ‘ism’ of the female sex, this is a new translation which emerged in China in the early 1980s. The term has less political but more biological connotations than ‘nuquan zhuyi’ which also translates as feminism. *Source: Chinese Women Organizing. Hsiung, Ping-chun, et al., eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.* Currently there are two translations for the English term “feminism,” *nüquan zhuyi* and *nüxing zhuyi*. Ping Chun Hsiung, et. al, eds. in *Chinese Women Organizing* (2001) define *nüquan zhuyizhe* as woman-rights-ism person, or feminist. Since *quan* can also mean power, the term can be interpreted as the ‘ism’ of women’s power. Although the CCP claims gender equality as a basic principle, it has defined feminism as bourgeois. In the Chinese Communist Party’s discourse since the 1920s this term can have negative connotations associated with bourgeois values. This term is primarily used to refer to Western feminists. In contrast *nüxing zhuyizhe* is woman-ism-person, or feminist. Literally the ‘ism’ of the female sex, this is a new translation of feminism that emerged in China in the early 1980s. This term has less political but more biological connotations than *nuquan zhuyizhe*.

they bring about the greatest degree of transformation that is possible. Therefore I do my best to find opportunities and channels that are acceptable within the existing structure to enable women's studies research to affect policy-making. When the government was working to revise China's Marriage Law,<sup>200</sup> I participated in this process as the representative for the Chinese Women's Studies Association. All of our suggestions were not accepted, but some were. Although very many of our opinions and suggestions were not accepted, we have made progress since in the past we would not have even been able to be a part of this process at all.

In the mid 1980s China's policy of reform and opening caused some intellectuals to spontaneously emerge with strong consciousness of group identity and subjectivity. Facing some of the problems in society, they really had a sense of social responsibility and an intense desire to organize and participate in decision-making. But I think that a kind of mechanism and a kind of clearly articulated view only emerged at the Fourth World Women's Conference.

In 1999 I spoke at a workshop on Chinese women's organizations at Oxford University. After the conference, I revised my talk into a paper called "The Development of China's Women's Non Governmental Organizations." In the last part of the paper, "The Trends in the Development of Chinese Women's NGOs," I argue that China's women's NGOs need to deal with "three kinds of relations."

The first is the relation between NGOs and the state. In fact, the relationship between women and the state has been an important theme in feminist research in recent years. I think that in order to strive for gender equality within the kind of system that our country has, we must utilize top-down mechanisms created by the state and also bottom-up mechanisms. Look at what has happened in the field of sports. The development of sports in China actually depended upon the state and could only rely on the resources of the state. If we want to achieve progress in women's development, we must make our agenda enter the mainstream as an aspect of government work; this is the local circumstance in China. Obviously it is impractical for us to create our strategies without taking into consideration this particular circumstance or to approach the government with harsh criticism or accusations. Instead we should establish a good partnership with the government in order to enable the government to understand, support and encourage our position. We need to use the government's top-down administrative force to promote the progress of women. This will be more effective than only relying on the limited power of women's organizations. Of course we cannot overlook the strength of the women's groups.

The second relation that we need to effectively handle are relations between various women's organizations, especially between the All-China Women's Federation and other

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<sup>200</sup> Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China: Adopted at the Third Session of the Fifth National People's Congress on September 10, 1980, and amended in accordance with Decision Regarding the Amendment (of Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China) passed at the 21st Session of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress on April 28, 2001.

women's NGOs. The All-China Women's Federation is based on a kind of top-down system. To a certain degree it is lacking some of the characteristics of women's NGOs in other countries, such as independence, an intimate relation with the women that they represent, and an equal and democratic internal mechanism. Moreover after the Fourth World Conference on Women, the older generation of women's leaders either retired or passed away. The new generation of women's leaders still does not have much experience with these kinds of NGO activities. There might be a tendency to manage the All China Women's Federation with more and more bureaucratization and to use a more and more governmental style. In addition, the Women's Federation is also facing challenges from society. For example when recently the Women's Federation proposed legislation that would make the retirement age the same for men and women governmental employees, they encountered disagreement as well as criticism from many women, who charged that the Women's Federation only represents "upper class women." On one hand this conflict reflects the diversification of women's interests. On the other hand it also reflects that the Women's Federation is somewhat separated from women and not identified with by women in society. Under the new historical conditions, how should the Women's Federation represent women's interests? How do they maintain independence and autonomy in their work? How do they position themselves? How do they bring about thorough change and get rid of meaningless campaigns and performances as well as condescending attitudes in their attempts to "direct and manage" women? These are really challenging problems. Currently the function of the government is changing. Its emphasis has shifted from one of management to one of service. The Women's Federation has not exhibited a similar sensitivity to the necessity of change. They are still saying that we need to manage, organize and coordinate. They are still treating other women's NGOs with a condescending attitude. This is not right.

The third relation that needs to be addressed is that between women's organization leaders and the women within an NGO. How organizing principles and mechanism are established is also very important. The organizational structure of the Women's Federation has an extremely big shortcoming. They are responsible to those above them, instead of being responsible to those under them. But this is also a duplicate of our government mechanism, a duplicate of the bureaucratic apparatus. Administrative ranking matters very much there. I remember at the Fourth World Women's Conference in Huairou, Beijing, at the NGO forum, Huang Qizao appealed to each provincial delegation that NGOs are equal and should not be treated differently according to their size. This was because in various delegations from the provinces, the "first lady" (the provincial governor's wife) or other female senior officials always observed the rules of seniority. They did not want to ride the shuttle bus with other representatives, did not want to eat boxed lunches, and always tried to enjoy special privileges. In China the hierarchical system of rank is deeply rooted in people's minds, including women. They have internalized this notion and thus are not aware that in a non-governmental organization for women we must obtain equality and break down the practices of hierarchy. Although people have different job responsibilities, we should not establish a new hierarchical system. They did not understand this truly critical aspect. Thus these women could not truly establish real equal and democratic relationships with other women. When we work to establish women's NGOs, what should we do? Do we

replicate the system of seniority and create a new patriarchal and hierarchical system? Or should we employ negotiation, democracy, elections, and adopt a policy that institutes rotation of decision-making positions and power-sharing? This is an issue that I brought up in that essay. I hoped to challenge the patriarchal system and develop new democratic relations. I believe that those organizations that are organized in the old manner will not last.

In addition, I think that it is really important for Chinese women activists to establish mutual trust, mutual understanding, mutual appreciation and tolerance. It is important to create a kind of sisterly bonding based on shared values and ideals. Otherwise, if our relationship is filled with public and covert vicious competition – some people jokingly say, “This is a Chinese characteristic” – then women’s NGOs cannot develop in the long run. This idea of “three relations” that I proposed at the Oxford seminar later gained much attention and agreement from people.

**Chen: Throughout this process, have you had any regrets?**

Liu: In this process... Yes. I will give you an example. When we held the Beijing World Women’s Conference, China had the most representatives – I think there were more than five thousand people. However, I can truthfully say that very few of our representatives understood how the conference was operating. Afterwards I interviewed a few Chinese women and men who had participated in the Beijing World Women’s Conference. Very few of them knew about the “Beijing Declaration” and “The Platform for Action.”<sup>201</sup> Rarely did they know about the Chinese government’s pledge and responsibilities. Even fewer of them knew about “mainstreaming gender” (a global strategy of advancing gender equality) and the twelve strategic targets. These included various levels of the Women’s Federation cadres. I don’t think we should criticize these individuals. This is a problem of our system. This system does not enable us to truly enter that kind of decision-making and participation mechanism.

**Chen: Why?**

Liu: When there were conferences on women, we tended to pay attention to performance – I call these people “the faction of praise and admiration.” We liked showing to the world a graceful performance. We were accustomed to approaching international events in this way. These women cared a lot about their appearance as if they were attending a fashion show. They did not treat such occasions as a chance to discuss important international issues. The goal of these conferences is to think about how to include women’s voices (including Chinese women’s voices) in the decision making process,

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<sup>201</sup> In 1995, Beijing hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women. Representatives from 189 different countries agreed that inequalities between women and men have serious consequences for the well-being of all people. The conference declared a set of goals for progress of women in various areas including politics, health, and education. The final document issued by the conference (called the “Platform for Action”) had this to say: “The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and should not be seen in isolation as a women’s issue.” Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace, Beijing, 15 September 1995.

how to make policies that integrate the idea of gender equality and conform with the laws of societal development. Actually the non-governmental forum is a kind of pressure group. On the international level it is a kind of mechanism that tries to ensure democratic policy-making. Based on our cultural background, realizing this is extremely difficult. In addition, we also had many difficulties in terms of participation.

In the majority of cases, when China sends officials to attend international conferences or activities, they are restricted in various ways. When there is a limit to the number of people who may attend or a limited amount of resources, going abroad becomes a kind of privilege or a kind of benefit. People are chosen from the top downward, according to seniority. This time you will go, the next time he will go, or perhaps people who are not busy in their work will be chosen to go. Often it will be a senior or an old employee who has not had the opportunity to go abroad for many years. Thus, people are not necessarily chosen based on their understanding of the issue, their research or their needs for information. Thus, they are not obliged to do anything after attending the conference. The next time a totally different group of people will be sent. Therefore, our representatives do not know what is going on out there; nor do they know much about China regarding a certain issue. Thus, they don't know what to say at the conference. The more you do not get your ideas represented, the more you feel that you are marginalized. You listen to others who have a thorough understanding of the subject and are able to eloquently discuss it. You do not know anything. You might feel that you are better-off sightseeing and shopping than participating in the meetings. Often you find that on the one hand relatively fewer Chinese have the opportunity to participate in international activities; on the other hand, the few people that do get to participate in international activities are simply touring around in a foreign city. This is generally what I have seen.

When we began making preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women's NGO forum, I jokingly said that the Chinese women who were going to participate in the international activity could be summarized by three characteristics: First, they stayed on the outskirts of the activities; second, they remained huddled together; third, they did not voice their opinions. When you looked into a conference room, the people who were sitting closest to the entrance or who were on the sides and those who were sitting in the very back definitely were Chinese. Why? It was easy for them to leave if they wanted. They were not there as active participants. Since they did not have much knowledge on the subject, they did not have the confidence to participate. Also, some people were not even interested. I mentioned that their second characteristic was that they huddled together. When Chinese people go abroad to attend a meeting or to participate in an international conference held in China, they do not cherish the time and opportunity to exchange ideas with foreigners. Instead they huddle together with other Chinese representatives. Of course there are many reasons for this. For example, there may be cultural or language issues, and different ways of interacting with people and different degrees of participation. Others seem to know each other in the same circle, while you are a newcomer. How do you initiate conversation with other people? The third characteristic of Chinese is that they do not voice their own opinions. They don't know enough to join the conversation, because they know nothing about the topic that everyone

is discussing.

In this kind of marginalization, a strange phenomenon occurs. On the one hand there are very few opportunities to participate. On the other hand when opportunities do occur, we are unable to take full advantage of them. An example of this would be the Fifth East Asian Women's Forum which was convened in Hong Kong December 19-21, 2003. The East Asian Women's Forum was established in 1993 as part of the Manila Asian and Pacific Women's Non-governmental Forum. It was designed to be a forum for exchanges, dialogue, consultation and policy-making mechanisms between East Asian women's NGOs. Many Chinese representatives attended from many different venues. They came from various NGOs and from different areas or different cities. They were supported by different international foundations or by their work units. Altogether there were about forty to fifty people. Apart from the local Hong Kong representatives, the group from mainland China was probably the largest. However those who truly took advantage of the benefits of attending the conference and persisted to the end until we finished the discussions about the "Manifesto" and "Work Agenda" probably numbered around thirteen or fourteen people. All of the rest of the people were sightseeing and shopping around town. Thus, as I have said before – we do not have many opportunities to participate in conferences and when we do send representatives, they do not fully take advantage of their opportunity to participate.

Gu Xiulian<sup>202</sup> once said to me, "Bohong, you and some others go abroad very often and you should find a way to deal with this situation. There are so many activities in the international women's movement and there are so many schools of feminism, but we are not part of these. You must try to do something about this and represent our voices in international forums and establish the status of Chinese feminism." No matter what Chairwoman Gu's specific goals were when she made such a request, I think that if we continue to "participate" like this, perhaps Chinese women will never have their voices heard.

Again we have to think about what our goals are when we participate. We always think about how best to put on display Chinese women's "elegant demeanor and graceful bearing." It seems as if we do not have any problem in this aspect and fare better than women in other countries. When we speak, we like talking about all of our accomplishments and only superficially touch on areas where there are still problems. We propose a suggestion, but it has no real substance. It is empty – there is no way to actually put it into operation. Also we like using words that other people do not understand. Actually there is no way that we have fewer problems than other countries. For example, we have a fairly high rate of domestic abuse. The difference between us and other countries is that we are not willing to face up to and acknowledge the problems that we do have.

**Chen: Facing this kind of situation, what do you think you personally ought to do?**

Liu: I think one of my most important responsibilities is to introduce this kind of feminist

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<sup>202</sup> Gu Xiulian is the chairwoman of All China Women's Federation.

mechanism and to urge Chinese women to join. I believe we have to reconsider the nature of the women's movement in this process. How do we deepen our analysis of gender issues? How do we then honestly put forward some views and suggestions to solve problems that are occurring on institutional, legislative, and policy levels and that have become the mainstream? We have to, on one hand, make sure that gender issues enter the macroscopic plan of economic and social development in China. On the other hand they must become part of the concerns of all kinds of international development treaty so that we can bring changes to social development and women and men's lives. This is the true essence of the women's movement.

As for me, my duty is to push forward these kinds of changes. For instance, after the World Women's Conference I participated in China's "Beijing + 5"<sup>203</sup> activities. (These were activities surrounding the Fourth World Conference on its fifth anniversary). Now we are promoting activities that commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women –the "Beijing + 10." Our goal is to change our women's studies and gender research from simply celebrating accomplishments to research that promotes the mainstreaming of gender perspective. I am not saying that we can never praise achievements. We should theorize our practices and experiences and share China's contributions with others. However, what is more important is that we must try to find a way to solve the existing problems in China. We have to find appropriate ways to deal with the problems. We have to gradually develop the law, policies and the government mechanisms. Really, this is the most important aspect of our work. Also we should get rid of the method of looking at issues in isolation and too narrowly. We are rather accustomed to only dealing with one issue as such but much less familiar with examining what kind of implications that dealing with this issue would have for bringing about systemic change. When we go to participate in an "Oppose Domestic Violence" forum, we only care about what effective methods others have for dealing with this problem. But we do not pay attention to this issue as part of the women's movement and key to the policy-making mechanism. If we did not incorporate anti-domestic violence into the United Nations Human Rights Joint Declaration, into the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and into the Beijing Program for Action, then the influence of the call to fight against domestic violence would be limited in terms of its influence and impact. Eliminating domestic violence cannot be dealt with by treating it as an isolated, very specific methodological problem. If we examine the mechanisms, the institutions and the processes related to this issue, we will be able to generate more fundamental and important impacts.

**Chen: So what you are saying is that becoming part of the process and the mechanisms is more important. Regarding this, do you have any special thoughts and special resources?**

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<sup>203</sup> Five years after the Beijing World Women's Conference, in a 23rd special session of the United Nations General Assembly, "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century" reviewed the progress the world has made towards achieving the goals set out by the Beijing conference. This conference has come to be known as the "Beijing +5" conference. Delegates found both progress and obstacles. The delegates made further agreements to continue carrying out the initiatives of the 1995 women's conference.

Liu: As the Vice President of the Women's Research Institute of the All China Women's Federation, my position at work probably enables me to have some opportunities and various channels of influence. I am one of the people in charge of this research facility. Because I am regarded as an expert in this area, my suggestions may have a certain amount of influence on some of the department leaders. If your calculation starts in 1949, the All China Women's Federation has been established for more than fifty years. During these years, why was it that in the 1970s and 80s the international women's movement began to slowly establish the concept of gender but the Women's Federation did not know about this? The All China Women's Federation gradually learned about this concept only after the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in China. One of the reasons for this is that the All-China Women's Federation's international activities had to conform to the policies of foreign relations. Only in the overall framework of Chinese diplomatic activity could they hold international activities. Wives, daughters and other female relatives of our leaders participated in these activities. These activities were not developed independently based on the needs of women. There was no way to widely and deeply get involved in the international women's movement and the process of promoting the development of women by the United Nations. But now, as experts, can we open up a door and remind the All-China Women's Federation and the related government departments to improve this aspect of the problem? As experts, to a certain degree and under certain conditions, we may play such a role. Through my research and teaching, I can continuously bring up these ideas and make people realize that actually knowing the kind of mechanism and system is more important than knowing the solution to a concrete issue. In fact this is also advancing the construction of democracy in Chinese politics. In the 1980s when I was a graduate student, I enthusiastically joined in the research and studies on the reform of the Chinese political system. It is a pity that later this was discontinued. Now perhaps we will be able to realize such an ideal by bringing gender equality into the mainstream. So as for me, this is a meaningful and engaging responsibility. Luckily, my position at work enables me to have a lot more opportunities and more access to resources than most people have.

**Chen: Do you think that the Fourth World Conference on Women was an important milestone for Chinese women's studies?**

Liu: I think so. After the 1980s, China's women studies were in a process of continual growth and development; there were different development phases. After the Fourth World Conference on Women, I wrote an article that discussed the influence of the World Women's Conference on women's studies in China. I thought that the Fourth World Conference on Women gave a strong push to women's studies in China. It has resulted in qualitative changes in China's women's studies, including the subjects of study, theoretical frameworks, research methodologies and its interactions with the women's movement. Of course we should not overestimate the impacts of this Conference. We should note that "gender" as a perspective or analytical tool is not part of the traditional Chinese culture. Thus, it will experience a process of confrontation and assimilation with traditional Chinese culture

For instance, take the project that we are working on now, “Mainstreaming Gender into the Mechanisms of the International Labor Organization.” One of the very important tasks of this work is to translate the phrase “mainstreaming gender” into a Chinese term that we would all agree on and would fully convey the original meaning in English. We have worked on the project for over a year and a half, but still have not found the appropriate Chinese translation for this concept. Some people suggested this concept was equivalent to “the equality of the sexes as the basic national policy,” but we felt that this was not quite the same as the concept of mainstreaming gender. Some people suggested understanding it as “mainstreaming gender equality,” however we still thought there was a distinction. Actually, this also illustrates that a gradual process of assimilating a foreign idea into a cultural tradition faces tremendous challenges. Wang Zheng<sup>204</sup> has said that within China many people use the concept of “gender consciousness;” but the intentions might be totally opposite. Some people use it to advance the idea of gender equality and to crush traditional sex roles. Others use it with the intent of constructing or emphasizing traditional sex roles – women should act more like women and men should act more like men. These two usages are clearly opposite.

In our culture, people’s understandings of gender consciousness are extremely complicated, because the social environment where people exist is extremely multi faceted. Therefore I feel that while women’s studies research has made incredible developments, it also faces very big challenges. We cannot expect to instantly achieve in all areas to the ideal levels articulated by feminist advocates. But we must work hard to achieve these ideals. This, of course, is extremely difficult. You must both respect peoples’ ability to comprehend these ideas, and also continuously discuss the relations and the differences of our understandings so that we can propose constructive suggestions – this is the work that I do. For example in my projects I look at how we see gender equality and gender justice as well as how these concepts are related to and different from “the equality between the sexes” in popular ideas. In fact the popular slogan of “the equality between the men and women” at a certain level does not conform to the internationally accepted demands of gender equality. These two ideas do not have the same foundations, the same standards or the same institutional systems. Thus, I think we have a long way to go before we could develop a concept that has insight into the future and is relatively reasonable based on different social and cultural contexts.

**Chen: The subjects that that you are currently working on – are they in this direction?**

Liu: Yes, they are. We call the project with the International Labor Organization the “3 + 1” program. The “3” refers three-part structure in labor organizing . In China this encompasses the government’s labor and social security department, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, and the Chinese Enterprise Confederation.<sup>205</sup> The “1” is the

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<sup>204</sup> Professor Wang Zheng teaches at the University of Michigan. She is a historian of Chinese women’s and gender history and a researcher for the Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

<sup>205</sup> The Chinese Enterprise Confederation is a non-profit national organization consisting of enterprises and entrepreneurs. Its goals include protecting the rights of enterprises, professional disciplining, and services to enterprises.

All-China Women's Federation. We gave our own project a set goal. We hoped that through this project, we could shift our conceptualization of women's development from "Woman in Development" (WID) to "Gender and Development" (GAD). Our government and the Women's Federation have tried to solve the pressing, real problems faced by women. But they do not pay enough attention to changing gendered structures and systems. For instance, the Women's Federation has promoted activities such as "constructing good families with five kinds of harmonious relations," "two studies, two competitions," "women's outstanding achievements" and so on, including the empowerment campaign. All of these programs are carried out within changing gender relations and the structures. Also, in their work to help the laid-off women to gain employment again, they encourage these women to do service work in their communities. This places these women in non-regular employment. In the employment structure they are engaged in the lowest level of work. The Women's Federation's goals stop at meeting the government's goal of reducing the rate of unemployment and helping these women find work. However, no one has considered the deeper issues of social security, career development, women's decreasing position in the employment structure and the traditional view that men should tend to matters outside the home, while women should be concerned with matters within the home. This kind of mentality still finds its way into programs for women's development. It simply adds women in development; it regards women as the object of development and the development of women as a means of the government to realize its goals of social development. How do we transform our way of thinking about development issues to be people-centered and women-centered? How do we make women as the subjects of development? How do we change the gender structure, the system and the institutions as well as change the unfair divisions of labor and social roles when we promote women's re-employment? How do we achieve a new understanding of development issues through these kinds of work? All of these concerns about women and development are included in our projects. Because the current conditions of society, culture, education, and also some systemic reforms in China have not achieved a certain level, we cannot all of a sudden achieve the levels promoted by GAD.<sup>206</sup> But since human society has already developed to the stage where GAD can be our goal, we should try to implement the high standards in GAD when we consider the issue of WID. We cannot always consider these matters in isolation. This is one of the ideals of our project, but we are not sure to what degree we will be able to achieve this ideal. However, we continue to work hard at this. This work includes how to best convince leaders of the Women's Federation and the leaders of the three parties involved in the system. We are frequently asked to give lectures. When we give lectures we introduce our new research on such topics as how to use gender to analyze policies, how to change and improve policies, and how to bring gender into the mainstream, etc. This work is extremely tiring. Sometimes I will jokingly say, "This work is like leaving your own land uncultivated while plowing the fields for others." What I mean is that we do not have the time to complete any of our own projects, but everyday we still have to go to give lectures. Sometimes this conflict is indeed a problem.

**Chen: What sort of progress have you seen in the research regarding your attempts**

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<sup>206</sup> GAD, or Gender And Development, is a new approach to gender equality in development programs. The Women In Development (WID) approach emphasizes "women" not "gender".

## to “mainstream gender”?

Liu: In these past ten years of research, we have continuously probed into exactly what factors have impacted the recognition and implementation of the concept and ideas of gender equality. Later we discovered that the dominant ideology and cultural tradition of “men and women’s equality” in China not only provide the foundation for understanding “gender equality” and mainstreaming gender but also pose certain barriers. Our project has delved into the relationship between the idea of “mainstreaming gender” and the popular conceptualization of “the equality between men and women.” What are the connections and differences between them? We have carried out an investigation of this topic. This investigation included questionnaires, discussion with focus groups, individual interviews and workshops. The participants in the investigation were from the “3 + 1” department staff, male and female officials and so on. The results revealed very many interesting phenomena. For instance people are accustomed to thinking that the gender issue is only a women’s issue and that solving the women’s issue is the responsibility of women’s organizations. Therefore, due to the marginalized status of the Women’s Federations in society, gender issues have been marginalized and women’s issues have been marginalized.

We believe that at the first level, gender issues are issues for all of society. It is an issue for women and men and is not just a women’s issue, an issue of one sex. It is not hard for us to see that nearly all women’s issues have some relation to men. For instance in the abduction and sale of women, men are generally the abductors and women are the ones who are abducted. Another example is so-called “selling sex” – if there were no people who frequented brothels, then there would not be any prostitutes. Yet another example is that of women’s political participation. Male cadres appoint almost all of the female cadres. Thus, this is a problem of masculine power and masculinist social structure. If we do not have this insight, and merely regard it as a women’s issue, then we will never be able to solve these problems. This is the nature of the problems we face.

The second level is deciding what mechanisms we should use to solve these problems. We think that we must bring this issue into the mainstream. We certainly want the government and the highest leaders’ political pledges. We want the government to regard this issue as an important one that they must act upon. A consideration of gender should be an integral part of all policy making. Only then will gender be truly mainstreamed. The government needs to be actively involved; it does not count if the government only takes out some money, gives it to the Women’s Federation, and then expects the Women’s Federation to bring about all of the necessary changes. Considering the current position of Chinese women’s organizations, putting the onus on the Women’s Federation to do things would only bring about further marginalization. This is a problem of approach. Of course at the same time as we emphasize mainstreaming gender, we also cannot deny a “two-front strategy.” What I mean is that we cannot abandon the projects specially targeted for women and the supports especially for women’s organizations. However these are two different matters.

The third problem that we need to pay attention to in our research is the discrepancies in

the standards for gender equality at the international level and the standards for men and women's equality in China. Based on China's cultural background, a lot of people think that men and women's equality means "Men work outside the home and women work inside the home." Some take the man as the standard as can be seen in Mao Zedong's statement: "The times are different; men and women are all the same. Anything that a male comrade can do, a female comrade can also achieve." This view takes the male comrade as the standard. Moreover this male comrade is not someone who has broken through the traditional sex roles or freely developed. The practices in accordance with this view have resulted in a "sexual sameness" that neglects the physiological characteristics of women and men. Deep in our culture actually lies the treatment of women not equally as "person." This kind of phenomenon is universal and occurs from the top level of government all the way down. For example some of our leaders always say, "All levels of the leading cadres have to be vigilant to guard against the temptations of money, authority, and beautiful women." In this speech does "all levels of the leading cadres" also include female cadres? A Women's Federation's comrade from the city of Shijiazhuang in Hebei Province told me that even Women's Federation's documents sometimes had this kind of language. We asked various leaders to fill in a survey related to issues of gender equality, in order to see their way of looking at equality. A lot of cadres agreed with the following statement: "Urban people have urban people's equality, while rural people have rural people's equality. Equality for rural people and equality for urban people are not the same." They believe that the city and countryside are at different levels of development. Thus equality was accommodated into hierarchies. Many people also agreed with the statement: "Men should do work that is suitable for men, while women should do work that is suitable for women. In this way men and women can both display their own advantages." However, what kind of work is "suitable" for men? What is "suitable" women's work? This view of gender equality is actually in line with the old practice that "Men are best suited to be leaders, while women are best suited to be secretaries." Traditional sex roles in society and the current disparities between the city and countryside have naturalized "a ranked equality." This is the view of equality that some communist party members have. This kind of view of equality obviously is behind the times. But many of us still follow it. Currently many countries and a lot of international organizations all have their own definitions of "equality." We should thoroughly study these definitions. For instance, the International Labor Organization's definition of equality is that gender equality refers to men and women's equality in terms of their rights, responsibility, opportunity, access to resources, recognition and incomes. It allows both men and women to fully, comprehensively develop and not be limited because of their physiology. This is the meaning of gender equality. Before we could research this well, some people are ready to jump on the topic and talk about it. This has not only ruined the intellectual atmosphere, but also failed to help to find a solution to the problem.

Fourthly, I think the concept of gender equality in other countries and China's concept of men and women's equality are built on different foundations. The international concept of gender equality is established within the framework of the basic human rights. For instance obtaining dignified work is each and every person's birthright. The government should provide opportunities and services for each person. Also birthing rights are part

of the basic human rights framework. This includes the basic human right to give birth to a girl. The law should not be used to naturalize the view that giving birth to a girl is not valuable. But our concept of men and women's equality is still built upon the idea that the government makes decisions for the people. When they decide to give you a right, you then have that right. For instance, male and female officials have different mandatory retirement ages. Gender mainstreaming encourages us to set up a progressive, comprehensive view of human rights.

The fifth level that needs to be addressed is that the methods of gender analysis and the traditional analysis of women are different. I am not going to get into this topic too deeply. The results of these two different methods of analysis lead to vastly different conclusions. The investigation of Chinese women's social position has basically been carried out in order to put forth a bright façade. I say this because the investigation did not include the two most discriminated against and most sensitive groups of women. The investigation only included women from eighteen to sixty-four years old. The disparity in the birth rate of the sex of Chinese babies is the most prominent in the world;<sup>207</sup> many girl babies are not wanted. Also the problem of increasing poverty among old people, especially old women, was not acknowledged. The study did not investigate either of these two phenomena. It avoided the most sensitive questions affecting the status of Chinese women. The investigation also was restricted in its mode of thinking. This mode of thinking was "If Chinese women's status has not been enhanced, then hasn't the work of the Women's Federation been for nothing?" However, we could think about this question from another angle: "If we did not have the work of the Women's Federation, then perhaps woman's status would be even lower." What is gender analysis? It analyzes the existence of disparities between men and women and the reasons for these disparities. It aims to reduce the disparities and gradually realize gender equality by changing the system and the policies.

The sixth aspect concerns whether or not women and men are the subject of development, what positions men and women – both sexes – have in development and whether they can participate in the development decision making and in the process of decision making whether their voices can be heard. As a result of development will their rights be strengthened? Will their skills be sharpened? Will equal, cooperative partnerships be constructed so men and women both "win?"

The seventh question is in regards to the prerequisites for development. Economic development cannot automatically substitute for gender equality. Without economic development, we do not have the prerequisites for women's development. But the current problem is that as the economy has developed, women have not developed at the same rate. Some have even sacrificed women's development so that the economy could develop. This is not only unfair but also not sustainable.

The eighth question is very important. There are different analyses of the causes of gender inequality. The traditional view is summarized in the "old five reasons." The first is class; the second is private ownership; the third is the level of development of

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<sup>207</sup> Current statistics show a 118:100 sex ratio in China.

productivity; the fourth is the influence of traditional ideas; and the fifth is the belief that women's quality is low. These five reasons do not offer a breakthrough in analyzing gender inequality. The gender mainstreaming position argues for analyzing gender systems and gendered division of labor while considering multiple factors such as society, politics, the economy, culture, class, ethnicity, nation, the market, communities, family, etc. Therefore it enriches and encourages the understanding of the complexity of gender issues.

Our research has found that the ideas of mainstreaming gender and gender equality have placed greater demands on us than China's traditional idea of men and women's equality. Within the country it is now popular to say, "advance with the times." We should also advance with the times in terms of theorizing men and women's equality. We can do this by studying the successful experiences and ideas of international society, and working to enhance the level of social development and the women's movement in China. We should abandon lofty slogans and empty campaigns. Others do not understand what we are doing. The more we only speak lofty words, the smaller our circle of supporters will become. The result of speaking within our own circles and entertaining ourselves is less support from society and declining popular trust.

**Chen: How do you regard this kind of shortcoming? How do we bring about a change in this area?**

Liu: In our research we find that Chinese culture has a problem. We call it a "great inferiority complex." China has a rich and glorious history and is well-known for this. We have a kind of intense national pride and feeling of superiority. When something appears in international society that is not proposed or invented by us, we always fear that we are falling behind. Thus, we always tend to say that we have everything and we are good at everything. As soon as the international community raises the issue of gender equality, we immediately say, we have "men and women's equality." As soon as they raise the issue of mainstreaming gender, we say we have "the basic national policy." As soon as they raise the issue of sustainable development, we say we have the policy of "tackling both problems." I will give you an example. Two days ago I met a Canadian female project design expert. The Canadian Agency for International Development planned to support the Chinese Supreme Court in their attempt to advance gender equality in the legal system. She discussed this matter with officials from the Chinese Department of Justice. All of the Chinese officials at present were men. After she introduced the goals of the project, those officials kept laughing. She asked the interpreter what they were laughing at. The interpreter said that when speaking of the matter of men and women's equality, it should be the Chinese that pass on their experiences to other countries. They did not think it was necessary to turn to Canada to help China. These Chinese officials simply did not understand the situation of gender equality in Canada. They only thought that China already does this especially well. This is exactly what I was referring to when I said that China has a "great inferiority complex".

Although Chinese women's position has been declining according to the United Nations' rankings, Chinese officials think that Chinese women with a relatively high status are not

rare. This kind of “great inferiority complex” causes people to think that everything they have is good, and it causes them not to be willing to learn from other people. Internationally, many indexes of sustainable development have been set. But we are still regarding the economy (GDP) as the most important. Now the Central Party Committee and the government have started to talk about scientific methods of development and have just started to emphasize the people-centered approach. However this is still quite far from a truly scientific conceptualization of development! At the very minimum we need several generations to bring about political democratization. There is a long way to go to realize a scientific conceptualization of development. But I think that a way to get at this issue and promote this process would be to advance gender mainstreaming. This is not only a theoretical question; it is also a very important practical issue, a political issue, an issue of worldview, and an issue of values.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: CHINA**

**Transcript of Wang Cuiyu  
Interviewer: Gao Xueyu**

**Date: May 2003**

**Location: Shanghai Women's Federation**

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**Wang Cuiyu**, born in 1935, is a retired Women's Federation cadre who has involved in many organized activities locally and nationally to promote women's social advancement. In the 1990s and early 2000s she was the executive secretary of the Shanghai Association of Women's Studies, an organization affiliated with the Shanghai Women's Federation. While promoting research on women in Shanghai, she also played a leading role in a national organization for women's career development. When women's unemployment became an increasingly acute issue in the economic reform, she set up a women's school in Shanghai to provide vocational training for laid-off women. Her activism illustrates how women in the official women's federation have been able to initiate projects that address the needs of various women's groups and to work closely with women activists outside the official organization. Her narrative also demonstrates how the Fourth UN Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 provided new frameworks for women activists in China.

Wang Cuiyu (hereafter Wang): I was born in Ningbo City in Zhejiang<sup>208</sup> to a very average family. When I was six years old, my mother passed away. The environment in our household became very trying.

**Gao Xueyu (hereafter Gao): How many brothers and sisters did you have?**

Wang: At the time there were four of us in our household. My eldest sister, since she was small, had lived with my grandmother. I had two older brothers and another older sister who lived at home. Before long my elder sister passed away because she had contracted a lung disease. When I was little I also had a lung illness for a time; however my sister died because of this. During the time the Japanese were in China, one of my older brothers was gunned down by the Japanese because they thought he was a resistance army soldier. So after my mother passed away, only one of my older brothers and I were left in the house. My father, who at the time depended on his small business deals, was especially lonely and later remarried. At that time Ningbo City was just like elsewhere in feudal China;<sup>209</sup> feudalistic ideas were still very strong. Since within a time span of one or two years, my mother had passed away and my older brother and sister had also both died, I was accused of being a “*bai hu xing*.”<sup>210</sup> This was because people believed that I had caused my family to suffer a whole series of misfortunes. This kind of attitude and thinking stemmed from my step mother, who represented feudalistic morals that were prevalent at the time. Thus, my childhood was very difficult. When I was four years old my family was in the cigarette business. Therefore, from morning till night I would sit on a stool and make cigarettes. I could do this really quickly. I had no childhood and no time to play. So when I was young I did not know how to play; I only knew how to work. Later, my father’s small business did not do well so I went to a factory to do child labor.

Later after China won the anti-Japanese war,<sup>211</sup> my older sister came back to Ningbo, to my grandmother’s house where she had grown up.

**Gao: Where was your grandmother’s house?**

Wang: My grandmother’s house was also in Ningbo. My sister had attended elementary school there and then had attended a sports school and then a nursing school. She had become a midwife and moved away. She had learned that our mom, sister and brother had passed away. So she wanted to return home to see our grandmother who had raised her since she was small. As soon as she saw how thin and pallid I had become and how I was suffering, she asked my father if she could take me with her and let me attend school.

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<sup>208</sup> Ningbo is a city in the Zhejiang Province (lower Yang-tze region).

<sup>209</sup> The official discourse and the Chinese public often use “feudal China” to refer to pre-1949 era (before the People’s Republic of China was established and a socialist system was created). People often use this word to describe a family where women are not respected or their rights are ignored.

<sup>210</sup> In Chinese astrology the *bai hu xing* is an evil spirit. Once you come into contact with this spirit, bad luck is supposed to follow you.

<sup>211</sup> The anti-Japanese war, as part of World War II, took place mainly from 1937-1945.

**Gao: How old were you then?**

Wang: This was in 1947.

**Gao: So when you were young, you had never attended any sort of formal schooling?**

Wang: No, I had not. My older sister saw that I had never attended a day of school and saw that I was being oppressed in both my home and at the factory. She said: “I already work, so I will take care of my younger sister.” So she took me with her. At that time she did not have a home either. Wherever she went, I also went with her. Sometimes she deposited me at her friends’ houses. I then attended school and baby-sat for her friends.

**Gao: How much older is your sister than you?**

Wang: She is fifteen years older.

**Gao: So at that time she was already in her twenties?**

Wang: Yes, she was. For a few years, living with my sister, I attended two or three years of school. I skipped a few grades of school. I did not start in first grade; instead I started in third grade and stayed in school until fifth grade. At that time Nanjing was liberated.<sup>212</sup> Yes, at the time of liberation I was in Nanjing. In this way I started to become educated. In school I was a very good student. At the time when I was almost ready to graduate from elementary school, Nanjing was liberated. In my elementary school there were many college students from the Jiao Tong University<sup>213</sup> – those who were involved in student activism came to advocate the ideas of the Chinese Communist Party and the liberation of China. I was very happy and encouraged. At the time I vowed that from that day forward I would definitely study very hard.

At this time, I ran into another problem. My older sister had gotten married. She had her first child. She also brought my older brother, who had become an apprentice, to live with us.

**Gao: Did you and your brother go to live with your sister at the same time?**

Wang: No, it was not the same year. He went later; I went to live with my sister first and my brother came to stay with us in 1948, right before liberation. At that time my sister saw that my brother, who was an apprentice in Shanghai, was undergoing difficulties. He made candy in Shanghai but the pots that he had to work with were extremely hot. Being

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<sup>212</sup> In this interview, “liberation” refers to the takeover of a city or region by the Chinese Communist Army (People’s Liberation Army, abbr. as PLA) from the hands of the Nationalist government. It also refers to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.

<sup>213</sup> Here Wang Cuiyu is referring to Shanghai Jiao Tong University, a university jointly run by the Ministry of Education of China and the Shanghai government. It is one of the oldest and most influential universities in the People’s Republic of China.

an apprentice in this industry was a very difficult life. My older sister, who had been working a few years, felt that her financial situation was not too bad. So she not only took me with her, but also took care of my brother. When she was dating her future husband, she told him that she had a requirement that must be met before she would marry him. She wanted to be able to continue to take care of her younger brother and sister. My future brother-in-law agreed.

**Gao: What kind of person was your brother-in-law?**

Wang: He was not a bad person. He came from a family that was relatively well off. Before liberation in 1948 he went to the United States to study. He studied medicine and was a really great guy. He came back to China just in time for liberation and then married my sister. By 1949, the year of liberation, they already had a child together. You can imagine that he had taken on a fairly big set of responsibilities. This guy who had studied abroad in the United States was married to my sister who was a midwife. They had a child together and he also had to take care of his wife's younger brother and sister. In this kind of situation when he had to make a choice (between me and my brother), my brother-in-law chose to be responsible for my brother. He told me that it would be better if I went to work. At that time there were cultural work groups everywhere and I could have found a job. My older sister did not know that he said this to me. After he said this to me, my feelings were a little hurt.

At that time I was in school and even though I was thrilled about liberation, I did not want to take a job in a culture work group and still wanted to stay in school. Later I talked with my teacher about my situation. I told my teacher about my experiences in my childhood. Why did I have to rely on my brother-in-law? What problems was I facing? At the time I had a teacher named Wang Hao. He had originally spent some time at the Tao Xingzhi<sup>214</sup> Yucai School. My teacher said, "I will introduce you to a school in Shanghai, a school established by Tao Xingzhi. This school especially catered to orphans. You may study there, because costs for food, books, tuition and clothes were all free. You could work and study at the same time." After I heard this, I was really happy. I said to my older sister: "My teacher has told me about a school in Shanghai where all of the school expenses are free; you have a lot of responsibilities now." At the time my older sister did not agree with this plan but I persisted and said that I wanted to go. Later when she saw me off at the train station she said to me: "Your wings have been hard but now you want to fly on your own." In her heart she was very hurt. She said she had originally thought that she would take care of me from elementary school, through high school, and then college. So she was hurt that I wanted to leave her. At the time I could not tell her what her husband had said to me. Although what my brother-in-law had said to me was hurtful, I could understand where he was coming from. However, I could not tell my sister what he had said to me. So I went by myself to Shanghai and entered the Yucai School. Since we had just been liberated the conditions at the school were very good. Although at the time Tao Xingzhi had already passed away... at the school we still all called each other brothers and sisters. We called male teachers "older brother" and female teachers "older sister." In this way we created an atmosphere that was similar to a

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<sup>214</sup> Tao Xingzhi was a famous educator in China.

big family. Most of the students at the school were orphans. A minority of the students' families had a little bit of money. These families paid a small amount of tuition. I was a top student. So everything was free for me. Actually, in the past Tao Xingzhi had made some connections with overseas donors. My photograph had been sent to them. Overseas there were some who wanted to offer assistance. I only discovered this after I had grown up, and especially after I myself had established a school for the disadvantaged. At the time I did not eat very well at all. Since the school was originally in Chongqing, many of the people and students were from Sichuan and Chongqing. They all liked to eat hot, spicy foods. Everyday they fed us cabbage and hot peppers. As a result I ended up having sores all over my buttocks.

**Gao: Was it because you were having a reaction to the spicy food?**

Wang: Yes. I ate these kinds of meals everyday. Everyday I would study and also do physical labor. At the time we were growing things in the field.

**Gao: At the time how big was the scope of your school? How many students were there?**

Wang: There were more than one hundred of us. At that time we were very happy. We also went to the countryside to be "little teachers." Tao Xingzhi advocated the practice of "little teachers." We would go to the countryside and help farmers learn Chinese characters, etc. In this school I felt free from worry and felt love everywhere. During this time, I did receive an education of love. In addition this school was the Party's democratic stronghold. Therefore I was deeply influenced by the democratic ideas and the party's revolutionary ideals. So I entered the school in 1949 and stayed for about two years. During this time I was really able to lay a foundation for myself. I felt that this was the first time that I was thoroughly liberated. I felt my individuality was fully set free. I was completely free from any worries and did not feel constrained in any way. Even though our lives were difficult at this time, I really felt a strong sense of independence. So, this describes my situation at the school.

The Korean War<sup>215</sup> broke out in 1950. Exactly because I had established this kind of foundation, I really loved the new government and really loved new China.<sup>216</sup> So, when

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<sup>215</sup> The Korean War from June 25, 1950 to cease-fire on July 27, 1953 (the war has not ended officially), was a conflict between North Korea and South Korea. Some consider this Cold War-era conflict to have been a proxy war between the United States and its allies, and the Communist powers of the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. The principal combatants were North Korea, supported by People's Volunteer Army (PVA) of Communist China, and later Soviet combat advisors, aircraft pilots and weapons; and South Korea, supported principally by the United States, the United Kingdom and the Philippines, although many other nations sent troops under the aegis of the United Nations. In South Korea, it is often called "6-25" (the date of the start of the conflict), or, more formally, *Hanguk Jeonjaeng*. In the United States, the conflict was termed a police action, as the Korean Conflict, under the aegis of the United Nations rather than a war, largely in order to remove the necessity of a Congressional declaration of war.

<sup>216</sup> By the time the Korean War broke out, the Chinese Communist Party had established a new government in China after defeating the Nationalist government and its armies (1949). People often refer to the post-1949 China as "the new China."

the War to Resist United States Aggression and Aid Korea began, many students participated in the “December Ninth Campaign.” This campaign was to mobilize students to participate in the military cadre school and then go to Korea. During this campaign, I suddenly felt that this time I did not want to stay in school but instead wanted to go to Korea. Years ago my brother-in-law urged me not to attend school. However, I went to join the Yucai school. But now, I wanted to quit school because I wanted to defend our homes and protect our country, wanted to protect the new government and our new China. So I was the first to get on stage in a mobilization meeting and take a stand. I said, “I really enthusiastically loved attending school” – at the time I was pretty good at my studies in literature and I also read many world famous authors like Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, etc. – “and I really loved literature and I originally thought that someday I would become a female author. But currently our country is seriously threatened so I decided not to continue my studies. I want to educate myself among the flames of war and write under the baptism of revolution. In the future I will become an author.” The time when I went to do this, I fell and stumbled.

Perhaps because my performance in the campaign was outstanding – I really did this out of my strong feeling that we needed to protect our homes and defend our country, in the end they did not make me go to the cadre school. If I had gone, I almost definitely would have ended up in Korea. This campaign was organized by the municipal youth league and the district youth league in Dachang, which is the present day Baoshan. At the time my school was in the Baoshan area. The municipal youth league saw my performance, especially when I ran onto stage, stumbled but then still delivered my speech about how I had come to Shanghai to study. So they allowed me to stay in school. I became part of the first group of cadres in the municipal youth league.

**Gao: Was this the Communist Youth League?**

Wang: I entered the Communist Youth League in my school.

**Gao: What year did you join the League?**

Wang: It was in 1949. Even though I really was not old enough, this was the first group and I became a member of it. Since I was a league member and my performance was also remarkable, I did work for the league as a committee member in the Dachang district. At the time, they were just about to begin land reform and the building of democratic government. Because of this, I went to the countryside to do work in land reform and helped to build democratic government. Later I transferred from the district league committee to the league committee for the city suburbs. This was the Shanghai suburban youth league. My work was connected with the countryside. I was there until 1954 when the suburban youth league was abolished. We were then divided and sent to different work units. I, along with the man who would become my future husband, was transferred to the city league committee and worked there until the end of the Cultural Revolution. I was then transferred from the municipal league committee to the Shanghai Women’s Federation.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> The All China Women’s Federation has its national networks and branches at all administrative levels in

**Gao: What year did you begin to work at the Women's Federation?**

Wang: That was in 1978.

**Gao: And what year did you get transferred to the municipal youth league?**

Wang: 1954. So In 1954 I went to the municipal youth league. Then I officially left in 1978. During this period, following the party policy, I went to the countryside to work as a teacher for eight and a half years. I feel that during these fourteen or fifteen years as a cadre of the Communist Youth League and as a member of the young people's work teams everyone was really full of vigor and vitality. I, myself, was also continuing to develop in my work, both in the countryside and in schools. In addition through my work in the Communist Youth League, I came to know my future husband and friend, Ye Zukang. We entered the Party together when we were eighteen years old. Then we dated for about five or six years. Then in 1959 we got married and soon had a child. At the time I felt very fortunate to have my career, my family and my love. Other people always said that we were such a happy couple. He really had a lot of talent.

On the eve of the Great Cultural Revolution, after I studied at the Central Party Youth Corps School, I did research on pedagogy at the youth corps school and was engaged in youth education. Even though at that time I also was impacted by the Cultural Revolution, it was a massive movement and everyone was impacted. I did not feel as if it had any special impact on me. At the time all of the old cadres had been treated unjustly. I was rather young and did not have any real worries. They made allowances for the things that we did.

Later after the Cultural Revolution and after I went to the Women's Federation, two situations emerged. This was when I started to get interested in feminist issues.

**Gao: Feminist ideas?**

Wang: Well, let me explain. Perhaps because when I went to the Women's Federation someone at the municipal youth league gave me an introduction or for some other reason; at any rate, the responsibilities that the Women's Federation placed upon me were very heavy. They wanted me to start our work on the senior women intellectuals in the spheres of science, education, culture and medicine in Shanghai. So I worked to establish women's organizations in colleges, cultural organizations, and the academy of science. In this way I felt like I had entered into a splendid world. I came to know a lot of female scientists, female professors, actresses and female athletes. At the time I got to meet and work with many celebrities. I deeply, deeply felt that there was an abundance of talented women in China. It was then that I got to meet women like Qin Yi.<sup>218</sup> I also felt very encouraged at the time. During the process of doing my work, I came to realize that their personal development was not an easy one. They had reached the heights of their

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China. In Shanghai, it is called the Shanghai Women's Federation.

<sup>218</sup> Qin Yi, currently in her 80s, is a famous Chinese actress who has more than a 60 year acting career.

professions, however when you compared them with those in the mid levels in their fields, they were the minority. The majority of women could not reach the upper echelons of their professions. It certainly was not easy for this small group of women to get to the top. It was like they had to struggle and fight to get where they were – like having to behead six generals at five different passes. It was very difficult for the many talented women, female scientists and actresses at the mid level to get to the top. Women comrades did most of the work on a daily base. However, when it came time for evaluations and promotions, if a man and woman were compared together, inevitably it would be the man who would move ahead. Because of this, often when women comrades would reach this critical stage, they would not be promoted and remain at their mid level positions. Thus women more often became involved in auxiliary work and genuinely important tasks were assigned to men. Women most likely took mid level positions and very few reached the upper echelons. At the beginning I had not been influenced by international feminist thoughts; I was not equipped with any feminist theory. I only knew the idea of “the equality between men and women.”<sup>219</sup> This idea was raised as early as the Maoist era.

At the time, I took several measures. The first measure was that recipients for the “March 8 Red Flag Bearers”<sup>220</sup> in the fields of Science, Education, Culture and Health must be selected and praised every year. At that time it was almost impossible for women to receive honor titles such as “model workers” and “outstanding workers,” since men and women were evaluated together and only men got recognized. But the honor title of “March 8 Red Flag Bearers” was reserved for women. Although the city Women’s Federation had a limited quota of the number of women they could nominate, each unit and various systems were each allowed to do evaluations and choose recipients for this award! This happened every year. At the city level we granted such awards biennially or triennially. In this way women would be exposed so that they could shine. This revealed their talents. This activity was carried out with great enthusiasm. The Science, Education, Culture and Health spheres were the first to have this evaluation system in Shanghai. The Women’s Federation started from Shanghai where they tried to promulgate this practice. I was engaged in the foundational work for this. I did not have any subordinates. I was both the supervisor and the clerk. I happily busied myself with this work.

In the meantime, I proposed a slogan “Clear out the dust and excavate the pearls.” The meaning of this slogan was that very many women were silently working; they all had achievements but they remained buried. So our women’s organization took on the work of cleaning out the dust so that people’s achievements could be revealed. We did not try to create talented people; the Women’s Federation could not cultivate talents because it

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<sup>219</sup> “The equality between men and women” (*nan nu ping deng* in Chinese) has been promoted in the Chinese official discourse since the establishment of the PRC. For a long period of time, this slogan illustrates the Communist Party gender view that women and men are the same and thus they should be treated in the same way despite their biological differences. It is used today by some people as the equivalent of “gender equality.” It has been written into laws as one of the basic national policies in China, since the former President Jiang Zeming spoke about it at the Fourth UN Women’s Conference in Beijing (1995).

<sup>220</sup> This title was created by the All China Women’s Federation to recognize women who had made remarkable accomplishments in their professions. Their goal was to promote women’s advancement.

was a mass organization. However, during the process of women's growth, we could seek out talented people, either by selecting the "March 8 Red Flag Bearers" award winners or recommending people to the leaders. We figuratively used the image of "cleaning out the dust." These women were often buried under the dust and we wanted to unearth them. We did an excellent job at doing this kind of work. We all worked together at discovering talented women. In addition to honoring "outstanding women workers," we also had the yearly activity of "finding shining women around us." It was to get together and talk about outstanding women around us and their achievements. In this way we would develop together. In this way we could gain some progress in terms of equal rights. Some women who later became leaders in Shanghai advanced as "March 8 Red Flag Bearers." This was one thing that we were involved in.

The second thing that we were involved in occurred after 1985. The Women's Federation called on me to help with establishing a cadre school, probably as a promotion for me. I went to help to establish the first women's cadre school. The Women's Federation had not had any women's cadre school until I went in 1985 to help to establish this. I was the first principal of the school. I went to prepare for the establishment of the women's cadre school. After it was built, the first matter at hand was to establish a curriculum with courses that aimed to enhance women's talents. Every woman cadre who came to the school had to attend this training class. At this time we did not have teaching materials. Ye Zonghai, a teacher from East China Normal University, and I initiated the Association of Female Talentology.<sup>221</sup> At the time he had only finished a manuscript, the first draft. Because at that time computers had not come into common use, the manuscript was written by hand. He had already sent the manuscript to Northern Women and Children's Publishing House, but the publishing house wanted a guarantee of the sale of two thousand copies in order to publish the manuscript. I was just about to offer this class. So I got hold of a copy of his manuscript, proofread and printed it, and then used this in my first semester of class. Of course, the outcome of using this material was very good.

**Gao: At the time how many students did your school have?**

Wang: At the time the school did not even have a dormitory. My first class was held in a space that we borrowed from a ballet school. It had about fifty or sixty people. Then I held my second class. Eventually because the women's cadre school was different from other more general schools – it was to train cadres, so every year we had several hundred people. Thus, since we produced some results, many women cadres, some of whom had attended our classes and wanted to take some books back to their branches to teach, there was the demand for the material. In the class you could find, for example, area Women's Federation presidents. So, I immediately was able to guarantee that the publishing house could sell two thousand copies of Ye Zonghai's book. Of course some people said: "Are you crazy? You need so much money and the women's cadre school does not have that kind of money." Since I chose to use his book in my classes, Ye Zonghai was able to publish his book.

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<sup>221</sup> This terminology was coined by this group in an effort to promote women's career advancement.

**Gao: Where did the funds come from to purchase the two thousand copies of the book?**

Wang: At that time the country had allocated funds to us that were in total about 130,000 yuan for the year. This was to include the rent for the classrooms, workers' wages and so on. We saved some of this funding for the textbooks.

**Gao: So the money came from the funding from the Women's Federation?**

Wang: These were the funds that the country allocated. After the women's cadre school was established, I applied to the government for funds for the year, about 130,000 yuan. Until the present day, we still only get 130,000 yuan.

**Gao: After so many years?**

Wang: Yes! It is the source for the wages, the rent and so on. We only get this much. The Women's Federation does not allocate funds for these things. This was the second matter that I did at that time.

Then I did the third thing. (So I accomplished three things.) The first was every year to select recipients for the "March 8 Red Flag Bearers" award. The second was the campaign of "clean out the dust to excavate the pearls."

The third was to offer a course at the school that emphasized making the best use of their special abilities so that they would learn skills and advance in their careers. This third project was larger in scale and would benefit many more people than the first two projects. After the "Gang of Four"<sup>222</sup> was crushed and after the policy of "reform and opening" – especially after 1985, I think I gradually started to have some feminist ideas for two reasons. The first reason was because of my experiences at work. I really felt that it was not an easy task for women to achieve their full potential. In society the starting line for women's career advancement, along with many other aspects, was unfair. We could also feel inequality in terms of the standards set up for women and the heavy workload for them. The other reason was personal. By that time, in 1983, my husband had passed away due to lung cancer. He left behind two children, a son who had just entered university, and a son who had just finished elementary school. So in addition to finding myself in the position of being a single mother, I also took on the responsibility of preparing from ground zero for the establishment of the women's cadre school. Imagine that. In 1983...no, in 1984 they asked me to help to prepare for the establishment of the women's cadre school.

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<sup>222</sup> The Gang of Four was a group of Communist Party leaders in the People's Republic of China who were arrested and removed from their positions in 1976, following the death of Mao Zedong, and were blamed for the events of the Cultural Revolution. The group included Mao's widow Jiang Qing and three of her close associates, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen. The removal of this group from power marked the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Therefore, how did I feel at that time? In my life I had three very unfortunate incidents. When I was a child I mourned the death of my mother. At the time I suffered from the oppression of feudal ideas such as being considered “*bai hu xing*.” I yearned for liberation at that time and sought to be liberated exactly because of my childhood experience. I still remember that in the 1960s, I saw the movie *Red Women’s Battalion*.<sup>223</sup> When I watched the movie I simply found myself with tears streaming down my face. I felt as if the situations that the movie characters found themselves in closely resembled my own experiences. I had just started to work at the municipal committee of the youth league at that time and my new job helped me to heal some of my emotional wounds.

The second unfortunate incident was the death of my husband when I was middle aged. Even though at that time I worked at the Women’s Federation, there were still subconscious feudal ideas that existed among these women in our offices. My first thought was to wonder why I couldn’t be promoted to an office level cadre at the Women’s Federation. Instead they wanted an orphaned widowed mother to start from ground zero to prepare for the establishment of the women’s cadre school. At the time I was a single mother who had to care for two children. I did not have any relatives in Shanghai. We had to start from zero; we did not even have a small patch of land, or a room, and I did not have a staff. We started from ground zero to open a women’s cadre school. At that time I borrowed a place to teach class from the ballet school. This was a place in the countryside. I remember at the time the TV series *A Xin*<sup>224</sup> was showing. Every day I would accompany students to watch this. At that time, my older son was living on campus at his university and my younger son was often home by himself. Nobody looked after him. In my heart I really felt extremely worried and I always thought about him, but I did not know what to do. Why did I have to deal with this? It was obvious that I did not have the ability nor did I have to take on this job. I was, after all, alone and weak. This was the first time that I felt that as a widow and single mother, I was discriminated against and was treated coldly. I did not receive care from others.

I felt that among women often there was a subconscious way of thinking. For instance, when a woman does not have a husband, on the one hand, she receives a lot of sympathy. However, actually, hidden behind this is the idea that the woman does not have strength and does not have someone that she can rely on. Moreover, frequently people had this kind of theory: “You, Old Wang, do not take enough care of your family. You work from morning to night. That is why you suffer from this kind of result.” Later my boss said to me, “If you have to take care of your husband and look after your two children, you can request a long term leave of absence. We can look after you.” After hearing my boss say this I was really hurt. During this time what I most needed was for them to inspire me; I did not want to retreat. They seemed to mean: “When you find yourself in the situation where you feel like you have lost everything, why do you still have to

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<sup>223</sup> Also referred to as *The Red Detachment of Women* in English. This popular Chinese movie has won many awards in China. It depicts a group of revolutionary women of the 1930s who rebelled against the oppression of local landlords and joined the Communist Party army to fight for the liberation of the Chinese people.

<sup>224</sup> *A Xin* was a Japanese TV series whose protagonist was named A Xin. The story tells of a woman who eventually becomes a successful entrepreneur after overcoming years of struggle and hardship.

struggle to show you are strong? Go and look after your family.” After my husband died, others said to me, “Well, you will soon be fifty years old. You should go and look after your children, retire early and so on.” During this time, I thought about when I was young and I was looked down upon by others because I lost my mother. They even treated me as the girl who was the root cause of disaster. When I became middle aged, I found myself mourning my husband. Now I was made to feel that I had not done well taking care of my family and that it would be best if I retired early. This left me feeling very uneasy. On the one hand, when my husband became sick, I tried my best so that I did not give up my work. And I also tried my best to help him lengthen his life. Originally, the doctor said that he only had three months to live. However under my care he lived for another three years. During these three years, I would work during the day and take care of him in the evenings. In the beginning I looked after him when he was in our home but later he had to stay in the hospital so I had to sleep in the hospital at night. I only had someone temporarily help me with my son at home. During the day she came to my home and looked after my son when I was at work. We also faced some economic difficulties. I received support from my older brother and older sister, too. So my husband lived for three more years and I was resolute about not asking for time off from my work. I said, “If under these circumstances I pulled back from my work, on the one hand I would have no way of maintaining our home financially. If he really left me, I would not have any way of supporting my family.” After he passed away, people had the idea that since I would be fifty years old soon that I should retire early and take care of my children and ask my sons to support me after they started to work. I believed what was important for us was that I should pursue my own career and my children should make progress in their studies. But we had to struggle to succeed and develop our talent while enduring hardship. I thought that the best way to educate my children was to influence them in subtle ways through my own actions. So, after my husband passed away, I took care of the kids by myself. I said to them, “You both work hard at your studies and mom will also work hard.” I took on all of the house chores by myself. I had stopped hiring the helper by then so I had to go to work during the day and do the house chores at night. Sometimes I would find myself still doing housework at two or three o’clock in the morning. I did not make my children wash a single dish. Later, my older son graduated from university and began to work. I also sent my second son to attend university and supported him until he graduated. Thus I felt that the female intellectuals in the spheres of science, education, culture and health had to walk a very difficult path in order to become successful. Many of us, including me, had suffered setbacks. So I feel that for women to move towards achieving their potential, and realizing their talents, they must have a kind of progressive way of thinking. If they do not, then often they will give up in difficult situations.

Why did I want to establish the curriculum that would help women achieve their potential at the women’s cadre school? This was the time when I myself was undergoing the most difficult time, so this made sense to me. After 1988, I started to foster and develop the Association of Female Talentology. This was also because I was thinking about how there were many women who found themselves in the same situation as me. In the lives of these women, the path to advance had also been very rough. We all had to climb over one mountain top after the other. If we did not have a spirit of pursuing liberating

ourselves and striving for self-strengthening, then women would have no way of getting past these kinds of extreme difficulties in life. Therefore after 1988, I talked with Ye Zonghai about using the study of making the best use of the theory of talented women as the foundation to initiate an organization. At that time, there was the National Association of Talentology and at the local level there was the Farmers' Association of Talentology, the Association of Talentology for Cultural Workers. So we wanted to have our Association of Female Talentology. We submitted a proposal and it was approved after June 4<sup>th</sup>. In December 1989, in Zhenhai in Zhejiang the Chinese Association of Female Talentology was established. I think at that time, besides the idea that women should strive to develop regardless of all kinds of difficult situations and must have the spirit of self-strengthening and independence, there was a theory that also influenced me. At that time there was a theory that had come from Japan that was called the "Three studies for ten thousand days."

**Gao: What does that mean?**

Wang: In a person's life there are three periods of ten thousand days of learning. From age zero to twenty-nine years old there are ten thousand days, where the primary focus is studying. This is the time when you are building a foundation. From age twenty-nine to fifty-nine there are also ten thousand days. During this period you are working. You become the backbone of society. In order to continuously develop, you certainly must persist in your studies. Since only by persisting in your studies can you fully develop in the second stage and continuously make progress so that you can climb to the peak, be successful and fully realize your talents. During the third period of ten thousand days when you are fifty-nine years old until after you are eighty-one years old, you become a person who has accumulated the rich experiences of a lifetime. At this stage you not only have little burden but you also have accumulated rich experiences. If you study now, it is a period of ten thousand days when you can soar to a higher level.

This theory inspired me in a very big way. At the time when I initiated the Association, I was about to retire soon. At that time the retirement age for women officials was not 60 but 55 and I was going to be 55 in 1990. I started to prepare for my work two years prior to my actual retirement. Some people asked me, "What are you doing? In the past you were always working. Even though we wanted you to take a leave and take care of your household you did not do this. Now after so much hardship you have been able to support your two sons through their college lives. Now the older has started to work and the younger one is already a sophomore student. This was a feat in itself. Now you will soon retire and you still want to work?" At that time, this theory of three ten thousand days was really inspirational to me. I felt that the greatest thing that China wasted was its human resources. Today, a lot of women retire when they in their forties. A person does not have very long to work in her lifetime and bring to light her value. Even though you are not yet old, you already feel that you are old. At that time no one would retire at the age of 45. When I retired the official retirement age for officials became 60. So I believed in this theory of "Three studies for ten thousand days" and used it to mobilize our sisters all over the country. We raised funds by ourselves. We gathered together to establish the countrywide Association of Female Talentology. So the thinking behind the

establishment of this association was very pure. We wanted to research theories of bringing forth women's talents and guide everyone so that they could achieve their potential. So I continuously spread the theory of the "Three studies for ten thousand days." I told everyone: It does not matter if women are currently in their careers or if they had already retired. This is all artificial. Now in the west there are a lot of people who are seventy-five and have still not retired. Doesn't this prove that the line is artificial? Why do we have to give up to this?

At the time of the 1995 World Women's Conference, one of the major things that the Chinese Association of Female Talentology wanted to do was to organize a delegation to participate in the World Women's Conference, although we did not have someone to back us up nor did we have much funding. I was the secretary general of the association at that time so the association asked me to organize our delegation. After a year of preparation, we did go and participate in the World Women's Conference in Huairou. China had forty-two forums and we were the only non governmental organization that relied upon our own funding. How did we come up with the funding for this? Some of the women entrepreneurs from our group donated some of the money as individuals. After we received the approval from the All-China Women's Federation, they also gave us some funding. At that time we collected more than one hundred thousand yuan in order to complete this important project. We were called "The Chinese Human Resources Development Research Board and the Association of Female Talentology." We were registered under the State Planning Commission. Prior to this we had been registered under the National Human Resources Department. The work we did at that time was extremely successful. After the World Women's Conference, we unceasingly promoted some large scale activities. In Chongqing we held the "Western China Women's Talent Development Research Seminar." Last year, in Jiangxi we held the "Urbanization and Women's Development Research Seminar." We had all kinds of people from every level of society. Young people in their 30s and 40s compose the backbone of our association.

**Gao: Which areas did they come from?**

Wang: Places like Jiangxi, Shaanxi, Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, Chongqing, Sichuan, Liaoning, Jiangsu and so on.<sup>225</sup>

**Gao: Like branches.**

Wang: Yes, they all have branches of our association. Currently, they all already have provincial level academic associations. There are old, middle aged and young people in these research boards. There are even plenty of people over seventy years old. There are also a lot of young people from about twenty to thirty years old. These people are extremely active in our seminars. The older people have done a lot of academic research. They have been continuously engaged in scholarly research in the field of female talentology for decades. Our research board focuses on academic issues that are all

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<sup>225</sup> Chongqing is one of the Municipalities in China. There are four Municipalities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing. These are large cities that have the same administrative level as provinces. Others are names of provinces in China.

related to actual problems. I think after the research association was established, one of our tasks was to adjust to social changes over times. For example, in Shanghai we also held a senior seminar, which addressed “women’s intellectual development in the new era.”

**Gao: How often does the association generally conduct large scale, national seminars like this?**

Wang: About a year and a half. There is a process to this. If we did not take enough time, the project would not be successful. If we would hold it every year, we would not have enough time to prepare, because many of us are not released from our regular work to take on these other duties and we do not have professional staff. We do our jobs as social work.

After the World Conference of Women in September 1995, in the same year in June, I had established a women’s school for the general populace.

**Gao: I think its full name is “Women’s Experimental Correspondence School for Further Studies.”**

Wang: The whole process kind of involved several things. When we were forming the Association of Female Talentology I found myself traveling to many different places in the country. I realized that there were many good things happening in the country, but at the same time it remained difficult for women to succeed. I discovered that our country has undergone enormous changes during the process of the implementation of the reform and opening policy. The country had become prosperous and more powerful and the people had become wealthier. However after traveling from place to place I discovered...I had gradually theorized the changes in terms of “three big differences.” The first was regional differences, for example like those of Shanghai and Inner Mongolia. In Shanghai even if a woman was laid off from her job, she would still live in a good apartment building. However there were a lot of women in Inner Mongolia who lived in mud houses. The second big difference is that of the difference in the groups. There is a portion of the people who have become rich since the reform and after all, this is a good thing. However, the rich people seem to grow richer while the poor seem to grow poorer. Thus people are increasingly polarized. Today our government is taking the problems of disadvantaged groups seriously. We all realize that “The countryside is really poor; the farmers are in dire straits; the agriculture is really bad.” But in the beginning of the 1990s when I first discovered this problem, no one was talking about this. Possibly because I came from an average family, I could really empathize with how people spent their days in these places. I felt this especially in 1993, after I had a meeting in Taiyuan in Shanxi province. After the conference was finished, the conference organizers planned a trip to Wutai Mountain for us representatives. I recall that this day did not fall on a Sunday. I saw a little girl who was selling things while she was at the same time reading her book. I asked her, “Today is not Sunday. Why don’t you go to school to study instead of reading and selling things here?” She told me, “Economic conditions in my family are not very good so I had to discontinue my studies. But I really

want to study and go to school!” At that time after I had heard what she said I suddenly thought about how I had gone to the Yucai School because of my special family situation. So at the time I felt that the need for schools like the Tao Xingzhi School had not passed! Why not establish a girls’ school for the general populace and let these children have an opportunity to study while they work! This little girl was engaged in small scale business to support her family while at the same time she was persisting in her studies. After I saw this, my heart felt pain. I thought of my own childhood and I felt that we needed to continue to develop Tao Xingzhi’s idea under new historical conditions. Tao Xingzhi’s idea is captured in his slogan: “Holding total devotion to our cause but expecting nothing in return. Spread love to every place under the sky.” I was a student who came from the Tao Xingzhi School. Currently, I had already achieved so much. So I felt that I should establish this school.

After I returned to Shanghai, I raised my courage and went to the then Shanghai Bureau of Education Office of Societal Strength – it is today’s Board of Education. I introduced myself to them and said that I wanted to apply to run a women’s school for the general populace. The name of the school was to be the “Women’s Experimental Correspondence School for Further Studies.” At that time I did not know it would become an institute. I told them that I did not have anything at the time. I was very frank with them. I said I did not have any staff, did not have even a small room, and did not have a single cent of money. But I possibly had an advantage. I originally was a student of the Tao Xingzhi Yucai School. I was gradually influenced by Tao Xingzhi’s idea of education. I was traveling in the country. I realized that there were three big things that were not balanced. At that time nobody had raised this issue of these kinds of inequality. But today our government always mentions inequality. This is not to say that my theoretical level was that sophisticated, but I was able to discuss this little girl’s situation. I said I could run a correspondence school. This type of school would not need dormitories. I would run ads through the *Young Women* magazine. This magazine was published in Shanghai. The magazine only cost one yuan per issue so it was cheap, but managed extremely well. It was distributed in very remote places and had a distribution rate of over 220,000 volumes. At that time at the magazine publishing house there was an editor named Chen Lili. She told me that the magazine was distributed to many medium sized and small cities and was connected to the countryside. This magazine was extremely popular and young women really liked it. Moreover I told them that the magazine had already agreed to publish my advertisement to recruit students for free. Thus, I used this magazine to recruit students. Then they asked me where I would get the textbooks from. I said the textbook that I would use was *Writing for Young Women*. It was compiled by an editor from this magazine and was published by the People’s Publishing House. The teaching materials were composed of ten lectures for an entire year. Every two months there would be another lecture. It only cost 400 yuan for a year. Moreover I asked a professor from the Textile University to write a book called “Clothing Design and Tailoring.” So we had teaching materials. By working through a Chinese business school, we also had materials for a marketing class. This teaching material was written extremely well. So I would offer three majors and had teaching materials for these courses. But I still did not have any staff. I told them that I was also the principal of the women’s cadre school. In addition I was asked to do office work in

the Women's Federation. So I had a lot of connections in the circle. I was also an initiator of the Association of Female Talentology. So I had an advantage to run this school. This was a correspondence school. I wanted the school to attract students from around the country. I did not want Shanghai to be the emphasis of our work. Why? Because Shanghai already had a women's cadre school and I was its principal. I did not want to replicate something that had already been done. In the first couple of years most of the students were from outside of Shanghai. After they registered, I sent them the teaching materials. After they studied on their own and did the homework, I asked some of the senior level Shanghai teachers to check and grade their work for them. For instance, the director of the editorial department of *Literature Report* graded the students' literature homework.

**Gao: Were all of the teaching materials given to the students free of charge?**

Wang: Well, at that time I did not have any money. In the beginning, I charged fifty yuan per year. However, if the students wrote to me and told me that they were having financial difficulties, I did not charge them anything. Over thirty percent of the students were in this situation. There was an incident that made an extremely deep impression on me. There was a young woman who had come from Guizhou to find work in Guangdong. At that time my teaching materials cost seventy yuan. She used the money that she had saved from working. She registered for three classes, which altogether cost 210 yuan. She said, "This kind of teaching style, the high level of the teaching material and the careful grading and corrections from the teachers enable me to continue to study while working, even during the time when I go back to the countryside." There were some people who studied language especially well and would be hired by companies. Some of the students wrote articles that were published. There were some people who studied sewing and tailoring and then opened their own shops. Some people became involved in sales. Such were the results of our endeavor. This girl was only nineteen years old at that time. She had long hair. She said, "I don't ask you to waive my fees. I only ask you to give me knowledge. Only by having knowledge can I completely change my destiny so that I do not have to do menial jobs. In reality I have an extremely wide range of interests. I like singing, dancing, drawing and making clothing. If I remain a good student, then I will have many kinds of talent and I will continue to develop in the future." After we mailed the first batch of teaching materials we decided to only charge her for one class and to refund the money for the costs for the other two classes. At about this time we received a letter from her friend. That year Guangzhou Mei Mountain area had been hard hit by a major flood and she had drowned. In the letter it said, "We are sorry to tell you this sad news of the death of our beloved friend. We found this completed batch of homework in her bedroom. We saved this batch of work as a permanent memory of her." The letter also asked if we could still send all of the teaching materials. Later, I did send all of the teaching materials along with a poem that I wrote. I asked her companion to read this at her memorial and then burn it to commemorate her. Her name was Luo Xuelian. I said, "You embraced ideals and hope in your nineteen years. You came from the countryside to work at the textile mill. So you came from the countryside to the city to pursue your dreams. But now you have passed away, but never left us since you will always remain in our hearts." I keep this poem pressed under the

glass top of my table. I said to Chen Ying, my assistant, “We should keep this memory. No matter currently how difficult it is, we must not give up.” It truly was extremely difficult, although the scale of our school was larger and larger. At that time I worked at the Women’s Federation. Chen Ying was a cadre who specialized in labor issues from the Worker’s University. The two of us used our spare time to work on this. All of the school fees that we received we used to pay the teachers who corrected and graded the students’ homework. We only paid them 5 yuan for each homework book that they corrected.

**Gao: So these teachers are also for the most part volunteering their time?**

Wang: Yes. Among my students, there are about twenty to thirty percent who do not pay fees. I feel that these women themselves demonstrate a kind of spirit that can be called “feminist.” Women must be strong and should struggle for themselves. Later we edited a publication titled *New Buds*. This journal was distributed to our students. Since we are a correspondence school, we can not teach the students face to face. So I wanted to use this journal to encourage them to persist and study, study and study even more!

After 1998 the emphasis of my work shifted from the whole country to Shanghai more specifically. Why did I want to focus on Shanghai? In the past I had a principle. Shanghai already had a women’s cadre school, so I did not want to focus on recruiting students from Shanghai. At that time the Association of Female Talentology was established in an office of the Women’s Federation. I heard numerous stories of people committing suicide at that time. The first case of a woman worker who committed suicide really shook me to the core. This woman worker was laid off from her work and her husband then divorced her. The courts decided to give the child to her. So under these dual stressors, one morning she went to the produce market and bought some green vegetable peels. She then made a bowl of vegetables and noodles for her child. The child went to school and then she hung herself in her home. As for me, hearing about this made me feel terribly pained and miserable. Why did I want to help people that were far away when there were so many people close at hand who needed help? Shanghai had so many women workers who were laid off. Moreover, the numbers of the women in this situation continued to grow. If they would come to my school to take courses, then I believe this would give them some hope for the future. The situation they were in was only temporary. So I talked with Chen Ying and we decided we should return to Shanghai. So we first went from Shanghai to a focus on most of the country and then changed again to focus on Shanghai. We wanted to integrate face to face teaching with correspondence courses. Because of this, in Shanghai we established an education center. The main reason for this was because we targeted laid off women workers. In other areas – I also went to Chifeng in Inner Mongolia, its most impoverished area, and established a correspondence education center. Here we would hold agricultural technology training. There was no way to offer an agricultural technology training class via a correspondence course, because the teachers could not correct homework. Since each area has its own weather and geographic conditions, the teachers cannot work via correspondence. So we offered an agricultural technology class over there. We compiled teaching materials here and then sent them over. Currently we have already offered this

course continuously for the past four years. We have had more than five hundred students in Inner Mongolia take this training.

**Gao: Were all of the students women?**

Wang: Yes. The costs for their tuition came from a scholarship fund for disadvantaged women.

**Gao: How did this scholarship money for disadvantaged women come about?**

Wang: I had teaching centers in Shanghai and two other provinces, Chifeng in Inner Mongolia, and Yongxiu in Jiangxi, which was an old revolutionary area.<sup>226</sup> Originally I had also wanted to establish a center in Yunnan, but I really lacked the ability to do what I would have liked. My funds were really limited. I worked hard to get a little funding from the government to offer trainings for laid off women workers in Shanghai. They gave us support because the problem of laid off workers and unemployment became more and more serious but the government did not know how to deal with it. In addition, we worked to get contributions from the Shanghai Charitable Foundation as well as the Hong Kong Bank. Also, we applied to the Global Women's Foundation for funding. There was also some money that we had accumulated ourselves. At that time when the school was being established, I myself contributed ten thousand yuan. There were also two women entrepreneurs who attended the World Women's Conference who both contributed ten thousand yuan. Three of us contributed thirty thousand yuan. We used this money as the base of our funding. In general my school did not maintain a staff or a facility. We would go anywhere there were students. We would temporarily borrow a classroom in order to limit our expenses. The places that we taught were all transitory; none of them were fixed places to teach. This was because it was difficult for these women to all gather in one place. Moreover, the price of public transportation in Shanghai is very expensive. I would spend twenty to thirty yuan on transportation per day. How could these laid-off women workers all gather in one place? We had to go to wherever they were. Up until the present, our school still does not have a fixed location. Currently in Chenghuang Temple<sup>227</sup> we have a house that is a little bigger than three hundred square meters. A private entrepreneur saw that we were really down on our luck and lent us the house. This was the first floor of a run down house. When it rains hard outside this room, there is a light rain inside the room. During the rainy season, everything inside becomes full of mildew. The room also has very poor ventilation. When the weather is very hot, the room becomes very stuffy. There are three classrooms. We just have to make the best of the situation. Despite all of these problems, it is better than having no place at all. In this way, I save the rent and I can use all of the funds that we have to help the women workers who have been laid off in Shanghai. Although they

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<sup>226</sup> Before establishing the new government in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party and its armies created some rural bases with which to fight against the Nationalist armies. These are often referred to as "old revolutionary areas." They are scattered in many provinces, particularly in Jiangxi, Hunan, and Shaanxi.

<sup>227</sup> The Chenghuang Temple area in Shanghai has a long history. The Temple itself began to take shape and prosper during the Ming (1368-1644) and throughout the Qing era (1644-1911), attracting a lot of worshippers. Since the mid-nineteenth century, this area has become one of the important business areas in Shanghai. Today, it is well-known nationally as a historical site, a tourist attraction and a business area.

had a bit of money, it is still not enough. Especially these past two years, I started a family knitting and processing industry.

After going through all kinds of specialized trainings, I later discovered that the employment rate was very low. Moreover, many of these jobs are unstable. How do you deal with this problem? I thought if women did knitting, they could use their free time productively. They would not have to leave their house and could carry on a family processing industry. This program was started in 2000. Three years time has passed. We have seen the establishment of this specialized industry, training courses and then the formation of an organized cooperative. Currently this group is flourishing. I trained more than seventy people at Huangsha Island. In the first year, on average, people increased their income by eight hundred yuan. The second year their income increased by twelve hundred yuan. This year they are really doing terrific. Up to the present, in two months there are already some people who have increased their income by more than one thousand yuan. What is going on? Their skills are getting better and better and their business is increasing. Before they made about half a yuan to a yuan to process an article of clothing but now they make at least ten times what they used to. We have a cooperative – the Huangsha Island Cooperative at Tonghe Street in Baoshan. The members of this cooperative were all Shanghai farmers. There is also the Danqing Garment Cooperative on Pingyang Street. Now they all are developing markets and receive orders on their own. They were all former students who we trained. In the beginning, when the labor bureau established specialties, this was not included. Later they saw that this was a very good channel for part time employment and then they included us. They also gave us a little bit of funding. We have become one of the training bases of Project 4050.<sup>228</sup>

Currently we are developing a training class for ten thousand women who have come from other areas outside of Shanghai. This project is being held by a charitable foundation. They know that we specialize in this area and that we did a great job developing the family processing industry. As a result, they chose twelve spots in the whole city. We are one of them. We currently are training four to five hundred of our sisters who have come from other areas. They originally migrated to work in Shanghai. Later they became Shanghai wives, but they do not work now. Since we have begun the trainings, I have always taught the first class. The basic content of the first class includes such things as me talking about the objectives of the class. I address the issue of how education has become a money making industry, but that this is not the purpose of our school. We do not make any money by offering these classes. I explain how we depend on our own accumulated resources as well as several applications that we have made for funding. I usually tell the students all of these things. The money that we receive from outside funding is all used to make the students' trainings better, so I hope that they really treasure the opportunity to take the class. The second main thing that I discuss is that women must have practical skills. Only then can you obtain the social position and the

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<sup>228</sup> Project 4050 is a project in Shanghai specifically designed to foster entrepreneurship and thereby transform the city's unemployed into small business owners. Project 4050 encourages individuals to start their own small businesses, and then follows through by providing these new entrepreneurs with tax incentives and advice in managing their new enterprises.

position in your household that you should have. You should not admit that you have lost your jobs because you are less capable. You are not less capable; you are making sacrifices for the country which is undergoing the process of a realignment of the social structure. As long as you take your studies seriously, you can start over and have a better development. The third thing that I speak about is economic independence. This really is the only way that women will obtain the rightful position in the household and in society. We stress this point especially to these women migrants. You should not think that because you have gotten married to a man from Shanghai that you will have stability. Why are some people always bullied or treated badly? This is because they do not have their own independent source of income. Even though your husband and your in-laws are very good to you, in the final analysis you are always the person who has no source of income in the home. Thus, it is almost impossible for you to have a very high position in the family household. And this is not even mentioning your position in society. It is impossible for you to become a true citizen of society since you do not participate in the labor pool in society. You do not make the contributions to society that you should. I always discuss these ideas with my students. Thus they have very deep feelings for our school.

Why did I want to work on establishing a school for economically disadvantaged women and organize cooperatives at the same time? Other people said to me, “You educate the poor and do not make any money, and also even have to sometimes use your own money.” The two of us, teacher Chen Ying and I, were busy from the beginning of the year until the end of the year. We worked hard from Monday until Sunday and never took any vacation. We were even busy in the evenings; we were very tired, very tired... But I still moved on to organize a cooperative. Why was I doing this? After these years of trainings, I think that women are stronger when they form a team and organize. If they do not follow the path of collective development, they often find themselves isolated and weak. Moreover I still want to instill in these students a kind of moral character. You have to not only develop yourself and work to free yourself from poverty but also pull your sisters by the hand so that we all can succeed together. One time I had an unexpected opportunity to get to know people from the Chinese International Labor Organization during a trip to Beijing, because of an introduction from Bing Xin’s daughter, Wu Qing.<sup>229</sup> This organization was founded in 1937 and was organized by the leaders of the Party. During the War of Resistance against Japan,<sup>230</sup> the main aim of the group was to help impoverished communities. It solved the problems of the poor by organizing them into cooperatives, as well as providing provisions that were needed because we were involved in the Sino-Japanese War at that time. The objectives of the organization were: work hard, work together, unify and cooperate, and common enrichment. Thus, I asked a person from the Labor Organization to come to Shanghai to give the students a training class on the spirit of cooperatives. From this time forward, I organized the students to walk the path of “work hard; work together, unify and cooperate, and common enrichment.” As sisters we should hold hands and walk forward together. At that time when I lectured to the students in class I said, “You have three

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<sup>229</sup> Bing Xin was a famous woman writer in the early twentieth century. Her daughter, Wu Qing, is a renowned activist and scholar.

<sup>230</sup> The anti-Japanese war, as part of World War II, took place mainly from 1937-1945.

paths of development after you complete the training here. The first path is to try to get a recommendation for a job where they only enroll those who are outstanding. In this kind of work, you must certainly try to adapt. It does not matter if you work for the government or for a private company. You certainly have to adapt to that working environment in order to continually develop. The second path is to start an independent undertaking. In this way you can best realize your own value and talents. However, this path also has the most risks. The third path is to start an undertaking with a unified cooperative group. In this way you can work together for common enrichment. Isn't this a better way of doing things? Everyone can work together and depend on each other. Moreover in your heart, you also must consider other people, and not only think of yourself." Now I feel that there have been many really diligent students who have chosen this last path. Because they share the spirit of unity and cooperation, they have done a good job in marketing.

**Gao: So far, how many successful cases are there?**

Wang: The Huangsha Island cooperative already has been in operation for three years. The Tonghe Street cooperative has only been in operation for a little more than a year, but it has developed very rapidly. In the beginning, they took orders from local foreign-trade private enterprises that needed some work added products. For instance they made sleeve cuffs for wool sweaters, or neckbands. The additional labor cost was only about half a yuan to one yuan. At that time, the more they made the better they did. However in fact, their income was still extremely low. I also organized people to go out and get more orders like this. But after we did this for a while, we thought that we should think of other means. As a result they themselves designed beaded purses. Then they put their products in the market. This place has now been turned into a base for the production of gifts.

**Gao: In the past the cooperative produced things for others. Now are they themselves taking on their own projects?**

Wang: Yes. The third cooperative is the Dan Qing garment production cooperative. The name of this cooperative sounds similar to the characters for "Dan Qing."<sup>231</sup> But actually the name means "single parent." Several of the core members of this group are single parents. Some are divorced, some have lost their spouses, and some are laid off from work. These several people have come together and cooperated to make clothes. Now they have a lot of orders for processing clothes. These three cooperatives are all operating rather successfully. Wujiao Chang originally had a cooperative. In the beginning they also did very well. These workers were all disabled people. But then they became subject to official intervention. Because the director of the community committee wanted to make this into an achievement in her official career, she decided to support the project. Currently each month they have to pay her a five hundred yuan regular wage and let her be the leader. At any rate this caused people to be at odds with the leadership. Originally these women were united and cooperating for common

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<sup>231</sup> Dan and Qing refer to two kinds of color that were most often used in Chinese traditional painting. Thus the word is used to refer to the art of painting. It also means "unwavering."

enrichment. Everybody shared in the hardships. After this individual began to take a five hundred yuan salary, other sisters in the cooperative left. Now they can't even complete an order of several hundred items. However in the past, the cooperative used to be able to complete big orders of several thousand items. But the other three cooperatives are very successful. I am now planning to establish a new cooperative here, in the school headquarters, because we can use this place made available by this businessman. We want to organize some of the people that had completed the training classes and can do this business well to create the fourth cooperative. We want to invest ourselves this time and make wool sweaters. We will purchase raw materials, make sweaters and then embroider designs on the wool sweaters. Thus we will go a step further than the other three cooperatives. I have some material about the plan here. Other people have told me what a great job that I am doing, but I do not think that I am doing anything extraordinary. You can take a look at this material.

**Gao: How would you analyze and evaluate the development of feminism on the mainland and how do you see its future?**

Wang: In terms of feminism in China now, I think I probably have some biased views on it, after spending years on activism. On the Women's Federation's part, there have been consistent efforts to promulgate the basic national policy of "the equality of men and women." They have done a lot of work in this area. But, how do actual women awaken their own consciousness and follow a path of self liberation? How do they themselves go and put into practice the ideas of feminism? I have always thought that their work is insufficient. Our Women's Federation organization always has a kind of inherent insufficiency. The Women's Federation, for the most part, still has to follow directions from the top.

**Gao: What influence has international feminism had on your personal development? When was the first time that you came into contact with feminism or heard of this concept?**

Wang: This was a time period when I had just suffered a very big setback and I was extremely stressed. I thought that I needed to resurrect myself. At that time I was working at the women's cadre school. One day I met with Wang Zheng.<sup>232</sup> She and others were at the women's cadre school to give a talk about feminism. I started to feel that the way that they were discussing the issues had a human face, compared to the way we were talking about "men and women's equality." It also was more stimulating in helping women achieve a kind of self-consciousness. Later, why was I able to establish this organization? Perhaps this had an influence on me. There was also the "three studies for ten thousand days" theory. This certainly had an enormous impact on me. These two things both influenced me.

**Gao: During the process of feminist research or activities, what are your greatest gains?**

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<sup>232</sup> Professor Wang Zheng teaches at the University of Michigan. She is a historian of Chinese women's and gender history and a researcher for the Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

Wang: I feel that there are a lot of things that still need to be done. It seems that the more things that I do, the more things there are that still need to be done.

**Gao: You have done so many things and you have worked so hard. Some times when you have time to sit down, do you ask yourself what are the goals of what you do?**

Wang: I do not have any regrets. I went from one organization to two organizations. Currently, the first organization has already developed and spread to more than ten provinces and cities. We are united. As for the second organization, this has grown even more. We have trained over ten thousand people free of charge. This has solved many people's problems. I have always thought this work is really worth it. Certainly, I am very tired from hard work. I got married to my second husband in 1990. He is a senior professor at Jiaotong University's agriculture school. We were both the same year and he had also lost his wife. At that time when we decided to get married, I raised a prerequisite for marrying him. I said, "Currently I have already reached retirement age, but I do not plan on ever retiring."

**Gao: What did he say to you in response to this?**

Wang: I had told him, "After I retire, I probably will have more things to do than before. I have to be in charge of the National Association of Female Talentology. I will need to travel to many different places in the country. After 1994 I also established the women's college. In addition, I still have a lot of work to do for the Women's Federation. These three things have been keeping me really busy. As long as I can still get around, I want to continuously work on these projects." He agreed with my plans. After he had retired, he continued to work on his projects for four or five years. Afterwards because he was limited in certain ways, when he applied for another project, he did not receive support. Currently, on the one hand, he does a great job of taking care of the household affairs. In addition he helps me to handle many problems.

**Gao: Does he wholeheartedly support you doing all of these things?**

Wang: Yes. But of course, at times he may complain. After all, it has been like this for more than ten years. He will soon be seventy years old. Sometimes he feels a little tired and a little lonely because he is often home by himself. So, sometimes he does complain. I told him that when I can no longer get around, I would then come home and spend time with him. But, now I can still run around and the nature of my work requires that I still run! If I do not do this, then my work has no way of continuing to develop.

**Gao: During this process what do you feel has been your greatest loss?**

Wang: From a very young age, I did not have a stable family. When I was young my mother passed away, then when I was middle-aged my husband passed away. Afterwards I created a new family. Originally I hoped in my heart for the happiness of a

family life in my old age. But when I look back on my life, if the children also want to enjoy the happiness of a family reunion, would they still be able to devote themselves to work? One of my children went from attending university to working at the university. After finishing his graduate degree at Fudan University, he stayed there to work. My other child is currently attending Number Two Industrial University. Now as society develops, they cannot be content with the present situation. Therefore, they also will need to keep working hard. In society, it will be difficult for them to be able to support even themselves. So I told them, “You struggle for what you believe in; I will struggle for what I believe in! I will struggle until I am eighty or ninety years old. I receive a small amount of pension, so I will always have food to eat.”

**Gao: Do your children complain? They love you and they probably feel that you work too hard and that you should rest. After all, their mother is not so young anymore. If she continues to work like this, it is probably not good for her health.**

Wang: First of all, do they have the ability to come and look after me? No. Secondly, I have to pursue my goals and my ideals. For instance, now I work for education for the general populace so that many women who find themselves in these difficult situations are able to get educated and become stronger. I also organize them to get rid of poverty together. If I gave up all of these projects, I would feel that I have no goals. I would only get older... get older and have no goals. How would I live in retirement? How do I spend the rest of my life? Working hard is still the most important. The ideal situation would be if the old and young – if everyone would work hard together. If we all support each other and enjoy our family life, this would be the best. But, when you work hard, you find it difficult to find time for your family. You have to deal with contradictions.

**Gao: How do you overcome these kinds of contradictions?**

Wang: You can only try to get the family together for holidays. Actually there is really no way of doing this.

**Gao: What do you personally feel was the greatest difficulty in establishing a school, creating the Association of Female Talentology and providing education for the poor?**

Wang: Of course my greatest difficulties have always been in the area of funding. I did not have a guaranteed source of funding. In the beginning when I started, I invested some of my own money. However, since I retired, my living standards become lower and lower in these years. After I had just retired, my wages were seven hundred yuan. There have been a series of adjustments made by the government but now my wages are only one thousand yuan. I also must take my husband into consideration. What if the two of us become seriously ill? I do not want my two children to have to take care of us. Because of this, I only intermittently spend money. I cannot give my own ten thousand yuan like I did when we were just starting out. Now my husband and I together receive only two thousand yuan in pension per month. However an even greater difficulty lies in people's lack of understanding. I frequently have a feeling of loneliness. In the area of

education of the general populace, up until now, the only person that I have found who shares my common goals is Chen Ying. There is no one else. When I first started this project, many people did not support me. This includes high level people like Ye Shuhua. She is a Delegate of the National People's Congress.<sup>233</sup> She said to me, "Why do you make yourself suffer like this? You are trying to solve the problems of the disadvantaged groups that even the premier could not solve. So do you really think that you can solve these problems?" I said, "The premier has his duties as a premier. He must solve the problems of the country. I only want to solve the problems of a small area. I am starting a single spark. I can only maintain this small oasis. I will do whatever I can. As long as I can continue my work, I will do so."

I feel that I exist in this world like a flash of light. But how long will this flash of light last? I am also very realistic. I can remain active for another couple of years. When the time comes when I am really not able to get around and when I really have no strength, perhaps this flash of light will be extinguished. But these ten years of history can never be buried. I will not live forever. If some day, some young people can take this light and continue this work, then that would be terrific. If no one does this, then do not worry about it. This is my point of view: I am prepared to face the possibility that this work started by myself has to be ended when I leave. If I become very ill then I will have no choice but to give up.

**Gao: I have heard that your health is not very good.**

Wang: In these past ten years I have had a lot of tumors.

**Gao: When were these discovered?**

Wang: In 1975 I had my first surgery. Then I had another tumor in my blood vessel in 1980, before my ex-husband got sick. I had another surgery. Then in 1994, after I remarried, I discovered another. At that time because I was involved in the preparation for the World Women's Conference, I was extremely tired. Since I was running the school and preparing for the World Women's Conference at the same time, I was really exhausted. In 1995, the doctors identified a lump in my breast. I have had numerous illnesses and my physical constitution is not very good. I am also very sensitive. I have always had surgery quickly so that the tumors do not take a turn for the worse. But because I quickly had a surgery, the cancer did not spread. I have had a partial mastectomy. In 1996 I had a tumor in my thyroid.

**Gao: So altogether you have had four surgeries?**

Wang: Yes. In addition, when I was young I had tuberculosis. My second older sister died from this. She was three or four years older than me but she died and I did not. I

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<sup>233</sup> Ye Shuhua is the director of the Shanghai Astronomical Observatory, an academician of the China Academy of Sciences, and also a member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (the national legislative body). She was selected as one of the Ten Most Distinguishing Chinese Women in the year 1995 and participated in the UN Fourth Women's Conference.

have also always had serious bronchitis. I have also had hepatitis and chronic stomach inflammation. At any rate, each part of my body has had some sort of problem. But my two children really understand me. My younger son said, “The most important thing for mom is that she keeps doing her work so that she maintains her spiritual strength.” My younger son said to my husband, “Uncle Zhao,<sup>234</sup> you let mother be busy! If she is not busy, she will collapse.” As you can see they really understand me.

**Gao: At your age and in this kind of physical condition, what kind of responsibilities do you continue to undertake or what role do you play in feminist activities?**

Wang: I think now I want to withdraw a bit from the Women’s Federation. First I would like to give up some of this work.

**Gao: Does the Women’s Federation currently employ you?**

Wang: Yes, they have hired me back after I retired. After having done so much, now I want to concentrate my main efforts on the National Association of Female Talentology and the education of poor women. Second, I want to use my efforts to fully train Chen Ying. She understands my views and shares my goals. So if she is well trained, I may be able to turn over more of the responsibilities to her.

**Gao: Is this her only job now?**

Wang: Yes. Originally she worked at the Second Industrial University as a woman’s committee party member, but she retired from that post. Now this is her only job.

**Gao: Do you pay her wages or is she a volunteer worker?**

Wang: She is mostly a volunteer. We pay her five hundred yuan a month. However when we are especially busy, we pay her a bit of overtime.

**Gao: Chen Ying really understands you and you have many of the same goals. Was this your influence, or was she originally very interested in working with women’s issues?**

Wang: She has a really good heart. For many years she has seen me run around doing different things. She has also witnessed what happened to my family and my health. She felt that she should do some things for society.

**Gao: How would you evaluate your own life?**

Wang: For my entire lifetime, from the very beginning until the end I have pursued my goals under difficult circumstances. During this process, my life has been full of hardships. However I have always tried to follow the path of striving to liberate my

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<sup>234</sup> Young people in China use kinship terms to address older people to show respect.

sisters in the country and myself. My path down this road has never changed. Even though I have made very big sacrifices, including when my husband passed away, and so on, these sacrifices also have had links to my work. Throughout this time I have always worked so I often did not take good care of my family.

**Gao: Society has preconceived notions of women's roles in the family. It degrades women who work outside and do not devote themselves to house chores. How have you tried to overcome such pressure in order to concentrate on your work? You have devoted yourself wholly to your work. As a woman who cannot look after her family, how do you deal with pressure from society?**

Wang: I think I have tried my best in taking care of my family, both my old one and the one that I have now. In my past family, I took care of two parents-in-law and raised two children. My husband's parents did not have work. In my current family our two incomes are certainly not very high, but we exist as company for each other. We are a couple that is experiencing hardships together. I have diligently tried to undertake a lot of the housework. When I was widowed, I went to work during the day and did house chores at night. I think a person must fulfill his or her responsibility to the country, to the people and to their families.

**Gao: Other people have called you China's "Jose Maria."<sup>235</sup> How do you feel about this?**

Wang: I don't know much about this figure. Other people are making this comparison. I certainly have not studied what she did and then tried to emulate this. Only after someone wrote to me about this, did I know that this person existed. But, both of us want to do something about poverty. What I most reject is that there are huge discrepancies between poor and rich, that there are inequalities, that men and women are not equal, and that people in general are not equal. I always thought that one person's actions have the power to affect the whole group. People are concerned about the country and the people. Based on this idea, I feel that although at times I have sacrificed a lot of myself, in the end it is worth it. Perhaps I have done part of the work, and have helped some of the people. If this kind of ideal is something that everybody can accept, then it will spread and help more.

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<sup>235</sup> Wang Cuiyu is referring to a woman activist surnamed Jose Maria in Spain, who created a new-style professional school in northern Spain on October 10, 1943. This school has developed into a comprehensive university.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: CHINA**

**Transcript of Wang Xingjuan  
Interviewer: Zhang Jian**

**Location: Red Maple Women's Psychological  
Counseling Center, Beijing  
Date: March 12, 2004  
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**Wang Xingjuan**, born in 1931, was an editor at the Beijing Publishing House for many years. After her retirement in 1988, she started the first women's hot line in China. This initiative has grown into The Maple Women's Counseling Center, where Wang Xingjuan is director. She is internationally renowned for creating and sustaining one of the earliest women's NGOs in China. The Center is currently expanding its services to include not only direct services to women, but also intervention activities that aim to educate the community. Activists from the Center have linked with local communities to provide gender training workshops to police, judges, doctors, neighborhood committee officials and women's federation officials to raise their awareness on domestic violence and gender hierarchies. Their intervention activism also involves setting up mechanisms in local communities to prevent domestic violence.

Wang Xingjuan was interviewed by Zhang Jian from the Women's Studies Department of the National Women's University of China.

**Zhang Jian (hereafter referred to as Zhang): Wang Xingjuan, thank you very much for participating in this international project, the Global Feminisms Project. For more than ten years you have been involved with this women’s non-profit organization. Actually it has been sixteen years, right? I had hoped that you could begin by explaining how you started on this path, how you became an activist in order to help women?**

Wang Xingjuan (hereafter referred to as Wang): Sure, I also had hoped to discuss some of my own experiences. We established the Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center<sup>236</sup> in October of 1988. Presently we are already in our sixteenth year of operation. In the beginning, the center was called “The Women’s Research Institute of the China Academy of Management Science.” In 1996 we separated from the research institute and changed our name to “The Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center.” This organization has already had a long history. After retiring – in 1988 I retired from the Beijing Publishing House and I took the lead in organizing this center. At that time several other women intellectuals also joined me in creating this organization.

A lot of people have asked me why in 1988 I chose to devote attention to women’s issues. Prior to this time period, I had always done work in the fields of culture and the media at a newspaper or a publishing house. But I had never worked in women’s organizations. So why would I become involved with this and even become the leader to start this kind of non-governmental organization for women? I think at the very beginning I started to pay attention to women because of a kind of deep concern for the situation of women.

I think that you all know that in the 1980s China embarked on its policy of reform and opening.<sup>237</sup> This policy of reform and opening really brought a new kind of life and new hope to the Chinese people. Regarding women, the policy has brought both advantages and disadvantages. As the economic system and the political system change, the status of some women will rise. They are transformed from ordinary workers and peasants to entrepreneurs, leaders and factory managers. People have said that women not only became white collar workers, but also even became higher status “gold collar” executives. However, only a very small portion of women have achieved this kind of success. The majority of women faced a situation where they had to start from scratch to find a position. Many women feel... Women have lost their original economic status and their original social status and consequently are losing their status within their families. As the economic system gradually transforms from that of a planned economy to a market economy, a lot of factories are getting rid of their female workers.

I remember quite clearly that in 1988 – which was precisely the time when I was going to retire – *Chinese Women*, a magazine of the All-China Women’s Federation, from the first

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<sup>236</sup> The Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center is the first national women’s crisis hotline in China.

<sup>237</sup> Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has adopted the policy of “reform and opening” to build more effective political and economic systems.

issue in January to the year's end had a very active discussion called "1988, What Path for Women?" The articles in this discussion raised such issues as: through the process of optimizing the composition of the labor force, women are being stripped of their positions; and after women are "downsized"<sup>238</sup> what path should they take? I still remember very clearly that one of the articles talked about a female worker who was downsized and then returned home. In the beginning she was really happy. At first she thought, "Thank goodness, at last I do not have to work from very early in the morning until very late at night. I can stay home and be a good wife and mother. Yes, I can help out my husband and take good care of my child." To her surprise, after she returned home, her husband always seemed to scowl at her no matter how well she did at home, because he thought she was dependent on his income and should do a better job doing household chores. Her mother-in-law, who lived with them, also treated her poorly. She looked down upon her daughter-in-law and asked derisively, "Other people were not laid off. How come you were laid off? It must be because you did not work hard in your work unit." Her daughter also looked down upon her. She thought that because her mother was laid off, it brought dishonor to her and the family. This woman wrote down her own experience. She wrote that she had repeatedly paced back and forth at the edge of the river. She felt that her life had no meaningful future and several times she thought that she would jump in the river and end her own life. This was a very typical case for many women. It told about women's feelings. Many women since reform and opening felt that they did not have a meaningful path to follow. They did not understand why society was developing and moving forward, but their status had actually fallen. Women faced very many new questions and problems. At that time I was in the Marriage and Family Research Association of the All-China Women's Federation. They asked me to take the position of the editor of a magazine called *Marriage and Family*. At that time a lot of women came to interview me. They wanted to know why a whole generation of women needed to sacrifice themselves to pay the price for society's development. This issue really shook me up a lot.

Another issue that emerged during this time was women's participation in government. A moment ago I mentioned the discussions in the magazine, *Chinese Women*. Also in 1988, the *Chinese Women's Newspaper* also launched a very big discussion about women's participation in government. At that time China was in the process of reforming its electoral system. In the past there were the same number of seats as there were number of candidates. They were working to change elections so that there would be more candidates than seats. For example, originally if there were nine seats available, then you would be given a ballot with nine names. Everybody would draw a circle around the nine choices. Now if there were nine seats available, you would be given a ballot with eleven names. Two people would not be elected. However, the people that would not be elected were always women. Thus at that time in some provinces and cities there were no women cadres in the four groups of administrative leaders.

**Zhang: You said four sets of administrative leaders; which four sets?**

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<sup>238</sup> Meaning layed-off.

Wang: The four sets are: 1) the National People's Congress; 2) the National Political Consultative Conference; 3) the State Council government... the government; and 4) the Chinese Communist Party, including the municipal party committee, the provincial party committee and the central committee.<sup>239</sup> A lot of provinces and cities did not even have a single woman as leaders to these institutions. An extremely interesting phenomenon occurred in the suburb of Beijing. When they had to elect a Women's Federation cadre they chose a male cadre for this position. Although there were still some women who participated in government, the rate of women's participation was dramatically falling. Therefore at that time the *Chinese Women's Newspaper* launched the discussion about women's participation in government.

I thought... Well, I myself am an educated woman. Before liberation I was a college student at Jinling University in the Chinese department. Then, in 1949 the revolutionary situation developed very rapidly and the Communist Party needed a lot of civilian cadres. I had already secretly joined the school's Communist Youth League. Therefore, as a cadre, I was assigned to the *Xinhua Daily* to work as a reporter. After Nanjing was liberated, the communist army advanced toward the south and toward the southwest. Therefore very few cadres engaged in political work could stay behind, so most of us at Jinling University participated in the work that needed to be done. This was how I started working and I was the last group of people who retired as senior revolutionary cadres.

In my own life experience, I feel that since my ability to work is still pretty good, for me at the time, I was discriminated against not because of my sex, but instead because of my family background. I was given the class status of small landlord because my father had a small business. For people like me, my family background was always called into question.<sup>240</sup> This always affected me when there were issues of personnel placement. However I always worked in a kind of intellectual environment. Originally I was at the *Xinhua Daily*, and then afterwards I went to the *China Youth Daily*. Then, finally, after the Cultural Revolution I went to work in the Beijing Publishing House. My self-confidence is very strong. I think the prejudice against my family background mainly was caused by the leftist policy of that time. Actually my father was rehabilitated very quickly. So he was no longer considered a landlord, but instead given the class status of peasant, a mid-level peasant because he only owned ten acres of land. However, this issue of family background was a burden that I had to continually shoulder.

I did not have any kind of gender consciousness. In the past I also looked down upon the Women's Federation. I thought that the Women's Federation members were all old women with bound feet who made a fuss over nothing important. Yeah, I really looked down upon them and did not want to be a part of what they did. Then, after the Cultural

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<sup>239</sup> The National People's Congress is the legislative body. The National Political Consultative Conference is a political advisory body. Each province has its own People's Congress and Political Consultative Conference.

<sup>240</sup> During the early years of the People's Republic of China, one's family background was taken into consideration at the time of entering schools and in career. Peasant and worker backgrounds were considered the most revolutionary. Wang Xingjuan's father was classified as a "small landlord," which fell in the category of the "oppressors." People with such a class background were often discriminated against at school and work unit.

Revolution,<sup>241</sup> I began to turn my intellectual interest to young girls, adolescents and women. This was partially because I had a very difficult time during adolescence. I can think of two times when I wanted to commit suicide. I was born into a very big family and I had very many siblings. Our economic situation was not very good. I was the middle child – I had both elder and younger brothers and sisters. No one paid much attention to me as I was growing up. Therefore, by the time I got to adolescence, I had an extremely pessimistic view of society. However, growing up like this also taught me to be self reliant and strengthened my independence. Thus when I was young and going through adolescence, I had an extremely difficult time. If only someone had shown me some warmth, some care and concern, I think I would not have faced the same difficulties when I was growing up.

Therefore, this kind of compassion and caring for women's issues perhaps was always inside me, but it was buried very deeply. After the Cultural Revolution, I heard women's bitter complaints and felt their sense of great loss. They had lost their status in their families. I was shocked – really, really shocked. Therefore in the 1980s I started to research women's issues. At that time I was also editing various book series for women readers, for example, "Book Series for Women," one of the first such collections in China. I worked together with Tao Chunfang<sup>242</sup> on this project. There were more than ten volumes in this collection and all of them were in great demand. This was the first set of works on modern women and it really paid attention to women's lives. Then, I retired in October of 1988. Actually I left my job position in February of 1988. I was fifty eight years old.

**Zhang: What was your position at that time?**

Wang: I was an editor of the Beijing Publishing Company.

**Zhang: An editor.**

Wang: Yes, an editor. At the Beijing Publishing Company I edited very many different kinds of books, in fields such as philosophy, economics, and also books for young adults, and so on. I began to research young girls. I wrote many pieces about the psychology of young girls, psychological instruction for teenage boys and girls, etc. Then in 1986 – I just talked about this a moment ago – in 1986 the Marriage and Family Research Association of the All-China Women's Federation hired me to be their vice chief editor, as the editor of the *Marriage and the Family* magazine. Thus, I started researching young girls, then marriage and the family, and eventually women. This was a step by step process whereby I gradually came to study women's issues.

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<sup>241</sup> The Cultural Revolution (Abbreviation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), often dated 1966-1976. According to a Central Committee resolution adopted on June 27, 1981, the Cultural Revolution was carried out "under the mistaken leadership of Mao Zedong who was used by the counterrevolutionaries Lin Biao and Jiang Qing and brought serious disaster and turmoil to the Party and the Chinese people." This official view has since become the dominant framework for the Chinese historiography of the Cultural Revolution. During the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, higher education was essentially closed down. Proper ideology was stressed over professional or technical competence.

<sup>242</sup> Tao Chunfang is the Vice President of the China Family Marriage Research Association.

Thus I think... Well, in 1988 I noticed the two big events for women that I just mentioned. The first was that in the businesses' attempt to find an optimum composition of the labor market; many women lost their job positions, lost their social status, and were discriminated against within their families. The second big event was the fall in women's participation levels in government. I thought, since I was retiring, I would have the time to do this work. I also had an interest in this kind of work. Moreover I felt that I had the skills and ability to bring about some positive changes for women. For many years I had always listened to the Communist Party's directives. The party assigned me to work in a place so I worked there and did my job well. After retiring, though, my time belonged to me alone. I could lead my life according to how I wanted. Yes, of course I could have chosen to do something else since I had been writing for many years. I had also written reporting literature.<sup>243</sup> Writing was something that I was good at; originally I had gone to school to study Chinese. But I thought that perhaps I could do some things that would help women. I thought that women were facing extremely difficult times and that I could extend a hand to help them. This would help them to get through this period of reform in society. For women this time was also one kind of labor pain. As society was changing, women faced new and more complicated problems. I do not think anyone at the time was doing research on these problems. At that time there was only the Chinese Women's Marriage and Family Research Association. There were not any women's research organizations.

Therefore I thought that I should do research in this area. After all, why did a whole generation of women have to sacrifice themselves in order to pay the price for the development of society? This should have been something that people were researching but at the time no one was doing this kind of work. I knew this was a bit outside my league, but at any rate, I thought I already paid attention to these questions and problems. Also prior to this, I had already written quite a few articles about women's participation in government and the future of laid-off women. Therefore, I wanted to gather a group of people with similar ideals, to maybe form a non-governmental women's research institute to study these issues. The All-China Women's Federation's Women's Research Institute was not established until 1990. In October of 1988 we established our institute. Thus, we had already been in operation for more than a year before the Women's Federation established its institute.

**Zhang: Was it fairly easy to register and set up your organization?**

Wang: The process went rather smoothly. We registered under the China Management Science Research Institute. This was also an organization that was not established by the state. However, the Science Research Institute was registered<sup>244</sup> under the State Council's Organizational Reform Committee.

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<sup>243</sup> Reporting literature is a literary genre in China. It is non-fictional, reporting in great detail on events and people.

<sup>244</sup> In China, organizations need to be registered officially. In order to be registered, the organization needs a supervising governmental institution. A powerful supervising governmental institution could imply more power and resources for its affiliated organization.

By registering like this, it gave our organization greater legitimacy. We operated as an organization affiliated with a formal, high-level state institution. Thus people did not oppose our idea of establishing a women's research institute. The Science Research Institute also did not need to provide us with any funding or subsidies. We pulled together all of the start-up costs for the organization.

**Zhang: Individuals pooled together their money?**

Wang: Yes, at that time the start-up fees were about 20,000 yuan.<sup>245</sup> I personally contributed half of this money. Tao Chunfang and a few other friends who joined me to create this organization pooled their money to make the other 10,000 yuan. Thus we started this organization ourselves. I gathered many of my friends and colleagues in this circle – for example, Liu Bohong, Feng Yuan, and Hou Zhiming,<sup>246</sup> etc. There were also many others. At that time I invited them all to my house and told them that I wanted to establish this kind of organization. Xie Lihua<sup>247</sup> was also there. I told them that I wanted to organize a non-governmental organization for women. They all strongly supported this idea. The All-China Women's Federation also supported us. At that time Zhang Guoying was the head of the Women's Federation. Zhang Guoying sent Guan Tao, the head of women's research and the Chinese Marriage and Family Research Association of the Women's Federation, to our meeting to say congratulations. This was a symbolic expression that showed we had the support of the Women's Federation. They also made us an association member of the All-China Women's Federation. (She laughs.) But the Women's Federation support was only in spirit. Thus, the process of keeping our organization operational was extremely difficult.

Our first research project was about the trends in Chinese women's employment. The State Council carried out an experiment in thirteen provinces and cities. They attempted to bring about the optimum composition of labor in factories by laying off workers. We went to these places to carry out a questionnaire survey and wrote our first research report. We found that women workers disproportionately bore the brunt of layoffs. Even if a female worker was re-employed, her position in the occupational structure had been lowered. At that time we proposed possibly having short term employment, or even a kind of part time system where two people each work half of the time. For example one person could work the morning shift, while a different person worked in the afternoon. We put forward many different proposals. This was our first research project. Because I had read the articles in the Women's Federation magazine, "1988, What Path for Women?" I paid attention to the predicament of female workers.

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<sup>245</sup> As of October 2006, the exchange rate is 1 U.S. dollar  $\approx$  8 yuan.

<sup>246</sup> Liu Bohong is currently the Deputy Director of the Women's Study Institute of China under the All China Women's Federation. She was also interviewed for the Global Feminisms project. Feng Yuan is a journalist of the *Chinese Women's Daily* who has played a leading role in setting up the organization of women's media watch and gender consciousness training group. Hou Zhiming is Deputy Director of the Red Maple Center.

<sup>247</sup> Xie Lihua is Deputy Editor of *China Women's News*.

Our second project was women's participation in government. We conducted our investigation at higher levels in the government. More than two thousand questionnaires were conducted with people above the office level. The funding for this was all money that we had gathered in order to research women's participation in government. We wanted to find out the way of thinking of women in leadership positions and the difficulties they faced. Moreover, precisely because we could understand these issues, we later held many – about eight or nine – sessions for trainings for Chinese women leading cadres. We started these kinds of trainings, which were the first in China. We worked with the *Chinese Women* magazine and used their institutional title. But in fact, we did all of the work.

**Zhang: What were the main things that you addressed in the trainings?**

Wang: In addition to general subjects like managerial techniques, the main content of the trainings were analyzing the difficulty of women's participation in government using a gender perspective. We looked at the discrimination against women in society and the phenomenon that oftentimes women in leadership positions were placed there as secondary instead of powerful players. We talked about what sort of attitude women leading cadres should adopt when facing these kinds of problems. At the time there were very many women who simply were not willing to participate in government exactly because of problems such as these. Based on our investigation, we worked with the *Chinese Women's Newspaper* to offer the first symposium on women's participation in government. We also published a book called *Chinese Women's Participation in Government*. These all were some of the earliest activities that we engaged in.

Then after we completed this work, there was... At the time we mainly did research on women, since no one was paying attention to these issues at the time. But doing research, publishing a book and publishing our findings in magazines was not our goal. Actually one of our goals was to influence decision making. However, we did not have much power and our voices were still too weak. We could not gain access to have our appeals heard directly, so that they would reach higher authorities. I had a foreign friend ask me, "Teacher Wang,<sup>248</sup> everything that you have achieved up until now – You spent a lot of time, energy and resources carrying out investigations and research. Do you think that it has been useful? Was this truly useful in helping women's development?" Wow, I really felt like she had asked a great question. I thought about the answer for a long time. I thought that our research should be different than that done by other research institutions such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Their research is more theoretical in nature and oftentimes is distant from reality. But what we research are current issues. We study issues that are currently the most urgent and the most pressing questions of the day that need to be solved. The goals of our research certainly are not only to be published. We hoped that our research would help women better understand why they now are in this kind of situation and how they can change this kind of situation. They need to know how to keep up in the ever changing society. You cannot pull the historical wheel with you into the future; you cannot dwell in the past time period of a planned economy, full

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<sup>248</sup> This is a literal translation of the custom in Chinese to address someone's teacher/professor/mentor. The Chinese word for "teacher" conveys a sense of respect.

employment and the iron rice bowl. It is impossible to do this. However, some women still think that they are public servants, and that the state will take care of them and should take care of them for their whole life. These women have not adapted to the competition and downsizing that is a part of a market economy. Therefore we felt that we must work diligently to try to influence women. We hope our research will help women to better understand the current situation under the market economy and to change their way of thinking and their perspective.

Based on this situation, we had to decide what to do. We were a very small non-governmental organization. We did not have many resources and barely had the means to do anything, including ensuring the survival of our organization. We did not have extensive social resources or economic resources; we were lacking material resources. What did we have? We had human resources. We had a group of people like me – women who were enthusiastic about working to improve women’s lives. They were willing to extend a hand to help their sisters, share other women’s concerns and provide help for them. Therefore, I thought that implementing a hotline would be the best way to help women. To do this, we only needed to have a room, to put in some telephone lines, and to train a group of volunteers. The initial capital investment might be small, but it could deliver the biggest benefits. As long as the hotline was operational then women would only need to spend the cost of a telephone call. After she dialed in to us, she could pour out her troubles and worries. We could explain to her why currently women are in the position where they are facing so many difficulties and give her advice on how to face so many of the new issues that had arisen. Yes, we thought the hotline was the best course to follow based on our circumstances and resources.

Then in 1992, I was in the United States. An American friend of mine was helping me. She told me that there was a foundation that could help me; this organization gave funds to small non-governmental organizations like mine. At that time we did not even have a bank account number, but she said that we did not need a bank account for the foundation to subsidize our work. She asked me what I wanted to apply for. I told her that I wanted to apply to establish a hotline. I applied for ten thousand dollars. In the first year the foundation gave us five thousand dollars. Thus, I opened a personal bank account and the five thousand dollars was deposited in my account. I used this five thousand dollars to get the women’s hotline up and running.

**Zhang: This was in 1992?**

Wang: October 1992 – no it was September 1992. At that time some people said that this women’s hotline would not be successful since Chinese women did not use telephones very often. However, as soon as we got the hotline up and running, it was really busy. This was China’s first hotline especially for women. The hotline was extremely popular.

**Zhang: Was the process of setting up a hotline for women in China relatively easy at that time? Was there a special procedure?**

Wang: No.

**Zhang: I remember at the time the women's hotline caused a very big stir in society.**

Wang: Yes it did. Since this was the first hotline for Chinese women I think all of the media reported on this. Xinhua News Agency printed an announcement. Chinese Central Television and Central Radio Station had reports in their prime time news programs. Papers in all of the local areas covered this story. Thus as soon as we opened, the telephone never stopped ringing.

**Zhang: Was the hotline for the whole country?**

Wang: Yes, the whole country. We even got some telephone calls from Japan, and cities like Stockholm, Sweden.

**Zhang: Were these people who called from other countries Chinese?**

Wang: Yes. They were facing some problems that they did not know how to deal with. As soon as they heard that there was this women's hotline, they called in. Yes, it really did cause a very big stir. We also all felt really happy. At last we had created a space where we could provide services to help women. Some people said that only a small percentage of women would be able to make a phone call to us, so later we decided to expand. So we established an expert hotline, a second women's hotline, and then later a hotline for women senior citizens. We also set up a recording that dealt with legal issues pertinent to women. This recording was available twenty four hours. Apart from the time when one of the staff was there, the answering machine could automatically operate. This recording informed women of their many rights and interests protected by the law. In addition, this year on March 8<sup>th</sup> we added a domestic violence hotline. From these hotline calls we learned that many, many women were experiencing difficulties and troubles and needed to obtain help. Perhaps they are willing to turn to the hotline for help, both because it is confidential and also possibly because the hotline is simple to access. The volunteers do not ask the women their names, their addresses or their work units. The women only need to make a phone call and explain their situation. Then the counselor will try to understand their situation and show concern. Moreover, the counselor will try to help the woman analyze her situation a little and transmit some pertinent information. The counselors try to diminish the stress levels of the callers and also work to help them explore new paths for their lives. Yes, these hotlines really do have advantages for women.

**Zhang: As you offer this kind of help to these callers, what are your principles? What kinds of thoughts are guiding you?**

Wang: To tell you the truth, at the time we started the hotlines, I did not have very much knowledge about feminist theory. I had not really read much on this. Actually I started from a very basic principle – very simply, I was concerned about the plight of women. I believed that women should be able to support themselves and be able to stand on their own two feet. Yes, it started like this. I did not first study feminist theory and principles

and then start my work. Instead I first paid attention to women's status during the reform era and felt that women should strive for their rights. When I became more aware of the difficulties they were facing, I wanted to do my best to help them improve and help them to be able to realize true equality and obtain equal rights. It started like this.

Then afterwards, I participated in some discussions regarding feminism, especially Professor Qiu Renzong's seminars. Every year he held two seminars on feminist theories. I do not know if you have ever participated in one of these seminars or not. As for me, this seminar was enlightening. The seminars covered a wide range of topics such as feminist ethics, feminist philosophy, and feminist view of science. He held these seminars twice a year for some years. These seminars were not directly helpful for me, but I started to become more familiar with these topics...

**Zhang: When was this?**

Wang: Qiu Renzong started offering the seminars in 1992. I think he held them for four years. The Ford Foundation subsidized him. Qiu Renzong specializes in ethics at the Philosophy Division of the Social Science Institute. He researches feminist ethics in all kinds of different domains, such as women's reproductive health rights, domestic violence against women, and women's rights in the family and household. The seminar topics covered many different areas. I attended his seminars every time that he offered them. Thus, I started to learn and better understand feminist theories. I am quite interested in these theories.

I believe the thing that really moved me the most was when I went to India in 1995. I think it was in 1995 but maybe it was 1994. I went to India to participate in a feminist conference on domestic violence. This conference really got me thinking about how to use feminist theories to guide the operation of the women's hotline. At that conference there was an Indian feminist... Well, women's status in countries like India and Thailand is much lower than that of women in China. However, feminists in these countries have done massive amounts of work in striving for women's rights and interests. I still remember very clearly something that this Indian feminist said. She said that you could not easily turn over an oppressed woman to a psychologist. (She laughs.) She said you could not easily refer the abused women to psychologists because they don't have feminist consciousness. At that time it was not referred to as gender consciousness; instead we called it feminist consciousness. Because psychologists do not have feminist consciousness they would treat an abused woman as if this was a humanist concern but not a gender concern. In fact this kind of treatment causes the second injury to the abused women because it often places the blame on the victim. At the time I had already started the psychological consultation hotline. I thought that we were helping women. But if we did not have gender consciousness, feminist perspective, then we in fact, we might have been hurting these women callers. Oh, up until this point I had really not thought of this.

After I came back from India, I read more books and articles. Moreover we had a very interesting seminar. A woman...One of our counselors introduced a case she had for our discussion. The counselor said she had received a telephone call from a divorced woman.

This woman had not been married long before she discovered that she was pregnant. Soon after she realized she was pregnant, she found out that her husband was having an extramarital affair. Based on these circumstances, she wanted to have an abortion. However the husband vehemently disagreed with her and told her that if she had the abortion, he would divorce her immediately. She thought that she was newly married and was not mentally ready for a divorce. So she thought maybe she would be able to save her marriage after the birth of their child. Thus she gave birth to the child. The birth of their child could not save her marriage; it eventually fell apart. At the time of her divorce, because her son was still very small and only a year old, she was given custody of the child by the court. However at the time she was very sick; she had contracted nephritis. Moreover, her wages were very low and she felt that she was incapable of providing for her son. She filed an application so that the father would have custody of the baby. However the courts said that she must take care of the baby because he was still too young to be separated from his mother. She had no choice but to try and take on this responsibility. In addition after the court ruled that she was to take care of the baby boy, her ex-husband often did not pay child support. The mother's health continued to deteriorate and she was often in the hospital. In addition she was laid off from her job. For five years she did her best to take care of her child. When he was six, she filed an application in the court to put him into his father's custody. So she petitioned the court to look into her case, however they refused. Since she was the child's mother they thought that it was unreasonable to not even want your own child. Thus, she made a call to the hotline. She wanted to know why the courts would not consider her request since she felt the child would be better off in his father's care. Do you think that the courts were right in their judgment in this case? This was the case.

How did our counselor respond to this caller? She agreed completely with the judge. Since the woman gave birth to the child, she should assume responsibility for him. She should fulfill her responsibilities as a mother. Even if you seem to face insurmountable difficulties, you should try and find a way to overcome them, since you are the child's mother.

When we discussed this case at our seminar, many people pointed out shortcomings in what the counselor told the woman. They said that the counselor did not have enough empathy for the woman's situation. They said the counselor's attitude did not show enough understanding; however, most agreed that her basic perspective was correct. This then launched an animated discussion about why a mother has these responsibilities to her child but the same is not expected of the father. In this situation why did not the father take care of this child? Why was it only assumed to be the responsibility of the mother? Why was the mother found to be at fault for wanting to place her child in the father's custody? Why should she be blamed? Why did not anyone blame the father for not taking the child? We thought this was a clear case of where we lacked gender consciousness. Thus in this case, you could have two completely different viewpoints. We thought using this case as an example really broadened our minds as to how we think about these types of issues.

Therefore after we had discussed this case, I invited Feng Yuan, Ge Youli, and also Du Jie<sup>249</sup> to give our counselors gender trainings. I felt that if the women's hotline volunteers did not have gender consciousness, then there would be no reason to have a women's hotline. Because these volunteer counselors must be able to see things from the woman caller's viewpoint and must give compassionate consideration for the woman's situation. This is how it should be, right? We shouldn't find fault with the women and reinforce the wrong ideas about these women. From this point on, we have continually trained our counselors to have gender consciousness. Originally when we had started training the volunteers, we did not train them in this way; we did not even address gender consciousness. Now our first training class is on the spirit of voluntary work and our second class addresses gender. These two classes are required. The volunteers sometimes do not attend all of the other classes; however these first two classes are absolutely required.

I think having a gender perspective is extremely important for our counselors. The discussion about the case I just mentioned showed huge differences. Many people think that because we give psychological consultation we already have a humanist approach, a human-centered approach. They assume that taking the person as the center includes women and that there is no need to emphasize women specifically. We need to explain to people why we should take a woman-centered approach. Women are marginalized in society. Taking a gender-neutral humanist approach often masks the male-centered reality, and can even further harm women. In our later trainings...But sometimes we have disagreements within ourselves. There are some supervisors who are against training counselors with gender theories. However, I think our approach using this principle, absolutely must not change.

We have started re-training staff for the newly-launched domestic violence hotline. We told people who wanted to work on this line that they needed to apply and go through another training. We train them with gender theories, women-centered perspective. After this kind of training, they will come to understand how their choice of words could traumatize the callers again and what kinds of questions that they should not ask. For instance prior to the training they might ask the woman, "Why did he hit you?" But we believe that asking this kind of question suggests that a woman can be hit when there is a reason. In fact no matter what happened, there is never a reason for hitting a woman. Hitting another person is breaking the law and violating the other person's human rights. For instance the husband's "reasons" might include such things as his wife talks incessantly, she returns home late, she does not prepare good food for dinner, etc. The husband and wife can argue and make compromises, which doesn't break the law or violate human rights. But hitting a person is illegal and could be a very serious crime. These are two issues of a very different nature. A person is never permitted to hit a woman because she talks too much or because she has made you angry. I feel that after these gender training classes, our counselors also gradually come to have a gender perspective. I think along with the opening of the hotline, we have instilled gender consciousness into our volunteers. They then use this to help the callers.

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<sup>249</sup> Du Jie is a researcher with the Women's Studies Institute of All China Women's Federation.

By embracing the idea of reliance on oneself and striving to improve oneself women can stand up. We must help women develop this kind of self-confidence. This should be one of the principles of the consultations provided by our women's hotline. This is a part of the work that we do. In fact putting this hotline into operation has helped many people. We have been in operation since 1992. By the end of last year (2003), we had answered about 75,000 calls. Each call was a different case. Actually if you count up until this March, we already have answered 80,000 calls. Every day we answer about thirty calls; thus every month we answer several hundred calls – approximately six hundred per month.

**Zhang: How many hours per day does the hotline operate?**

Wang: Eighteen hours per day.

**Zhang: Eighteen hours. How many hotlines do you have?**

Wang: Three hotlines.

**Zhang: Do they all operate at the same time?**

Wang: Yes. In the evenings all three are operational.

**Zhang: As far as I know, your organization, the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center not only has these hotlines but also at the same time works on a lot of other projects.**

Wang: Right, right.

**Zhang: I remember that you gave gender consciousness training to police captains, police officers, court personnel, judges and doctors in Tianjin. Can you talk a bit about why you thought that they needed training? Furthermore, what effect do you think that these trainings with women-centered contents and a gender perspective had on these people and institutions?**

Wang: Actually the project in Tianjin was called "Community Intervention into Family Problems." Why was it called this? Like what I just said, our women's hotline is not only a site where we provide a service for women but also a window through which we listen to their voices and concerns so that we could better understand their issues. Thus, we attempt to bring together the research on women with service for women. We received very many calls where women had various issues. They tell us that they seek help from their husbands' work units about the custody of their children and domestic violence. But the work units did not do anything. They have called 110<sup>250</sup> but they also did not do anything. They went to the local police station and they said they would not intervene into domestic matters. These women said that they have nowhere to turn to for help.

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<sup>250</sup> This is the phone number to call when there is an emergency and is similar to calling 911 in the United States.

Why do women as a group have these kinds of worries? Why aren't women's rights protected? We studied four hundred cases where women encountered various family problems, such as divorce, property and inheritance rights. In these cases these women all sought out help from society, but they did not find any support. We spent two years thoroughly analyzing these cases. The results of our analysis have shown that society is currently in a time of transformation from a situation where people are part of their work unit<sup>251</sup> to a situation where people are a part of society or part of a community. During this transformation process, many of the previous functions of a work unit have changed. In the past a work unit was responsible for everything from birth to death, including taking care of the old and the sick. Currently work units, especially privately-owned and foreign enterprises, do not take responsibility for these matters. State-run industries also are not willing to be responsible for these matters. This is something that must be managed by the community. But communities simply have not realized that their functions must change with the times and that they should take on part of this responsibility. Therefore, a vacuum has formed in the provision of these services. This is why we need community intervention, i.e. communities have to establish intervention systems. How can they go about establishing this? Our research suggests that they definitely have to use a new perspective and while taking a humanist approach, they also have to have a gender perspective. This kind of new idea has uprooted some of the Chinese traditional ideas and has the power to shake up society and change people's ideas.

**Zhang: This change could guide the perspective of many of the leading figures in society – for example authorities such as doctors, judges and police officers.**

Wang: The most important thing is to try to bring gender into the mainstream – the mainstream of society and of the community. This is the kind of work that we do. The results of our research also suggest that many people do not take into account women's rights and interests because they still hold traditional ideas of gender roles. They still believe things like women are inferior to men, men should lead and women should follow, men should work outside of the home while women should work inside the home, and men should be the head of the household and women should obey their husbands. Yes, they often still hold the traditional idea of “the three obediences and the four virtues.”<sup>252</sup> Many still believe in the old saying: “Even an upright official finds it difficult to settle a family quarrel.” No one is willing to get involved. Yet in public, for example in the street, if a man hits a woman, then the local police station can intervene immediately, right? They will take the man to the local police station to administer some kind of punishment, like a warning, a fine or even holding him in a cell. However any violence that occurs in the home is thought of as a domestic issue, a private family affair. This does not establish the woman as a person in the same way that a man is a person. The woman should have an equal standing within the family. Men should not hit women

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<sup>251</sup> In China, especially before the 1980s, everyone called his or her workplace the “work unit” (a literal translation of “workplace” in Chinese).

<sup>252</sup> According to Confucian ethics, the “three obediences” include a woman's obedience to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage, and to her son after the husband's death. The four virtues are morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work.

and women should not be hit by men. Many people do not have this kind of perspective. Instead they have inherited feudal society's customs and ideas of morality.

Therefore we think one of the most important tasks is to initiate this kind of gender perspective that takes people, both women and men, as its core. We certainly must change the traditional way of thinking. If we do not change this way of thinking, this situation...then it is impossible to protect women's rights. Therefore I feel our greatest accomplishment of this project was to change how people think. In three years we have conducted eleven sessions of gender training workshops. Initially it is very difficult to get these workshops going since in the beginning people generally do not accept these ideas. Actually some of the police were all right. Since most of the police officers' level of education is not too high, after the training, especially exercises and a workshop, they changed their way of thinking relatively easily. However it has been harder with other people, especially judges. They believe that they are well educated and that they only need to follow the principle "in the eyes of the law everyone is equal." They feel that taking on a gender perspective is wrong. Therefore the first time that we trained a small group of judges, we could not even continue our training. The judges confronted our coordinator and the training was interrupted. We could not continue the first day of training. That evening I asked to speak with some of these judges. We talked until after eleven o'clock. (She laughs.) The second day we finished the training awkwardly. This clearly shows the collision of ideas. A lot of the judges thought these women suffer because they did something wrong. These people need to be reprimanded. These women must have been unreasonable and made a scene; they must just be troublemakers. To make the family harmonious, the husband must beat the wife until she becomes obedient. Many judges shared such assumptions. Thus we held four trainings for the local police and four trainings for the judges. In the end, their perspectives were changed. We also held two trainings for doctors.

A judge once said something typical. He had always thought that some women were simply trouble-makers. These were all private affairs and he was unwilling to interfere. But we told him why women often press charges and then later withdrawal them. This is because of the way that gender relations operate. We gave them a thorough explanation of various cases that we had encountered. In the end, they finally acknowledged that some women change their minds because their resources are insufficient and they are influenced by traditional ideas, such as "a woman should only marry one man," "no one that gets a divorce can be a good person since good people do not divorce," and that a good woman should always consider her family first and always take care of the needs of her children and shouldn't think about her own interests. After the trainings some of the judges came to believe that all of these traditional ideas that they had held were mistaken. One judge told me about a case. A woman was abused by her husband and filed for divorce. Before the judge delivered the verdict, the woman suddenly withdrew her case. It was because her husband threatened her – that if she divorced him, he would harm her family. In order to protect her family she withdrew her suit. The judge told the woman: "I don't want you to withdraw your case because if you stay in this marriage you will continue to suffer." However, when he heard of her situation he told the woman: "I understand why you withdrew the case. You withdraw because you don't have other

options. Currently there are no laws to protect you if you feel that your life is in danger. We cannot guarantee the safety of your family if you get divorced.” The judge said the court has not obtained the power to prevent these kinds of criminal activities from happening. But he said that after the training, the judges came to be more understanding and more sympathetic. He explained this very well. There was also a court official. He was the one to lead other judges in the first training class to confront our teacher. Afterwards he participated in our trainings three times. He said he had to catch up. Afterwards he did very well in the trainings. There was a huge change in these judges. They even offer legal consultations to women who cannot win in court, telling them how they should file the law suit in a better way. They felt that their entire outlook had been changed.

There were very many cases like this. In the past some doctors would say to the abused women, “You were not hit that hard. You only need three stitches. Is it really worth so much crying?” In the past this is how these women were treated. Nowadays doctors would look at this as a possible case of domestic abuse. They would introduce the woman to our network. In addition to treating her physical injury, they would also give her other help. For instance they would advise her to keep a report of her injuries and to go to the local police station to file a case. They would suggest that she document this instance so that in the future, if she finds herself in a position where she has to prove these things, all of these reports are evidence. And finally for some psychological help, they should introduce the woman to our Tianjin “Half of the Sky Homeland.”<sup>253</sup>

Having a gender perspective changed all of these people. Gender perspective is a new way of looking at things. This perspective is slowly entering into the mainstream. Moreover we must also teach these ideas to members of the community – for example, the cadres of the women’s representative group and the residents’ committee. Only then would the ideas of democracy and equality exist in our communities. This year we have already held three training sessions. From March to May we will have another five training sessions. These trainings are all for cadres from the residents’ committee, judges and police officers of experimental areas. These are in fact gender trainings. We are trying to make people understand that traditional ideas are not innate; women are not born to be abused. Abusing women is tolerated because social opinions, evaluation, expectation and requirement for the two sexes are biased in terms of gender. Our trainings make a distinction between physiological sex and gender. They discuss how gender influences our perspective and our way of looking at women. The participants came to realize that “the women-centered” means respect and equality. Therefore, now when they deal with an abused woman, their attitude has completely changed.

In the past they thought that these women were making trouble out of nothing, that they were all shrews. They described these women as uneducated and hopeless. Women sometimes asked for help because of domestic abuse and then later recanted their story. Sometimes women want the residents’ committee to support them and other times they

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<sup>253</sup> The “Half of the Sky Homeland” is a program implemented by the Tianjin Women’s Federation with the help of Maple Counseling Center. It provides legal counseling services to women who have experienced domestic violence and collaborates with other institutions to empower women and protect women’s rights.

want the Women's Federation to be in their corner. But often, after a while women will change their minds and say that they do not want anyone to intervene. Then she is hit again and she comes for help again. As soon as he does not hit her, she changes her mind again. It is often like this. The judges felt that these women were hopeless; they deserved no help. After our trainings the judges can better understand these women's situations, respect their choices, and moreover try to promote their growth. A residents' committee cadre said, "Now I understand. We must help by allowing women to recover their self confidence." When she said this, we felt especially happy.

**Zhang: Was this the project that you did in Tianjin?**

Wang: Yes, the project in Tianjin.

**Zhang: Does your organization have branch offices in other places?**

Wang: We have helped eight or nine women's hotlines in the country. Moreover all of these hotlines use a gender perspective. Eight or nine such hotlines.

**Zhang: What is the relation of these hotlines with your organization?**

Wang: We do not have official relations with them. They said they wanted to become our branch offices. We do not seek this kind of recognition. These other hotlines can be named whatever they want. If you are willing to tell others that the "the Red Maple Women's Hotline" helped you, that is okay. If you do not want to say this, that is also okay. We don't care. We feel that we only help to initiate a process whereby more people pay attention to women's health and more people give women the emotional support.

I often say "When a person encounters some sort of difficulty, if you stretch out a hand to help him or her, then that person will be able to deal with his or her situation a little easier." I know this from my personal experiences. When I was young and facing the most difficult time period in my life, I really could not find anyone at that time to turn to for help and support. I had turned to religion, for instance, to see if it would help me through this difficult time. Later, actually it was the Communist Party, the communist ideal, which pulled me up. Therefore I feel my current work is also a kind of personal ideal. After I retired I did these things because I wanted to. I did not do them to gain prestige or to gain profit. I did these things because of the ideals that I have. I hope more people can find happiness. When a woman is having difficulties, if I can give her some help or stretch out a hand to her, it costs me nothing but gives me a kind of feeling that I have achieved something. It really makes me feel very good. Although I am very busy everyday, doing this kind of work really makes me feel happy. (She laughs.) Our volunteers all like saying: "We do not like calling our work 'selfless sacrifice,' we help people to help ourselves." When you help others, you also personally grow. Even now I feel as if I am still developing. In the past I was the kind of person who sat at a desk all day and wrote. An intellectual, I was not involved with management in any way. Now of course I am still studying how to best manage our organization. I am over seventy years

old. Actually I am seventy-four and I am still studying and learning new things about management, for example, how best to respect others, how to effectively communicate with my staff, and how to drive everyone to continue to work hard. (She laughs.) In the past I did not know how to approach or best handle these kinds of management techniques.

**Zhang: How many people do you have on regular staff currently at your organization?**

Wang: Now I only have six people.

**Zhang: Six people. And the volunteers?**

Wang: At our highest point we had more than two hundred volunteers; we trained more than two hundred people. Now we have about seventy or eighty volunteers.

**Zhang: How about the stability of the organization's personnel?**

Wang: Not good. Because our funds are insufficient, we pay very low wages. We want everyone to have a volunteer spirit. The other day I calculated some of the statistics for our volunteers. Approximately seven percent have served for more than ten years. Twenty one percent have served for more than five years. I must say that we have a core group that are really steadfast and dedicated and make up the backbone of our organization. After we moved our organization to a place that was very far from the original location, we lost about twenty or thirty people, but this could not be helped.

**Zhang: What sort of plans do you have for the future development of your organization?**

Wang: Of course I have some tentative plans. Today I told them that I already have a prospective plan. What is our objective, our mission? Our mission is to pay attention to women, especially promoting women's health in mind and body, and advocating women's comprehensive development. We do not only seek to solve a woman's present hardship, to alleviate some of her psychological burden by giving her an opportunity to open up to us and pour out her feelings. In the end we must help women to be self-dependent, to strive to be stronger, and to stand up for themselves. We must promote women's growth. This is our final objective. Then, what type of organization should we become? I think that our organization should become an authority on telephone psychological consultation services. We should become an established, authoritative organization that promotes women's psychological health. This is our second goal. Third we should also become an influential organization on the research and study of women's psychology. We receive so many calls from women. We understand their psychological state; we also understand how we can help them. We think we should take on this kind of responsibility.

Therefore I feel that we still have a lot of room for growth since the women's hotline is only one part of the Red Maple Women's Center. I have only started to pave the way for others. More people should continue to develop this path. Moreover this road should gradually extend because there is a social need. More and more people have mental and psychological diseases. People suffer from increasing psychological problems. They need a place where they can obtain free psychological help. In my work, although since we started twelve years ago we only have been able to help seventy or eighty thousand people, I think what is important to us is the process, not necessarily the result. Helping one person is only helping one person. With China's population at about 1.3 billion people, we have only helped a very small number. Yet we work very hard at this. Since we give our best efforts, we feel very happy. But because the conditions that we work in are not great, it is very difficult to keep good people. For instance, we cannot pay a lot of money to invite a psychology expert to work as our director. It is really difficult for us to retain some outstanding talented people. This is because the salaries we pay are too low. Yes, these are some of the difficulties that we face. But as I said before, there will always be some dedicated volunteers. Approximately seven percent of our volunteers have served for more than ten years and twenty one percent have served for more than five years. This means that we are capable of getting devoted people together. From this group of people we will be able to select some who are the most dedicated and competent to take over the leadership. Therefore, I should say that I still have a lot of confidence that our work will continue.

**Zhang: In your organization aside from the volunteers and the staff who have made this organization develop and expand, you also need financial support. Where do these funds come from?**

Wang: We apply for them.

**Zhang: Where do you apply or what channels do you use to obtain funding?**

Wang: Well, the government has not given us a single cent.

**Zhang: So far, they have not given any funding.**

Wang: Right. I apply for all of the funding. This is why it is so difficult for me. I have to get funding. I also do a lot of the research. In addition I design our projects. Finally, I, myself, also have to study.

**Zhang: But when you apply for funding – what sorts of places do you apply to?**

Wang: I mainly apply to overseas foundations. We have tried very hard to look for domestic funding sources, however we still have not found any. I even proposed the chance to name our hotlines. Whoever provided enough funding for our hotline for a year would then be able to name the hotline. However we have not succeeded yet. We need to work harder on this.

**Zhang: On a different topic, what sort of relations do you have with other women's groups in the country?**

Wang: We have a lot of connections with other women's groups. For instance we continually do exchanges with the Shaanxi Women's Research Association. We learn from each other. They really do a good job there. Also we work closely for example with the Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Aid Services of Peking University,<sup>254</sup> the organization led by Guo Jianmei.<sup>255</sup>

**Zhang: a legal consultation center?**

Wang: Right, our relations are extremely good. We have some cases...

**Zhang: ...that you turned over to that center?**

Wang: Right, right. I turn some of these cases over to them. They then help the woman with her lawsuit. Some of the domestic abuse victims do not have money. The people at the legal consultation center help them with their case. We have also established a connection with the anti-domestic abuse intervention network. The All-China Women's Federation women's rights and interests department and also the Beijing Women's Federation rights and interests department both give us their full support. They have told us that if we have some especially complicated cases, we can call on them to intervene and they will try to help. I feel that society supports us and gives us a lot of help.

**Zhang: You offer emergency help to women and put into practice a gender perspective. However from a theoretical approach how do you see the development and actual activities that put into practice the feminist ideals, especially taking on a gender perspective, on the Chinese mainland? What do you think about this and how would you evaluate the current situation?**

Wang: Oh, I think that the World Women's Conference really pushed forward China's women's movement. It really helped a lot of people to look at things from a feminist point of view. This was a huge advancement.

**Zhang: You are referring to the 1995 conference?**

Wang: Right, right. The World Women's Conference was especially important to the women's movement in China because people came to see that the Marxist view of women and the feminist point of view were not contradictory. When people realized that these two ideas were compatible, the World Women's Conference helped gender perspective enter the All-China Women's Federation leadership. Do you remember – I do

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<sup>254</sup> Shaanxi Women's Research Association is an NGO devoted to feminist research and activism. It is very active in central China. The Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Aid Services of Peking University is an NGO that focuses on promoting legislations that protect women's rights and interests and provides legal services to women.

<sup>255</sup> Guo Jianmei is the director of this center and a professor at Peking University Law School.

not know if you participated or not – prior to the World Women’s Conference they had especially criticized this trend. For example, they criticized Li Xiaojiang<sup>256</sup> and other theorists as if they introduced Western feminism to guide the women’s movement in China in the wrong direction. The Women’s Federation considered this wrong and wanted to criticize these people. Actually these criticisms did not have much effect. Moreover, after the World Women’s Conference Huang Qizao<sup>257</sup> stated publicly that the Women’s Federation should look at issues from a women’s perspective. What is a “women’s perspective?” In fact it means a gender perspective. In these past few years, I think the idea of gender has entered into the mainstream of society and has entered the mainstream of the Chinese central decision makers. This is a very big development and sign of progress. Don’t you agree? For instance there is a new provision in the revised marriage law that prohibits domestic abuse. This illustrates that the law makers have accepted a gender perspective. I think this was a very important example of our achievements. When the marriage law was being revised, in the first five or six drafts, the prohibition against domestic abuse was not included. The drafters thought that social laws should not include such content. But, in the end, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress passed the revised version that contained this provision. Why did this occur? The judicial committee of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress adopted a gender perspective. Our government also made a Five Year Plan for the development of women – the first plan was from 1995 to 2000. Now there is a ten-year plan for women’s development for the years 2000 to 2010. In fact, the announcement of the outline also exemplifies that the idea of gender has been brought into the mainstream of government decision making. In addition the State Council has established a department for issues concerning women and children. This is also an example that gender perspective is influencing the mainstream for policymakers and legislators.

Of course I feel that there still is much more to be done. Gender perspective needs to affect more aspects of society, especially the institutions that administer justice. Although there are laws that protect women, some judges and the law enforcement personnel still do not have a gender perspective. Therefore, they haven’t implemented the laws effectively. So I think gender training... Well, when we hold the gender training sessions for the lower level personnel, sometimes they say to us, “We think that having this training is good for us; however you should also train our superiors and the higher level leaders.” We told them that that we were also holding these kinds of trainings. (Laughs.)

**Zhang: (Laughs.) It looks like for you the task is important and the road is a long one.**

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<sup>256</sup> Li Xiaojiang was one of the first scholars in 1980s that started rethinking women’s issues and feminist theorizing. As one of the founders of the discipline of Chinese (mainland) Women’s Studies, since the 1980s, Li Xiaojiang has been carrying out pioneering work in Women’s Studies. Through her efforts, the first series of western feminist articles and rethinking works on Marxism about women’s liberation were published. She has been engaged in institutionalizing Women’s Studies in academia and establishing women’s NGO in China, and has made outstanding achievements in the education, academic field and women’s development.

<sup>257</sup> Huang Qizao is Vice Chairwoman of the All China Women’s Federation.

Wang: Yes, but we are also very confident. I think we are really making rapid progress.

**Zhang: But I remember...many people are saying that during this process, since you started to pay attention to the topics regarding women and doing research on women, sometimes you find yourself, as an individual, in a very difficult situation.**

Wang: Mmm, yes, sometimes it has been difficult. Starting a non-governmental organization in China was a relatively new phenomenon. In China the political system has all kinds of restrictions. Non-governmental organizations must try to survive by adapting to this condition. The government wants to put these organizations under its control. I have no strong background or powerful backers. I only had great enthusiasm and followed a kind of idealism when I created this women's organization. And I am trying my best to keep it alive. Society did not understand. I think this is actually very natural. Therefore there was a time when it was really very difficult; indeed it was very difficult. But, because I am a communist party member, I believed that in the end, our society and our government would understand that in fact my work would benefit society. Many people have the misconception that "non-governmental organization" implies "anti-government organization." They do not trust these non-governmental organizations and they are always wary of them. I was not worried about things like this; I thought in the end they would come to understand. Eventually, I think...it probably took only a year or so to change the situation. Moreover, finally, some of the central ministries and departments and some leaders of the Beijing municipal party committee made explicit statements of support. They told me to act bravely; the party supports me and the government supports me. They told me that the things I did would contribute to maintaining the stability and unity of society. Therefore I could survive since in fact we have obtained the government's acknowledgement and society's recognition. This process is very natural. I am very lucky. I improved the situation of our organization so fast. The hardship did not affect my spirit. (Laughs.)

**Zhang: Is your organization still affiliated with the China Management Science Research Institute?**

Wang: No we are not affiliated with any institution.

**Zhang: Are you registered independently?**

Wang: Yes, we are registered with the Industry and Commerce Bureau.

**Zhang: Registered with the Industry and Commerce Bureau?**

Wang: Today I went down to the Industry and Commerce Bureau for my yearly registration.

**Zhang: Since you are a non-profit organization, why do you register with the Industry and Commerce Bureau?**

Wang: Oh right.

**Zhang: Do you also have to pay taxes?**

Wang: No, we do not pay taxes. Those people at the Industry and Commerce Bureau know, because we now do not have a supervising institution, so we cannot register with the Bureau of Civil Administration. Actually we should register with the Bureau of Civil Administration.

**Zhang: Right.**

Wang: But now we cannot register with them because we do not have a supervising institution. But we are striving to find one.

**Zhang: A higher level authority?**

Wang: Yes, we are hoping to find a supervising institution.

**Zhang: Then even though you are registered with the Industry and Commerce Bureau, you do not have to pay tax?**

Wang: We have never paid taxes to them. We tell them at the Industry and Commerce Bureau what we do. They are very understanding. Actually today I went to the industry and commerce company to do our registration again. The Industry and Commerce Bureau people said, "We know your women's hotline. It is against domestic abuse." Their attitude towards us was very good. They all knew that actually we are unable to register in the Civil Administration Department so that we had no choice but to stay registered with the Industry and Commerce Bureau.

**Zhang: Didn't you have a supervising institution earlier?**

Wang: Later we had to become an independent organization.

**Zhang: Became independent?**

Wang: Yes. And we changed our name in 1996 to "Maple."

**Zhang: Mmm, right. From that time you became independent.**

Wang: Right, right.

**Zhang: Then you started to register with the Industry and Commerce Bureau.**

Wang: Right, right. We went to register with the Industry and Commerce Bureau. In fact, we were the first non-governmental organization to register with the Industry and

Commerce Bureau. I created this path and now many other organizations follow suit. Xie Lihua and her group also registered with them....

**Zhang: I know other NGOs are all registered there.**

Wang: Right, right. A lot of organizations registered with the Industry and Commerce Bureau.

**Zhang: This is a Chinese characteristic.**

Wang: Right, right. The first group to register was ours.

**Zhang: Mmm, it seems as if you have done a lot of firsts. (Laughs.) You created the first women's non-governmental organization. Of course the Women's Federation also says that they are an NGO. Do you have anything else that you would like to talk about regarding feminist research and practices?**

Wang: I think we have incorporated many different streams of thought into our work. Of course there are differences among them, but I do not think we need to pay too much attention to the differences. We should pull from some of their most essential ideas, for instance, the ideal of realizing gender equality. We are not concentrating on the theoretical aspect – spending a whole lot of time doing this kind of research. I think we can leave this work to theorists. What I am doing is utilizing gender theories in practice, making them enter our society and people's lives, changing their ideas and getting into the mainstream. Mainly I do this kind of advocacy work. Therefore I rarely participate in the kind of feminist conferences that only address very theoretical issues. I do not have enough time to participate in all of these. But I think that my concern is how to use the essence of feminist theories to change women's status, change people's ideas, and enter into the decision-making process and the social mainstream. So possibly I am different than other people. However, I do not only do this kind of practical work; I also do gender research. My research is closely related to our work on psychological consultation and women's psychology. I have written some papers and have also had some of these published. These pieces all use a gender perspective. I have not done that many.

**Zhang: You have already been extremely successful.**

Wang: I could do more.

**Zhang: It is really admirable that you have maintained the organization for sixteen years. And your organization is still expanding...**

Wang: But we really need a next generation to continue this work. It has been very difficult to find a successor. You know, this job is really difficult – too difficult. Today I still have to come everyday and deal with all matters big or small. Actually I should not have to do all of these things. I should be able to focus on my research again and write and publish more. Research is something I am good at. In fact, at the time when I started

the research institute, I mainly wanted to do research. However, recently I have spent very little time on research. I have to do a lot of organizational work, look for funding, and also work on various projects. I spend the majority of my time on this kind of work. I would really like to have a little more time to write. One of the things I want to write about is my experience with this small NGO in the past sixteen years, the hardship that we have gone through. I think we need to let people know what kinds of difficulties a Chinese non-governmental organization has to deal with. Actually the things that I talked to you about are very general things. We have not talked about all of the most difficult issues.

**Zhang: Yes. Your sixteen years...**

Wang: Understanding from society.

**Zhang: Right. Your reflection on this process of sixteen years cannot all be covered in such a short time. Therefore we are eagerly looking forward to reading your book. It will be useful for later women's organizations so they can draw lessons from your experiences.**

Wang: Right, right.

**Zhang: Thank you very much for your support of our project.**

Wang: I'm glad to help. Your project also supports me, right?

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: CHINA**

**Transcript of Zhang Li Xi  
Interviewer: Shi Tong**

**Location: China Women's College, Beijing  
Date: June 2003  
Translated by: Kim Dorazio**

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**Zhang Li Xi**, born in 1953, is President of the China Women's University. She has been personally involved in many feminist projects since the early 1990s. With her strong leadership, the CWU created the first Women's Studies Department in China in 2001 and the first Women's Studies major in 2006. The CWU is affiliated with the All-China Women's Federation, and responsible for providing training to officials of the Women's Federation system nationwide. Zhang Li Xi's feminist activism in promoting women's studies in the women's federation has large implications for transforming the official women's organization.

**Shi Tong (hereafter referred to as Shi):** President Zhang Li Xi, would you please discuss in detail the process through which you came to accept feminist thought unconsciously and consciously? How did your background, including things like experiences when you were growing up, your personal life and your work affect this process?

Zhang Li Xi (hereafter referred to as Zhang Li): You indicated this is a process from unconsciously to consciously accepting feminism. I myself find it difficult to summarize the various phases, to say in which phases I was relatively unaware, in which phases I was rather aware, and in which phases I was actively engaged. I find it very difficult to categorize like this. But, when I really begin to think back about this process... it is probably worthwhile for me to reflect on things that have happened to me. A lot of things have affected me. I remember it was 1994...no it was 1995 on the eve of the Beijing World Women's Conference.<sup>258</sup> At that time in the country there were many professions, universities and many people who were quite interested in the Women's Conference. They all gave input and helped to prepare for the World Women's Conference, and especially the NGO forums. I remember in 1994, a feminist author from Hong Kong, surnamed Huang, came to Beijing. I remember at the time she invited a few friends together and wanted to write a book that addressed how people came to be involved with feminism. She found a few friends and together they talked about their experiences, their backgrounds and what they have learned from their experiences. She wanted everyone to reconsider and look back on their own experiences. I remember the book that she wrote. It is called *Reflections*. One evening, we were all together at her residence. I remember this very clearly. We were all together talking. As everyone was speaking, she was taking down what we were saying. At the time we felt her approach – recording everyone's memories and compiling them into a book – was novel. I remember at the time some friends were talking. Some had started to talk about what things or events had a big influence on them. Of course people addressed how some things affected them positively and others affected them negatively. For example one friend, when she was little she wanted to play basketball but she had to wear skirts. She felt that when wearing a skirt, she could not play. Therefore at the time she asked her teacher, "Why do girls wear skirts?" Her teacher said to her, "Girls must wear skirts; wearing skirts is pretty." She remembered clearly and said that she didn't like wearing skirts because they were not convenient. Running while wearing a skirt was strange and could expose her body. So she then did not participate in any sports activities. She felt, "Oh, why do girls and boys have to be different?" Afterwards one friend recalled when she was working for a company. Later one of her bosses from overseas came. He had a strong background in Women's Studies and he exerted a large influence on her, although she did not realize it at the time. Everyone discussed different things. However, they all

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<sup>258</sup> In 1995, Beijing hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women. Representatives from 189 different countries agreed that inequalities between women and men have serious consequences for the well-being of all people. The conference declared a set of goals for progress of women in various areas including politics, health, and education.

discussed how they came to pay attention to women's issues and how they first got interested in women's studies. At the time they discussed many things. As my friends were talking, I was thinking, why were they all seemingly typical cases. For example, "I've come across that situation, I then was very interested in..." Or, "At that time I was wondering why women had to be like that..." Or, "This experience enlightened me..."

At the time I couldn't recall a turning point, from where I started to care about these issues. How did I first begin to get interested in women's issues? I couldn't recall a kind of inspirational event or a specific activity. Afterwards I thought about why this was the case. I suddenly discovered in reality I could not help but do women's research. I was compelled; I had no choice whatsoever but to get caught up in it. I was not necessarily willing but did not have a choice, and in the end had to enter this area of study. But I should say, I have no regrets and I have marched forward courageously. But I should say the first phase – if you divide it into phases – I feel I should start with my transfer to the All China Women's Federation's Women's Cadres Managerial Institute<sup>259</sup> in 1985. I entered this field of women's studies, but why? I had graduated from Beijing University in 1982 and then went to Lanzhou University to work. I was the first class of university students after China's Cultural Revolution.<sup>260</sup> At the time I went to college while still receiving a salary. I remember very clearly that my salary was forty-four *yuan*<sup>261</sup> a month. I already had been working for six years. At the time the government had set a policy that if you had worked at least five years, then you were able to attend university while still receiving your salary. I think this was because the background of our generation was special, since during the many years of the Cultural Revolution there were no university students. At the time when I went to university, I was already 24 years old. There were many people like me who had already graduated from high school many years ago; they were even older than I was and already had families. I think the policy at the time considered this group's special background. If people were not paid then they could not possibly attend university, because they needed to support their families. Under these circumstances, I received my salary. Prior to attending university, I had been working as a sent-down youth<sup>262</sup> in Lanzhou. Afterwards I taught at a middle school for

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<sup>259</sup> The Chinese Women's University, affiliated with the All-China Women's Federation, is the only women's college in China. In 1949, a group of widely respected feminist activists and officials founded the New China Women's Professional School. Later it became the All-China Women's Federation School for Women Cadres. In 1984, with approval from the Ministry of Education, it changed its name to the All China Women's Federation's Women Cadres Managerial Institute and became the first independent institution of higher education for women. In 1987, the name was changed to the Chinese Women Cadres Managerial Institute. In 1995 when it moved to the current location and expanded in its scale, it was officially renamed as the Chinese Women's College. It has recently been renamed once again to the China Women's University. For more information, see [www.cwu.edu.cn](http://www.cwu.edu.cn).

<sup>260</sup> The Cultural Revolution (Abbreviation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), often dated 1966-1976. According to a Central Committee resolution adopted on June 27, 1981, the Cultural Revolution was carried out "under the mistaken leadership of Mao Zedong who was used by the counterrevolutionaries Lin Biao and Jiang Qing and brought serious disaster and turmoil to the Party and the Chinese people." This official view has since become the dominant framework for the Chinese historiography of the Cultural Revolution. During the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, higher education was essentially closed down. Proper ideology was stressed over professional or technical competence.

<sup>261</sup> As of October 2006, the exchange rate is 1 U.S. dollar  $\approx$  8 yuan.

<sup>262</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, many urban young people were sent to the countryside and remote areas

five to six years. Then I attended Beijing University. When I graduated from Beijing University, there was another government policy. People who had received salaries while attending university must return to the area where they originally came from. Thus, I graduated from Beijing University and returned to Lanzhou. Since I was a college graduate, my job changed and I did not work at a middle school any more. Instead I taught in the Department of Philosophy at Lanzhou University. At the time I taught classical German philosophy and the history of Western philosophy. I taught Fierbach, Kant and Hegel, these philosophers. I worked about another five years there. During this time, my husband and I lived in separate places. He stayed in Beijing after graduating from college and I went back to Lanzhou. My foreign friends have asked me why my husband and I worked in different cities. I said I was assigned to work in Lanzhou and that this was a very common phenomenon in China. At the time the government assigned where you would work. You then were supposed to go there and settle down. At that time we had a saying. Every person is like a screw on a machine. The Party assigns you to some place and you were supposed to be useful there. Therefore at the time in China, married couples having two different residences was very common. We had no choice in the matter. Therefore I was in Lanzhou and my husband was in Beijing. But after five years passed, I had an opportunity. At the time in Beijing a school named the All China Women's Federation's Institute for Women's Administrative Cadres had just opened. Initially it was only a cadre training school but afterwards it became a college with degree programs. The National Personnel Department – the department that administered residency permits – gave this school a set number of permits that the school could use to recruit faculty to Beijing. There were several conditions. First, the recruits from the provinces must be university teachers. Second, they must have the title of “lecturer.” The third condition was that they had to be the spouse of someone who was already in Beijing. Since I satisfied all of these conditions, I was then selected to work at this school. Therefore, if I did not come to this school, then I would not have a Beijing residency permit. I came to this school without a real understanding of what the school did. So, at the time I took my letter of acceptance and went to the All China Women's Federation to register. Because this school was affiliated with the All China Women's Federation, I asked many people teaching in universities: what does the All China Women's Federation do? Nobody knew much about the All China Women's Federation. Some people told me that they thought the All China Women's Federation managed the sub-district administrative units.<sup>263</sup> I thought that I did not have any choice but to take this job since I wanted a Beijing residency permit. If I wanted to return to Beijing and if I wanted to be together with my husband – one family together – then I must accept this work. You could say that I had no alternative but to go to the Institute for Women's Administrative Cadres.

Thus, because of my job placement, I started to do research on women. I should say that I very accidentally, very unwillingly and very blindly entered this field. After I came to this school, I was not sure what I would teach since this school did not offer courses in

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to help with local development. They are called the “sent-down youth.”

<sup>263</sup> These administrative units, called *jiedao banshichu*, are governmental branches that manage local affairs.

the history of western philosophy and did not teach classical German philosophy. They did not have such things in their curriculum. At the time the department where I was placed was called the Women's Movement Department. There weren't any classes for me to teach because the philosophy class already had a teacher. Under these conditions, I had no choice. I had to choose a course to teach. Therefore at the time I chose sociology, which I felt was relatively close to philosophy. Thus, I began to teach sociology. While teaching an introductory sociology class, I started a class called "family sociology." When teaching family sociology, I inevitably had to be able to address family issues, such as conflicts between husband and wife, women's status, women's roles, role conflicts, etc. At this time I started to come in contact with and gradually came to understand feminism. After working several years – in these several years my work was relatively regular. I conscientiously did my teaching. However, I was not particularly interested in the work; it was only my income.

In this situation, I again came upon another opportunity. The All China Women's Federation was going to select and send two people to go to Canada to engage in advanced studies and participate in a training class called "Women Participating in Development." I submitted my application, passed the English exam, went through various selection procedures and at last I was selected. In September 1992, I went to Canada to participate in the training. At this time, I began to pay attention to issues related to women. While working within China, I had very limited materials. Therefore in Canada, in addition to participating in the training class, I selected a few classes to audit. For example, I took Introduction to Women's Studies, Women and the Environment, and Women and Health. I selected various classes that dealt with women's issues, like these. When I attended class, through my contacts with classmates, discussions and the exchanges with professors, I discovered Women's Studies was an incredibly wide ranging field of activity. I then discovered some issues that I had never paid attention to before and also some issues that I had never even thought of. For example when I was attending the Women and the Environment class, the teacher took us out onto the street in the evening. We were supposed to walk around and observe. For instance in a bar – what did you see? When you were walking in the streets what did you see? Why were the lights on in the offices? Who was working inside? At the time I did not think about it too much. But what many classmates said caused me to think in a new way. For example, many office buildings were lit. At this time it was after 9:00, almost 10:00 at night. The lights were on so people could clean. Who was cleaning? Everyone said it probably was many women cleaning. Why are there relatively so many women doing this kind of work? We started to ask questions and one by one we began to address these issues, going deeper and deeper. I felt these issues were really interesting. It was not merely some phenomenon that existed; my classmates wanted to discuss the reasons for this phenomenon. They also wanted to connect this phenomenon with the social structure, the social system and the social culture. At the time it caused me to think in a new way. I felt that year of study was really motivational to my career. I started to consciously pay attention to women's research and the domain of women's issues. Before going to Canada, although I worked at the women's college and paid attention to women's issues, I separated myself from it and thought of it only as work, as

an income. Studying for one year in Canada was a huge inspiration to me. I think it was really a motivational force and laid a solid foundation for my entering this field.

So then at the end of 1993 I returned to Beijing. At the time Beijing already started aggressively preparing for the 1995 World Women's Conference. While at a women's symposium at Beijing University, I met an American student named Lisa<sup>264</sup> who was teaching at Beijing University. We then began talking, exchanged business cards and so on. At the time she told me that they had established an East Meets West Feminist Translation Group. It was a completely informal small group. She asked me if I would be willing to participate. At the time I very happily took part in their activities. There I met many people who were interested in women's studies, women's movements or women's issues. I believe some of your interviewees this time had some experience in this group – for example Ge Youli,<sup>265</sup> who at the time was this small group's convener. She was working at the Ford Foundation. She arranged our meeting place. Every week or sometimes every other week we talked to each other on the phone and discussed some issues there in the evening. At this time I actively participated.

I began to combine things that I had studied, things that I taught in the classroom and Chinese women's issues, and began thinking and reflecting. At that time I consciously began to take on the role of a feminist. For example sometimes when I consider my own problems, I often talk about the story of my own name. The way that Chinese people give children names is not the same as in the culture of other countries. When Chinese people choose the name for their child, implicit in their choice is a very profound expectation. Their name choice implies parents' expectations for the child, and parents' expectation for their child reflects the uniqueness of Chinese family culture. It is symbolic of the "patrilineal" tradition, a kind of family continuity, a kind of family blood line continuity. Another meaning is the important parental wish that their child will become successful. From the child's point of view, what is expected of them in return? Children need to support their parents in the future. Thus the parents and child both have expectations of each other. Parents hope that their children become responsible adults. After the children become responsible adults they can care for their parents after they become old. After all, China does not provide for most people in old age. Therefore under these conditions, naming children is a very special reflection of Chinese people's expectations for their children. My name is rather strange; my name consists of two surname characters. In China you usually only have one surname, which continues the father's blood line, I am surnamed Zhang and Li. Li is the surname from my mother's side of the family. Very few people have two surnames like me – especially in the 1950s this was rare. Why do I have these two surnames? Actually it is a long story. It is because my grandmother only had one daughter, my mother. She was married only one year when her husband died. Afterwards she did not remarry and they lived with my paternal

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<sup>264</sup> Later, Lisa Stearns joined the Beijing office of the Ford Foundation to work on the preparation for the UN women's conference in Beijing.

<sup>265</sup> Ge Youli, a feminist activist, is currently the China Country Director for the Global Alliance for Workers and Communities. Prior to this, she worked as a Program Officer at the United Nations Development Program on issues of gender equity, poverty alleviation, micro-finance and community development. She was also interviewed for the Global Feminisms Project.

grandmother. Soon after, the Anti-Japanese War began. At the time of the Japanese invasion, my maternal grandmother's home town was in Hebei.<sup>266</sup> She fled from Hebei to Tianjin, and from Tianjin to Henan, and then from Henan fled to Shanxi.<sup>267</sup> The whole time they were on the run with other refugees, escaping the army and going from place to place, my grandmother had to care for my mother. When my grandmother began to tell her story it was very bitter – a woman with her daughter who had no support at all. They went different places and sometimes begged for food and sometimes she worked in factories. In the end they had many such bitter experiences. My mother married when she was twenty-three years old. My grandmother said that no matter who married her daughter, there was one condition. They must use the family's surname, Li. In her heart she had a wish – because she only had a daughter, this daughter must continue the Li family name. So there was this condition. At the time my father wanted to marry my mother, so my father accepted this condition and agreed to it but said Li must be after his surname Zhang. My grandmother then very willingly accepted this condition, because she felt the surname Li after the surname Zhang is natural. Because of this agreement, all of the children in our family had the surname Zhang Li.

Thus I felt that our family's boys and girls were equal because they used both my father's surname and my mother's surname. I felt this was equality between men and women. But as I became a conscious feminist, I realized that my name was the least “feminist” name and it was really a discriminatory name. In reality my name very typically reflected how Chinese women felt about their position in the family and what they recognized their role to be. Why do I say this? If my grandmother wanted to argue about a surname, shouldn't she have argued for her own surname? She was not surnamed Li; she married into the Li family. Her last name was Gao, but she did not argue for the surname Gao. This is because she married into the Li family so she thought of herself as a member of the Li family. Therefore when many foreign scholars discuss Chinese issues in depth, they have a common view. That is, when discussing Chinese societal issues, you cannot avoid talking about the culture of the Chinese family. Chinese family issues permeate every aspect of Chinese society, government and economy. Recognizing herself and her role as a Chinese woman, she did not have any doubt. First you should use the husband's surname. Second you should use the man's family name. She did not question this. My grandmother argued a long time for her husband's family's surname, but at the time, she already was apart from her husband's family for more than twenty years and had no connections to them whatsoever. She had independently supported her family. Yet, twenty years later, when her daughter was getting married, she still thought of herself as a member of the Li family. This typically reflects what Fei Xiaotong<sup>268</sup> proposed as the “differential mode of association” and Xu Lianguang proposed as the “father-son axis.” It reflects the Chinese family culture. This characteristic of family culture is that males are the nucleus of the family. What does male-centered mean? This is masculine rights; this is patriarchy. It is handed down from father to son, father to son.

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<sup>266</sup> Hebei is a province in Northern China.

<sup>267</sup> Tianjin is one of the biggest cities in Northern China. Henan province is the mid-west of China, neighboring the Shanxi province.

<sup>268</sup> Professor Fei Xiaotong (1911-2005) was one of China's finest anthropologists. His book *Peasant Life In China* (1939) made him famous in the English-speaking world.

Other relations are also passed down. They are relations of dependency and subordination. Consequently this kind of patrilineal relation spreads. This then naturally manifests itself in the idea that men are superior and women are inferior – these kinds of relations between the sexes. Therefore at the time it was very natural, that I thought about this kind of problem....

**Shi: What other problems did you pay particular attention to during this phase?**

Zhang Li: At that time this group's concerns were extremely wide ranging. Because our group came from different fields, people had a wide variety of interests. It was informal and based on interests but not on rules. For instance we had members who worked in publications, factories, foreign enterprises and university professors, etc. We came from different places, and therefore we discussed different issues. But each time we tried to concentrate on one theme. Usually we had a person speak, and everybody then shared this aspect of her experience, and discovered the problems involved. For instance we discussed problems like that of university graduates finding employment, the problems of NGOs, the question of gender roles, etc. At that time we paid particular attention to representation of gender roles in the media. There was a broad set of issues that we paid attention to. So you could say that that our group, at the NGO level, later played a very important role. Therefore at that time I started to feel that I already started to consciously reflect on and discover problems. Actually when I discovered a problem, I would think about why it was the way it was and how it came to be like this. In 1994 I went to Shanghai to attend a meeting to prepare for the 1995 NGO Forum and organized a forum called "Women and Education." I was responsible for organizing a panel called "Women and Job Training" that targeted women without college degrees. When I went to register, I found that the registration person who had not seen me before, had assigned me my room. I grabbed my key and went to my room. At that time I discovered I was sharing a room with a man. So I went to look for the conference organizer. I discovered they simply had not paid attention to who I was. They had looked at my name and thought that Chinese people would not have chosen this name for a [girl] child. My given name is Xi and my surnames are Zhang and Li. Xi comes from the character for imperial seal. It was the emperor's seal and it is a character that denotes extreme authority. In most cases this character is used to name a boy, just like the name *jianguo* which means "building a nation." It is extremely rare for me to have this character in my name. Thus, they naturally placed me in the male students' dormitory. When I went to find them, they apologized, I cracked a joke and said if my name were for example, Zhang Huihua,<sup>269</sup> you would have prepared to place me in a girl's room. They laughed. Your name delivers a strong stereotyped message among Chinese people – they know about you when they see your name. Therefore I often make my students discuss this in the classroom. The students would say their names. Then they would discuss why these characters were used. The girls very quickly discovered that the characters that often appear in their names included those for rosy clouds, flowers, qin (a Chinese stringed instrument) and so on. They found that these characters usually were limited to beautiful, exquisite or cute things. We then discussed why we had such characters in our names, and why our parents chose these names for girls, and so on.

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<sup>269</sup> The Chinese character "hua" in this name means flower and is often used in women's names.

For me, I felt in this way that I was different than other people. So in the field of women's studies, initially I did my job without thinking too deeply about the implications of my work. Later when I was in Canada studying, I started to accept western feminism theory and training. Then at the Beijing World Women's Conference in 1995, I thought I could use western feminist theory to discuss and reconsider some questions particular to China. I attempted to do some things that I could accomplish. At this time I felt that I had started to participate in this women's movement though my own initiative.

**Shi: You said a moment ago that you are a feminist (*nuquan zhuyizhe*). What does this term mean to you?**

Zhang Li: This is a rather academic question. First we can talk about the problem of translation, especially of the term "feminism." In fact in Chinese theoretical circles, the media and in everyday language there are two most common usages of feminism, *nuquan zhuyi* and *nuxing zhuyi*. When people translate these terms they have their own understandings of the concept and at the same time a certain identification with the concept. The translator's understanding of the concept will undoubtedly be influenced by her environment. Again, at the same time she will have to identify with this concept. When translated, this word will not be value neutral. It represents your identification with this concept and its implied meanings. Actually, as early as the 1920s during the New Culture Movement,<sup>270</sup> this word was translated from western cultural theory. Some people called feminism *nuquan zhuyi* and others used the term *nuxing zhuyi*. However at that time this was not widely debated. It was not until the 1980s when many Chinese people came into contact with the theories of women's studies. Many people coming back from overseas and China's open door policy also allowed more and more people to come into contact with western theories. At this time everybody again started to discuss the translation of "feminism" (*nuquan zhuyi* and *nuxing zhuyi*). I think there are two rather distinct schools of thought. One group asserts that the Chinese term *nuquan zhuyi* more completely reflects the nature of the concept of "feminism" in the West. In addition to advocating the equality of the sexes, it also calls for actions and questions the societal behaviors and the social system. In addition it believes that women must challenge and take on subversive practices in order to realize true gender equality. But translators who use *nuxing zhuyi* as the term for "feminism" believe that the term *nuquan zhuyi* clearly represents the first wave and has the characteristics of feminism in the nineteenth century. For example, this includes striving for women's right to vote and reproductive rights, protesting and demonstrating. This view asserts that this concept of "feminism" represents how things were at this time. But, as feminism developed the second wave of feminism came about in the 1960s and multiplied. No longer was it merely a unitary movement – there was also communication and many different voices were heard. In this kind of situation, the term *nuquan zhuyi* could not comprehensively include all of the connotations of feminism. This is the first reason. The second reason for not using *nuquan zhuyi* is that they think this term would be easily misunderstood; it sounds "very

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<sup>270</sup> The New Cultural Movement during the 1910s and 1920s was initially an intellectual movement that aimed to challenge traditional Chinese culture and promote a new culture, new social relations and new ways of thinking in Chinese society, especially about "science" and "democracy."

strong.” It sounds as if it is against everything, even unreasonably oppositional. I remember rather prominent articles by people such as Gao Huizhu and Chen Yiyun.<sup>271</sup> But as for me, I approve of the translation of feminism as *nuquan zhuyi*. Moreover, I feel that these two translations of “feminism” are quite different. I also think that the translation itself certainly reflects the cultural context. At the same time, a person’s choice of terms also reflects the degree of identification that she has with this concept. As for the term *nuxing zhuyi*, what does it try to avoid? Of course feminists urge people to avoid misunderstanding, but on the other hand, my view is that precisely because you advocate *nuxing zhuyi* you have written off the special value of *nuquan zhuyi*. This value or special characteristic is the core of feminism. What is this kind of core useful for? It impels questioning and challenging the unequal social structure and culture. Women advocate gender equality. This is not merely a kind of desire or belief. More importantly it is a kind of movement. Therefore I feel that *nuquan zhuyi* should be used when translating the term “feminism” because it represents the true meaning of feminism. *Nuxing zhuyi* feminists have persistently asserted that this usage can create misunderstandings, but things that create misunderstanding are exactly the special characteristics of *nuquan zhuyi* feminism. Therefore the things that you try to avoid are exactly the things that should not be avoided. Consequently I advocate the term *nuquan zhuyi* because in Chinese culture, terms like female (*nuxing*), male (*nanxing*), man (*nanren*) and woman (*nuren*) already create a fixed impression. When you say “female culture,” “femininity,” “female characteristics,” people think of being kind and courteous and virtuous, the so-called “feminine special characteristics.” Because I think this is something that should be avoided, we should not use a term which has these connotations. Therefore I feel that using *nuquan zhuyi* can more accurately reflect the essence and connotations of feminism. It can better publicly advocate feminism and the things associated with it. It should publicly confront things which *nuxing zhuyi* feminists want to evade. Therefore, I approve of the term *nuquan zhuyi*. Of course I realize that every person has his or her own views and understandings. I feel some people believe *nuxing zhuyi* is a better reflection of the term feminism. I think this is an individual attitude.

**Shi: How then do you see mainland Chinese feminism?**

Zhang Li: Are you referring to the concept or the movement?

**Shi: You can talk about the concept and the movement, if you would like.**

Zhang Li: I think that it is very hard to say that mainland China has a feminist movement in the same way that western feminism has developed. Western feminism had a clear first wave and then a second. When we talk about the first wave, we can think of innumerable works, innumerable people who represented the movement, and representative points of view and activities. When referring to the second wave, we also can point to many typical things. But in China... Well, when you speak of a movement, it

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should be a very natural combination of theory and practice. I feel that it is really difficult to say that China already has a feminist movement. I feel that is quite appropriate to say that China has a group of people who have feminist consciousness. They actively carry forth the feminist movement and actively take part in work to promote gender equality in society. When we talk about a movement, there should be a natural union between the theory and practice. But presently in China, when you speak of the feminist movement, there are not enough people who focus enough attention on putting things into practice, promoting various projects and tasks, or activities. But the research of the development of feminist theory and the usefulness of theory for the feminist movement is insufficient. I think this deficiency is a shortcoming. On the other hand, some people are deeply involved in feminist research, and I feel that some of their articles are written quite well. However, I feel that there are still some deficiencies in actually putting ideas into practice. Of course some times we have limited time and funds But I think that these people are not good at truly going down to China's grassroots level to discover the problem of sex discrimination, the problem of gender inequality and to make up for the insufficiencies and eliminate difference. I think these people have some flaws and that there is a distance between them and their subject of study. Actually, since 1995 I have continuously been advocating the viewpoint that researchers cannot be separate from activism and activists must also engage in research. I believe that combining them is possible. Activists consider doing research too abstract, too academic. We have to use many concepts –for instance, postmodernism, post structuralism, self, etc. It seems that as though if we do not use these new words, we cannot truly study this body of knowledge. Meanwhile, there are some researchers who feel that engaging in activities takes too much effort and the effects are rather slow.

However I believe that these two kinds of people should be brought together. My colleagues and I, especially colleagues who have common goals, have made such an attempt. For example, after 1995, in the Chinese Institute for Women's Administrative Cadres we established a group called "The Women's Consulting and Activity Center." Why was it called the consulting and activity center? At the time, we thought about whether or not we should do research. If we wanted to provide consulting and guidance, we needed to have things that had a theoretical component. But it also had an activism aspect. Could we unify theory and activism? Therefore at the time we had the women's hot line and a column that we cooperated with the *Worker's Daily*<sup>272</sup> that focused on pragmatic aspects. We made some attempts at that time.

Then I had my own project, called "The State of Chinese Rural Women's Education." This kind of investigation came about because of the 1995 Women's Conference forum. At that time we did an investigation of rural women in twenty-nine villages. The first time that we did this project my colleagues and I, women from the Women's Studies department, we invested a lot of time and effort. We used the active participant method. That was the first time that we had used the active participant method. This was the first time we were going to do this project together with the people from the countryside. When we became more involved in the project we discovered very many problems. For example many women could not write Chinese characters. When we asked women to

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<sup>272</sup> *Worker's Daily* is one of the official newspapers in China.

sign their names, they were unable to do so. Some asked if they could draw a picture. For instance, one woman said that she raised chickens so she drew a picture of a chicken. Then we asked them to draw where their homes were. I remember clearly that we separated the men and women, dividing them into two small groups. I still preserve two of the pictures. The picture drawn by one of the women was called “my home.” This picture was of a traditional four walled Chinese courtyard (*si he yuan*). In the courtyard there were very many side rooms, the kitchen, the main room, the pigsty and the chicken coop. There were chickens running in the courtyard and a person was feeding the chickens. She had this kind of picture; this was her home. But in a picture drawn by a man of his home, I could not find his house in the picture. He drew the railroad, which extended in all directions, and Beijing and Tianjin. At that time he was living in Hebei. He also drew a fruit orchard, the pond, the county seat and stores. Finally he added a small dot. In that large picture, he said this little dot was his home. At that time I discovered that the concept of home for a man and woman are completely different. Through this project we can study why the concepts of home are dissimilar for a man and a woman. Through what type of education...when we are born we are the same. After we are born why do we gradually become man and woman?

We started to bring this kind of research into the classroom. We started to study the socialization process of men and women. What kind of influence does our family, our schooling and our society have on us? How does society turn a natural person into a man or a woman? In this project, I came to more deeply understand the reasoning behind Beauvoir’s saying that “people are not born men; instead they grow to be men.” So I felt that this project was not merely a practice oriented project – counting female literacy rates, female education levels, how many girls have enough money to go to school, how many females have the aspirations of going to school, etc. It was not only about collecting data and materials and organizing them.

I feel that attempts to understand the condition of women in the Chinese countryside – their ideas and wishes – and to examine the cultural system behind this kind of reasoning can be integrated in our work. I remember at that time we chose one group of people to attend the preparatory meeting for the 1995 World Women’s Conference in Beijing. For many of the women this was their first time to ride on a train, their first time to come to Beijing, their first time to stay in a hotel and their first time to see such a lively place. I remember at the time a woman said to me that she was astonished at how nice Beijing people were. After they left, we sat down and thought of the days that had passed. We had different kinds of feelings – for us the stress had been quite severe. We had brought them to Beijing; after they saw it, was it good or bad for them? We thought about this for a very long time. Some people might have immediately felt that it was not fair or was not equal. In their hearts they might feel a kind of unhappiness. Therefore did we do a good thing or not? We brought these women into this kind of environment and suddenly opened their eyes to so much. We really thought about this for a good long period of time. These are some of the issues that we later came across in the classroom and in our research. These kinds of activities provide lots of source material and a foundation for the development of the theory behind all of women’s studies. This was only a project and a small example. Actually afterwards we did very many of these kinds of projects and

activities. Both these projects and classroom discussion really had a big influence on us.

**Shi: In what areas does this kind of scholarly research concentrate?**

Zhang Li: Something that I consider rather central to my work is marriage and the family. I think that for as long as I can remember, Chinese people have regarded marriage and family as important. Thus, people's views of their family and familial relations have actually gradually seeped into other aspects of society. Therefore I focus on marital conflict. Also I myself pay a lot of attention to women's health, mainly women's psychological health.

**Shi: In what areas are all of your individual activities concentrated?**

Zhang Li: My own activities? In my personal experiences, I went to a women's school and later it became the China Women's College. I was originally in this school and was a teacher in the Women's Movement department. Later I became the head of this department. Then the name of this department was changed to the Department of Social Work. It had an emphasis on women's work. I was also the head of this department. Then I undertook some administrative work for the college. Now I serve as the deputy vice-president. Throughout this kind of long process, I have never left my teaching post. My very many activities in this department have been carried out together with all of my colleagues who all have a common goal. For instance a big project that we worked on is putting an end to domestic violence and improving the condition of marginalized women in the community – for instance laid-off women workers and so on. We worked to create a marginalized community women's network, and offered support services. Moreover we have also done, for instance, community intervention models, how to establish models and so on. We have engaged in quite a few of these kinds of activities; these activities were quite large. I felt that these activities had two kinds of impacts. The first was to promote the development of woman studies inside our department and to train a team of people. The second aspect was to have a tremendous influence on society. For instance, we have done an integrated intervention project that dealt with domestic abuse in an area of Beijing. In this case integrated intervention is not merely a topic for study, and is also not merely research. In fact we looked at this community's program comprehensively including administration and the judiciary. Participants included all levels, such as government officials, police department and the judicial system, NGOs and families. We put all of these people together. Therefore I feel that this integration does not only have significance for research, and is not merely a research project. I think it has a positive meaning and encourages the development of the entire community, encourages the development of community-building in China and the entire Chinese effort to prevent domestic abuse.

**Shi: You said a moment ago that feminist scholarly research and practice and also classroom teaching should be combined. What kind of changes did the union of these various aspects bring about in you personally? What useful things could you draw from this?**

Zhang Li: Because we worked together on many of these endeavors, it is very difficult to say for me personally how I have changed. For an individual I think that is a continuous process of consciousness-raising. You become more and more sensitive to many problems. You increasingly feel that things are unfair. You get more and more excited and agitated. It is not merely the excitement and the challenge. You come to realize you must really actively take actions and make change. So, now in the Women's College, the women's studies department, the social work department, and also a few other departments such as the law department, we all advocate "Research and Action." This is the model of the union of research and activism. Training students with this kind of model has had a huge influence on them. So when our students go on the market to work and compete for jobs, this is one kind of comprehensive qualitative advantage that they have. For instance, regarding their own self-understanding, they are full of confidence in their abilities to be effective against the unfair challenges that may lie ahead. For example, when one of our students went to a recruiting fair, there was a sign posted that said "no female student interviews." There were very many university students in front of that sign. They looked, walked back and forth, and finally walked away. But our student stood in front of this sign, and then sat there. Then she asked the recruiter what kind of person the company was looking for. He described the type of person that he was looking for. She told him that she met all of the requirements that he had just laid out and then asked him why he would not hire a woman. He then asked where she had attended college. She said that she went to the China Women's College. "Oh," he said, "the students at your school are different." Our school's student said that writing a sign like this is not right and it violates the law. She said I could sue your company for posting a sign like that. This student then said, "I have met all of the requirements for the job, including my level of education and the skills that you require. Why won't you interview me?" Afterwards that person said I will tell my supervisor what you have said and ask my supervisor to discuss this with you. Therefore I think that this is an example to show that research and practice should be integrated, and the enhancement of the quality of teachers and students are related. Therefore it is very difficult to say, personally what obvious changes I have undergone during this process. I think I have changed because of influence from being in my department, from the school, and from the students who have graduated. These different levels of influence are all reflected in my change.

**Shi: But what has influenced you personally?**

Zhang Li: If you want to speak of things that have influenced me individually, I feel that I have experienced different things because I am not a pure research scholar. I am very willing to participate in some practical activities. Even though I am rather busy, for example, if I have a discussion topic, I really want to engage this deeply. I would go to do interviews, make an investigation, or go and see the issue at the most basic level. As for me, I am really willing to practice in order to take practical actions, and am really willing to use practical actions as a feminist.

**Shi: You are the president of the China Women's College, the only official Chinese women's university. What administrative practices did you use to develop this schools' education of women? What type of changes did the school undergo?**

Zhang Li: I have been in this position since March 1999. Before this, I also had a year of working as a specialized director of education. What does the “only” “official” women’s college have? These two adjectives tell of some problems. What does “official” imply? Actually it means that we are very restricted in what we do by the system. Unofficial schools have a lot of space to do what they want and quite a bit of leeway. However as an official institution, many government departments have all sorts of rules and influence on us. Therefore currently at many universities, they are not able to have a women’s studies department and are not able to develop a women’s studies curriculum, not have a genuine women’s research center and so on. They did not have the structure for this. Why is it like this? Because in universities, women’s studies does not have the status of a primary discipline<sup>273</sup> or even secondary discipline. So it cannot be the same as women’s studies programs in other countries where they recruit undergraduates, master’s students and Ph.D. students. In China this possibility still does not exist. They have started to do women’s studies research in universities... Women’s studies in universities, this kind of atmosphere developed after 1995, but I should mention that it was voluntary. It has not received substantive, significant support from the administration. If for instance you are allowed to establish a women’s research center, often you do not have office space, the personnel, or the wages to pay them. You do not have access to very many resources. Therefore there are very many things that you cannot do and in fact you will definitely fail.

But in the China Women’s College, inside such a special school, there is an unusual environment. Why? Because the school is affiliated to the All-China Women’s Federation. The All-China Women’s Federation is China’s biggest NGO. Of course many people questioned the status of the All-China Women’s Federation as an NGO. Some people said that it was a “semi-NGO” because it is semi-official. People that ask if we are official or semi-official always have some reasons. For instance the personnel quota and the wages of the Women’s Federation all come from allocations of funds from the government. This is a fact. Although its funds are allocated by the government, we should also look at this from another point of view. The Women’s Federation does not have policy-making power. Therefore the Women’s Federation certainly does not participate in government policy-making, so it is only a bridge. The Women’s Federation only acts as a bridge. Because of this, the organization has a lot of space within which to work. Thus, the China Women’s College is then placed in this unique position. It both falls under the guidance of the All-China Women’s Federation, because it is the All-China Women’s Federation’s subordinate school, but at the same time it also is under the guidance of the Ministry of Education. This is because degree granting education in China falls under the Ministry of Education. So therefore we have two supervisory bodies. From the point of view of the All-China Women’s Federation, we undertake the responsibilities of training women cadres, implementing equality between men and women, which is a basic state policy, advocating for the equality of the sexes and encouraging the spirit of the “Four Selves”,<sup>274</sup> among women and so on. We take on these duties. Therefore this kind of women’s research... for the All-China Women’s Federation

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<sup>273</sup> The Chinese education system categorizes different academic fields.

<sup>274</sup> “Four Selves” refers to self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance and self-improvement.

researching women's issues is a natural part of one's work. Because of this, we are different from other universities. I often jokingly say that if professors at other universities want to teach women's studies courses, it is like struggling for a bowl of food to eat. Since women's studies is not an established discipline, they have to fight for time and resources to teach. However at the China Women's College, we do not need to fight for our bowl of food; what we do is teach women's studies courses. Therefore researching and studying women's issue at the Chinese Women's College is natural. But at the same time we also fall under the guidance of the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education supervises the construction of our curriculum, the majors that we offer, and supervises the degree and direction of the development of the institution. In this way we are severely limited in what we do. For example you have a women's studies department – we have established a women's studies department, but what degrees does the department of women's studies issue to the graduates? What diploma do they receive? I do not know. If you want to recruit women's studies undergraduate students, you can't. Why? Women's Studies is not considered a primary or secondary discipline. We cannot recruit women's studies students and therefore we cannot give these students diplomas. Because of this you are absolutely limited.

But under this kind of situation, as for me personally, although you have challenges, you also have very big opportunities. This time I came by my work as college president by chance. I could say that I am a voluntary feminist. I wholeheartedly identify with, accept and approve many feminist viewpoints. These viewpoints, strictly speaking, adhere to the Women's Federation's viewpoints and moreover are the same as our state policy. In the end, our final goal is gender equality. At the same time I am different from other people; I am extremely lucky to have some authority. Because I have some authority, I can appropriately act within my scope to handle matters how I may want to. So under these kinds of circumstances, we have established the women's studies department. The women's studies department is now independent from the social work department. This social work department was the predecessor of what we called the women's movement department. The women's movement department changed its name to the social work department because we wanted to bring women's work into line with the discipline of social work. Women's work is regarded as part of social work, but women, this community, is the focus of the social work department. Therefore the social work department's curriculum, discussion topics, and research all center on the development of women. This is what makes us unique. When we established the women's studies department, we wanted to specialize in women's research to train researchers who could then go on to other institutions to do research. We wanted to have people with these abilities. But in the department of social work we focus on the operational aspect. Therefore in this kind of situation, we established a women's studies department. We recruited students for the women's studies department through the social work department, but with a women's studies focus. Therefore we used the loopholes in this policy to create a path away from marginality in order to develop women's studies. Through this method we were able to have the women studies department. First I was the education director, then the vice president of the school and then the president. I was the only president of an official China Women's College in the whole country. The first challenge to face was that our position didn't mean we actually had gender

consciousness, that we consciously developed women's research, or that we carried on activities that promoted gender equality.

Then when I became president, you could say that I had authority, and at the same I also had a space for action. If you do not have this kind of space, it seems as if among other university presidents, even though they may have this authority they still are not useful. Sometimes the area under their control does not allow them to create their own space for action. I happen to have both the authority and the space. For me this is an extremely good opportunity. I can do things that I want to do. For example some university presidents also encourage and approve of feminism, but they may not be able to carry out these things. There are some people who really approve of these ideas but they cannot continue to carry them out. Therefore from this point of view, I really was quite lucky. I could rather naturally unify my way of thinking, my ideals and my work. It is similar to how we built the women's studies department that I talked about a moment ago. Then I gradually began to consider making some changes, not merely in terms of institution building but also bringing about some fundamental changes. We believe that this is quite essential. For instance, from a structural perspective we have the women's studies department and the social work department. As for the social work department, we said a moment ago that its focus was the female community. We also have the law department. What does our school's law department focus on? The Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women, but also children – women and children. Naturally it has its own characteristics. Simultaneously, add in the goals of the Women's Federation. Certainly at the same time we also add the feminist goal of gender equality. At the same time we need to be unified with the entire education system. Therefore I think that based on these circumstances, we attempted to make adjustments in departmental building.

At the same time, for instance, in the library there is a collection of feminist books. Soon we also will start a women's information and resource center. We wanted to make this center so it would become the country's biggest collection of electronic resources, where you could search on line for materials, and also the largest collection of source materials on women's studies and so on. We want to make it an interconnected body. I hope that we can provide China's largest, most complete and most easy to use feminist book collection. This collection would include every aspect of feminism. Now we already carried out some planning and have made adjustments. We are currently working on this.

Also the focus of the school's research supports topics that are related to women. This point was extremely explicit. Therefore at the China Women's College, your research proposal has to be relatively focused on women's issues, but any aspect of women's issues. Because we have a variety of departments – altogether we have nine departments and more than thirty different areas of specialization. These thirty different majors all can be related with women. You can study women's literature, women's health, kindergarten principals' gender training, etc. We bring together all of our areas of specialization with women's education. It starts in the curriculum but we have also started a required course for the entire school. This course is called women's studies. This course is not only a forty class hour Introduction to Women's Studies. In fact in class discussions, we want to focus on the essence of this subject area. There are different

topics – for instance, women and society, women and health, women and employment, and so on. It immerses students in the context of different topics. This way every department... In this way you are a China Women’s College student and you must take this class. I think this is quite unique in the country. Moreover we also clearly see that students benefit from this aspect of their education. For instance, I just gave you that example of that student who was looking for work. She knew [that sign] was not right. Why? Because she had learned from this curriculum that sex discrimination is illegal – sex discrimination is present in advertisements and classified ads, etc. It even includes some work situations such as sexual harassment and so on. In our physical education class, we have a class called “Women’s Self Defense.” It also teaches the students how to protect themselves– from the law, and from other’s actions. Thus we have very many distinct aspects of the curriculum. All aspects of the curriculum revolve around our essential core idea.

Moreover, in the entire school, we really advocate the educational model that combines teaching, scientific research and practice. Looking at this from the bigger picture, this is a problem of how the school wants to position itself. Should it become a research institute, or a comprehensive university, or a university of high quality that focuses on undergraduate education? So we positioned the school in a way so that we would have special characteristics. For instance we sought to be special, not comprehensive, and chose quality over quantity. We also have some slogans in order to highlight the cultivation of young women with the spirit of the “Four Selves” and talented female students in different areas of study. According to this basic idea, in reality we know we have to reform the curriculum in the classroom. We have to advocate that students participate in practical matters. We have to advocate for teachers to do research. Trying to do this we realized we faced a very important problem of communication, between teachers and students and between society and teachers and students. This is a problem of building linkages. In this kind of process, some traditional ideas in the Chinese education process, such as the unquestionable authority of the teachers, the idea that if a teacher says something then it is right, and the idea that the students only listen and do not think, have gradually changed under our new educational principle. This is something that feminism indeed advocates – the idea that everyone is equal and everybody has opportunities. These ideas have slowly affected pedagogy, curriculum, research and practice. Therefore our students go out into society and engage in practical activities, for instance, being concerned for migrant workers’ children and volunteering at mobile schools. Our students gradually have the sense that everyone should be equal and that everyone should have equal opportunity. Everybody needs to have self-respect, to be self-confident, to be able to support herself and to have the spirit of self-strengthening, working hard and self-respect and so on. This kind of spirit has slowly affected each sector of teaching.

Therefore I think that I am rather lucky to be in this kind of position where I have two spaces, the feminist space and space within the structure of formal education. In this way, our school is unique in China. We have implemented a women’s studies curriculum – the only institution of higher learning to have a women’s studies department. So we integrate research, practice and teaching into one body with the hope that we can provide support to other universities and a very good environment for foreign scholars who come to

China to conduct research on Chinese women. So as the deputy president of this college, I personally have worked very diligently to promote this aspect of our school. But I should also say that I had a very good opportunity and the space for action to carry out my work. Compared to other colleges and universities it is much smoother and much easier to do our work. Of course, other administrators in this school did not all consciously accept the ideas of feminism. But we all had the will to make this school special. What kind of special characteristics? These characteristics are based on women's studies research. Because of this, everybody rather easily accepted my general design and ideas. Therefore, in carrying this out for some years – since the school became the Chinese Women's College – from 1985, no, from 1995 when we officially changed our name, to the present, we have increasingly clearly highlighted our own special characteristics. We have more and more famous women's studies researchers and some quite well-known women scholars. Thus, also we have more and more influence on society.

**Shi: What difficulties then did you have in this process? For instance were there any conflicts between your feminist values and the All-China Women's Federation's organizational values or the values of other officials at your school?**

Zhang Li: These existed all the time, but of course it was not only conflicts of feminist values. In any kind of situation conflicting ideas always exist. However, the issue you raised is a rather important one. When for instance you stipulate the required courses in other disciplines, you face resistance. The fine arts department students say, "Why do I have to take a women's studies class?"; the nursing department students ask "Why I do want to study a class in the women's studies department curriculum?"; the fashion design department students say "Why do I have to take a women's studies class?" People question this. Their curriculum has already given them 1,600 hours of class time. If they add on additional class hours, they simply will not fit in their schedule. Originally there are very many courses that they are required to take such as public theory classes and fundamental courses for their major. This is because the Ministry of Education sets some courses, which are compulsory. So they feel as if they already have to take so many classes and then the school adds another. Therefore in each department I must talk to the head of the department; there has to be a process. On the one hand I clearly establish with everyone the importance of the women's studies curriculum at the Chinese Women's College. If at the Chinese Women's College you do not cultivate students with gender consciousness then we have not fulfilled our responsibility to them. From the point of view of the All-China Women's Federation and the China Women's College what is our goal? We must cultivate students who have the spirit of the "Four Selves." This should be reflected in our curriculum; this is a necessity.

On the other hand, I use some administrative methods, demanding that the students attend a women's studies class. I ordered the implementation of this required course in women's studies and thus it was pushed down to the lower levels. Therefore everybody had no alternative but to accept this. After several years, opinion has changed. After every course is finished, we all have an evaluation which includes student's feedback and opinion of the class. Department heads and students were all quite satisfied with this

group of teachers' courses – the content was quite good, the students' feedback was positive, the teacher's lectures were quite good, and their basic skills were good. Thus, students liked these classes. Moreover the teaching methodology for these classes – the basic idea and students' interactions, communication, participation – students thought that all of this was extremely interesting. They especially liked that they could express their opinions. Therefore students all really welcomed this curriculum. Every time we do an evaluation of the course, basically students have commented that it was outstanding. Thus currently everyone has gradually come to accept this kind of curriculum. Therefore I had these kinds of obstacles (that I talked about above).

Moreover I think these kinds of obstacles are not initially obvious. It is not deliberate or intentional but the result of a difference in ideas. For instance when we are promoting the special characteristics of the Chinese Women's College some people said: "Right, right. We should have a special character. As you can see some girls have no education on how to carry themselves, how they should stand, sit and walk in a lady-like way. We should teach them how to wear clothes, teach them how to have a good image..." As for the question of women's image, as a feminist, I have never had the idea that people should have disheveled hair and dirty faces, and not take care of themselves or be extremely messy. But, we cannot train students according to how everyone thinks women should behave or act. This would mean that the Chinese Women's College had failed, right? But in this kind of situation, when discussing these things with some of the leaders and teachers you sometimes have a conflict, a conflict of ideas. Everybody wants this school to have special characteristics and believes that this school must advocate the "Four Selves" and that women should have their own goals for cultivating themselves. But when actually putting these things into practice, you may discover that you are talking about two different matters. Actually you are doing two different things. Therefore I think in this aspect, there is still much work to be done. Often there is a conflict of ideas, differences, and the intersection of the two. Everyone should try to work together to accomplish these things, but this does not always work. I think that you must go through this kind of process.

Moreover, from the point of view of the All-China Women's Federation, they are after all a bridge that connects the party and the women's populace. Therefore to a very great degree, we definitely have to carry out the party and government's resolutions and policies. Because of this, sometimes I feel that in some concepts problems may emerge. But at this time we need to pay attention to our understanding and approach. The "equality of the sexes" and "gender" are two typical concepts. Beginning in 1995 everyone began using the concept of gender. Everybody knows the concept of gender, and they also know the differences between sex and gender. They also know that the term "gender" has its own history and know gender theory advocates a kind of equality of the sexes. They also know gender itself challenges the social system. Therefore people have come to understand the concept of gender more. The Chinese government, women's organizations and many people do not use this word consciously. Because the United Nations documents use this term in an attempt to bring gender consciousness into the decision-making level, when the Chinese government or Women's Federation formulate plans and suggest we must bring gender consciousness into decision-making, it

is very natural to introduce this topic. As soon as it is introduced people start to ask what exactly is this thing called gender. Why do we say gender? I remember at that time a Chinese leader asked me, “China has never not advocated ‘equality between men and women.’ Right? ‘The equality of men and women’ is a basic state policy of the Chinese Communist Party that has been carried out for fifty years. Everyone knows of the equality of the sexes. It is deep in the hearts of the people. Now you want to use words like ‘gender consciousness’ and ‘gender blindness,’ and so on. Why do you have to use a different set of language?” He did not mean that he did not agree with us. He meant why don’t we use the concepts that everyone already accepts, understands and already knows. Why don’t we express our ideas using these words? At the time he really caused me to think in a different way. I think this actually may be a solution to many debates that we are having now. Actually in some debates we cannot be too rigid. We cannot say my way is of course the only way. If you do not agree, I cannot do it or I will not do it. Then nothing can be accomplished. Therefore because of this kind of situation, I actually discovered that sometimes you can discuss new issues within a previously existing framework. In fact when I think of the similarities and differences of gender and the equality of the sexes, I feel they share many things. You cannot say that equality of men and women and gender are completely different concepts. You cannot understand it this way. I think the equality of men and women – advocating the equality of the sexes – has been a basic state policy and the Communist Party of China has done this for many years. You cannot deny the work the Chinese government and the Communist Party has carried out. I think at the very least, no man dares to say, “I am a male chauvinist,” or “I am like this.” Why? Because everyone thinks that “male chauvinism” is a derogatory term and is not a good thing. Why isn’t it a good thing? This is the result of education. This is the genuine result of the process of education of the equality of men and women that the government has carried out. A man can only tell you, “I certainly am not a chauvinist; I respect women.” However, he may then turn around and say, “But the woman should make food, should take care of the child. If the woman does not take care (of the child), who would...?” He very naturally turns his words around but he cannot wear “the chauvinist” hat. This is a result of education from the Communist Party of China. But an incident has inspired me. That is, at the time when we did gender trainings, there was a researcher from the social science institute. We discussed during the training that we must have a standard to measure the degree and the environment of equality of the sexes. We have to have a standard. If you do not have a standard how can you speak of equality? But what was this standard? Actually this standard was a standard set by men. Therefore when you are saying that women are not equally treated and that women must participate in government more, what is your standard? Your standard is that participating in government is in the domain of men. Now women must enter this domain. Now women are not equal because men occupy ninety percent of the seats. Therefore we must increase the proportion (of women). Increasing the proportion of women in government is then equality. But in our discussion I said I thought actually this is not true equality of the sexes. In fact, when you use gender as your analytical framework, you can see this is not right. What we actually must do is not increase the ratio of women. What we must do in fact is gender equality. I said that the standard is based on a male standard. Then this woman from the social science institute at this training session asked me – So when we throw away the male standard, we no longer

have a standard; what is our standard? At that time I really thought this was a problem. We did not have a standard; what was the standard? In fact there exists a framework; the standard is the male standard. If you get rid of this standard, what standard would you use? Actually we must create a new standard in order to make everyone truly equal. If you say that this domain is only for men and increase the ratio to make equality of the sexes, then this would be unfair to women. This fundamentally violates the basic principles of Aristotle, the fundamental principle of fairness – “people of the same rank should receive the same treatment, and people of different ranks should receive different treatment.” If you put people of different ranks together and force them to be equal, inequality will forever manifest itself.

This incident really inspired me to think in a new way. Therefore I started to think about how some of our concepts certainly did not need to be absolute or definitely like this and definitely not like that. In the process of promoting equality of the sexes, there are very many things... For instance a Party leader gave me an example. I criticized that governor and told him that he was a male chauvinist, and did not promote equality of men and women. That governor said “Oh, but I do not want to be chauvinistic. I certainly must correct this. ... I have to try to correct this.” If I told him that his problem was gender blindness, he would not really understand what I meant. He wouldn’t understand what we were talking about. I definitely feel that there is a problem of understanding and conceptualizing “gender” and “the equality of men and women,” these two concepts. But looking at this from another angle, actually we can see, the concept of “the equality of men and women” is known and accepted by everyone. But for the concept of “gender” to achieve this and its effects to be even evaluated, it will be an extremely long process.

Therefore I think in this process – let’s return to what you just asked a moment ago about obstacles to carrying out this process. When I am carrying out some of my own ideas, actually it is these kinds of problems – the kind that you cannot see. But there are differences in ideas. I think in these aspects, I have truly encountered some difficulties. It is really different. Since I am not a pure scholar, I cannot say a question should only be discussed as an academic question: if you agree, then agree; if you do not, then drop it. As for me, I also have a position as an administrator. As an administrator I also have rules to follow. If I do not observe these rules, then my choice is either I give up or I insist on my ideas and other people give up on me. Therefore in this kind of situation, to a very great degree, I truly have encountered many difficulties. But, I feel lucky that at the same time I have these two areas where I have space to work. Therefore I think in carrying out women’s studies research, in taking feminism as a basic idea in the foundation of complete educational reform – doing these things has been a rather smooth process.

**Shi: What has affected you most profoundly or deeply?**

Zhang Li: Are you saying feelings of overcoming obstacles?

**Shi: In all aspects – in all aspects of your work, what has affected you in a profound way?**

Zhang Li: I feel, to return to the basic overarching topic, working in China's only official women's college, I believe that if you want to accomplish things under this kind of system, you must have a dual identity. Otherwise you will not be able to do many things.

**Shi: Then what kind of outlook do you have for yourself and the college? What do you hope the future brings?**

Zhang Li: Actually I have just said it. For example, as the leader of this college, I currently work with other people to establish this school as a top rate institution, a women's college that has special characteristics. The college has this kind of self-identification. But, what is a "top rate institution?" We need to work together to explore its meaning. For example, as a college president, I want my students to easily find work in the job market. You want the students to have the ability to go out into the job market and in addition to their technical abilities – for example a law department graduate would need to understand legal knowledge, clothing design department students need to understand colors, cutting garments, etc. – apart from this, I hope the students who graduate from our school are able to become a new force in the women's movement. They should consciously and unconsciously promote gender equality and take this as their personal responsibility. This is one special characteristic. Another special characteristic is that the school positions itself within the women's community, because I feel that you cannot abandon this space of operation. Under the auspices of the All China Women's Federation, I carry fourth the goals of this organization and position ourselves in alignment with the women's federation's position in the women's community. I feel the goals of the women's federation and our goals are the same, because we all want to achieve a kind of equality. How we accomplish this is up to us, but our goals are consistent. We cannot give up this special characteristic of our school. Therefore, other departments, research activities and practical activities are all concentrating on the women's community. We want to actively foster young women. For example, currently we have offered the first class for graduate study in women's studies in cooperation with Hong Kong Chinese University and the University of Michigan. Our vision is to be the first institute in China to obtain the right to confer a Master's degree in women's studies. Why don't we recruit students for a bachelor's degree? During our study in the past two years, I realized that as an administrative leader of a university, I still certainly must consider the issue of students finding employment after they leave the college. Undergraduate students only with a women's studies degree would still find it relatively difficult to find employment. Therefore I thought that we should first focus on graduate education. Another goal is what we just talked about. In addition to developing students' characters so that they have gender consciousness, and developing our women's studies department so that it can confer a master's degree, our greatest hope is to make China's largest and most complete women's research center. It would have an extensive collection of texts, and various electronic resources, and every kind of information. In the future, this largest research center will provide an invaluable service for the college, and at the same time, it will provide service for both domestic and foreign people who have interest in women's research. We are preparing to begin construction next year of this new library and we hope to complete it in two years. If we are able to complete it, we are

thinking of building a museum in our new research center. The museum will be on the first floor of the library. If we can realize this plan, I will feel this is one thing that is very meaningful for me. I have wanted to do this for several years.

**Shi: What plans do you, personally, have for the future?**

Zhang Li: I do not have any specific plans, I hope that after completing these several years of administrative work, I will be able to return to the department and be a relatively good teacher.

**Shi: Finally, can you talk a bit about the development of feminism on the mainland, its past and its future? What kinds of difficulties will the development of feminism on the mainland face and what kinds of efforts need to be carried out?**

Zhang Li: It is very difficult to summarize this question. Actually, I also thought about this question, but I still feel it is rather difficult to answer. I feel that we can divide it into levels. The first level concerns the sphere of academic research. I feel that this is the most rapidly developing field. Why? I feel in this sphere, in the recent years research in feminism should be relatively smooth and develop relatively quickly. This is because these changes have come about at the same time as the government's reform and opening policy, the revolution in the education system, an increasing number of scholars returning from overseas, and along with increasingly more people beginning to accept different kinds of thinking. But I personally estimate that until we can make women's studies an official discipline like it is overseas, to obtain national Ministry of Education approval, and to be able to award different types of degrees, there is still a long way to go. Because people still consider women's studies to be a marginal discipline that does not count. Currently there are a lot of people engaged in this kind of work. For example Du Fangqin<sup>275</sup> of Tianjin, Wang Zheng,<sup>276</sup> people at our school, as well as Beijing Normal University.<sup>277</sup> We are jointly putting together classes for a higher education curriculum that encourages women's research. Our goal is to be able to influence college students and establish a favorable climate for women's studies. After we have a foundation and when the Ministry of Education approves and agrees to our plan, then we already have a few prerequisites. I feel this is one level.

Another sphere I feel that will be relatively easy to carry forth is that of "development." Why this field? Because currently many people – no matter if they accept or do not accept feminist thought and theory – in fact have already discovered this field, or are carrying out programs in this field. This is a field in which it is relatively easy to find funds from big foundations, even including some national funds. For example there are

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<sup>275</sup> Du Fangqin is a prominent gender historian and feminist scholar in China. Currently she teaches at the Tianjin Normal University of China, where she holds the position of the director of the Women's Studies Center.

<sup>276</sup> Professor Wang Zheng teaches at the University of Michigan. She is a historian of Chinese women's and gender history and a researcher for the Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

<sup>277</sup> Beijing Normal University was the first teaching-training university in China, which grew out the Faculty of Education of the Metropolitan University founded in 1902. It was named the Beijing Normal University in 1923.

funds for women's employment, employment projects, training rural women, supporting marginalized women, etc. I found that quite a lot of people have already begun to pay attention to these programs. Although some officials have not consciously accepted some of the feminist theories, methods and perceptions, they still feel that they can do these projects because they have funds. Therefore I feel that similar to the field of women's research, the field of development should also receive our attention. I believe the development of these two fields probably occurs rather quickly. I believe that a big issue is that these two fields are still relatively separate. Still people doing research focus on pure scholarly research. Those administering programs care more about operations. Therefore I believe that the integration of these two aspects is still quite important.

The situation appears to be different overseas. Overseas when a field of research exists, there is also a market for that field of research. For example women's studies departments have different types of degrees to award and naturally have funding sources. Since this discipline exists, there is a kind approval for the discipline. Since students choose this discipline, the students themselves must consider the market and job possibilities after they graduate. But China is not quite the same, because there is still the problem of the graduate employment rate for Chinese universities. China's current Ministry of Education department publicly announces each university's employment success rate. When you publicly announce the employment success rate, this puts pressure on the university. Then the university will not recruit students to fields or disciplines where employment rates are relatively low. This occurs even to the extent that there are stipulations – for example if the employment success rate does not reach 50%, your discipline's recruitment of students is automatically cancelled. This is a kind of pressure. Therefore I feel that if you want these two fields to develop relatively quickly and to form a strong force, there is still quite a long road to travel. But I should say, in the field of women's research and conducting women's programs – women participating in “development” programs, we currently have some outstanding people who have a great influence. I myself feel this field's development should be the fastest.

**Shi: Thank you, President Zhang Li Xi.**

Zhang Li: Thank you.