

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

**SITE: CHINA
PARTNER ORGANISATION**

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

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

Ge: I unequivocally believe that I am a woman.

Zhang: Woman?

Ge: Yes.

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

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

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

Ge: Yes.

Zhang: What term for feminist, *nuquan zhuyizhe* or *nuxing zhuyizhe* best describes you?¹

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

¹ Both terms can be translated as "feminism." *Nuxing zhuyi* is literally "female-ism" or "feminine-ism." This translation emerged in the early twentieth century but reemerged in the 1980s. Some believe that this term has less political but more biological connotations than *nuquan zhuyi*. *Nuquan zhuyi* is literally "woman- rights-ism" Since *quan* can mean both rights and power, the term can be interpreted as the "ism" of women's power and rights. In history, the Chinese Communist Party has defined *nuquan zhuyi* as bourgeois, because of the potential conflicts between gender struggles and class struggles. In contemporary China, this term is primarily used to refer to Western feminism and often conveys a negative image of a men-hating woman hungry for power. For this reason, many Chinese feminists avoid calling themselves *nuquan zhuyi zhe*. See Ping-chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok, et.al, eds. *Chinese Women Organizing* (2001) and Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* (1999) for detailed historical reviews.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I still remember the incident that was the most extreme example of being treated differently because I was a girl. One time we all went out together. My grandmother said, "Why don't we go out for ice cream!" which, during winter for us kids, was a rare treat. I excitedly went with them. To my surprise, my grandmother bought my brother an ice cream, but bought me a four cent popsicle.² I was really angry so I asked her why I did not get an ice cream, too. At that time an ice cream cost about twelve cents while a popsicle cost about three to four cents. She just said that of course he should have a rich, creamy ice cream because he was a boy. I will never be able to forget those kinds of feelings of being treated unfairly.

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

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

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

² Although in the United States children might choose a popsicle over ice cream, in China at this time, ice cream was definitely a more valued treat than a popsicle.

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

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

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

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

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

Ge: It came from their eyes.

Zhang: The way they looked at you.

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

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

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

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

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

Zhang: Until 1996, you...

Ge: No, I graduated in 1988.

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

Ge: No, in 1988 I graduated. Then I went to the Ford Foundation to work.³ At Ford, I started to do development work. This kind of work was really important because it sought to bring a gender perspective to the process of development. So I got to know “gender,” this kind of method of work and this concept. Then I was exposed to feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*). Why do I say that my friend or my colleague had such a big influence on me? For a time, we worked together at the Ford Foundation. She was my boss, Mary Ann Burris. I was her assistant. Together we worked on a project that dealt with women’s reproductive health. This gave me the opportunity to begin to learn about feminist theory. I wanted to understand “gender” and wanted to know how to use a gender approach to do development work. So first I needed to understand the theoretical background of feminist theory (*nuquan zhuyi lilun*). I started to read books. When I was reading, I realized that I wished I had discovered this concept earlier.

Zhang: Did you read books in English or Chinese?

Ge: Chinese. Most were translations.

Zhang: Translations?

Ge: Yes, translations. Afterwards, I made some new friends. These friends were all Western women, including my boss, Lisa, and Sussie.⁴ Later Lisa came to the Ford Foundation to work. We would continuously discuss what exactly our experiences and things that puzzled us were, and how we could explain them. Later I discovered that only feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*), this kind of explanation, would satisfy me. Moreover, its explanations really addressed issues that I felt were important and my concerns. I was convinced by the logic of this theory; it gave me the feeling of being suddenly enlightened. So I felt that as a woman it was as if I were born again and I could conquer the feelings of depression and negativity that I had experienced as a young person. I finally emerged from the shadows, from life’s shadows.

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

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

³ Here Ge refers to the Ford Foundation’s office in Beijing where Ge worked as an assistant to program officer Mary Ann Burris who was in charge of the program on women and reproductive health.

⁴ Lisa Stearns joined the Beijing office of the Ford Foundation to work on the preparation for the UN women’s conference in Beijing.

Also we promoted women's theoretical research and the development of local women activities. Since I was doing this kind of work, I needed to study. So at the same time I also came into contact with some women's activists and some feminist scholars. Meeting them was part of my continual process of learning and improvement. Also, I organized a small group. It was in 1992 when we organized the East Meets West group.⁵ Actually, it was Lisa (Stearns) who initiated the idea for this group. That year she was doing consulting work at the Ford Foundation. She was representing Ford to help China's non-governmental women groups make arrangements for the Fourth World Conference on Women. Lisa was an activist and a scholar who really understood the international women's movement. After she started this work, she came to realize Chinese women activists and theories about women in China lagged behind the West in terms of development of concepts and work methods at that time. Moreover, differences also existed in our understandings of the most pressing issues facing these women. Chinese women's understandings and western women's understandings were not the same. Thus, Lisa felt that a huge disparity existed. What should we do? At the time of the 1995 World Women's Conference, Chinese women would have to face the international women's movement. If we went to participate in the Conference with such a big disparity in understanding, we might have... actually it would be very likely that we could face conflict, misunderstandings or even feelings of disappointment. So we thought about what we should do. As a group of young women professionals in Beijing, what could we do? So I felt we should have a small translating group that could translate and introduce some western feminist theories and writings into China, two or three years before the Conference. This would allow Chinese women to learn about Western feminism: what they paid close attention to, what issues they explored, what kind of theoretical concepts as well as analytical frameworks they held, and so on. So we created a small group called the East Meets West translation group. This small group consisted of Chinese and foreign women; we were all bilingual. Every two or three weeks we would meet. Our main work was translation. But after we did the translations, we would also hold discussions, since translation is not only linguistic but also cultural and conceptual. In this process of translation, we discovered that many concepts did not exist in the Chinese language. So we had to figure out how to translate appropriately into language that Chinese women would understand. In other words, we had to figure out how to create a new vocabulary. Discussions about this issue took a lot of time. This process of discussion actually was a process of our self-development, and a process of learning from Western women about the history of social development behind these concepts. For example, when we came across the word "gender," we felt that it was a very difficult word to translate. We had to ask someone to explain to us exactly what "gender" meant. We had to ask people to recommend readings to us so that we could, at least roughly, understand the meaning of "gender." So, it seemed that we were only doing translation work. But, actually, it was a process of learning, of self-reflection and self-understanding. In the process of learning, as these new theories and ideas were continually introduced, we felt that suddenly we were becoming enlightened. In other words, we found these concepts – for example "gender roles," gender orientation, gender relations, gender power relations, etc. – were like keys that released us from the things

⁵ This is a small but very active organization made up of professional women in Beijing who have been involved in many projects translating feminist scholarship between Chinese and English.

that held us down. They allowed me to truly look at myself, as a woman, my position in society and what kind of relation that I had with men. How should I reevaluate this kind of relation so that I would not lose my own guiding principles and my values? We slowly raised this kind of consciousness. So I believe this was a process of personal development. There were many people who participated. Our group had activities from 1992 to 1999, no, until 2000. Eight years. Our members were constantly changing, but usually we maintained about twenty to thirty people. When we started, we only had about fifteen people. Members introduced their friends into the group, and we also went out to recruit women who shared our goals. We maintained our group for seven or eight years. The long-term members have all become the leaders of their own women groups or governmental institutions, or have become leading feminist scholars. For example, Feng Yuan, Bu Wei, Liu Bohong and Zhang Lixi⁶ were all members of our group. Today they have already become experts in this field or prominent leading members of individual organizations. Of course I am not saying that only because of the East Meets West group,...that is not what I mean. I think that at the time we created a learning environment, a kind of environment for the free exchange of ideas, and ...(Pause) and that this process positively influenced the self-development of each member.

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

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

Zhang: What role did you play in this group?

Ge: I was always the one who got everyone together. In the beginning, it was Lisa and I who planned this group. Because we were in existence for seven or eight years, the group's members came and went. I am the only person who participated from the very beginning until the end. Moreover, during these seven or eight years, I was the organizer of the group for at least six or seven years. As the organizer, I planned discussion topics for when we met and chose what kinds of articles to translate. Actually, the translations were not only from English to Chinese; we also had some translated from Chinese to English. Later, the East Meets West group also provided translation service to other development projects. For example, we helped Chen Mingxia⁷ and her group in Qianxi

⁶ These women have all become prominent feminist activists. Feng Yuan, a journalist of the Chinese Women's Daily, has played a leading role in setting up the organization of women's media watch and gender consciousness training group. Bu Wei, a researcher from the China Academy of Social Sciences, has played the leading role in intervention against sexism in media and in the project of anti domestic violence. Liu Bohong, an official in the Women's Research Institute of the All-China Women's Federation, has led many research and translation projects on women, including translating *Our Bodies, Ourselves* into Chinese. Zhang Lixi, currently the Vice President of the Chinese Women's College, has also been in charge of many research and activist projects on women. Liu Bohong and Zhang Lixi were also interviewed in the Global Feminisms Project.

⁷ Chen Mingxia, a scholar of law from the China Academy of Social Sciences, has been active in promoting women's legal rights. She is also a leading figure for the project on anti domestic violence. Prof. Chen was also interviewed in the Global Feminisms Project.

(in Hebei Province)⁸ with a project related to The Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (abbreviated as the Women's Law).⁹ They sought to educate women in the countryside about this law. They then compiled a seven-part pamphlet promoting knowledge about the law. Each part used cartoons and very simple words to explain the law and for example, rights mentioned in this law... This series was translated into English by our group. They produced the Chinese version and we translated it into English. Then after the World Women's Conference, the Ford Foundation had another project; they produced a book called *Responses and Reflections of Women*. More than one hundred women who had participated in making arrangements for the non-governmental activities were asked to write how participating in preparatory works for the Conference and participating in the Conference itself influenced their lives. This book was also one of our translations...from Chinese to English. At that time there was another small group called the "Sino-Canadian Young Women's Group." Our two groups worked together to translate this book into English. So we translated books, articles, and some small volumes, among other things. Our earliest translations concerned, for example, domestic violence. This was a very new concept for Chinese women. I am trying to recall... The topics covered domestic violence, and for example women's sexual rights, images of women, "mass media and women," women and the environment, etc. These were the kinds of topics that we addressed.

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

Ge: Yes. That was 1993 – No, that is not right. In 1998 Chen Mingxia, Chen Yiyun,¹⁰ and I had an opportunity to go to India to participate in a symposium on domestic violence. After we came back from this symposium, we thought about it and wondered what "domestic violence" meant for Chinese women. Also, what was the current situation like for Chinese women? Actually we did not understand this issue very well at the time; we only felt that it seemed this phenomenon existed. So what kind of societal, psychological and political-cultural influence did this have on Chinese women? We then discovered that there were very few resources, very few research materials, and very little data on this subject. This was the first thought. Second we wanted to know how many kinds of mechanisms were available in China for responding to issues of violence, domestic violence, and how many of them were aimed at helping women and sought to reduce domestic violence. We were not very clear about this. We also did not know if these kinds of institutions existed. So I felt that maybe China should also have a domestic violence project. Together we established a plan of action. The process of making this plan was rather long. It was not like the three of us returned from the conference with a clear understanding of "violence" and then sat down to think what we should do and acted. It was not such a simple process. Actually, what we did was to

⁸ Hebei Province is in northern China.

⁹ In 1992 China promulgated and put into effect the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests. It stipulates in concrete terms all aspects of women's rights and interests, including rights and interests in politics, culture and education, labor, property, person, marriage and family.

¹⁰ Chen Yiyun is a sociologist who has been doing research on women and family.

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

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

Zhang: Right.

Ge: She is the object of more leering.

Zhang: The way of looking...

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

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

Zhang: Very good...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

base their assessment on these things. So I think that setting a number could not guarantee its realization, but the goal did exist and had a certain degree of impact on the final evaluation of the accomplishments of the project. At the very least, the evaluation can say that this aspect of this project was not satisfactory. If you have this statement, you can let people know that this is a problem. But I also believe that you cannot use these numbers to change the situation. You cannot do this. You can only achieve two goals: the first is to raise people's consciousness. If you do not make this widely known at these meetings, people will not realize that this is a problem. Think about it – ninety percent of those sitting at the podium of a meeting hall¹¹ are men but people usually think this is very normal. When an observation group goes abroad to study an advanced technology or policy, ninety-five percent are men, but ordinary people do not think that this is a problem. Only by raising these issues will people realize that in fact, this is a problem. This will not solve the problem; this will only make people know there is a problem.

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

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

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

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

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

¹¹ Here she refers to any major event in China that would seat prestigious people or leaders on the podium.

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

So then I started to plan. I did everything from looking for experts to finding teaching materials. I gathered every development organization's materials concerning gender and development that were in English. Then I chose some women to work with me whom I felt had feminist consciousness and had equality and development awareness. We formed a small team that included Wang Zuofang.¹² We then talked about translations and writings and decided the content of the teaching materials. Then we discussed the method of training. We worked together for about six or seven months to compile a booklet. As far as I know, this was China's first...the first Chinese manual of gender training. Why did I place special importance on this manual? It was because I wish...we.... For example this kind of UN development project, if you really want to achieve the goal of gender equality, you first need to raise the gender consciousness of the projects' participants and managers and make them pursue the goal consciously rather than merely writing on paper that the goal is to have thirty percent women. For if the project leader does not feel the need, (s)he will not take the initiative to think about methods to try to achieve this "thirty percent." So, I thought, if we could intervene early on in development projects, and through training, develop a gender sensitivity, it would make them realize that gender problems are about unequal social relations. Everyone would benefit from more just social relations. They could then become a more active... in taking action to initiate these kinds of operations. So at that time these people were who we thought of as our targeted training group.

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

¹² Wang Zuofang is a program officer of Oxfam who is in charge of funding projects in China.

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

With these \$30,000 we could have done something else, but we also could do this. If we want to achieve a lasting influence, I think that training in gender equality and spreading gender, this analytical tool, is extremely significant. So I am pretty proud of this. (She laughs.) This kind of gender training work has continued. The demand for it has continually grown. Later the training tools that the UN developed became other NGO's training materials. For example, later when we did the "violence" project, in which I was an initiator, I again stressed this point of view. All participants in the project are assigned with more than ten smaller projects. The core members and the managers of these smaller projects all must participate in gender training. Moreover, one of our theoretical foundations of our domestic violence project was also gender analysis. It became our analytical tool, our very foundational analytical tool and perspective. Everyone felt the same so later the "violence" project took full use of these training resources. For example, Feng Yuan and some others were extremely busy.¹³ Later Shaanxi (Province) invited them; the northeast (areas) also invited them to present their materials. Anyway, I am not too clear on how other people see these training resources, but I know that they (the training group) are now in every part of the country providing gender trainings. At the very least, in working with domestic violence projects, we have a fundamental principle about taking these trainings. Anyone who has not taken gender training will not do development work and cannot start to work until they have completed the training. Also our trainings are divided into several times – it has been a process of progressively moving forward. When they do the trainings, sometimes they mould domestic violence and gender analysis together and develop new analytical tools and methods. I think this also has significance and value.

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

Ge: Well, then, after we made the list, the participants chose which activities they wanted to focus on. I asked them: Which one do you want to do the most? Which one attracts you or interests you the most? Since all of these groups were together in one place, we asked which aspects they wanted to be responsible for. Later the Capital Women's Media Watch¹⁴ chose to focus on the media. Because they felt that their strength was raising media workers' domestic violence awareness and influencing mainstream media's coverage of violence, they took this on. Then, for example, another task was to provide about a hundred cases of victims of domestic violence. The Maple Women's Hotline¹⁵ took this on. They thought they had strengths in this area. There was also a project that

¹³ Feng Yuan is leading a group providing gender training nationwide.

¹⁴ This is an organization of women journalists in Beijing. Feng Yuan is one of the leaders.

¹⁵ This is the first women's hotline in China, created in Beijing in early 1990s and led by Wang Xingjuan.

carried out a domestic violence investigation. This was a basic investigation to collect preliminary data and to summarize it in order to illustrate the situation of domestic violence in China. The Chinese Women's College¹⁶ said they could do this. Our method of assigning projects and coming up with ideas was very democratic and a process where everyone participated. I feel a sense of satisfaction and am rather proud of the domestic violence project. Then, if a group wanted to take on the responsibility for a project, they had to write a proposal and then prepare how to carry out their plan. In the proposal they needed to address how much money they needed for the project. After we divided up the responsibilities, we decided to meet again on a certain day. After setting a date, every project needed to establish a contact person and to organize its members and delegate responsibilities. We settled on the time for the next meeting, for example a month later. At the next meeting each group would present a two or three page preliminary plan and a proposed budget at the meeting. This time not everyone came to meet; it was mainly the project leaders. I gathered them in my office to meet again. Then I collected all of the proposals and then went to look for money. This later became the basis of our application to the donors in four different countries. We drew up an application for funds that summarized these projects. During this process, everyone also... I myself felt that I was consciously sending out a message: feminism's most basic value, its most fundamental meaning, is that it challenges the current cultural order and challenges the current organizational and management structure, representing a new way of doing things which is different from conventions. Why do we want to challenge masculinist culture? Because this culture is not fair. It is a culture based on hierarchy, a culture of exclusion, a culture of repression. It suppresses a certain sex. So feminism is useful in that it subverts the old cultural structure and establishes a new cultural framework. I think within our movement and within our organizational behavior, we should consciously pursue a kind of mode that is different from the traditional leadership style, managerial style, or organizational style. What do we think this kind of mode should be? It is participatory, equal and sharing, and it does not include, rank, or control. So I think the domestic violence project has two significant aspects. One is that this project was the first to address the phenomenon of domestic violence candidly and explore Chinese anti-domestic violence theories and actions. The second significant aspect was that during the whole process of establishing, implementing and organizing the project, we attempted to create a new... something different from the traditional masculinist model. I believe that we are actively involved in establishing a new kind of culture. I believe that ultimately feminism must create a new culture. It will break with the old, traditional culture and create a new culture.

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

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

¹⁶ The Chinese Women's University is affiliated with the All-China Women's Federation. Many of its faculty are feminist activists who have been involved in many projects since the UN conference on Women.

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

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

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

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

Zhang: What do you mean by "fragile?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So I think we need a leader to emerge. When everyone truly makes joint efforts, we will have a unified strategy. I am not saying that this "leader" has to be an individual; it could also be a collective, a collective of women that must have ambition, political vision and political strategy. They must be able to rally and unite our power and create a unified force, and also continually develop and strengthen our power. What means will we use? We should keep thinking and reflecting on this question. This reminds me of that Ford Foundation project, or my relationship with Women's Studies. The Ford Foundation once invited a Canadian scholar and me to do an evaluation together. In order for the Chinese women's movement to continue to deepen and strengthen, I felt that it would be strategically important to build Women's Studies in higher education, since this is a way of influencing a whole generation of women, with a totally new set of values. Of course I had already thought about... my own miserable experiences in college. If I had been able to study such theories in college, I would have suffered less, and would have spent fewer years in darkness. I felt that feminism is like a heavenly vision (*tianyan*).¹⁷ It allowed me to have a new vision. It allowed me to recognize myself anew. It allowed me to give myself a fresh orientation. Feminism gave me self confidence. So I feel that we should give this opportunity to young women. We also should... go to women's colleges to train a large number of future colleagues and future activists. Because of our limited funding and ability, we must decide with which group of people do we have the most potential for making the greatest change? I think that we should target those in higher education. There is the slogan, "Fighting for the next generation." We should fight for the next generation of women against patriarchy. So in the assessment report that I gave to the Ford Foundation, we strongly appealed to the Ford Foundation to fund the establishment of Women Studies in China. At the time there were very few schools that offered good women's studies courses. There were few institutes and departments that

¹⁷ *Tianyan* is one of the five eyes in Buddhism, it can see things far and near, above and below, front and rear, inside and outside, and in the future.

could do this. I thought that this project would have a great social significance and significance for the future and that the Ford Foundation should give serious consideration to funding this. Later, fortunately, Ford Foundation accepted our suggestions and that was how Du Fangqin's project¹⁸ got the support, to develop a women studies curriculum in China. Prior to this point, the Ford Foundation had not provided funding for developing new academic fields. They funded some policy research but not establishing new disciplines. Also, a rather large amount of money is required to establish a new academic field. The Canadian specialist and I both thought that in order for the feminist movement to develop, we must have a reserve of talented people for the future. Of course first of all, the most important thing is that this is a theory and a tool to liberate, to liberate women. I truly hope that thousands upon thousands of women can benefit from the same process that I benefited from. . Only by first having this kind of consciousness, can one make a choice in life. So we feel that perhaps we will still have our reserve army, despite the fact that today we are still small and weak. So that was another project that I had worked on behind the scenes...

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

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

Ge: I think I am really very fortunate. In my own life, I have been very lucky. After I left my grandparents, I think my home life became rather happy because my mother was a person with vision. She was a professional woman and in my household the yin was actually stronger than the yang.¹⁹ I think my mother had more vision than my father and

¹⁸ Du Fangqin is a prominent gender historian and feminist scholar in China. Currently she teaches at the Tianjin Normal University of China, where she holds the position of the director of the Women's Studies Center. She also leads the project funded by the Ford Foundation.

¹⁹ In Chinese thought *yin* and *yang* are the two opposing but complementary principles in nature. While historically *yin* and *yang* were thought to exist together in one body and keeping the balance of the two was the key to one's health, *yin* was also used to refer to women and *yang* to men. Here Ge Youli is making a reference to assert that her mother was stronger than her father.

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

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

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

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

Zhang: Patiently...

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

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

Zhang: Has he had any kind of gender training?

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

So I feel very... very fortunate. This includes when I came here looking for work. I think every aspect of the job was quite...when I was about to graduate, I satisfied every aspect of the job description requirements, but then I saw the job was in Guangzhou.²⁰ When I found this job opportunity on line, he was laying in bed. (She laughs.) At that time the two of us were in the United States. I thought that I definitely should not consider this opportunity. Otherwise our household would not look like a household. I certainly was not thinking like a *xiao nu ren*.²¹ But I believed the two of us should be together. When I went to the United States, my husband accompanied me. Meanwhile, I thought that it was a shame that I was going to have to pass up this opportunity. But my husband said to me, "If you like this job, you should not give it up because of me." So I said ok, I would try for the job. I started to write...write the application, started to send my résumé. I sat there while he lay on the bed. It was eleven or twelve o'clock at night when I discovered a work opportunity on line. Then I came back to China. We are still very much in love. Later many people would ask me, "Aren't you afraid he will cheat on you?" But I think a man with his kind of personality is not the kind pursued by today's young women, right? That is to say, perhaps from a traditional point of view, he is not a macho man. But I wonder what fosters that kind of gender notion that men should be

²⁰ Guangzhou is the capital of Guangdong Province in southern China.

²¹ The term *xiao nu ren* emerged recently in the discourse on femininity. It implies a feminine woman, who can be a career woman or woman with a full time job, but is preoccupied with domesticity and wants to emphasize her role as mother and wife.

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

So I think this was also fate – finding such a man. Actually when I was dating him, there was also another guy who was a Ph.D. student. At that time I lived at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences²² by myself in a dormitory room. The Ph.D. guy often stopped by to talk to me, even though, in the end he never clearly told me how he felt. But, I knew that he had feelings for me. Every evening as soon as I got off work, he would come over to my dorm room to talk to me. At that time I was working at the Ford Foundation and living in a single room in the graduate student housing at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. People who lived there usually ate in the dining hall at night. But by the time I would get home from work, the food at the dining hall was sold out. So when the Ph.D. guy came over to talk, I would often be making myself instant noodles. He would already have eaten and then would come over my room to talk. So as I made my instant noodles, often adding two sausages, I would talk to him. He often said, “Your salary at the Ford Foundation is pretty high. You should go to a restaurant to eat. Why are you eating instant noodles?” My now husband would also sometimes come over to see me. He saw that I often ate instant noodles or only reheated leftover food. Although it was against the rules, I had a small electric burner that I hid in my room to use sometimes. He saw this and said “Let me make dinner for you.” Because my husband is ethnically Hui (Muslim), he did not like to eat at the dining hall. He said, “I make food for myself so making some for you is no problem. I know you cannot get back to eat dinner in the dining hall. So I am going to start making dinner for two.”

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

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

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

²² The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is the national academy of the People’s Republic of China for the social sciences. It is an institution of the State Council of China. It was founded in May of 1977.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ge: But all of these things are not purposefully done. Everything is because when conditions are ripe, opportunities have emerged. For example, I worked at the Ford Foundation for five years. My boss introduced me to the United Nations Development office. At the UN Development Office I naturally could accomplish these things and have these opportunities. Tony Saich²³ recommended me for a graduate degree at Harvard because I have made good use of these opportunities. Because I graduated from Harvard, I found this job. But none of these things happened because I purposefully pursued them. I do not purposefully pursue anything. But I believe that a person's hard work and a person's sincerity and earnestness will bring opportunities. If an opportunity presents itself, I do my very best. I think that this is my attitude in life and my way of doing things.

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

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

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

²³ Tony Saich was the representative of the Ford Foundation's Beijing office. Currently he is a professor at Harvard University.

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

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

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

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

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

Shi: Becoming a feminist has made you very happy.

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

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

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