

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

**SITE: CHINA**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Li: During the time period of the Cultural Revolution,<sup>1</sup> very little attention was paid to the sexual differences of men and women. Moreover, the prevailing idea was that this was a different time, and that men and women were the same. Whatever male comrades could do, female comrades could also do. Thus, male comrades were often used as a measure of how female comrades should also perform. You were not evaluated with a notion of sexual difference, but instead by the male standard. In this sense, many of the biological differences of women were in fact not taken into consideration. So during this period, men and women looked alike, including the colors of their clothes. At the same time, women’s biological particularity, for example, whether they should have special needs when they were pregnant, was easily neglected. Therefore, it was a time that did not emphasize gender and was obviously a time of degendering. Women like me who grew up in this time period never thought about, as a “woman,” how to be “feminine” or

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<sup>1</sup> The Cultural Revolution (Abbreviation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), often dated 1966-1976. According to a Central Committee resolution adopted on June 27, 1981, the Cultural Revolution was carried out “under the mistaken leadership of Mao Zedong who was used by the counterrevolutionaries Lin Biao and Jiang Qing and brought serious disaster and turmoil to the Party and the Chinese people.” This official view has since become the dominant framework for the Chinese historiography of the Cultural Revolution.

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

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

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

Li: I was in elementary school in 1965 and started middle school in 1972. In 1977 I graduated from high school. In 1965 the Cultural Revolution began and in 1976 it ended – ten years. Oh, from 1966 to 1976. Thus my early educational background and time period when I grew up must be viewed in the light of the Cultural Revolution. So generally speaking, including psychologically, we would not think how girls were different from boys. Not a bit, because of our environment. You felt the revolutionary passion. After high school, I wanted to go to a youth farm in Inner Mongolia, to be a sent-down youth.<sup>2</sup>

**Zhang: Where is your hometown?**

Li: Tianjin.

**Zhang: Tianjin.**

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

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

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

**Zhang: 1976. Right?**

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<sup>2</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, many urban young people were sent to the countryside and remote areas to help with local development. They are called the “sent-down youth.”

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

So, I felt when I was reading books like *The Dream of the Red Chamber*<sup>3</sup> by myself, I could not live a meaningful life; I couldn't find a sense of emotional belonging. That was like a room, no matter how big it was, it was empty. We despised the material but pursued the spiritual; we despised pragmatism but embraced idealism. In fact I felt that kind of spiritual inclination. So, I think this context of the Cultural Revolution shaped my experience before college.

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

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

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<sup>3</sup> *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is considered one of China's greatest novels. It was written by Cao Xueqin of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911); its story about the tragic love between the two main characters is well known.

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

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

But in 1983, when I was still in such struggles, I felt all of China was undergoing change after the reforms began.<sup>4</sup> I graduated from college and went to graduate school. Then, when I was a graduate student at Nankai University, I had some strong feelings about being able to have my private space, my bed in the dorm. (Laughs.) This space is mine.

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

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<sup>4</sup> The Chinese government started to implement reforms in its administrative and economic policies since the end of 1970s. This is often called the “opening-up and reform.”

Li: No. At Tianjin Normal University.

**Zhang: Normal University?**

Li: Yes.

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

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

**Zhang: Did you work first and then go to college, or the opposite?**

Li: I went to the countryside before college.

**Zhang: Went to the countryside!**

Li: Yes. I went to college in 1977 after coming back from the countryside. After I graduated I started to work. I studied at the Department of Chinese for four years at Tianjin Normal University. Then, I was given a teaching position at the Tianjin Finance and Trade Cadre Management School.

**Zhang: The work unit that you spoke of earlier – was it the Tianjin School of Financial and Commercial Management?<sup>5</sup>**

Li: Yes. By this time I was already twenty-four or twenty-five years old. My work unit felt that I should first get married. Then they would basically solve my housing problem. Didn't this mean that it was the time that I should start thinking about getting married? But just at this time I tested into Nankai University. During this time I attended classes and also thought about the question of getting married. My classmates, who were all Nankai graduate students, all felt similar pressure. There were relatively few female graduate students. Nowadays there are many women in the Department of Chinese. But at that time in my class only about one-third of the students were women. I was only twenty years old when I first attended university in 1977.

**Zhang: Relatively young.**

Li: Yes. I was relatively young. Most of the other students were older than me, as much as ten years older than me. Some of the students attended university and their children at the same time attended elementary school. This was the situation. But during my college years, I felt that things were changing. I felt at that time that I should use of all of my efforts to study. It seemed as if during the past ten years, most of my time was wasted.

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<sup>5</sup> The Tianjin School of Financial and Commercial Management is now called Tianjing Institute of Financial and Commercial Management. It was established in 1985 to train cadres in financial management, accounting and business management. It is in the city of Tianjin, one of the four Municipalities in China.

So my desire to study was especially strong. When I was at university, there was a definite change that had already occurred in societal views. Society's demands for young women and young men were changing. Our differences reappeared. This was a big difference from the genderless period of the Cultural Revolution, when we were all just revolutionary comrades. Young women and young female students should have more of a kind of femininity. Women were supposed to be more emotional and use their hearts to think about things. More women also attended university. In the past it was assumed that more young men would attend university. Thus, I feel it is important to show the difference that came about during the time period of when I was growing up.

When I was a graduate student, it seemed as if the general atmosphere had turned so that there was special attention paid to the differences in gender. Specifically among male and female students, it centered on what guys thought were ideal characteristics for a partner. Male students seemed to feel that an ideal wife should be especially warm and friendly, pretty, and willing to rely on her husband. They did not want women who were especially career oriented. As you can see these requirements for an ideal wife changed from the time period before and became more and more emphasized.

Female students in my dorm used to talk. Most of us still had a desire and ambition to continue to develop personally. Even if they did not go on for their doctorate degree, they still held personal ideals and wanted to find work outside the home in the future. Moreover, most of them wanted to pursue their own careers. But in terms of relationships, we came to realize that we faced a lot of conflicts. Our own personal goals were often far from what guys envisioned for us in the future.

In our dorm at that time there was a woman who I got along with well. Her family name was Li, the same family name as me. She was a student in the history department and was two years further along in her program than me. So I started to read for my master's degree in 1983 and she had started in 1981. When I moved in to the dorm, she only had one more year before she graduated. At this time she was facing the question of whether or not she wanted to try and test into a doctoral program. She said that if she entered a doctoral program, then dating and being in a relationship would become extremely difficult. This was because most men did not want their wives to have a higher degree than them. She really wanted to enter the doctoral program but was torn about what to do. For two full months she struggled with this question of whether to try to test into a Ph.D. program or not. In the end she decided that even if she would not know what her future would bring, she still wanted to first get her doctorate.

So as you can see, I had already experienced a kind of struggle. As for me personally, I felt that I had to deal with the same kind of pressure and stress. We already had begun to feel some of society's requirements for women. But what we were taught since we were small, including the environment when we were growing up, gave us idealism and enthusiasm. However, you still felt a kind of weight – a kind of baggage that you had to carry because of your sex. I feel that having this kind of experience caused me to have an interest in a lot of issues and questions related to women.

Thus, this experience really made an impression on me. When I graduated with my master's degree I was already twenty-nine years old. I had started when I was twenty-six. I had begun to work when I was about twenty-five years old. My colleagues at my work unit were all very enthusiastic. They thought I was very warm and open and asked me what I was looking for in an ideal husband. Since I had reached my mid twenties, they thought that I should be thinking about these things. I told them that I did not have any specific requirements, except for one. I wanted someone who I got along with especially well. My colleague said that this requirement would make it difficult for them to find people to introduce me to. If I wanted, for example, a man to be a certain height or to have a certain academic background then it would be relatively easy to try and match me with someone. However, my request was difficult because she did not know what kind of person that I would get along with well. This requirement was very important to me since I saw a partner as a person that I would connect with on a deeper level. So it was an absolute necessity for me that we got along well together. Thus, I did not have any special requirements for his material or physical characteristics, such as his level of education, how tall he was, what he looked like, or his family background. My older sister insisted that I definitely must not marry someone from a peasant family, since our future together would certainly not be good. She thought his family would come to bother us and our home would eventually turn into a hotel for them. I thought that she was really shallow.

So you could say that I felt like I was a person who was especially idealistic. However when I look back on this time and think about how I was especially adamant about this point, I still feel that I was right. I thought even if I remained single for my whole life, I did not want to get married if I could not find someone that I liked, who liked me, and that when we were together we could talk and get along effortlessly. I feel that there is a certain aspect of my personality that makes it difficult for me to always go along with the mainstream. I am usually pretty resolute about things that I believe in. At the time my aunt used to say that I was independent and a person who made decisions by myself. (Laughs.) I believe that exactly because I have a distinctive type of personality and my own kinds of goals and pursuits that I found there were a lot of obstacles in real life. Perhaps this caused me to be concerned about these issues. Moreover, especially these kinds of issues, such as the dating process caused me to come into contact with various people.

So, in the end I feel that I can be very satisfied with the overall result. I held on to this way of thinking; if I could not find someone compatible, then I definitely would not get married. But I feel that I was able to find this in my husband. When we were dating, my husband did not have a Beijing residence permit. When other people looked at this situation, they urged me to be more practical. They said that since I had already found work at the Central Party School, I should try and find a person from Beijing. This would make things much easier for me in the future. However, since I viewed it as especially important, I was very stubborn about finding this characteristic in a partner. When the two of us would meet and talk, I would always have the feeling that we could keep on talking forever. Really, I think this kind of feeling is extremely important. By the time that I ended up getting married I was thirty-one years old, which you could say is

rather late. At that time there were some young women in Tianjin who would talk about me. They would say, “Look at Li Huiying; she still has not gotten married. What kind of person is so old and still has not gotten married?” And they would purposefully come to Beijing to visit me. That is to say that during that time I discovered that if you reached a certain age and were still not married you would have to put up with a lot of pressure. I truly felt that being single after a certain age really gave me a lot of stress. Being single required me to expend a lot of effort to get such things as my own space or my own housing. Being single also causes the people around you to look at you differently. However, I remained stubborn about my requirement for finding the right person for me. So looking back at my life, you could say that I am a rather idealistic kind of person. And I am very persistent about attaining the things that I feel are very important for me. Perhaps because of this, I later felt a kind of identification with women’s studies. I started dealing with these dating and marriage issues after I began working at the Central Party School.<sup>6</sup>

**Zhang: When did you begin working at the Central Party School?**

Li: I started in 1986. It was after I graduated with my master’s degree. At that time it was relatively easy to find work. When my classmates and I were together and discussed our future, we decided that we might all go to Beijing. So we all went to Beijing and checked out job opportunities. There was a great need for qualified people at that time in Beijing. So a lot of my classmates decided to come to Beijing. However, I still wanted to find work at a language university. Originally I had wanted to go to Beijing to find a university that had a library and a dining hall. This was because I did not want to have to make food. (Laughs.) So, as for me, feminism has a lot of things that are suitable to my personality. Since I really did not want to have to prepare my meals, a university that had a dining hall would solve my eating problem. A school with a library suited my need for books. So I hoped for these two conditions – and also one other. I wanted a school that had dormitories because I really needed some independent living space. Based on these three requirements, I felt that the conditions at the Central Party School were better than at the language institute. The language institute had a lot of books, but most of the books were in the field of language studies. But I needed social science and humanities books. Therefore I came to the Central Party School.

At the time when I first went to the Central Party School I was twenty-nine years old. When I was thirty, I started dating the man who later became my husband. We first met at a conference. When we began dating I realized that we had a lot in common. So I feel that I had a kind of feeling of love at first sight. This feeling was not based on how he looked but more on how well we got along. When we talked I felt that we had similar views on a lot of different topics. However if you looked at some of my classmates who had not yet married, perhaps their reasons for not marrying were different. So in this sense, I feel that I found the kind of person that I was looking for. Of course in order to

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<sup>6</sup> The Central Party School (abbreviation of the Chinese Communist Party Central Party School) is an educational institution that trains Chinese Communist Party officials of the middle and high levels. Faculties of the Central Party School are the main think-tank of the CPC’s highest policy-making body, the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau.

do this you have to pay a high price. (Laughs.) Sometimes when you think of our ideals, you have to consider the many problems you face. For example there were issues such as the problem of transferring his residence permit so that he was able to live in Beijing and the problem of finding a suitable job. Moreover at the time, I did not want to have a child. When your work unit allocates housing there are many conditions. For example, if you do not have a child, they generally will not give you a place to live. I think these issues are unique to China. They always consider such things like if you are married or not and if you have a child or not. If you do not follow the common practices of most people, then I have discovered that based on Chinese policies, you can be continually discriminated against. My experiences gave me a very deep feeling of this. I feel I had problems because I came from a genderless and idealistic time period to being overwhelmed by different treatment brought about by your sex and marriage. Living space also became an issue because of my sex and my marital status. All of these issues perhaps caused me to identify with women's studies.

**Zhang: When you went to the Central Party School in 1986, what kind of work did you do?**

Li: When I started I worked in the Department of Chinese. I was a teacher. After I went to the Central Party School, they told me that all of the new arrivals needed to do one year of training. For me this training was to work as a reporter for the *Central Party School Communications*.<sup>7</sup> The year that I spent training to be a reporter was really interesting. Later I returned to the Department to teach.

In preparation for the 1995 World Women's Conference the Central Party School planned to carry out some activities. I had a male colleague, who was also a teacher, who felt that I might be able to contribute to the preparatory activities for the conference. So we submitted a project proposal. This teacher was surnamed Chen; his full name was Chen Duansheng. I think at the time this teacher was already in his early fifties. He was very interested in new things and he was passionate. And he was male! So at that time he submitted a proposal about a project that was related to the experiences of women leaders. He wanted to interview about a hundred women leaders, especially those who had studied at the Central Party School. I was interested in such kinds of topics at the time and also had already written some articles. So he found me and asked if I would like to participate in this project. I thought that this would be a great opportunity for me. So, because of this project, I became involved in the World Women's Conference activities.

When I think about the influences on the course of my life, actually this was an especially important turning point. After we began this project we started to conduct some interviews. These interviews were different from the research that I had done before at the Central Party School. In the past I had done research by searching through newspapers and journals for pertinent information and then it would depend on me as to how I organized and wrote about the materials that I found. This was one way of doing research and was more of a kind of archival research. However this project required to us

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<sup>7</sup> *Central Party School Communications* is an internal paper of the Central Party School.

do interviews where we tried to delve deeply into many women leader's lives and experiences. Through these interviews I came into contact with many leading women cadres. I found the interviews to be extremely interesting. We would begin to talk and I learned of the joys and sorrows of their lives. At some point during the interview I would often have a kind of feeling that it was like I had entered the realm of their social lives and the world of the psychological aspects of being a female leader. After entering into these worlds, you discovered that things that you had previously believed or accepted and the realities of their lives were very different. In the past you would only see the especially impressive and public sides of these women. There would always be so many people circling around these women, for example when they gave a lecture or a report. However, when you would get to know the other sides of these women – the side that most people never saw – you discovered that these women had experienced many joys and sorrows that were never revealed in their public lives. So in this aspect, I discovered a new world. In this world, these women not only had some similar experiences and hardships as their male colleagues, but also more importantly, had certain experiences or faced certain situations because they were women.

I remember that at the time I interviewed a woman from the city of Nantong.<sup>8</sup> She was the leader of the mid-level court. She studied at the Central Party School in the class for leaders of high administrative levels. The Central Party School divided the students into many different classes. For example they had classes for officials at the governor level and officials at the provincial level. This woman studied in the provincial officials' class. When I spoke with her at this time, I really felt that she was very different from other ordinary leaders. When many of the leaders would be reserved; they made sure they paid attention to the “proper” parameters of speech. They knew what they should say and what issues they should not talk about. However, this woman was not like that. She was very willing to talk quite freely about herself and her experiences. We discussed many different issues, including how she concurrently held two positions. She was the leader of the mid-level court of Nantong City. In addition she was the Secretary of her Party branch. Thus she held two very important positions. When she took on both of these jobs she was extremely busy at her work. However she also had three kids at home. She also had been one of the educated urban youth who during the Cultural Revolution was sent to the countryside to work. It was during this time that she had three kids. Then she went to the city of Nantong. When she came to Nantong, it was the period of the “Four Modernizations” of cadres. These included becoming more educated and knowledgeable, involving more young people in government, specialization, and promoting revolutionary ideals. For the cadre regiments at the time this was an incredible change. In the past what was valued was being a model worker, not having a remarkable academic background. But at this time it was changing so now your level of education was important. So many of the cadres with college degrees started to be promoted. Anyway, this woman held these two positions and had three children. Her parents only had two daughters. So she moved to Nantong so that she could help to take care of her parents. Her mother and father were both considered senior revolutionaries. So she had a great deal of familial responsibilities. Her husband, who worked in the Public Security Bureau, was the kind of guy who felt that the woman should be responsible for all of the

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<sup>8</sup> Nantong is a city in Jiangsu province.

household chores; he did not help out. Thus this woman had a great deal of responsibility at work and at home. She continually had the feeling of being very stressed. When she spoke about this time, she talked about how difficult juggling all of these responsibilities was. During the week her work gave her a lot of stress. And, when the weekend came, she needed to take care of her three children and her parents. She was extremely stressed and exhausted since sometimes her household responsibilities and work responsibilities clashed. There was one time when for her work she had to go to do an inspection of the lower level county courthouse. During this time her father became seriously ill. She did not get back in time and her father passed away. Thus, she still has a guilty conscience about not being able to get back in time to see him. She told me that she is a good courthouse leader. Every time that she runs for election to the people's congress, she wins by a large margin. She is a good leader and a good Party Secretary. However, she felt that she was not a good daughter, nor a good mother. Her three kids all did not do well in school and she had no way of taking better care of them. In her heart she really suffered and had conflicting emotions.

So I got to know about her. At that time I thought Nantong was an interesting city. In most other cities there were very, very few women leading cadres. However there were more than ten outstanding women officials occupying important positions in Nantong. For example, the mayor, the courthouse leader, and the head of the department of transportation were all women. Moreover, they all performed exceptionally in their work. At that time I traveled to a lot of different places in Nantong to interview these women, including the president of the labor union. None of these women were "ornamental." They all performed their jobs well. In addition they all had good strategies at work. They knew how in their positions they could be a positive force in the process of reform in China, how they could promote reform, and how they could encourage China's development. I think that these women, as the leaders and organizers of their work units, constitute a huge contrast to women who were laid off and fell into an especially difficult situation.

Thus, by interviewing these people I feel that I came to appreciate and understand some of the special problems that women leaders face, especially those that participate in government. You could say that this was my starting point for entrance into women's research. However at that time I feel that it would be difficult to say that my work was intimately connected with feminism. Actually I had no background in the theory of *nuxing zhuyi* or *nuquan zhuyi*.<sup>9</sup> I only came into contact with these ideas because of my life experiences and because of the project that I worked on. Thus, at that time I did not know much about western theories.

**Zhang: You just talked about your life, your experiences when you were growing**

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<sup>9</sup> Both terms can be translated as feminism. *Nuxing zhuyi* is literally woman-ism. This is a new translation of feminism which emerged in the early 1980s. The term has less political but more biological connotations than *nuquan zhuyi*. *Nuquan zhuyi* is literally woman-rights-ism. Since *quan* can also mean power, the term can be interpreted as the 'ism' of women's power. Although the CCP claims gender equality as a basic principle, it has defined feminism as bourgeois. This term is primarily used to refer to Western feminism. These definitions are taken from Ping-chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok, et.al, eds. *Chinese Women Organizing* (2001).

**up, and things that you have learned from your work. What was the connection between feminism and your experience of interviewing many of those extraordinary women leaders and cadres?**

Li: You could explain it in this way. Only after experiencing certain things could you identify with or agree with feminist theories and ideas once they are introduced to you. Therefore I feel that only after having some sort of foundation can you move forward to appreciating the theory. These ideas would have been very difficult to accept if I did not first have this kind of foundation.

I believe I first started to know some foreign concepts of feminism at the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, including ideas and perspectives about gender. I feel that some of these ideas were only seen in China after the 1995 conference. For example the use of the term “gender” first appeared in the Beijing Platform for Action and the move to bring gender into the mainstream when making policy also came about at this time. So during this time I had a new idea. We had previously put emphasis on interviewing women, in order to understand the conflicts of their roles and the problems that they faced. This was a way for women to have a better understanding of other women. However I came to realize that the idea of bringing gender into the policy making mainstream could become a point where gender issues and state policy as well as its responsibilities meet. Thus I feel that there should be a way to incorporate this way of thinking into our work. We work at the Central Party School and the Central Party School has so many leading cadres. The way that these cadres administer policy can have an influence on women. So how could we make it so that when these cadres made policy they would also bring a kind of gendered sensitivity to their work? I believe that the 1995 Conference, including the Beijing Platform for Action, inspired me. At this time I began to be more familiar with the concept of gender.

Also at this time Ge Youli<sup>10</sup> still worked at the United Nations Development Program. She wanted to create a training handbook that dealt with gender and development. At the time even using the term “gender” was very new. In the past in these kinds of projects, we had always tried to apply foreign concepts or ideas to China. But then she wanted to write a handbook that was unique to China. We still incorporated some of the foreign ideas and concepts, perspectives, and even the main methods used. However, at the same time, we used cases and examples that were specific to China. We really tried to have this kind of handbook, which integrated western ideas and Chinese experiences. So I started to extensively read Western ideas about gender. When I first came into contact with these materials, the concept of “gender” impressed me mostly because I felt that the foundation for this concept is about “rights,” or “empowerment.” Having rights is a kind of power. According to China, power has two meanings. One is control. There is also another meaning, which involves agency – the ability to determine one’s own fate. So I think this concept has very rich meanings. I feel that gender is a kind of especially rich,

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<sup>10</sup> Ge Youli, a feminist activist, is currently the China Country Director, Global Alliance for Workers and Communities. Prior to this, she worked as a Program Officer at the United Nations Development Program on issues of gender equity, poverty alleviation, micro-finance and community development. Ge Youli was also interviewed for the Global Feminisms Project.

captivating concept. One of the main points that makes it captivating is that it teaches you the concept of rights. I want you to make sure you type this correctly in the transcript – I mean the character for “li” that is also used in the word for benefit. When you translate this character it has the meaning of “rights.”<sup>11</sup>

You can compare this concept of rights with our understanding of “rights” during the period of the planned economy. Actually at that time we also frequently raised the concept of male and female equality and promoted the idea that women and men had the same level of rights. However at that time, we really did not understand the connotations of having rights. Moreover, we would often determine the value of this concept instrumentally. In reality if the Party told us to do something then we would. Since China was liberated in 1949, you could say that women who have been struggling for their rights have had an extremely difficult time, since the concept of “rights” has been turned into a means to the end. But this time the concept of gender highlights “rights,” human agency and subjectivity. People should know what rights they have and then should struggle for those rights. I believe that at this time I came to have a completely different understanding of humans, including my understanding of women. In reality these two things – the concept of “rights” and the concept of gender – could be pursued separately in the West. In China during this time of enlightened culture, especially after the period of reform and opening, actually we often first learned about the concept of gender and then approached the idea of rights from the concept of gender. I feel this describes my own experience. When I first came into contact with the concept of gender, it already implied these two things. That is to say that the emergence of feminist thought in myself should be linked with this time period. I do not think that we can, as we did in the past, simply discredit feminism as something that only looks at the differences between men and women. Instead we should look at it in terms of human agency and power. So why don’t many women have power? Of course many men in China also have no power. When you compare the concept of gender in China to other countries, you will realize that perhaps there are many differences. In other countries it seems as if men have power while women do not. However in China in many aspects both men and women are deprived of power. Of course there are more instances where women do not have power.

Thus, this concept makes you reconsider a lot of the things that you had been taught in the past. I believe that these kinds of ideas broadened my way of thinking. So, when I looked at these problems and issues again I did it in a different way than I had in the past. It really causes you to reflect on many different issues, including phenomena that occur in everyday life. These ideas encourage you to examine how people lose their power and how they understand losing power. In China disempowerment is often treated as a virtue. This is true for both men and women, and maybe more true for women. It is considered a kind of good thing, a kind of virtuous thing. This is because Chinese culture teaches the concept of selflessness. However this idea of selflessness overlooks people’s rights. Our culture highly praises the good mother...the kind of “virtuous wife and loving mother.”

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<sup>11</sup> In Chinese, “rights” and “power” (*quan li*) consist of different Chinese characters but they sound exactly the same. Li Huiying is trying to clarify which word she is using by discussing the different meanings of two characters that both are pronounced as “li.”

However implicit in this depiction of women is the disregard of people's basic rights or the complete obliteration of them.

So I feel... Well, at that time we participated in the All China Women's Federation's project called "Mass Media and Women." They asked me to do the part of this project that examined the representation of women in television series. When I looked at these famous figures, some of my background learning influenced me. That was the concept of "rights." When I approached this project I could no longer identify with the romanticized version of the good wife and loving mother. In my heart I have never had interest in such things as preparing meals. However, at that time I still probably felt that self-sacrifice was a good thing. Self-sacrifice – the revolutionaries' spirit of self sacrifice – was a concept that I could identify with myself. Nowadays I no longer identify with this. I think many traditional representations of mother should be rethought and reexamined. We should also critically rethink the image of the "strong woman." Actually, the image of the "strong woman" contains more of a sense of independence. How do we view these women? In reality the media promotes the ideal of the good wife and the loving mother, while the image of the "strong woman" is played down.

So what are the problems with these images if we look at them from the perspective of "rights?" We can discover many things in the media. I think popular media has undergone an extremely great change in the thirty years from the 1950s to the beginning of the 1980s. Thirty years ago, the media emphasized the "gender-neutral." Currently, the media emphasizes "returning to tradition." This "returning to tradition" contains many depictions of women, including for example Liu Huifang.<sup>12</sup> These types of women are greatly liked. How exactly do you understand this kind of representation?

So I think that there really are many things that need to be reexamined. Moreover there are many media phenomena that are very interesting. For example they depict differences for a man and a woman who are both in leadership positions at their jobs. Once they date and then get married, they behave differently. Generally the man is made to give up some money. He would say, "I have money. I will buy you a house. I will give you a whole lot of money to spend." Thus the man is supposed to provide the wealth. But in the case of a woman figure, once she starts to date and gets married, she is often depicted as giving up power. She would give up her position to her partner in order to demonstrate their love for each other. A woman boss would willingly give up her position to her man and become his supporting figure. Such depictions do not necessarily reflect what really occurs. For example, that woman called A Chun in the TV series "Beijingers in New York." She lets Wang Qiming have her position and supports him. So men give up their riches while women give up their power. Why do they create these kinds of differences in the media? In reality... Well, I read the novel by Cao Guilin from which the TV series was adapted. He doesn't depict their relationship in this way. A Chun and Wang Qiming are represented as such by the TV series. So their interaction reflects the male director's imagination, about what the ideal man and ideal woman should be. Why is such a difference created, whereby the man gives up money and the

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<sup>12</sup> Liu Huifang was the protagonist in a Chinese TV series called, *Yearning*. She embodied many of the traditional Chinese virtues.

woman gives up power? The more money that he gives you, and the more money that you accept, the greater your dependence on him. When you give up your power you actually give the man a kind of control over your decisions. Moreover you become his...how do I call it... You take on a supporting role to him. This is still guided by the idea that “men lead while women obey.” So if you look at this from the point of view of power, you will discover that there are numerous phenomena in one’s life that are worthy of reexamining in a critical manner.

Because of issues like this, the idea of feminism really grabbed my interest and attention. So back in 1995 we wanted to create a Women’s Research Center. Before then, many of us simply wanted to do something in practice. Thus in 1995 a few of the female teachers and I together requested that the school establish a women’s center. After receiving the approval of the school, we established the Central Party School Women’s Research Center.

**Zhang: Which year?**

Li: 1995.

**Zhang: 1995.**

Li: Yes.

**Zhang: Is it still in the Central Party School?**

Li: Yes.

**Zhang: What is your position in the Center?**

Li: I am an assistant director of the Center and am in charge of research. Of course... I think that we are an NGO that operates within the Central Party School. Actually we do not have funding from the school. Basically if we have interest in doing a project then we try and do it. At that time I moved from the Language and History Department to the Department of Social Science, because the Department of Social Science had a sociology teaching and research unit. Institutionally, we were able to establish the Women’s Research Center as an affiliation to the social science department. In addition in the sociology teaching and research unit we could specialize our research on women. At that time I also felt that the courses that I taught in the Literature and History Department were further and further from my real interests. I wondered if I could find a place to focus on women’s studies. So based on these considerations I changed to the department of social science. So one reason for my transfer was to establish the Women’s Research Center and the second was that I could focus on women’s research. Since the World Women’s Conference was also taking place in 1995, other people thought this was understandable that I did this because I was following the trend. However, a few years later they would ask me, “Why are you still doing women's studies?” They seemed to feel that since the 1995 conference had long been finished and that the trend to study

women's issues had ended, I should move on. Sometimes the student discussion occurred after work, my colleagues would introduce me saying, "This is a teacher from our work unit, assistant professor Li Huiying. She researches women's issues." After this introduction many of the students laughed. Why were they laughing? They seemed to ask, "Why do you need to specifically study women?" My feeling was that society still did not understand the contents of women's studies. As for me, since the 1995 Conference, in these past several years, I have been critically thinking about many questions.

Later, I think it was in 1998 I wrote an article that was published in our school's journal, *Study News*. The name of the article was "I Do Women's Studies." I wrote about how I felt about my work. I wrote that during the several years that I had been doing women's studies, although my appearance had not changed, I had experienced incredible change in my way of thinking. I said that such works allowed me to better understand many different things, including myself. I believe that actually feminism is not only a subject of study, but also a kind of humanist spirit. It encourages people to remake themselves and thus it is action-oriented. So feminism can have a very big influence on people's personalities. When I started to learn about feminism, I also at the same time came to know many women's studies researchers in the circle, or you could say, feminists.

I remember in 1996 I went to Henan to attend a conference. It was organized by Li Xiaojiang.<sup>13</sup> The conference centered around how to develop women's studies in higher education. At the conference Li Xiaojiang was the major presenter and she talked about research methods she used and the content of her research of several years. We all engaged in a lot of discussion and this was very inspirational for me. Of course Li Xiaojiang was one of the earlier people to learn about women's studies, and she had some creative ideas. Later we went to visit feminist scholars in Hong Kong and South Korea. We spent some days with Hong Kong scholars. I believe there were several activities that left a very deep impression on me. I feel...I not only heard some new ideas but also learned how they organized activities, how they managed their affairs, how they exchanged ideas, etc. I learned a lot, such as equal participation and self-reflection. After I participated in the Henan conference I did not sleep well for many nights. This was because I had learned many things at the conference that were very exciting. It made me think about many things. I was just too excited to go to sleep. When I attended graduate school I was a student in the Chinese department. At that time I went to some conferences on literary theories, cultural theories and aesthetics. However none of those conferences had moved me in the same way that the conference in Henan had. The Henan conference really shook me to the core. Why did I have this kind of feeling? Why did the conference touch me so deeply? I think it is because many of these Chinese academics were integrating their academic research with their own personal lives and experiences. Thus, for many, doing women's research was not only an intellectual pursuit, but also a personal pursuit. I think in these people I could see such a pursuit, a spiritual pursuit. Once feminism turns into something inside of you, a life pursuit, it will

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<sup>13</sup> Li Xiaojiang is one of the first Chinese scholars to study feminist theories. Teaching at Zhengzhou University, she initiated and participated in many important conferences and research activities concerning feminisms in the West and in China.

be extremely powerful. You come to realize that feminism is very different from many of the generally accepted ideas and norms. I feel that feminism is very valuable. It enables a person to transform from being instrumental to actively self-empowering. In the past we were all accustomed to doing what we were told. In short, we lived in a big group environment. We acted according to the way of the thinking of that group environment. However, I now think about how to take the initiative to struggle for things we want. This is especially true in the field of women's studies. At that time at the Central Party School, the students did not take this kind of research seriously. Many people around you do not understand you. Then you have to struggle to create some activities because you will realize that if you do not take the initiative you cannot accomplish things. When you struggle you must expend a lot of energy. However you will feel that you have changed the way of doing things. You are no longer a person who waits for other people to tell you what to do. Instead you become a person who takes the initiative to actively pursue a goal that you think is valuable and accomplish it.

So in 1998 at the Women's Center we offered a gender training for the Party School's classes for young officials. The content of this training...when we submitted the course proposal, we were asked, "What is gender?" "What is the point of offering this kind of training?" We met a lot of difficulties. No one would pay attention to what we were proposing. So I went to find Li Qiufang,<sup>14</sup> who worked at the All China Women's Federation.<sup>15</sup> I told her what I was thinking and that my goal was to promote men and women's equality, our basic national policy. I thought we could find a point where Chinese discourse and Western discourse could meet. (Laughs.) Later I began to critically think about the relationship between our national policy of men and women's equality and the concept of gender. Perhaps this was a question that was worth thinking about. But if you try to promote something, you will find that an individual's power is quite limited.

Then maybe you could try to utilize the governmental...mainstream discourse, but insert the spirit of the concept of "gender" into it. Perhaps the strategy for the development of Chinese women and foreign women has many differences. In other countries you can directly say your opinion. There is nothing wrong with new ideas, right? There is a space for this. However in China, if you do not use the mainstream language then you will face many difficulties. Actually we did use the concept of gender. But we asked the Women's Federation to write a letter, saying that they were willing to work with us at the Central Party School Women's Center on such training. So when we took the letter with us to the Central Party Department of Research and Teaching, they read the letter and felt that the idea was fine because the Women's Federation was involved. The Women's Federation's participation gave us greater legitimacy because it was seen as an institution within the official mainstream and it was considered trustworthy. Because we were only

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<sup>14</sup> Li Qiufang has spent much of her career active in the China Youth League and the All-China Women's Federation. She is currently the Secretary of the 8th Session Secretariat of the All-China Women's Federation.

<sup>15</sup> Founded on April 3, 1949, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) is a mass organization dedicated to the advancement of Chinese women of all ethnic groups in all walks of life. ACWF is a multi-tiered organization with local women's federations and group members at every divisional level of government.

a NGO, they might have felt suspicious about what we were trying to achieve. So during the process of promoting this activity I realized that we still needed to solicit support from a recognized official organization and promote our goals with its collaboration.

In reality what we use is the concept of gender. Actually we used feminist discourse in our trainings for the Central Party School's leading cadres. This goal was reached in this way. I realized through this process that you can accomplish things by taking the initiative instead of passively waiting for orders. Working in this way will bring life some very fresh things. You could change yourself into a much more proactive person, a person with agency. I feel that in this aspect that feminism stresses activism. Feminism is not only a theoretical concept; it encourages you also to take action. For me this includes...in 2000...how we acted to introduce a gender curriculum, including women's studies classes, into the graduate program at the Central Party School. In 1999 we succeeded in getting the permit to create a M.A. program in the department of sociology. Now we could recruit master's students. At this time we thought about how to successfully bring gender training into the sociology department's graduate curriculum. So I proposed we create a subfield, "gender and public policy." In this way we could recruit some master's students who specialized in gender studies. These seven or eight master's sociology students are required to take all of the courses. In this way we can introduce many gender theories to the students. I think that those of us who engage in women's studies actually have a very important responsibility to spread these ideas in China.

So at that time we wanted to do this. But we encountered the problem of explaining the meaning of "gender and public policy" to people, especially the concept of "gender." At that time the head of my department called me and asked me what exactly was "gender." She found the usage of the word "gender" was extremely new; she had never heard of it before. So I tried to explain this concept to her. I said that currently this new concept was emerging outside of China and this was a big intellectual tide in the world. Women's studies courses were already being offered in a lot of different countries. So in this sense, if we could offer women's studies courses, we were going to lead the intellectual trend. (Laughs.) At the time I felt that we were doing well. Because our sociology curriculum was new, we had to, as individuals, insist that we move in this direction, and insist on including the women's studies courses. We had several rounds of debates about the question of whether this course was necessary and whether we should incorporate it in the curriculum. Fortunately, we had the women's research center and also a few teachers that were focusing their attentions on these kinds of issues. We became a powerful force that pushed for including women's studies courses in the curriculum. We tried to overwhelm them with the sheer force of our convictions. (Laughs.) The number of teachers in our group definitely helped to convince people. So because of our persistence and hard work, we were successful in setting the required courses and the subfields of our graduate program. I believe that the reason we were successful was because of how diligently we worked toward this goal. In the traditional sociology curriculum there absolutely was no kind of course like this. However after we took this action we were able to incorporate our course. So up until this point, in the three classes in the sociology department, we have made them take women's studies

classes. One of these classes is the master's curriculum, the curriculum for graduate students studying for a higher degree.

We also have graduate students who work as public servants and also take classes. They are all above a certain administrative rank. They can take some classes here and pass a test in order to attain credentials in sociology, however they will not obtain the degree. These people all currently work and are all leading cadres. In this two-year program, they take weekend classes. In class, we integrate social policies and the contents of gender theories. Another class that we offer is independent studying with advisors, available for officials with higher ranks who also work while attending graduate classes. They are provincial level cadres. Thus every six months they attend one session. Gender and Public Policy is technically an elective course in their curriculum, however they almost have to take this class. This is our "Chinese characteristic."<sup>16</sup> Although it seems to be an elective course, we actually make it required and insert the gender contents into the program. So now we currently have students studying gender in several classes.

So I think that we are integrating research and teaching like this. During this process, a lot of...well, you are facing this kind of situation: on the one hand, in order to understand what gender is and what feminism means, you have to skim through a large amount of foreign books and materials. On the other hand, you have to consider the best way to present this information so that Chinese students will accept these ideas. What exactly is the situation in China? Gender theories are always located where Chinese and Western culture collide with each other.

Thus, I feel that one of the great things about feminism is that it can give you a broad space to think. Feminism includes many different streams of thought and many different points of view. Thus, I believe that this is really inspirational for us. In terms of the concept of gender, I think it can be analyzed on many different levels. Discussion of gender often brings about the question of whether you can bring these western ideas to the Chinese situation. I think that it is absolutely necessary to bring some of these international feminist ideas into Chinese culture. Especially important are the foundational theories and basic methods. By "theory" I do not mean western theories. Associating "theory" with the West is...well, this way of thinking itself already treats China as isolated. In reality feminism in the Third World, in developing countries, is very popular. I am talking about the kind of internationalized feminisms. In this aspect, feminism is actually theorized experiences of women in many different countries. I believe that in this sense, feminism is very open, and feminism itself is constantly developing and changing.

When you come to know these theories and then teach them in a class, you should not only teach others' ideas as they are. It is better to take these ideas and make them relevant to the Chinese situation. So when we teach feminism we always need to consider how to meld the two together and how to decide what to teach. Moreover,

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<sup>16</sup> *Zhongguo tese* in Chinese. It literally means "Chinese characteristics," often appearing in official language to describe the uniqueness of Chinese experience and their exploration in Chinese socio-political policies. Li Huiying here uses it jokingly.

currently, as feminism develops in China, this also involves rethinking western feminisms. Well, now, I feel...I am thinking that Chinese feminism from the early 1990s to the present, for the most part has been a period of translating and borrowing outside theories. This has been a continual process and it is very necessary, since if you do not introduce foreign works and theories, you may never really understand what other people are doing and talking about. So we must bring them in. Only by doing this can you then begin to compare. You have to see which theories are universal and which perhaps have to be adapted to the Chinese situation. I think Moser<sup>17</sup>... she talks about “triple roles.” She asserts that developed countries and developing countries are not the same. In most developed countries the sexual division of labor is strongly evidenced: men are in charge of external matters, while women are in charge of the home. However in developing countries being a woman does not imply only one kind of role. Most of these women do not only stay in the home. Women in the Chinese countryside are definitely like this. So many women’s studies scholars have gone to many different countries to do research. They then discover that there are different phenomena in different areas of the world. In China, an agricultural country, I think there are many phenomena that clearly reflect the differences between the developed versus the developing countries. For example, in the West, there is often an emphasis on the sexual division of labor. Why? Because it is everywhere in life. But scholars don’t pay much attention to the marriage system, patrilocal system. However in China the institution of marriage, especially in the countryside, is very common. Moreover the patrilocal marriage system has enormous impacts on many rural Chinese women. It affects the problems of land allocation and education. Many people think since when women get married they become part of the man’s family, it is not worth it to spend so much money educating women. In this way women’s education is connected to the institution of marriage. If you look at western feminist theories they do not often address some of these issues, since generally the man and woman form a new family separate from both sides. In addition in most western countries the urban population is very large while the population in the country has shrunk greatly. However, China’s population is still largely rural. Thus we face different problems or issues than these western countries.

So I think during this process you can see that while we are borrowing from the experiences of others, we are not mechanically imitating these other countries. Instead we take their concepts and ideas to analyze and understand China’s situation. In this process we continue to learn about foreign theories and analyze, reconsider and digest them. We have done a lot of this kind of work. Currently more and more scholars have come to realize that during this process...we need to take into consideration the distinct characteristics of China. We should not use the distinct characteristics of China to completely reject feminist ideas in other parts of the world. However, as I have said we cannot only imitate feminisms of other countries, but instead have to use them to analyze and better understand many of the problems that we face in China. I believe that currently there are many people involved in this kind of work, using this kind of method and fundamental principles of feminism to analyze and understand many of the phenomena in China. I think if we can further develop our work like this, we will

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<sup>17</sup> Li Huiying is referring to Caroline Moser. Her article is titled, “Gender Planning in the Third World” and can be found in Wang Zheng and Du Fangqin, eds. *Selected Works on Gender Studies* (1998).

perhaps find explanations or analyses for many of the issues that are distinct to China. Thus, this is a really important step in the process. However I still feel that we have only just begun to explore this and it appears...I think we haven't done enough yet.

Of course there are people who are actively exploring. For example Professor Du Fanqin<sup>18</sup> and her colleagues have attempted to introduce "gender" into the research on women's history in order to see how the gender structure was created in China. Moreover there are other kinds of projects, including work on domestic violence. We have to see, what a foreign developed anti-domestic violence program is like, what the Chinese situation is, and what needs to be changed to be useful for the Chinese situation. Also, we have to think about which ways to deal with this situation would be most effective. I am afraid that in these cases we really need to localize foreign theories and practices. Localization and internationalization are always interactively linked. In this aspect, I actually think that those who were involved with the previous period of research and work on Chinese feminism have done this quite well. Of course, even in the later stages of Chinese feminism, this kind of mutual learning from each other's experiences...well, people now really emphasize this. It is not only reading some books that were published overseas and feeling they are remotely "foreign." Instead, there are many exchanges and conversations that occur in such places as international activities or conferences. Even this interview in which I am now taking part is the result of international cooperation. Right? So I think China is continually integrated into the international feminist movement. Moreover many Chinese women's studies scholars overseas such as Professor Wang Zheng<sup>19</sup> often in this field...have facilitated many international activities and really promote exchange. I really believe that these kinds of works are very beneficial.

But I think...well, in terms of the next stage of our work, I think there will be a lot of interesting insights if we, on top of our earlier study, examine many of the things that are specific to China and analyze them at a deeper level, including the issue of patrilocal marriage which makes the identity of women unstable. Even at that time when the slogan of "men and women's equality" dominated and the Communist Party advocated the so-called "women's liberation," you still could find that this problem had a deep impact on women. I have a few examples for you. Outside of China, feminist scholarship often uses examples of women workers to demonstrate the impact of industrialization on women. However, because of the marriage structure in China, people recognize a woman's identity and value based on the private domain. So this illustrates the instability of the identity of "women." There are many things within this phenomenon that are worth examining.

Another example. In the history of the Chinese revolution, how did revolutionary women disappear? There were many women in the Red Army. But during the Cultural Revolution, we often talked about...we often invited aged former Red Army heroes to

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<sup>18</sup> Du Fanqin is a professor of women's and gender history at the Center for Women's Studies, Tianjin Normal University.

<sup>19</sup> Professor Wang Zheng teaches at the University of Michigan. She is a historian of Chinese women's and gender history and a researcher for the Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

give talks. In my impression, they were all men; there were no women Red Army heroes. Why was this group of women erased from history? Later many women's studies scholars have done a lot of analyses. I think this is really valuable. They also found some of these women revolutionaries and interviewed them, asking them to talk about their life experiences. Initially these women identified as female Red Army soldiers. Then some of them got captured by the enemy in battles. Some of them were forced to marry enemy soldiers. Therefore we see their identity changing, from women Red Army soldiers to anti-Red Army...

**Zhang: Historians have found these women revolutionary soldiers. If we don't go interview them, they will really disappear.**

Li: Right. Exactly. See...at the beginning she was a female revolutionary soldier. Then she was forced to marry an enemy soldier and became a part of the family of the enemy.

**Zhang: Yes.**

Li: So how do we define her identity? Such an experience...if it happened to a male Red Army soldier, it wouldn't be a problem. He would remain a revolutionary, after this unfortunate suffering. But the woman soldier would be treated differently. Her identity would change, because it would be decided by men...

**Zhang: Her identity would be determined by men.**

Li: Yes, her identity. This kind of phenomenon is rare in feminist scholarship elsewhere. But it exists here. How do you determine her identity? This tellingly shows that in the old marriage system, in this aspect, women's rights are absolutely violated. And this marriage structure in the countryside dictates that as a matter of course when a woman gets married she leaves the family home and she becomes a part of the man's family. This is extremely deeply rooted in people's way of thinking. So I believe that feminist research, especially with gender theories, can unearth some of the roots of this issue. In the past everyone always shouted "men and women are equal" but in reality we never really understood the fundamentals of gender inequality. There are two fundamental issues, gendered division of labor and the marriage system. The former has been fully investigated in western women's studies research. The second issue, the marriage structure, can be researched thoroughly by examining rural Chinese culture. I even feel... well, think about some of the experiences in my own life. For example since I was not married my work unit would not allocate housing for me. Actually many work units do not even give housing to married women; they expect that the man's work unit will provide the housing. What are the roots of this issue? Of course there is a connection with the marriage structure. The marriage structure, this way of thinking, is such a fundamental problem. I think in Chinese culture, it has far-reaching impacts. These aspects of Chinese culture especially need to be thoroughly investigated.

The marriage structure not only affects how land is divided and a woman's identity, but also affects a woman's access to education. Recently I spent some time in Guangdong

province. When I was giving a class to leading cadres there, I suddenly realized something. In China people often say that the quality of the people in the countryside is low and that women's quality is low. What does the "quality of women" mean? It refers to their cultural level. If you look at "cultural level" in this sense, you will find in many instances that it is often true because only 59% of rural women have graduated from primary school. But more men are able to finish middle school. Women's "quality" is lower than men's, if evaluated in this way. But why is this the case? The first reason is that the state does not do enough to provide obligatory education. The state has shirked its responsibility in this aspect. The second reason is found within the household. The parents must decide whom will be most beneficial to invest their assets in. Thus, usually there is an inclination to spend the money on the boy children since in China the boys are supposed to take care of the parents when they are old. The parents depend on their children to take care of them in their old age. Since the daughters generally become part of the husbands' families after they get married, the parents must rely on their sons. Thus, naturally there is a tendency to invest their resources in the boy children. There is also the issue of the gendered division of labor. What is the point of a girl child attaining a lot of education when in the future she will only do house chores and take care of the children? Thus as you can see when taking these various things into consideration, there is a strong tendency for families to invest in their sons. In reality, women's educational level is low as the result of her very basic rights to education being stripped away. A low quality among women indicates that girls' basic rights to receive education have been violated. The problem of "low quality" needs to be addressed from this perspective. This right to education is not guaranteed. This has a very intimate connection with the marriage structure.

Therefore I think in China that these two root problems must be eradicated. Moreover there must be a guarantee of women's basic rights. I think the concept of "rights" in China is extremely important, for cultural enlightenment or for democratic politics. It is extremely important for a citizen society. Thus I think in China feminism will be very useful in promoting the country's development. Of course actually I have always thought that the development of feminism in China, the whole idea of democratic politics, and the citizen society in China should all form as a joint force. I think this kind of integration does not pose any problems to feminism. However many male scholars pay attention to the idea of democratic politics and a citizen society but reject feminism. They do not see that feminism has many shared aspects with these two concepts. I think this reveals male scholars' limitations and demonstrates a lack of thoroughness. If they want to be thorough in promoting social change, then they should also promote women's rights. Because of the concept of "rights" present in feminism, I believe feminism also has something else important to offer, i.e. "empowerment." Feminism brings to light the relationship between men and women. They believe that at the root is the issue of control and being controlled. I feel that gender theory is very insightful. But this kind of thoughts in our...in my teaching, I realize that it is often not understood or recognized. When we talk to people about it, they don't know how to use it and they cannot approach problems from this perspective.

We once asked our students to write about the responsibilities of birth control. When I introduce this assignment I tell them that actually men and women should both have responsibility for birth control. But for the most part women are responsible for this. So why is it that in 90% of all birth control cases women take the measures? Why is it that a very low percentage of men take on such responsibility? Family planning policy requires that after having one or two children, you must take care to prevent future pregnancies. At this time who takes on this responsibility? In most instances the woman must shoulder this responsibility. How do we understand this problem? When students look at this issue they often say that this is because men do not have knowledge in this area. They may think that men often do not understand birth control and assume that birth control means castration for men. Well, ignorance might be one reason. However, women's knowledge of reproductive health is often even less than men's. Many people know little about reproductive health. So why are women expected to take on this responsibility? What is operating on a deeper level? Men have more power and control than women. Women have more obligations and men have more power. Thus many of these responsibilities are given to women. What is operating on the deeper level is a kind of power relation, a relationship of control and domination. However, most people do not come to realize this.

I think the concept of power...if we can deeply analyze many of the phenomena in our lives with it, we will find it to be very subversive. You may discover why many of these problems have encroached upon your rights. Why do some people only have rights but no obligations while others have obligations but no rights? In fact many people have not given much thought to practically how power relations have affected their lives. However it is very important to realize this. Once you recognize the significance of power relations, you may have new findings. For example, now we stress a market economy. According to market economy theories, many workers rush to areas where they can make the most money in order to earn money. This is the force of the market, of profit, and of money. There is also another kind of force, which is also actually a kind of power of control. Sometimes this is a kind of administrative power. Sometimes it is the power that is present in the relationships between people. This kind of power is displayed or manifests itself differently in different groups of people. For example, as urban women, educated women, we do not have the same experiences as rural women. This is because women from the city lack the experience of how your social stratum is related to the issue of power. Of course we also have regional differences. All these aspects have...Actually power relations, often implicit and thus not recognized, operate in all kinds of issues important to people's lives.

I pay attention to the ways things are represented as well. I still remember there was one time when the All China Women's Federation held a conference. This conference was co-hosted with the *People's Daily* newspaper. The head publisher from the *People's Daily* attended. At that time we hoped to publish the contents of this conference in the *People's Daily*. We hoped to use the media influence as a way to spread our voices. At that time when I looked at the articles I felt uncomfortable with one heading. It said, "Strive to develop your social position..." No, it said: "Strive for a higher social position with your contributions, and strive for development based on your abilities." (Silent)

What did this actually mean? This was in a series of articles we wrote at the time. What this heading says is that currently women's social position is low, which illustrates that their contributions must also be low. Read this in another way. It says that your social status is low because your contribution is low. If you have made many contributions, should not your social position be high? If you are competent then would not you have also have a high level of development? Doesn't this blame women? In reality you will find that in life women, including women from the countryside, often put forth a lot but receive very little. However there are some people who put forth very little but receive a lot. Why is this the case? It is because when natural resources are distributed, there is an implicit power. If I control this power, I can cause some people who do little work to receive a lot, and some people who do a lot of work to receive a little. The situation in the Chinese countryside illustrates this. Is it true that rural people contribute very little? But they receive so little. What is in operation is the power to control resources. Its functions are prominent in China. Of course it happens in other countries as well; but I think it is especially true in China. An invisible hand is operating behind the curtain. But people often overlook this fact. They only think that she receives a little because her quality is low; if we could only raise her quality then this problem can be solved. Why is it hard to raise her quality? Because this woman is not provided with resources. In fact, whoever controls these resources has the implicit power. I do not believe that this is only an issue between men and women, an issue of men controlling women. Actually there are many levels of control.

So I think this concept really has subversive power. By using these ideas to analyze many of the issues in China you can make some unique discoveries. Thus, I believe that the future development of Chinese feminism lies in analyzing Chinese phenomena with these theories. This process of analysis might even bring about some new concepts and new frameworks. Outside of China I have come to see two different types of scholars. The first kind believes that it is important to research a problem and then publish a research paper, which they hope will influence people's way of thinking. The second kind takes what is written in various research papers and then creates new analytical frameworks. For example, there are many development projects in England which pay particular attention to creating usable analytic frameworks.

I think Chinese feminism should also be concerned with the second aspect. We should continually investigate issues in everyday life, and then create some analytical frameworks that people can use to examine issues. Traditional gender ideas can be found everywhere, having permeated into every nook and corner of our lives. This requires us to not only investigate these issues but also to gradually change people's way of thinking. Thus we still have very many things to do. If we can do this deeply and thoroughly, I think this will be China's contribution to the international development of feminism.

So as for me, the next step... Well, as an individual, this is how my path has proceeded. I think I have strongly identified with feminism deep in my heart. Actually the problem of terminology, that *nuquan zhuyi* has been changed to become *nuxing zhuyi*, illustrates that the environment for Chinese feminism is not good. (Laughs.) It (*nuxing zhuyi*) has

actually demonized feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*).<sup>20</sup> Thus I think sometimes when we have a chance, for example in the classroom when we are teaching or giving training, we must take the opportunity to state clearly what the concept of feminism embodies. Nowadays I feel that the bigger environment works in our favor. In other words, in China we are currently experiencing the process of the change from a society that only takes economic concerns as central to a societal model that realizes that people are the most important. You can see this transformation in such cases as now there is attention being paid to farm workers' retirement funds. In the past as we were developing our economy, these types of issues were pushed to the side. Now there is attention being paid to them. They are linked with many issues of rights and are already being brought to people's attention. I think we are in the beginning phase of this process, including possibly the gradual move to more democratic politics. However, perhaps this process is bringing about some changes to the space of feminism. Moreover feminism may provide a special contribution to China by facilitating social changes.

Thus I think to make fundamental change, we have to use a feminist perspective and maybe multiple perspectives. Recently... Well, in the past there was a period of time when I especially focused on issues of gender. Now I feel that I am placing "gender" together with many other areas in order to avoid being too limited. For example I have been looking at such things as social policies, social psychology and social work with gender. I believe that looking at things in this way perhaps will enrich the contents of gender studies.

### **Zhang: Interdisciplinary...**

Li: Right. My approach is interdisciplinary instead of treating gender and other questions as separate topics. Dealing with these topics separately does not allow us to discuss them as thoroughly as we should. The contents of people's lives actually spread into many fields of study. What I mean is that when you adopt an interdisciplinary approach, perhaps you will be able to provide more insights. So I think that having a multi-disciplinary background helps people to analyze and recognize problems and issues. It is not like... I remember a feminist scholar Friedman who wrote an article called "Transcending Gender."<sup>21</sup> In her literary criticism of women writers and women's literature, she discusses a new theory of gender boundary. In her discussion she stresses multiple identities and multiple perspectives and even the interconnectedness of gender

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<sup>20</sup> Currently there are two translations for the English term "feminism," *nüquan zhuyi* and *nüxing zhuyi*. Ping Chun Hsuing, et. al, eds. in *Chinese Women Organizing* (2001) define *nüquan zhuyizhe* as woman-rights-ism person, or feminist. Since *quan* can also mean power, the term can be interpreted as the 'ism' of women's power. Although the CCP claims gender equality as a basic principle, it has defined feminism as bourgeois. In the Chinese Communist Party's discourse since the 1920s this term can have negative connotations associated with bourgeois values. This term is primarily used to refer to Western feminists. In contrast *nüxing zhuyizhe* is woman-ism-person, or feminist. Literally the 'ism' of the female sex, this is a new translation of feminism that emerged in China in the early 1980s. This term has less political but more biological connotations than *nuquan zhuyizhe*.

<sup>21</sup> Li Huiying is mistaken in the title of the article. She is referring to the article, "Beyond Gynocriticism and Gynesis" by Susan Stanford Friedman. This can be found in Wang Zheng and Du Fangqin, eds. *Selected Works on Gender Studies* (1998).

with class and other multiple identities. I believe this kind of approach is very important and necessary. But you cannot cast aside the importance of gender. So I think we can approach problems from an interdisciplinary perspective.

In addition we must make every effort to spread the ideas of feminism. In China I really think perhaps this is a kind of activism. In the process of spreading feminism, including our teaching and participatory training classes, we are not only spreading a way of thinking. Actually during this interactive process, you find out how the society reacts to these kinds of thoughts. Why does it have this kind of reaction? What exactly are some of the difficulties that we encounter here? How do we keep making adjustments? We need to think about these issues and spread feminist ideas through this interactive process. These past few years, both in teaching and giving trainings, I really think that both sides have benefited. If you turn back and think, you will reconsider some questions, including the concept of “gender” and “men and women’s equality.”<sup>22</sup> China since 1949 has been using the phrase, “men and women’s equality.” Many people think “gender” is a western concept. But actually the concept of “men and women’s equality” was something introduced from the west. It became very “Chinese” only because the state has used it for a long time. So how do we understand this? I think concerning this there are important questions that are worthy of analysis. One thing that should be looked into is what “men and women’s equality” means in the west? Another thing that is important to examine is what sorts of changes occurred after the idea of “men and women’s equality” came to China?

You can use “men and women’s equality” or use “gender.” There are some people who feel that “gender” is a western concept. I think this shows a kind of narrow mindedness or a lack of knowledge in this area. However I think we should clarify the terminology; we should even perhaps understand the contexts of these terms. I think during the early period of liberation we often talked about “men and women’s equality.” We also talked about “rights.” But we actually did not understand what these concepts implied. We could not really understand gender like we can now. At that time we often said “men and women’s equality;” we would scream over and over “men and women’s equality.” However in actuality we looked at men and women as being the same instrumentally. But we now look at this issue from the perspective of “rights,” and we see “men and women’s equality” very differently. So I think these two concepts of “men and women’s equality” and gender share many things. However, the concept of “men and women’s equality” has its limitations. By using the concept of gender we can unearth many of the roots of the instances of inequality. In this sense, “gender” provides unique insights. I think in this aspect there are still many important issues to ponder.

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<sup>22</sup> “The equality between men and women” (*nan nu ping deng* in Chinese) has been promoted in the Chinese official discourse since the establishment of the PRC. For a long period of time, this slogan illustrates the Communist Party gender view that women and men are same and thus they should be treated in the same way despite their biological differences. It is used today by some people as the equivalent of “gender equality.” It has been written into laws as one of the basic national policies in China, since the former President Jiang Zeming spoke about it at the Fourth UN Women’s Conference in Beijing (1995).

So this kind of reflection...After this kind of reflection, we also need to consider the state of the situation in China. I think because of national differences, Chinese people and foreigners develop different strategies. However, when humans reach a certain level of development, I believe that there are in fact very many things that are common to all people and are not distinct according to national boundaries. So I think there can be many shared things such as ideas and concepts, principles, and some of the basic methods used. However perhaps there are some differences in some of the specific tactics that we employ. For example, the 1995 World Women's Conference was held in the Huairou County of Beijing. Jiang Zemin, the Party General Secretary, made a statement that the state had always been advocating the policy of "men and women's equality." (Laughs.) His speech was very interesting. He was not talking about international exchange; instead he was saying that China was already performing well in this area as we had always insisted. This reflects an important point of difference. Basically his language was that of the mainstream state discourse; it was a traditional way of thinking. However, when we introduced "gender" we already had learned a lot of meanings of this concept. What is the difference between "gender" and "men and women's equality?" So we could develop a strategy. Sometimes although we use old terminology, we have given it new meanings. Recently I was asked to lecture in Guangdong. The title of my lecture was "How to Implement the Basic State Policy of Men and Women's Equality." Later they asked me how I would use the concept of gender in such a talk. Actually I think we shouldn't consider "gender" merely as a concept; instead we should understand its meanings. For example, the central part of the concept of gender is the issue of rights. There are two fundamental parts in this concept. The first is the structural problems of gender. Actually when you discuss "men and women's equality" you can add this. I am not very sure but I feel that in the west this problem of how to discuss this does not exist. You say whatever you want to teach. However, here, we have to pay attention to our strategy when we discuss gender. The strategy is to avoid causing rejection of a new culture. We should try to give new meanings to the existing mainstream language that has been accepted by the state. We should place gender into the content of our talk. I believe that in this aspect we need to develop more of these kinds of tactics. I do not think this is a compromise on our part, because if we don't use this strategy, our thoughts wouldn't be accepted. It will be a gradual process. During this process you definitely want to put into your talk the essence of gender theories. Otherwise I am afraid that the concept of gender in China will come to a premature end. We must think about our strategy.

**Zhang: So in the classroom, especially when you give lectures to the party and government cadres, no matter if you use "men and women's equality" or strategically use and teach about "gender," have you been challenged?**

Li: Yes, especially in the class for young and middle-aged leading cadres. When this class first started we discussed what is gender, and that included in this concept is the pursuit of men and women's equality. The students said "men and women's equality" meant that men and women are all the same. This was how they understood it. Therefore, they believe that Chinese women already have achieved a very high position in society. So the students often challenged me by saying these sorts of things. Every time someone raises this kind of opinion, we will try to read his way of thinking – try to understand his

perspective. Then when we come back to the classroom discussion, we will try to clarify the issues for the students and correct the misunderstandings. So for example, this time when I went to Guangdong to give lectures, I tried to address quite a few of the misunderstandings regarding the notion of “men and women’s equality.” (Laughs.) Because this slogan has been used in China for so many years, there are quite many misunderstandings regarding it, for example, the notion that “men and women are all the same” and that their physical strength is also the same. This is just a ridiculous interpretation of “men and women’s equality.” Our understanding of “men and women’s equality” does not have these kinds of connotations. I would talk directly about the equality of rights. We question how to understand the concept of rights, how the “equality of rights” manifests, what are basic rights and what are rights to develop. When you talk about “men and women’s equality” in this way, you are not repeating the old discourse by using this term with its old meanings. Then the students will realize that within this old rhetoric they can still find new meanings and there is still a lot of work to be done. This enables them to skip over the original way of thinking. Thus, I think that when students challenge me, this actually helps me to eventually know what I need to clarify. It helps me to discover exactly what are their areas of misunderstanding that I need to address in the class and how I should do this. We have to let them know the true meanings of a concept, or what kind of meanings we should give it. Thus, I feel that during the process of being challenged by the students I am afforded an opportunity for self-reflection, self-criticism and self-improvement.

**Zhang: We know that you do research on gender and social policy, and that you pay special attention to social policy. Up until the present what kinds of difficulties do you feel exist when we try to introduce the concept of gender and its ideas into policymaking? How much have we accomplished?**

Li: Integrating gender theories into policymaking... Well, I think since social policies are made by policy makers, we can try to convince these people. But since they make the call, it is extremely important for these policy makers to have gender consciousness. In China the conditions for women’s interest and pressure groups to have a direct impact on policymaking are still not ripe. So under these kinds of circumstances, the importance of policy makers is even greater. Thus it is extremely important for these people to have an understanding of gender issues. Of course I think this completely does not undermine the importance of the many women’s groups currently in China. These groups use every kind of channel to influence policy makers so that when policies are made but overlook or violate women’s interests, they can express women’s interests. Meanwhile, I think we need to hold gender trainings for many leading cadres. Thus in this aspect, our goal is to not only become a part of some discipline but also influence extensively the trainings for many leading cadres at the party school. In the beginning these classes are electives and make them available to more people. Later we hope to make them required courses... I think relatively Guangdong province has promoted this quite forcefully. They have the “one hundred lectures” program to promote the state policy of “men and women’s equality.”

**Zhang: Where in Guangdong? In the Party School?**

Li: The program was jointly promoted by Guangdong province's Party School, Women's Federation, Organization Department, and the Propaganda Department. They had an opening ceremony for the program of "One Hundred Lectures Implementing the Basic National Policy of Men and Women's Equality" – one hundred lectures to make the national policy of men and women's equality known to all.

**Zhang: One hundred lectures?**

Li: Yes, a hundred lectures. Our first target was the leading cadres. That is to say we put forth great effort so that government officials and policy makers would know that we have this kind of national policy and what sort of contents this policy contains. When these people perform their official responsibilities in the future, they would take into account the spirit of this national policy. But I think there are also limitations to this approach. Actually this year is the All China Women's Federation's year of "Promoting the Basic National Policy of Men and Women's Equality." That is to say...

**Zhang: Who initiated this?**

Li: The All China Women's Federation.

**Zhang: The All China Women's Federation?**

Li: Yes, right. In fact the Women's Federation is putting a great deal of effort into publicly promoting this policy. In Guangdong, if you now look at Guangdong satellite television programs, they have long aired a public service announcement which states that: "Men and Women's Equality is a basic national policy that facilitates our national development." This program was quickly approved.

**Zhang: They have done a good job.**

Li: Yes, they really have.

**Zhang: What about CCTV?<sup>23</sup>**

Li: Well...It depends on how the All China Women's Federation has promoted this and how they have pushed the Department of Organization.<sup>24</sup>

**Zhang: This also requires a strategy.**

Li: Yes, the tactic is how we go about convincing people, letting people know that the national policy of men and women's equality really exists – there are five national basic policies, not four. It really depends on how we proceed. If publicity fails, integrating

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<sup>23</sup> China Central Television is a state-run television network.

<sup>24</sup> This is an internal division of the Chinese Communist Party, and therefore is not formally considered to be a Chinese governmental agency.

gender into policymaking will only become empty talk. So I think the work of informing people is really important. At the same time, we can also consider bringing forth some legislative proposals. In fact in our country, women are facing many problems, but from the government's point of view, these are not issues. However, there are some other problems that are somewhat linked with the problems faced by women. For example, the problem of the sex ratio of newborn babies is worsening. Currently the disparity in rates of boys compared to girls is increasingly large; it has reached 118:100, according to official statistics. Since girl babies are not preferred, the girls are often abandoned. This situation has reached a very serious state. Officials have realized that in the future when these boys grow up and want to get married, they will not be able to, since there will not be enough girls to marry. The monogamous marriage system will collapse. They certainly consider this a problem. If they do not solve this problem, it will cause many, many social problems in the future. So when baby girls are abandoned, it was not initially considered to be a problem. However, later officials have come to fear that some social problem may arise...

**Zhang: These officials' perspective is still the male perspective. They approach the "women's question" from the male perspective, like what happened to "releasing bound feet."**

Li: Right. Right. They always approach problems from a man's point of view, from the state's point of view. When we talk about this, we can explain to them from their point of view. Why is this phenomenon taking place? Since this situation is not good for men, only by protecting women's rights can they minimize the occurrence of this problem. They are actually connected. Thus, we guide them to think from a different point of view. So this time, a representative proposed solutions to this problem. One of them is to advocate the basic national policy of men and women's equality. In this way this issue can be raised and then steps can be taken to improve the situation. This includes such issues as the marriage structure and the contents of the local rules and regulations which often violate women's rights to choose where they live after getting married. We should strive to work to eliminate these types of practices by making such legislative proposals.

**Zhang: You just spoke of the particularity of the issue of women's participation in government. This is something that you began to give attention to even prior to the 1995 World Women's Conference. As we begin to reconsider the problem of lack of women's participation in government in China, what differences have you found? I mean how differently do you look at this issue today compared to the way you understood it before you got to know feminism?**

Li: Before I learned about feminism, I probably looked at women's issues more often in terms of the problem of the "double-burden" for career women. After I came to study feminism, I have come to realize that this role conflict actually is linked to the gendered division of labor. Perhaps when we trace back to the causes of these issues and uncover some of the real roots of the problems, we realize...In the past you might have felt sympathy for many of the female leading cadres since being in this position gave these women a lot of stress. However now we know that we should try to solve this problem

by looking at the gendered division of labor. This is not only a problem with an individual woman, but instead is a problem with social opinions and even our government policies. So now when you look at these women, you not only feel sympathy, but you also find these women both “modern” and “traditional.” These women themselves are quite contradictory. In terms of challenging many traditional ways of thinking and the gendered division of labor, they are modern; however, many of these women have a very weak sense of rights. We pay special attention to this issue of rights and find these women lack a sense of rights; they still only follow orders. Of course perhaps it is possible that they have many difficulties in their particular position, which demands them to behave in a certain way. They are both traditional and modern. In terms of challenging the gendered division of labor, they also demonstrate a lack of resolution. They feel that they should, in addition to being a modern leader to challenge tradition, they must also work to be a good wife and a caring mother. To sum up, these women often identify with many traditional ideas. Thus, this gives these women a lot of stress. They need to think how during this process they can free themselves from such pressure and become less psychologically restrained. How can they thoroughly challenge these traditional ideas? In these aspects we still have a lot of work to do. I believe that perhaps this problem still encompasses many other issues within it. Moreover, when examining this problem, you cannot only look at these women. You can see that our society and system support what these women think and do. There are so many dimensions to this problem. Looking at the problem in this way, we realize that changing these women’s way of thinking is not the only solution; we have to not only change their ideas but also seek to change many of the systems in our society, government policies, and even customs that are related to this problem.

So I think gender theories really have the potential to challenge many of our traditional ways of thinking. It does not allow us to limit our vision to one aspect of the problem; it tends to subvert many aspects of our everyday life, the fundamentals of our everyday life. Thus, when we pursue feminist goals, we may discover that this is a very difficult process. However, if we do not do this in a feminist way, in many cases you can only touch the surface; we will never be able to make necessary fundamental changes. After having shouted the slogan of “men and women’s equality” for so many years, we find actually not many fundamental changes have been achieved. Why? Because the roots of many problems are not touched and consequently the problems wouldn’t be truly solved. So I think by truly embracing the concept of gender we will...It sharpens our vision and makes us realize that there are many root issues. Of course to solve the problems from their roots is much more difficult. But we must insist on this. Otherwise...Well, look at history. It is really amazing how traditional gender ideas persist and come back. Why? Because the issues at root are never touched. Nowadays, many young women think returning to tradition is trendy. History is fragmented. Thus, I even more deeply feel the necessity of promoting gender consciousness.

**Zhang: Do you even have the feeling that you have a mission to accomplish?**

Li: Yes, I really think that my feeling right this moment is a sense of responsibility. I feel that there is something that sustains me and drives me in life. This feeling is different

from the feeling of merely considering my career as a teacher. I feel great! I like this feeling! (Laughs.) There was one time at a conference when the speaker asked the audience to raise their hand if they were feminists (*nuquan zhuyizhe*). However, no one raised his or her hands. This is because this concept has been demonized in China.<sup>25</sup> This also happens elsewhere, but in China it is even worse. Feminists are portrayed as men-haters who think of men as enemies. I think this view is caused by the fact that not many people have a real understanding of gender theories.

**Zhang: Now, do you consider yourself a feminist?**

Li: If you consider a feminist a person who pursues women's rights, then I am. I seek to advocate human rights for all but I think women's rights should not be overlooked and they should be guaranteed. In this sense, I am a feminist. However if you think a feminist is a person who believes in a theory that oppresses men or views men as the enemy, then I am not. Of course I believe that those who demonize feminism do not really understand feminism. I think currently there are not many people who really have a grasp of feminism in China. So I feel that because I understand feminism, I identify with feminism in my heart. So in China when people assume that because you are a feminist you want to bring down men, you must first clarify your position to them. You must first tell them what you are actually talking about and then what you personally advocate and stand for. However, perhaps you will not have very many opportunities that will allow you to explain so much. (Laughs.)

**Zhang: Thank you very much.**

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<sup>25</sup> Currently there are two translations for the English term "feminism," *nüquan zhuyi* and *nüxing zhuyi*. Ping Chun Hsuing, et. al, eds. in *Chinese Women Organizing* (2001) define *nüquan zhuyizhe* as woman-rights-ism person, or feminist. Since *quan* can also mean power, the term can be interpreted as the 'ism' of women's power. Although the CCP claims gender equality as a basic principle, it has defined feminism as bourgeois. In the Chinese Communist Party's discourse since the 1920s this term can have negative connotations associated with bourgeois values. This term is primarily used to refer to Western feminists. In contrast *nüxing zhuyizhe* is woman-ism-person, or feminist. Literally the 'ism' of the female sex, this is a new translation of feminism that emerged in China in the early 1980s. This term has less political but more biological connotations than *nuquan zhuyizhe*.