

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

SITE: CHINA

**Transcript of Duan Jiling
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Liang Xiaowen, was born May 7th, 1992 in Guangzhou, Guangdong, China; she is a Fordham Law Graduate, and a New York licensed attorney. Xiaowen is a Chinese feminist activist and organizer. She started her activism work in the LGBT and feminist movements in 2012. She has initiated and participated in several influential campaigns addressing women's rights issues in China and the U.S.

Liang Xiaowen: First of all, I am really glad that we have this opportunity to engage in a dialogue with each other. To get started, could you please introduce yourself so that we can understand a bit about your background? Could you tell us your name and what are you doing now?

Duan Jiling: My name is Duan Jiling. I am now a doctoral student, researching gender studies in the U.S.

LX: What is your research mainly about?

DJ: What I'm most concerned about, well, is perhaps related to my initial desire to come to the US to study in a Ph.D. program. There were many different complicated reasons. When I was in China, I first worked in commercial media. Although I was doing work related to women at the time and also had the opportunity to do a lot of things I wanted to do, it was a commercial enterprise after all. Consequently, often I was not too fond of the work or you might say I wasn't willing to do it. Then there was the entire (political, social) environment at that time, and because it was Beijing, my whole personal situation was less than ideal. Subsequently, I left that job. At that time, I really wanted to go back to a campus environment so that I could focus on studying. I also felt that I hoped to change my living environment and then pursue some things I wanted to do. I thought at the time that the only way I could find the answers to some questions I had was by doing research, so I came (to the US to study toward doctorate).

What I was more certain about at that time was that I wanted to do women and gender studies, but I didn't know specifically what I would research. Because after all, there were many pieces of researches I felt I could do. But I hadn't yet thought through my specific research topic. But there was one thing -- from the time I came to the US to study for my Ph.D. until today, which has been about four years-- that has never changed. As I told my Ph.D. committee, no matter what specific topic I end up doing, I very much want to do whatever might be useful for the Chinese feminist movement. This was also the answer I gave to my advisor when she asked me what I wanted to do, and so this is also what I am doing right now, probably one ...

LX: Maybe we can talk about this later. What research are you doing now specifically?

DJ: What research am I doing now?

LX: Let's go back to what you said earlier. You said you didn't know what you were going to study, but you're very confident that your research will be related to the Chinese feminist movement. And you expect that your research will benefit the Chinese feminist movement. What made you feel so firmly convinced?

DJ: So back again to the beginning, how should I say...

LX: What prompted you to determine that this is the field you wanted to pursue, that this is your direction?

DJ: I think I determined this long before I arrived here to study for my Ph.D.

LX: Could you elaborate?

DJ: I think it should be from around the time I did my postgraduate studies [in China]. During my postgraduate studies, very belatedly, after many detours, I finally discovered the term “feminism.” After seeing this word at that time and reading related personal essays by Wang Zheng, Shen Rui,¹ and others about how they had become feminists, I felt afterward that there had always been some confusion in my heart up until that time. Still, I had never found a word such as feminism that came so close to the answer. I had sought in my heart. Suddenly I found this term, and finally, it provided an answer to all kinds of confusion I had for many years.

Starting from that time, I decided that I definitely wanted to do work related to women. It didn't matter what the job was, as long as it was work that enabled me to help women. I had spoken with some friends previously; in fact, at the time, I was quite ignorant. I had no idea what women's NGOs there were, or any women's organizations. I really didn't know anything about them at the time. Then I went online and searched for work related to women. It was particularly ridiculous that some of the jobs I found, I learned later, were not in NGOs, but rather “in the official system” (*tizhinei*), and they weren't openly recruiting. But I made some phone calls. I really had no idea how it all worked.

LX: What kind of work?

DJ: For example, the Women's Research Institute of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)². I had no idea what type of work unit it was, or what kind of process you had to go through to work there, or what sort of person they were hoping to hire. I knew absolutely nothing. It's hilarious to think about it now. Then I found a commercial media outlet. At the time, when I gave them my resume, I also checked them out. I saw they had done some special reports, which I thought were quite good. For example, like some routine content -- their gender consciousness was quite strong. I saw some of the topics they covered, all of which discussed the situation of women. I thought it was acceptable. Moreover, I thought if I do

¹ Wang Zheng is a historian of modern China, professor of Women's Studies and researcher of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan. She has worked on developing feminist discourse and promoting women's and gender studies in China since the early 1990s. Shen Rui is a professor of Chinese Studies at Morehouse College, Georgia, Atlanta. She is a feminist writer whose works in Chinese have a large readership.

²The All-China Women's Federation was established on April 3, 1949 by feminists in the Chinese Communist Party, which initially served as an umbrella organization unifying various pro-CCP women's organizations to provide leadership for Chinese women's liberation in the People's Republic of China. In the subsequent years the ACWF's rapid institutional development reached down to each level of administration with a Women's Congress at each urban neighborhood and rural village. The officials and staff of the WF system are on the government payroll and the leading position at each level of the WF is appointed by the CCP committee of the same administrative level. <http://www.womenofchina.cn/about.htm>.

media, it's closer to the kind of work I want to do! Even though at the time, I was more interested in landing a job that was utterly related to women's rights. Although women's rights were not a central issue for them, at least they did work related to women's issues, and their gender awareness was also up to standard, so I applied. They replied promptly.

LX: Was this the commercial enterprise?

DJ: Right. They responded very quickly. Then I got the job and started working there. So, to answer your question --this was a decision that I made quite early.

LX: So [it was because] you read... you just said that you had a lot of confusion at the time. Later, you read articles written by Professors Wang Zheng and Shen Rui...

DJ: It wasn't just the two of them; I also read some other books, some of which were compiled in the West, etc. But their articles left a deep impression.

LX: So, what confusion did you have before?

DJ: Some may not exactly be confusion. It also includes some of my own experiences and some stories I heard. Doesn't everyone say that I might have been a feminist before I found this word? It's just that I didn't know how to describe myself, or I don't know that there existed such a thing that could be used to describe myself. For example, it may be related to how and where I grew up.

LX: You can talk about it; it's alright.

DJ: I grew up in the countryside, and really heard a lot when I was young... I think this background is very important because, for example, where you grow up actually determines the resources you can access during the growth process, which may be different, for instance, from those of the city. Then the environment around you also shapes you. When I was a child, I heard my mother tell my paternal grandmother's story and her mother's story. They are really, I think, especially tragic. This tragedy is related to the stage of development at the time in China. The material conditions [were underprivileged] ... For example, what my mother told me that my paternal grandmother was actually just a guess, because my mother never met my paternal grandmother. She died when my father was in high school. Then my mother told me that she thought my paternal grandmother starved to death because she was always the last one to eat in the family. She waited for everyone else to finish eating before she would eat. But she had five sons, so it was often the case that after waiting until everyone had finished and it was her turn to eat, there was nothing left. After listening to a lot of these kinds of stories, including my maternal grandmother's and my mother's own experience, I observed other people around me, and my mother told me many things.... So, I think my mother was the source of my enlightenment. She told me those stories and she had her own judgment. For example, one of my aunts, my uncle's wife -- everyone said she died of an [unknown] illness. Only my mother told me that she didn't think so. She believed that

my uncle beat my aunt to death. She said that was because she observed a detail; first of all, my uncle often beat her; then, before my aunt died, she was seriously ill and looked very sickly for more than half a year. The reason she got sick was there was one time ... Do you know those older houses that had a threshold? Do you know what a threshold is?³

LX: I know.

DJ: In short, she was beaten by my uncle. He probably grabbed her from behind, and she fell on the threshold. My aunt became ill and later it was surmised that she definitely didn't receive proper treatment, and she was sick ever since that event. Later I guessed it was likely internal bleeding, and she died after bleeding for a long time. But absolutely no one else told me that she was beaten to death, only my mother observed this. After listening to so many stories like this, I feel that it is impossible for you not to have such awareness. These things happened to them exactly because they were women.

LX: So, the experiences of your family members you heard from childhood made you realize that you were a feminist.

DJ: Almost! Although there were other things that also played significant roles.

LX: So, what else is there?

DJ: Many other things can be mentioned. It may not be entirely gender-related, but it is related to why I became me, including what I wanted to do in terms of work later on. For example, when I graduated from junior high school, most of my classmates went to work in factories in the south. This may be a trend related to the class. Many of the classmates from my junior high school do not have the opportunity to go to high school. When I went to high school, most of them became what people referred to as migrant workers or floating workers-- these were my former junior high school classmates and elementary school classmates. Then when I was in high school, I found that the composition of my classmates changed dramatically. For example, there were fewer and fewer people from the countryside, which was especially interesting. When I was in high school, I was always assigned to share a desk with students from families with some official backgrounds because my grades were good.⁴ In fact, I realized this gender and class intersection very early, because this is the real experience of my life. But maybe at that time I couldn't articulate a highly theoretical summary of the intersection of gender and class, but this was the real experience of my life.

³ In some parts of China, door thresholds were necessarily high to ensure protection of the dwelling from flooding; in addition, the threshold of a house (its entry space) was viewed as providing protection of the occupants from external

negative forces. For that reason thresholds had symbolic importance. <https://courses.cit.cornell.edu/dea668/entries/elaine.html>; see also <http://fengshuidiy.com/door-threshold-good-feng-shui/>; and <http://china-talk.blogspot.com/2015/01/the-culture-of-chinese-doorsill.html>

⁴ This statement implies that the student sitting next to her did not have good academic performance, would need her help, and was in the same class because of a parent with some sort of power or money. High schools in China are organized and ranked by students' academic performance.

It was particularly obvious that when I was in high school, I found that there were fewer and fewer classmates from the countryside. When I went to college, there were even fewer rural students. This ratio has fallen sharply. I later realized that earlier-- during elementary school, and junior high-- I didn't know what it meant to be from the countryside; or that I didn't feel I was poor because everyone around me was poor; in such a situation, you don't think you're unfortunate. Then, after I went to high school, I discovered that many of my classmates were the children of bureau directors. At that point, the teacher's preference for them was very obvious. Now that I think about it, all of us were classmates; we were all children, everyone, including some of the officials' kids themselves, hated the corrupt conduct of their parents. The kids would say they actually didn't want to sit in the front of the classroom, or that they didn't want to study at all, but they had to sit in the front because their parents gave gifts to the class teacher or whatever. You know some things happened behind the scenes, which you can't see.

It became more apparent during college. For example, this was particularly interesting-- we all came to the university from different provinces, and there were several students from Beijing in our class. The Beijing students' scores on the college entrance examination were a few percentage points lower than the scores of those of us from the provinces. But they sit in the same classroom with us, and then they fail many courses; there were some students' faces I rarely saw over four years. Then when it was time to graduate, they morphed into outstanding graduates. In addition, we've heard that every time their parents came to school [from Beijing] to visit them, the dean of our school would go to the airport to greet the parents personally.⁵ I think this process of growth is all intertwined; that is, having the life experience of being a girl, and also having the life experience of being from the countryside, they are forever intertwined. Then you are able to see that this is not only a difference between urban and rural areas but also regional differences; the many different hierarchies contained within the whole structure are all intertwined.

In addition, these hierarchies also included age and intergenerational divides. One thing I found interesting was the last time when I talked with Ermao,⁶ I was reminded of many things. We talked about one thing that was quite interesting. We talked about the post-80s idealism, and when we were in junior high school, our school library accepted a large number of books donated by-- if I remember correctly --either the Soong Ching Ling Foundation or Hope Project. I still remember the scene. It was raining heavily that day, and all the students were on the playground sopping wet --of course, the leaders had umbrellas-- to receive the donation of books. I was delighted at the time because I finally had books to read. Because at that time, I especially liked reading books, and so I was waiting for these donated books. I remember very clearly standing in the rain in a square matrix on the playground, a neat and

⁵ Here Duan suggests the parents from Beijing may be officials or people with power and wealth whom the dean wants to please for personal gains.

⁶ Nickname of a feminist activist, former editor of the *Feminist Voices*.

orderly team, applauding the leaders and giving thanks for the donation. So, this is also an ideal for me [to donate books to students in the countryside] if I make a fortune in the future (laughing). But there may be no opportunity for me to get rich.

In short, the library now had a batch of books. I was thrilled and went to get a library card. But then I discovered that the majority of the books were locked up. I wasn't able to read them; they were not for the students, but only for teachers. The books that remained for students to read were only "Red Classics."⁷ As a member of the post-'80 generation, I read a lot of the "Red Classics," like *The Song of Youth*⁸ and *Tracks in the Snowy Forest*.⁹ At the time those books filled me with revolutionary passion. On that day, I was with Ermao, and by chance, we both recited in unison the famous words of Pavel Korchagin¹⁰.

These "Red Classics" made me feel that I must be a person with ideals, and that I must be a person who is useful to society. I also wanted to be a person with internationalist sentiment. You know Bethune¹¹-- "As a foreigner, he traveled far to come to China," right? So, at that time, this was also part of what constituted my idealism. I think all of these readings influenced me. Because in adolescence, this sort of impact expands-- the impact it has on you is particularly strong, and your reaction at that time will also be particularly strong. I have an impression, a memory, of reading Ba Jin's *Turbulent Stream* trilogy (*Family, Spring, Autumn*) series¹². I was so excited that I could hardly control myself. I hated that feudal society¹³, a society that eats its own people, and what that does to humanity-- this kind of

⁷ These are cultural works that were viewed as containing or reflecting appropriate Maoist ideological perspectives during that era. <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/book-reviews/yizhonggu/>. They are discussed in this volume: Roberts, R. & Li Li (Eds.), (2017). *The making and remaking of China's "Red Classics": Politics, aesthetics and mass culture*. Hong Kong University Press. ⁸ *The Song of Youth* is a popular semi-autobiographical novel written by female writer Yang Mo and published in 1958. It describes the struggle of urban young women and men in the 1930s against the background of the Japanese invasion of China and the Chinese Communist Revolution. The author eventually joined the revolution. https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Song_of_Youth.html?id=vJUJYAAACAAJ&source=kp_book_description

⁹ *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* is a novel by writer Qu Bo, published in 1957. It tells the story of the CCP's fight against bandits in the Northeast of China during the Civil War between the CCP and the Nationalist Party after the WWII. It was a popular fiction of the Communist Revolution. <https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/2593240-tracks-in-the-snowy-forest>.

¹⁰ Pavel Korchagin is the protagonist, a committed Communist soldier with exceptionally strong will and tenacity, in the novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*, written by Nikolai Ostrovsky. It is the most popular Soviet novel with a wide circulation in China, especially in the socialist period. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_the_Steel_Was_Tempered.

¹¹ Henry Norman Bethune (March 4, 1890-November 12, 1939) was a Canadian physician who went to the Chinese Communist Party's base area Yan'an in the War against Japanese invasion. He cured sick villagers and saved wounded soldiers. He died of infection from a cut when performing a surgery on a wounded soldier in Yan'an. The CCP leader Mao Zedong wrote a eulogy to commemorate his selfless commitment to saving Chinese people's lives as well as his internationalism. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Bethune.

¹² Ba Jin, originally named Li Yaotang, was a prolific writer whose works were well-known in China. Ba Jin's famous *Torrents Trilogy* is consisted of "The Family," "Spring," and "Autumn," published in 1931, 1938, and 1940 respectively. They were regarded as the anarchist and left-oriented novelist's critical representations of the Chinese traditional society and family. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ba_Jin.

¹³ Feudalism was an ancient Chinese political system with some features in common with European feudalism. It structured land ownership and material resources among a small number of elites accountable to a strong centralized leader, and organized the population into broad occupational categories that fixed opportunities for that individual but not their descendants. The term was adopted by Chinese Marxists as both an analysis of historical practice and an encouragement to development of a newer economic system. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fengjian>.

restriction [it puts on humanity]. In short, I think these things also played a role in forming my ...

LX: Your urge to work for women’s rights after you graduated from college; after completing graduate school.

DJ: Right.

LX: So again, what was it that made you decide that you were going to engage in research work related to feminism?

DJ: This is related to my work situation at the time. I mentioned that because it was a commercial enterprise after all, and then the media itself has this kind of nature -- just like the interview we are doing now-- you interview me, at least this topic is something I am willing to talk about, that is to say, you are not doing public relations for me, right? You are not interviewing me to make me look good, and I am not doing this interview for my own personal purpose, such as wanting to raise my profile. Anyway, no one knows me, right? However, in the commercial media, usually the interviews you do are not like this. They usually are more like PR; for example, you have to interview stars and celebrities, this kind of thing, I think this is really not me. For example, I had a colleague at the time, who is now an internet celebrity already. She wrote an article, which a few colleagues and I thought was particularly ridiculous. She said that she worked in a well-known large-scale Internet Media company and had met many celebrities. Later she was “invited to answer” the question on zhihu.com [i.e., a Chinese Quora-like crowd-sourced information-sharing site] “which celebrities I’ve met” and she reeled off a list of stars. At that time, I felt that this was part of your work. You wouldn’t think that just because I met such and such celebrity it gave you something, or added to you in anyway, because you were too aware of the nature of the work. Your job was to gild the lily; everyone was a mutually replaceable resource. I just couldn’t be moved by such things, that just because I saw something, or interviewed a celebrity star, that also made me a success. This was impossible for me; this was not me.

In contrast, the work that I did at the time that was particularly meaningful was related to feminism, for example, reporting on your (i.e., Chinese feminist activists’) actions. I think I reported basically every action you all did at the time, up until the time I left my job. I don’t think I actually met any of you then, but I added all of your QQ¹⁴ anyway, and so every time there were new actions, you’d send me the news as soon as possible, including your photos and an introduction about the action. When I was in Beijing, when there were things happening there, I would run over myself, for example, the court proceedings in the famous divorce case of domestic violence victim Kim Lee¹⁵. I’d run over each time. In fact, this kind of work was not the kind that could bring me the best benefits; it was different than being in

¹⁴ Chinese instant messaging software.

¹⁵ Kim Lee’s ex- husband was Li Yang, the founder of “Crazy English,” a celebrity and language instructor in China.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Yang_\(educator\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Yang_(educator)).

a company where they review you, or an online media site, where your appraisal is the traffic or clicks your work gets. Or whether you are able to connect with and obtain some resources. For example, once when I received praise for my work, it was because I made contact with a high-end women's summit -- the kind of thing that company would like, because that was a high-end resource, right? It was clear to me then that women's issues were what I truly wanted to support.

But I also want to thank the media outlet I worked at. This is why I think the feminist movement cannot be one dimensional, nor can it be that one group of people are all doing the same thing, and only this group of people can do things in this way. If this is the case, then we will always be divided and weak. Because a society is inherently a complex organism, it is often a matter of influencing people in unexpected ways, or some method you'd never thought of that emerges to promote the development of this movement. For example, the media company I worked at then was a gender-conscious media within the world of mass media or commercial media; this gender consciousness was inseparable from the work that some feminists had done earlier. For example, at that time, much of our company's leadership came from the Southern Media (*Nanfang*) group. Then the company moved from Guangzhou to Beijing. When it was in Guangzhou, the company wanted to establish a women's channel. Naturally, they discussed what kind of channel they wanted to build, and that it should have its own leadership. The leaders came from the Southern Media group, where they experienced a certain kind of atmosphere, and this also had something to do with their own personal concerns and the overall environment. In other words, the leadership of the channel all had a gender consciousness, even if they didn't call themselves feminists.

Where did their gender consciousness come from? It was like how mine evolved; in sum, this awareness came from reading other people, and their predecessors, etc. For example, I am writing this article --how did I get on the path of feminism? This may all of a sudden resonate with many people, and it may affect many people. A reader may become a feminist, or at least a supporter of women's rights. Just like those leaders, this is how they came to their female consciousness; it didn't come out of thin air. There was another thing, at that time, I believe Li Sipan¹⁶ participated, and Ke Qianting¹⁷ -- they might have participated [in those media training workshops]. I'm not absolutely certain-- you'd have to interview my leader to get the specifics, the historical facts-- but they invited some gender experts to give them trainings or workshops about determining the editorial principles of the channel; later that outline of editorial principles was continuously improved. I also did some work to improve it. This outline became a training guide for every new person who joined the channel. It was the basic guideline of our work at the time. This editorial outline has high gender-awareness.

¹⁶ Li Sipan is a feminist journalist who founded a New Media Women's Network in Guangzhou that provided gender trainings to journalists, among many other activities.

¹⁷ Ke Qianting is a professor of Sun Yat-sen University who led many feminist activities on and off campus. Here it refers to her lectures to feminist workshops for journalists.

For example, in terms of what kind of reports we should do, what kind of reports we shouldn't do, and that no misogynistic or discriminatory terms should appear. For example, terms such as "leftover women"¹⁸ must not be used; this was written very clearly in our editorial outline. Another principle was to do our best to resist societal stereotypes of women, like women should be this way or do this or that; we must break these stereotypes.

LX: Quite an advanced editorial outline.

DJ: Yes. But this editorial outline did not come out of thin air; it was built with the help of some earlier feminists. Then what was also needed was for it go through the new people that were constantly being recruited, people who had this basic awareness. I believe that they chose me so quickly because at the time I already had gender awareness. I wanted to do things related to women's rights. They thought this person was a good match for us, and that conceptually we were on the same page. These things are mutually reinforcing, and this is also my personal point of view. I think this movement needs different talents and it needs people from different positions to work together. This is not to say that our method is the best or most useful. Some people may feel that they are in this position and are doing very well, and then use that as a benchmark to measure the work of others -- that they are not doing the work as well as I am. But I don't really see things this way. From my own experience, I saw how many things could get done in a commercial media space, because many different aspects came together to contribute to this work.

LX: But despite all of this, you still felt you couldn't be satisfied working at that commercial media...

DJ: Yes, but I still have to give the media company its credit. If I hadn't been at that kind of company at the time, it wouldn't have mattered how strong my feminist consciousness was, I might not have been able to do a lot of those kinds of reports about work that was being done in support of women's rights.

LX: Later you decided to do academic research. What was that process like?

DJ: There were several reasons. One reason was the nature of the media itself --- that you also must be pursuing the hot topics. For example, sometimes I interviewed a person, and then after that interview I had to move on to the next interview. Or if some hot news event happened, I'd submit an article, or do a commentary, or do a special report, but then immediately the next hot news item would appear, and I'd have to go follow that. You'd never be able to do anything deep. But this may just have had something to do with me. Because there were a lot of things that I wanted to dig deeper into, and I also didn't have the same enthusiasm for every hot topic. Of course, I feel that my work experience as a journalist and editor has helped me a lot because you need to have a sensitivity to these social issues; I

¹⁸ Leftover women (or Sheng nü) is a derogatory term that is popularized by the All-China Women's Federation. It refers to women who have remained single in their late twenties. Most women bear the immense pressure to marry young and face the stigma of being single. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheng_nu.

think this is good. In addition, that experience also led me to meet a lot of people, including you all, and I learned a lot from you. I also felt at that time that my knowledge of women's rights, including knowledge about gender, was definitely growing rapidly. In fact, this helped me to judge [what I really want in my life]. I really met a lot of people in that job, because the nature of our work was to interview women from all walks of life, and there was an activity in which we had to select women from all walks of life, so I went to do interviews. There were many times when I went to those so-called high-level events, and I also went to the countryside. And there was even more; just as if there was a repository of options, so you could consider what kind of person you wanted to be, or that you naturally were closer to certain people, and then you weren't so close with other people. I just knew more clearly what I wanted.

Then there's the political environment. I think this environment is, I don't really know how to explain it... During the later period of time when I was working, I was actually in a very depressed state, but I didn't know it at the time. It was only later that I learned what was going on. During that time, I couldn't get out of bed in the morning; I couldn't get myself out the door, but I had to go to work and punch in. Aside from going to work and the times when I had to travel for work, I did not leave my home. This was not a good state to be in, so I decided to leave. It was pretty clear to me at the time that I wanted to go back to school and I wanted to conduct research, so I made this decision. Because I had been working for many years, I first picked up English and then prepared to apply to schools. During the time I was preparing my applications, I was very anxious, because I had no income, and I resigned at the wrong time, and lost a lot of money. It was during that time that I participated in some workshops, including Professor Wang Zheng's workshop at Fudan¹⁹. That workshop helped me a lot; it convinced me that I indeed wanted to go back to school, and that doing research was the life I wanted to live. Because in that workshop, I don't know how other people felt, because some people perhaps felt that they couldn't learn anything at all, but I experienced complete happiness. Because the workshop at that time was three weeks or one month long; during that period different topics were presented, and I liked and cared about each topic, and especially wanted to know more. In addition, I also really liked the reading material. Although my English wasn't good enough at the time, and I wasn't sufficiently diligent, and I wasn't able to complete many of the readings, but I felt wow, it was so interesting, every topic was so interesting, and they were topics I was particularly concerned about. For example, reading *On the Question of Women's Liberation* by He Yinzheng²⁰ at that time was really refreshing and eye-opening. I thought that the feminists of

¹⁹ Fudan University, founded in 1905 and located in Shanghai, is one of the most prestigious research universities in China. The workshop Duan enrolled in was a gender studies workshop for Chinese graduate students in and outside China, run annually in the summer by the UM-Fudan Joint Institute for Gender Studies at Fudan from 2011 to 2013. Wang Zheng was the founder and co-director of the UM-Fudan JI.

²⁰ He-Yin Zhen(1884-1920) was a Chinese socialist feminist and anarchist who insisted on the necessity of the simultaneity of a feminist revolution and an economic revolution for women to achieve their liberation. An early feminist theorist, she

more than 100 years ago were originally already so knowledgeable and had such depth of thought, including a broad perspective. We also discussed how *Women's Bell*²¹ was labeled as the first book of the feminist enlightenment, and you discover how history has always been one of the spoils of men's victory. In short, there were other topics too, and I was interested in all of them. I felt so happy in that workshop; every day I was living an intellectual life. You don't have to do some meaningless mediation with the so-called "high end" celebrities, or that kind of "cooperation" (interview), or whatever -- just live an intellectual life. And the things you read are all things you're interested in, and then you want to dig deeper; you want to do more study and gain more understanding, I just feel so very happy. Then during class discussion, even though some things I may not have fully understood at the time, at least attending the workshop made me more convinced that I should study for a Ph.D.

LX: When you decided to do academic research on feminism, how did your situation change?

DJ: My depression significantly reduced, this was the biggest benefit. Yes, the most obvious and most direct benefit.

LX: Other than that, after you decided to engage in academic research, personally what changed for you, or what progress did you experience in your thinking, after you've done some academic research?

DJ: I think I may not be "engaged" in research now. I think I am still at a learning stage, that is, "a baby scholar in training." This is how I define my status. Because I am still in the learning stage, and I think, especially because an American doctoral program itself is positioned to train you to become a scholar who can do research independently, I am still in this process. I just started doing my own research, but I am still in the early stages. But I think that the personal impact on me is still quite significant. For example, compared with my earlier understanding of feminism and gender, although I did have some understanding, but it was quite different from this systematic study. For example, when I was studying (in China) -- and this is also the reason why I wanted to go to the US-- my previous background was not related to gender and feminism, not even social science, so I really liked the design of this project in the United States-- the first three years are dedicated to taking classes, so you can read extensively and widely-- so I thought this was suitable for me. Indeed, I wanted to read extensively and also figure out what it is that I want to do, so I took a lot of classes. I think an intuitive impact has been to greatly expand my horizons. It is after some systematic study of

published many essays powerfully critiquing masculinist power and Chinese gender system. Her article "On the Question of Women's Liberation" was published in the journal *Natural Justice* she and her husband founded in July 1907. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/He_Zhen_\(anarchist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/He_Zhen_(anarchist)).

²¹ *Women's Bell* is a book written by the late Qing dynasty's prominent revolutionary Jin Tianhe, published in 1903. It discusses women's issues and expresses the idea of feminism in modern China. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/女界钟/6973191?fr=aladdin>.

some theories that I feel that this world is too vast, and there are too many things that can be done. For example, what we heard this afternoon, that is, you can dig deep down every thread and pull up something big and find that its root system is very deep. So now I find myself increasingly unwilling to comment recklessly, because I feel that this water is too deep and I know too little. I am more and more afraid to speak hastily. Even when others ask me what my research is, I am hesitant to answer as I feel it is not easy to describe. When I do describe it and hear what I'm saying, I have that kind of feeling, that it's "lame" – maybe this is one aspect.

Then there's another aspect . . . it may be because you have a new identity. After your identity changes, there will be new doubts about yourself. For example, I think about this often: I do this research, but in the end, who benefits? Who will find it significant? First of all, I have no doubt that this is what I want to do. This is the kind of lifestyle I thought of, and this is suitable to what I'm doing. This may also relate back to the actions I was involved with in China. I think I can talk about this, because it's a real experience of my own, and may be different from our younger [feminist activist] friends.

I think that the first action I participated in at the time was in Wuhan. I was with Leilei, and Zhu Xixi, and also Wei Tingting,²² and who else? I was very happy. I realized that I especially enjoyed being there together. When we were brainstorming, I felt that I was particularly able to propose ideas. Then, because I had editing experience after all, and I felt that my literary style was pretty good, I could write articles, and also think up catchphrases and slogans; these things are my strong suits. I recall we were supporting sex workers in Dongguan, and we said "CCTV wants "big underpants"²³, sex workers want pixilation"²⁴--right, I recall that I made a significant "contribution" to this slogan. I'm not really arguing for this contribution, what I mean is that this kind of thing is what I like to do, and I am more suited to doing these sorts of things, but when I get to the street, I find that this is so not like me. It's like having a self, jumping out of my body, hanging in midair, looking at myself; it was a sudden increase in self-awareness, and it was especially uncomfortable.

I think this discomfort was very complicated. But fortunately, I was with young feminist activists, so it was not as threatening as if I had been alone . . . Later, I can also tell a story about a time when I actually went alone. In short, I am unusually... it's just like I am floating in the air and looking at myself, that feeling is especially strange. I just told you that when I was in junior high school, I read a lot of these "red" revolutionary classics; they were all about "shedding blood and sacrificing their lives." Why can't I feel them? The ideal youth I read about in the past shouldn't be that kind-- burning with passion --why do I feel this way?

~~22 All three are young feminist activists~~ with whom Duan worked together on many activities.

²³ China Central Television Headquarters. People call it "Big Underpants" based on the unique shape of the building.

²⁴ Chinese female students walk on the street in 2014 with slogans to require the China Central Television to cover the sex workers' face with mosaic when reporting illegal activities of prostitution on TV.

Even now, I really can't accurately describe this feeling. But in short, it's certainly not like the kind of brainstorming together that I did earlier with our younger friends . . .

LX: At ease.

DJ: Especially comfortable. Then there were the quips and witty remarks; it was really relaxing. And I felt that this was me, this is who I was. But when I went to the street, I asked myself, who am I? Why am I walking here, why am I looking at myself and feeling ridiculous? Of course, there is another well-known [political] reason; it was very tense. I think this is an experience that all activists share. But the first point I actually don't know, because I hadn't communicated with other activists. So, I don't know if you all have had this kind of experience, but in sum, I will talk about it here, to enrich the resource repository.

Later, there was another action, involving just me alone. I happened to be there, because it was my alma mater. I dragged a good friend of mine along. Of course, she is a feminist sympathizer, but a sympathizer who keeps her distance [from the movement]. So, I persuaded her and she agreed to accompany me and promised to take pictures of me, but she wanted to stand on the other side of the street and take pictures of me from afar.

LX: Against sexual harassment on campus.

DJ: Right. Then she said I can accompany you, but we have to keep a distance, and not walk together, and not let people think that I am together with you, dressed in those outlandish clothes. But she is a good friend, and I understand very well that she makes her choices, and they are understandable. Not every person is willing [to participate in activism], and this is her choice. I'm very grateful that she's willing to help me take pictures. Then, at that time, anyway, originally, it would be a relatively heroic pose with a sword and a shield, but I was stupid. The sword was sent, but I didn't see the express delivery, so I needed another something (to act as a sword), so I smashed a stick on the side of the road and felt as if it was OK; it even looked a bit like a sword. In short, we went to take photos, and then because that time I was alone, that feeling was even stronger. I don't know what the feeling is. I think this thing is, there aren't any other people here, and I support this action. So, if there's no one, then I'll go ahead; I'll do it.

But this is definitely not like what I read in the "Red Classics" when I was a child, full of passion and blood; it was not like I was going to rush forward and take a bullet or be the kind that presses forward with an indomitable will. I feel this isn't me. I think that I am definitely not that kind of person. I have to clarify this. But I think if this thing needs me, then I will go. I am like this, this kind of person. In short, I am a responsible person and I have a sense of responsibility. But I don't think I can go out and enjoy this process -- that feeling of zeal and surging passion, I don't have this. But I went, took a photo, and left. However, they also suggested that as an alum I should deliver a letter to the president of the university in person. I then went to persuade my friend to accompany me to the president's office. She said that

she would absolutely not do this kind of thing and would not go. Because she was still studying at school, at the time I had graduated and was just an alumnus. Because the action would impact her directly, I think I can understand. She is a student at the school and it's risky for her. There wasn't really any risk for me because they couldn't do anything to me.

There wasn't much I could do; she was not even willing to enter the building with me, so I just had to go by myself. The principal's office was on the top floor. In short, the process was very long.

LX: What was the action?

DJ: That was the one involving Xiamen University's Wu Chunming²⁵, Little Red Riding Hood – that one.

I entered a pitch-dark building alone, later I wasn't sure if that feeling was fear or something else. On the way [to this interview room], we just discussed the difference in terms of accessibility between Chinese and American universities. [In China] You know that regardless of where you go, there's someone who will set a barrier for you (to prevent free access). When you are a student at a school, you don't think you're entitled to any resources, or that you have the right to enter wherever building to do something.

LX: You went directly to the president's office.

DJ: Right, I'm someone with a sense of responsibility. This is what I promised to do, so I must go do it, right? After I got there, I knocked on the door of the president's office, and mentally rehearsed what I would say to him -- that what I had to tell him [about anti-sexual harassment on campus] was a good thing. I also really believed that this was a good thing, that is, to establish anti-sexual harassment mechanism on campus. I was going to go and give the letter to him, but how to explain this to him? Then I composed an outline in my mind. I knocked but no one answered. I thought the president's office perhaps was not so amenable to knocking. Maybe there was a layer of assistants or secretaries outside, so I knocked again, and still no one answered. I wondered if I was in the wrong place. Then I took another turn and discovered a problem. It seemed that there was no one on this floor. All the doors were closed. I wondered, what was going on? Then I went downstairs. With some difficulty I finally came across someone downstairs, and I said, I want to go somewhere—I didn't dare to tell the person the truth, I didn't know who he was-- just a person I happened to meet in the

²⁵ Wu Chunming was a professor of Archaeology and Museology and the Department of History at Xiamen University, one of the most preeminent universities in Fujian province. He habitually demanded sex from female graduate students until one of the students exposed him. Chinese feminists organized petitions to the administrators of his university, demanding punishment, and to the Ministry of Education as well demanding the establishment of anti-sexual harassment mechanisms in higher education. It was Chinese feminists' first concerted campaign against sexual harassment. Under the public pressure generated by feminists, Wu was temporarily removed from his teaching responsibility, but in the following year his academic prestige was restored and he again served as an expert on the committee on the Neolithic age at the Chinese Academy of Science's Institute of Archaeology. The case illustrates huge obstacles of male dominated academic institutions Chinese feminists encounter.

<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201801/17/WS5a5f0992a310e4ebf433e57a.html>.

building. Then I asked him, I went to an office upstairs because I had a matter to attend to, but no one responded when I knocked on the door. What happened? The person said: It's summer vacation now! Who cares about [that you have a matter to attend to]! I was so relieved to hear this; it was so great! There was no one there! So, I was neither a coward nor a deserter, right? I accepted this task and very responsibly sought to complete it, but due to uncontrollable factors, there was no way to complete it. Then, with a great sense of relief, I quickly left the scene.

In short, these are two different experiences of mine; one I experienced with young feminist activist friends, the other was the feeling of going into battle alone, without other friends. Combining all of this, I think I might be better suited to be a researcher than an activist. Of course, there are various forms of action, but I perhaps feel that I'm not as brave as the other young feminist activists, like Xiao Meili and others who wore the bloody wedding dresses.²⁶ If there were truly no one else, and it was necessary for me to go, I would definitely have gone and worn a bloody dress. But the problem is that my feelings would likely be similar to these two experiences. I didn't enjoy myself in the process, or you could say not like what I read in those red revolutionary classics, that feeling of having found life's ultimate goal. In short, this is my feeling. I feel that my personality and the focus that I'm most enthusiastic about is doing research. So, to answer your question, this is why I want to do research.

LX: During the process of an action-- because you just talked about the influence of feminism on you during the research process--feminism led you to make these decisions to participate in these feminist activities. How did feminism affect you in the course of participating in an event, and what role did it play? How did you develop your feminist ideas further in the course of participating in these activities, what new understanding did you have, and what was different from before --after the event, before the event. For example, your views on the feminist movement itself.

DJ: I think what I persist is definitely something that has not changed. Then it feels very difficult. It's too hard to do something. First of all, you face a lot of pressure. If you were in a different social environment, these things are not necessary. It's the feeling of dancing in shackles, that is, a feeling that everyone is wearing shackles. These chains should all be removed. That is, you shouldn't be in such a state. For example, in the United States, those feminist activists, such as the department I'm in, there are all kinds -- the feminist movement, queer movement; there are many various ways that I can participate. This includes this Ph.D process; I wonder why, for example, in China, it seems that there is a binary opposition between research and action. It seems that the researcher and the activist are considered to

²⁶ This refers to the feminist performative action of anti-domestic violence, "Wounded Brides," in which three feminists (one of whom was Xiao Meili mentioned here by Duan), put on white bridal gowns stained with "blood" standing in a busy street in Beijing. The picture of "wounded brides" was later widely circulated via both the traditional media and social media.

be incompatible, but actually that's not the case at all, nor does this view conform to the history of the feminist movement.

LX: We have to ask the next question quickly, that is, what do you expect from yourself? You just said that feminist theorists and activists should not be in opposition to each other. So how do you want to combine your academic research with action?

DJ: One thing is that after I came to study, I just mentioned that I needed to systematically read a lot of theory. I am quite envious; for example, I like the black feminist theorists the most. They contributed a lot of original ideas, and there are many I really like, like bell hooks²⁷ and Audre Lorde²⁸. They write such thorough feminist thought and they are so deep, so clear, and straightforward, this is what I want to do, this kind of feminist research or theory. There are also some very good studies from feminists in India, and I don't think they are just achieving influence in the English-speaking world. Because they are able to produce a theory, if you believe that women all over the world face patriarchal oppression, and you believe that feminism has some appeal that crosses national borders and crosses race and class boundaries, then the feminist theory you produce should also have this power to cross boundaries. For example, I've read black feminist theory, and I've also read some Indian feminist theory. They made me feel this power, as a person from China who has a very different background, different language, and a different cultural and historical background. I also felt they could explain my own experience and explain the reality of China I have observed. I think this is very good, and I look forward to the research that we will be able to do in the future. You have to have this kind of deep feminist thought that transcends this specific cultural and historical background.

LX: So here you're talking about research...

DJ: It is also an answer to your question, that is, it's a takeaway, or an observation after doing research. This is what I observed. I admire that black people and Indians are non-Western, or that they are not white centric; they have the ability to produce original and deep feminist thought that can cross ethnic and national cultural boundaries. I look forward to --not that I am looking forward to myself-- but that Chinese feminists can also make a contribution in this regard.

LX: How can such feminist ideas be combined with activities and actions?

²⁷ Gloria Jean Watkins (September 25, 1952-), better known by her pen name bell hooks, is an American author who focuses on writing intersectionality of race, capitalism, and gender because she believes they have the power to perpetuate systems of oppression and class domination. She also established the bell hooks Institute at Berea College in Kentucky. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bell_hooks.

²⁸ Audre Lorde (February 18, 1934-November 17, 1992) was an American feminist, writer, and civil rights activist with a self-description of "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet." She is best known for her emotional expression and technical mastery when addressing injustices of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, and fighting against toxic male masculinity. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Audre_Lorde.

DJ: These thoughts I just mentioned, and actions are not divided; they're not separate. The ideas all come from action, including the idea of intersectionality that is now used by various other disciplines -- of course, this is a good thing, if your theory is not used by others, it doesn't have vitality --that is, the black feminist lawyers emerged from the frontline of experience. You find that you can't use a single gender or class, or race, or a single aspect to understand things. This is also like Audre Lorde, who talked about this in the 1960s and 70s; although at the time this word (intersectionality²⁹) was not coined yet, but because she was a black lesbian it was very obvious to her that -- there was no way you could explain her life experience with just a single aspect. Just like myself, when I was in junior high school, I definitely couldn't have known this word, this theory, but as a personal life experience, I knew that gender, class, and region are forever intertwined in their influence and use.

LX: So you want to be able to sum up from the actions

DJ: Not necessarily a summary. I think this can't be done by one person. I can't say that I am a researcher, and that I'll summarize your experience, and it will become my conclusion. Doing this research is the same as engaging in action. I don't think this is a one-person job. For example, I am doing this research now. I hope that other people will do related research with me, or will do research in the same field, because then there will be people to engage in intellectual conversation with, and everyone promotes each other. If you are only doing it alone, there's no way you can become a field.

LX: So everyone is together, summing up such feminist thought from actions.

DJ: We need more people, many people, to do research, to do action, and may be to do research and action at the same time, and then promote each other. Summarize the various experiences, theorize from the experience, and then if the theory is able to, if not provide guidance, then become an actor. For example, if I want to do an action, which method should I use, what kind of discourse, including my advocacy on social media. For example, the advocacy we do in the field of gender, it is also the researchers who can use this discourse, and can clarify some concepts, and can explain clearly some of the confusion that everyone has. Only then can you use this set of narratives to advocate, right? So, you realize this, you can't make a clear cut between which part is the theory, which part is the action, right? And it's not the case that theory is limited to only what is published in academic journals, right? Like many black feminist theorists simply don't write according to academic norms, but they have really valuable ideas, and everyone will naturally cite to them, and activists can turn this into their own language. For example, I am facing my training object, specifically, I am doing a kind of translation. My translation may involve a different language, but this idea is

²⁹ Intersectionality is a term coined by black feminist scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989. It signifies a conceptual framework that considers the interconnectedness of different modes of power relations and social categorizations such as race, class, gender, religion, and sexual orientation in producing and maintaining inequality and social injustice. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intersectionality>.

still this idea, so I think there's no way to make a cut between these things. Because in reality they are not...

LX: They complement each other.

DJ: Yes.