

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

SITE: CHINA

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

**Date: September 26, 2005
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Acknowledgments

Global Feminisms: Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship was housed at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan (UM) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The project was co-directed by Abigail Stewart, Jayati Lal and Kristin McGuire.

The China site was housed at the China Women's University in Beijing, China and directed by Wang Jinling and Zhang Jian, in collaboration with UM faculty member Wang Zheng.

The India site was housed at the Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW) in Mumbai, India and directed by C.S. Lakshmi, in collaboration with UM faculty members Jayati Lal and Abigail Stewart.

The Poland site was housed at Fundacja Kobiet eFKa (Women's Foundation eFKa) in Krakow, Poland and directed by Slawka Walczewska, in collaboration with UM faculty member Magdalena Zaborowska.

The U.S. site was housed at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan and directed by UM faculty member Elizabeth Cole.

Graduate student interns on the project included Nicola Curtin, Kim Dorazio, Jana Haritatos, Helen Ho, Julianna Lee, Sumiao Li, Zakiya Luna, Leslie Marsh, Sridevi Nair, Justyna Pas, Rosa Peralta, Desdamona Rios and Ying Zhang.

Undergraduate student interns on the project included Alexandra Gross, Julia MacMillan, Libby Pozolo, Shana Schoem and Megan Williamson.

Translations into English, Polish and Chinese were provided by Kim Dorazio, Cheng Jizhong, Kasia Kietlinska, Justyna Pas, Alena Zemanek and Ying Zhang.

Technical assistance was provided by R. Thomas Bray, Dustin Edwards and Keith Rainwater. Graphic design was provided by Elisabeth Paymal.

The project was initially supported by a University of Michigan Rackham Interdisciplinary Collaboration Research Grant. Additional support was provided by the College of Literature, Science and the Arts, International Institute, Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Women's Studies, Humanities Institute, the Center for South Asian Studies, the Herman Family Fund, the Center for African and Afro-American Studies and the Office of the Provost at the University of Michigan.

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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.¹

Gao Xiaoxian: Hmm, this probably is related to my own experiences. I was one of the “class of 1977”² 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.³ So when we graduated and received job assignments,⁴ 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.⁵

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?⁶

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ Under the old system, the government would assign job positions to university graduates.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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 system⁷ 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 Law⁸ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.⁹ 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,¹⁰ 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*.¹¹

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*.¹² 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

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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*¹³ 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.

¹³ 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 University¹⁴ 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,¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ He was also a Chinese-American. Scholars like Fei Xiaotong¹⁷ all came to give lectures in our class.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Cai Wenhui is a Taiwanese sociologist.

¹⁶ 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).

¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ In 1984 I already read Li Xiaojiang's article in *Wei Ding Gao*.¹⁹

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*²⁰ 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.

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

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ *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.

²⁰ *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 Fangqin²¹ 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's²² 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 Xingjuan²³ went and so did Liu Dalin.²⁴ Liu Ying,²⁵ a sociologist, also went. Liang Jun²⁶ was also there.

²¹ 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.

²² Tan Shen is a sociologist whose research interests are focused on women.

²³ 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.

²⁴ 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.²⁷ 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 Xin²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ Tong Xin currently teaches sociology at Peking University.

²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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 Bohong³¹ 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.

³⁰ *Funu xue* literally means "the study of women;" *Funu lilun* means "theories about women;" and *Funu yanjiu* means "research on women."

³¹ 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 70th anniversary of the May Fourth movement³² 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 Hainan³³ 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 4th.

Gao Xiaoxian: June 4th. 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?

³² 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.

³³ 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.³⁴ 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,³⁵ 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.³⁶ I could not attend a key middle school³⁷ and instead went to the provincial girls’ high school because my test grades were always very good—my middle school was a key

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ Guanzhong is a region within the Shaanxi province, where the province’s industries and agricultural sector are concentrated.

³⁶ During the Cultural Revolution, a person’s family members and family background often affected his or her educational and professional opportunities.

³⁷ 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.³⁸

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;³⁹ 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

³⁸ Northwest University is in Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi province.

³⁹ 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,⁴⁰ 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 youth⁴¹ 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?

⁴⁰ Xianyang is a major city in the Shaanxi province.

⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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" theory⁴³ and was also interested in Marx's theory on "alienation."⁴⁴ Therefore I used Engels' "two kinds of production" theory to study the Chinese...

⁴² 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)

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ Her name was...

Wang Zheng: Zhu Chuzhu?⁴⁷

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

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.

⁴⁵ 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.

⁴⁶ Jiaotong University is a university in Xi'an.

⁴⁷ 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 Theory⁴⁸ and the World System Theory.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ I was right in the process of drafting the Principles on how to implement Women’s Law⁵¹ 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...

⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ 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.

⁵⁰ Tan Jingchang, whose English name is Sharon K. Hom, is a legal scholar teaching at New York City University.

⁵¹ 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 Mingruo⁵² 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 Mei⁵³ 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?

⁵² 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.

⁵³ 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 municipalities⁵⁴ 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 county. At that time I had just come back from Manila; I remember it was in November – I think it was the 20th 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

⁵⁴ 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 4th?⁵⁵

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

⁵⁵ 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 Women⁵⁶ 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 Foundation⁵⁷ 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

⁵⁶ 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.

⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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 Henan⁵⁹ – 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

⁵⁸ This was a workshop-conference held at Oxford University, joined by both Chinese and Western feminist scholars.

⁵⁹ Henan province is in central China.

time the project officer from the Oxfam Hong Kong⁶⁰ 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 conference⁶¹ 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

⁶⁰ Oxfam Hong Kong is an independent development and relief agency based in Hong Kong.

⁶¹ 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 SARS⁶² ... 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.

⁶² 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 Huixia⁶³ 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 Hershtatter.⁶⁴

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

⁶³ Ning Huanxia used to work at the “red phoenix project” office.

⁶⁴ Dorothy Ko and Gail Hershtatter 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.⁶⁵ 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,⁶⁶ 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

⁶⁵ 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.

⁶⁶ 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.