

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

SITE: CHINA

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Liu Bohong, born in 1951, is Deputy Director of the Institute of Research on Women of the All-China Women's Federation. Liu has played an active role circulating feminism in the Women's Federation system by leading many research projects on women and gender. Since the 1995 UN conference in Beijing, she has been one of the major figures promoting gender-awareness in the Chinese government system. She has participated in formulating national programs that implement the 1995 UN Platform for Action. Liu's narrative illustrates a significant historical period in which the official women's organization has been experiencing meaningful transformations.

Chen: Professor Liu, would you please speak about some of your experiences when you were growing up, as well as how some of your ideas that you engage in your research were formed? How have your personal experiences affected how you approach women's studies?

Liu: Sure. First I would like to talk a bit about my childhood. The development of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and I had similar experiences. The PRC was founded in 1949 and I was born in 1951. I grew up in a military family. When I was little my parents were away a lot of the time so I was taken care of by the military's nursery and then went to the military's kindergarten. After kindergarten I went to the military's elementary school. The environment when I was growing up was that of a collective, that of a big revolutionary family. In my kindergarten a lot of the kids' fathers and mothers were in the military fighting in the Korean War. Therefore, the parents were all away most of the time, so in our kindergarten it seemed like a big family.

Now that I think back, having this kind of experience when I was young has taught me a lot of things. My younger brother has a child. My younger brother and his wife worked overseas for a long time. My nephew has complained to them and said, "Why didn't you take responsibility for me? You chose to give birth to me so why didn't you raise me?" During the 1970s and the 1980s China's diplomats or Chinese officials who were stationed overseas were not allowed to bring their children with them. Thus, I have talked with my nephew about how I felt growing up and tried to get him to understand why his parents acted like they did. I told him that although he complained about his father and mother giving birth to him and not raising him, I felt grateful that after I was born, my father and mother did not raise me; instead they sent me to the nursery school, then kindergarten, and then to a boarding school. I was in boarding school from elementary school straight through high school. Thus, the way my nephew and I think about the issue is different. Perhaps the reason is that the times and the kinds of education are different. At that time we all led a revolutionary way of life. We did not complain to our fathers and mothers, because we respected them and admired them. We knew they had a far greater responsibility to carry out. Compared with raising us, their responsibility to society was definitely more important. At the same time the army pragmatically took their situation into consideration. By providing an educational system to raise us kids, the army reduced the familial responsibilities of the army personnel. I really fondly remember this time in my life. It has given me very many things that have already become an integral part of my life. What are these things? They are the sense of responsibility toward others and society and the inspiration of many heroes. Some of these children's fathers and mothers sacrificed their lives for our country in the Korean War and could not come back. Thus the kids raised in this environment all considered each other to be brothers and sisters. Teachers and staff, whom we called "aunties," took special care of these children, those kids that we now speak of as the children of martyrs. They were treated better than kids who did not lose their parents. The teachers raised them with care as if they had been their own kids. People had an immense degree of respect for these martyrs who overcame hardships and fought valiantly and who sacrificed their lives for their country. Their children should be doubly treasured and loved. When we were young we often sang a song. The lyrics were, "Aunties are like our

mothers; we will listen to what they say.” It was really like this at the time. The auntie at the nursery would tell me stories. Even now, as soon as I close my eyes, I can remember this time. Let me tell you a special little story that shows how much they cared for us. In the early 1950s we did not have a refrigerator but in the summers we loved to eat cool tomatoes mixed with sugar. Our aunties would cut the tomatoes, mix the sugar, put them on the plate, put the plate in the bucket, and attach a string to the bucket so that they could lower the bucket down into a well. They used the cool temperatures of the well to cool the tomatoes. When it was time for our meal, they would pull the tomatoes up from the well and give them to us to eat. At that time we all thought the icy cool tomatoes mixed with sugar tasted especially delicious. Now living conditions are much better and if you want to eat cool tomatoes mixed with sugar, you can just put the tomatoes in the refrigerator. I do not even know if this is something kids these days still think of as a treat to eat. More than forty years have passed by, but each time I eat icy cool tomatoes mixed with sugar I still think of Auntie Zhu Yanzong from the nursery. In the revolutionary cradle, we thought of all of our small friends like brothers and sisters. Therefore after I grew up, I have always advocated the spirit of collectivism and heroism. I truly love the kind of feeling described in a famous song of the time: “as the sun sets on the western mountains and the rosy clouds fly, the soldiers return to camp from their training field.” I like feeling that I have a common goal with many others, the strength that comes from uniting as one, and the kind of friendships that were as intimate as ties between sisters and brothers. Personally, more or less I have a kind of loyalty to friends, and am always willing to share their joys and sorrows. Perhaps the reason is because I learned this from my parents’ generation. They sacrificed themselves to protect others. I especially admire the heroism and the idealism of the times.

Chen: Do you think these things had any influence on your engagement in research on women?

Liu: I feel these things influenced me by fostering my sense of social responsibility. I remember when I was a kid, my father and mother explained to me why they had to join the revolution. They had to struggle in order to create a new China. Now when I visit my father’s grave, I often wonder if my father and his generation knew how corrupt many cadres are nowadays – that the results of their struggle would be this kind of present day situation. Would they still have bled and sacrificed for this? I asked my mother this question, and my mother said that they still may have. I think that her answer reveals the idealism of a person from their generation, self-sacrifice and persistence. This has actually profoundly affected me and I do not think this same spirit can be found in kids these days. When SARS¹ affected China, everyone raced to get away instead of helping others. We now struggle for gender equality. Actually our ideals are similar to those of our parents. During their time they fought so that poverty-stricken people would gain control of their own lives. Today in our struggle, we hope that all people – men, women, old people, and children – can lead dignified lives by having the protection of basic human rights.

¹ Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. In 2003 there was a breakout in some countries, including Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Chen: Do you think that the gradual influence of heroism and idealism that affected you during your childhood provides you with an important background and foundation for what you strive for in your work today?

Liu: Yes, I think it really had an important influence on me. In addition, another lesson I learned from this time period was the kind of persistent spirit that people demonstrated in their studies and in their efforts to overcome any sort of difficulties. After 1949 when the new regime was established,² they did not have any experience in building a country. In fact they had to overcome many unexpected difficulties. So they studied extremely diligently. For me, this was very important. I am a so-called experienced, knowledgeable expert, but I never had that many opportunities to study. Actually my ability to overcome obstacles in order to study was something that I learned from them.

Chen: Could you talk about how you first got involved in the area of gender equality and the things that you have learned or obtained from being involved in this field?

Liu: My employment history is very interesting. Actually I never thought that I wanted to be involved in women's studies. In the past, I always had worked in more mainstream sort of professions. For example, I was a worker and a soldier. From a traditional point of view, the Women's Federation³ is not a mainstream governmental institution. In the time of my parents' generation, people who worked in the Women's Federation were all the wives of leading cadres. For the most part they did not have any sort of specialized training or expertise. They merely assisted their husbands in dealing with "women's problems." Therefore when I was young, in fact, I looked down upon these officials' wives. I thought that they did not get their position based on their own skills, but instead depended upon their husbands' authority and status for their positions. When I was young my life goals did not have anything to do with working at the Women's Federation. But then later why did I choose to do research work in the Women's Federation? There were many different and complicated reasons. However, fundamentally it was my own choice.

During the mid 1980s I was pursuing a graduate degree. My research focused on the history of socialist thought. In 1986 a period of criticizing "bourgeois liberalization" started. Prior to this, following a reform and opening-up policy⁴, the country embraced the spirit of "seeking truth from facts," and was concentrating on undertaking tasks that had been previously neglected. China had made an extremely monumental historical turn for the better and we felt like we had tremendously bright prospects for the future. We had broken through the ideological confinement and ended the historical disaster of the Cultural Revolution.⁵ At that time we students were very excited and had chosen some

² The People's Republic of China was established in 1949 after the Chinese Communist Party army defeated the Nationalist Party and toppled its government.

³ All China Women's Federation.

⁴ Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has adopted the policy of "reform and opening-up" to build more effective political and economic systems.

⁵ 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

innovative topics for our research papers. But as a result of the campaign against “bourgeois liberalization,” research topics that concerned the reform of the political system were all “shot down.” In order to avoid suspicion, the majority of my classmates wrote papers that focused more on history. I found out that although studying about women was marginalized, it was the kind of research question that would not be rejected. Thus I focused on the thoughts on the equality of the sexes by three important thinkers – Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen.⁶ Now that I look back, I realize that at that time, complex political factors caused me to inadvertently begin theoretical research on gender equality and to develop a strong interest in it. The political environment of the time did not encourage people to talk about humanitarianism, human nature, or human rights, but it was acceptable to talk about women and the rights and interests of women. Possibly this was because at the time society did not think of women’s issues as being very important. Studying women’s issues would not be considered to bring about dangerous political thinking. Thus, a space for gender research was created in this way. I really unintentionally entered into this area of study.

After I chose this research area, my teachers and classmates all felt deeply sorry for me. This was possibly because I was a rather good student who had some influence in the school. Classmates commented on my choice by saying, “the good steel has not been used for the edge of the knife.” They also gave me advice saying, “Bohong, you should not study women’s issues in order to evade the responsibility of research on the reform of political systems because of the temporary political environment. What a pity!”

Later in my life, I received similar suggestions. Bu Wei⁷ and I had worked together on “Research on Women’s Images Portrayed in Chinese Commercials.” Our paper was accepted by the North American Chinese Sociologists’ Association⁸ for their annual conference. Some people suggested to me, “Your research has some new ideas and no one else is doing this kind of research in China. If you could apply these approaches and your efforts to analyzing politics and economics, you would have a tremendous influence on society.” They also felt bad for us.

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.

⁶ Saint-Simon: Henri de Saint-Simon is reknowned as the founder of the "Saint-Simonian" movement, a type of semi-mystical "Christian-Scientific socialism that pervaded the 19th Century. Saint-Simon envisaged the reorganization of society with an elite of philosophers, engineers and scientists leading a peaceful process of industrialization tamed by their "rational" Christian-Humanism. Charles Fourier: 1772–1837, French social philosopher. From a bourgeois family, he condemned existing institutions and evolved a kind of utopian socialism. In *Théorie des quatre mouvements* (1808) and later works he developed his idea that the natural passions of man would, if properly channeled, result in social harmony. Robert Owen: 1771-1858, was a Welsh socialist and social reformer. He is considered the father of the cooperative movement.

⁷ Bu Wei is a researcher and professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Science (Media Research Institute). Her research focuses on gender and mass media, feminist theories and activism, education.

⁸ Abbreviated as NACSA. NACSA is a North America-based global network organization of sociologists of Chinese and non-Chinese ethnic background. These sociologists not only are based in the United States and Canada but spread across China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and elsewhere.

However, since that time, twenty years have already passed by. My former classmates and colleagues as well as some very influential scholars have changed their attitudes. They use a different phrase to evaluate the research that I do. They say I have “hit the mark by a fluke.” They have also started to realize that the issue of gender equality cuts into and affects many other areas of study. I think this is an important space and a place to enter into the realm of Chinese politics.

We can take a look at the development of Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Actually it has been very difficult to develop worker’s NGOs, for instance, the trade union as a top-down institution has had difficulties, even though China has signed the “International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights”⁹ and the “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.”¹⁰ These agreements include such things as the right to organize and the freedom of speech. However, the government does not hinder women’s organizations in the same way and allows women’s NGOs to be established. In fact, women’s NGOs are some of China’s earliest NGOs and they are one of the three most powerful types of NGO in China. The three most powerful groups include women’s NGOs, NGOs which help the poor, and NGOs engaged in environmental protection. My own research experience reveals that actually, there is actually a space of “civil society” in China. Although this term may be inaccurate and this space is not institutionalized, there is a grey area and we happen to work in it.

In this area, we can research women’s rights – that is to say human rights, basic human rights. These include women’s political rights, economic rights, cultural rights, the right to receive an education and also bodily rights. Of course it is not as if as soon as we start research in these areas we can achieve all of these things immediately, but we can slowly have influence in these areas. Our struggles surrounding these issues are related to China’s overall progress. For example, women’s rights in marriage and family and the right to protection from domestic abuse and sexual harassment were considered extremely sensitive areas. Also, there is the problem of the rights of female prisoners. All these issues were initially brought up as women’s rights issues. Since women should have these rights, all citizens should have these rights, including disabled people, rural people, senior citizens and children. Actually women’s research is an avenue to getting to many of these issues. Therefore, like I said before, my friends and classmates now think I have “hit the mark by a fluke.”

In this aspect, China’s women studies started to explore these issues earlier than the more mainstream research fields. China’s first NGO international conference was held in July 1999 at the Beijing Friendship Hotel. At that time groups did not dare to be called a non governmental organization. Instead they were called non-profit organizations (NPO). But

⁹ The UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) is the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of this Covenant by its States parties.

¹⁰ The UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966. The UN Human Rights Committee is the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the Covenant by its State parties.

the women's NGO international conference was held at Oxford University in June 1999. Generally people think that women's qualifications were quite low so naturally women's research must be rather mediocre. But I feel women's studies in China has been influenced by the strategic visions developed internationally; our research is not necessarily slow and shallow compared to mainstream research. We use gender to analyze public policies. We look at the procedures and principles that have been used to formulate public policies in China. Then we analyze how to examine, evaluate and revise them. People are still used to thinking that a policy influences all people in the same way, that government policy making represents all people, and that the government may effectively evaluate whether the policy is good or not. We use gender to analyze the policies and provide feedback to the government, which reveals that policies may affect different segments of the population in different ways. It should not be the government (the policy-maker) but instead the people affected by the policy or a third party (independent evaluator) that evaluates the policy. Let me give you another example. When discussing the problem of the serious imbalance of the sex-ratio of new-born babies in China, the government cannot help but accept the gendered analysis of this issue. They cannot merely regard it as a Chinese tradition whereby boys are favored, or only regard it as a purely technical question of analyzing amniocentesis to determine the sex of the baby or not. When you use gender to analyze this issue, you can see that it is a problem at the level of the social system. We have been liberated for so many years, yet traditional ideas still play a role in our policy formation. This particular problem has some material and systematic bases, for example, policies of land, property, marriage and even basic-level election in rural areas. If young women do not have the right to vote and instead get married and are represented by their husbands' vote, then they would not be qualified to be voted as community leaders; nor would they have the real right of inheritance or property rights. If girls encounter difficulties in education, employment and marriage, why would anyone ever want to give birth to a girl? Thus, by using these research techniques we have come to see that currently China's social policies have much deeper implications, things that were invisible to us before. My classmates joke that I "hit the mark by a fluke." However, in terms of the depth and extensiveness of scholarship, my academic choice did bring me many opportunities.

Interviewer: What are some of the things that have deeply impressed you after you entered the field of women's studies?

Liu: The discipline of women's studies is rather new to us, and honestly I myself entered into this area quite late compared to those who started in the 1980s. When I came to this research institute, it already had very many specialized researchers. More than a third of the people at the research institute today came here before I arrived. But I think my work attitude and the result of my work may have made a difference. Now young people choose to work here because the environment has improved. As for my generation, during the Cultural Revolution, we did not have many opportunities to study. Probably most of us had been to the countryside to work, to the factories, or to the army. We regarded these experiences as valuable for us and assiduously learned from these experiences. This fostered a kind of character in us. We would not wait to take action only when external conditions allow; instead we would simultaneously study and work.

Therefore it also caused us to treasure each and every historical opportunity. We actively participated in all kinds of intellectual activities within and outside of the country. This in and of itself has had an exponential degree of influence. The more you participate in these activities, the more ideas you will come up with. The greater your resources, the greater your opportunities are. On the other hand, the more you hesitate, the fewer the opportunities you will have. Thus your attitude eventually determines how much intellectual wealth you can accumulate. This kind of diligence and hard work have created for me a lot more opportunities and varied experiences than many other people.

Chen: Could you tell us about some of your most memorable experiences?

Liu: At the end of September 1993 I changed careers and ended my service in the army. Two months later I was especially fortunate to be able to participate in the Asian Pacific Women's Non- governmental Forum, which was held in Manila, Philippines, in November 1993. This was one of the regional constituent groups which helped to prepare for the Fourth World Conference on Women. I remember, at this forum, there were representatives from nineteen non-governmental organizations, and also twenty-four representatives from the Chinese non-governmental committees to the Fourth World Conference on Women in China. So altogether there were forty-three representatives from mainland China. That was the first time China's non-governmental organizations appeared in front of the world. The vice chairwoman of the All China Women's Federation at the time, Huang Qizao,¹¹ announced at the meeting that the All-China Women's Federation was China's largest women's non-governmental organization. This announcement sent shock waves throughout the meeting. Some people supported this view while others doubted its claim. I was a witness to this historical event.¹²

After I came back from the Philippines, I started working on China's non-governmental organizations' committee for the Fourth World Conference on Women.¹³ I took the post of the forum organization department vice-minister and was one of the earliest people to begin preparatory work for the Chinese non- governmental forum. Arranging such a large scale conference was truly a challenge. This work gave me the opportunity to participate in some important international activities. For example, some of these activities included the 1994 United Nations Population and Development Conference in Cairo. There I attended the NGO Forum. In 1995 I attended the NGO forum of the United Nations Social Development summit meeting in Copenhagen. These were all a series of United Nations preparatory forums for the Fourth World Conference on Women. When I attended the Fourth World Conference on Women, I also had the opportunity to attend the governmental level conference as an observer from NGOs. An observer had a consultant status. Participating in the activities of the two sides allowed me to have a better understanding than most Chinese participants of the United Nations

¹¹ At the time Huang Qizao was the Vice President of the All China Women's Federation.

¹² Scholars and activists have been debating whether the All China Women's Federation should be considered a NGO or a governmental institution.

¹³ The Chinese organizational committees had five subcommittees: the general membership committee, treasury committee, publicity and mobilization committee, security committee and non- government forum committee

decision making mechanisms concerning women's issues. Actually this was the most important aspect of this job.

Chen: How useful was participating in these various activities to your research?

Liu: These activities had a tremendous influence on my research. They opened up my horizons and transformed my ideas. I will give you a simple example. Before I attended the 1993 Asian and Pacific Non-government Women's Forum, I had been influenced by our leader Deng Xiaoping¹⁴, who said, "Science and technology are the most important productive forces." During China's Cultural Revolution, we did not respect science, did not respect knowledge, and we attacked intellectuals. Therefore after the policy of reform and opening, Deng Xiaoping had to enhance the status of science and technology in society. I also regarded science and technology as an extremely positive aspect of our development. After I went to Manila and participated in a forum that addressed the topic, "Woman and Science and Technology," I learned that science and technology could also bring negative repercussions to women. At that time I was shocked, since this other way of looking at this issue was completely at odds with my previous education. Thus, we listened attentively to other voices at the forum and discovered that with a gender analysis, we could see that science and technology could affect women in many different ways. Science and technology is also a double-edged sword. It may benefit humanity and promote the development of women, but it may also exclude women from development. These different perspectives caused me to change my previously one-sided point of view. Thus the forum broadened the angle of my outlook and enabled me to look at development issues more comprehensively, more concretely, and more thoroughly.

Another example would be that in the past, I was not sensitive to gender issues in my research and work. I became accustomed to certain phenomena and did not think that they could be problematic. For instance, I only began to think about the issue of opposing violence against women, including domestic violence, at the Manila forum. After I came back from the meeting in Manila, we gave a report to the officials of the non-governmental organization committee. We asked for instructions on whether we should add such a forum. They said that perhaps this would not be appropriate. The officials' guiding principle was the same as the old one; that is, to demonstrate Chinese women's "great spirit" and the enormous progress that the Chinese people had made. At that time the official said, "We are a socialist country; our families follow the model of 'Five Good Families'¹⁵ and promote the mutual love between the husband and the wife. Although

¹⁴ Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) was a leader in the Communist Party of China (CPC). Deng never held office as the head of state or the head of government, but served as the *de facto* ruler of the People's Republic of China from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. He pioneered "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" and Chinese economic reform, and Maoists accuse him of returning the country to capitalism. Deng formed the core of the "second generation" CPC leadership. Under his tutelage, China developed one of the fastest growing economies in the world while keeping the Communist Party in tight overall control.

¹⁵ The "Five Good Families" Campaign: This campaign was introduced 40 years ago in the 1950s. This campaign, supported by similar activities such as to select model, harmonious and good families, has deeply involved families throughout society. Sponsored by ACWF, this campaign uniquely promotes

socialist countries also have occurrences of wife beatings – we call domestic violence ‘wife beating,’ but that was mostly true in the former Soviet Union, where excessive drinking is culturally acceptable; people there get drunk and then hit their wives. China is not like this.” Thus, our first suggestion was not accepted. But as we got more involved in the preparatory work – after the Asian and Pacific regional forum we also had the European area, African area, North America area, and the West Asian area women’s non-governmental forum – the leadership also thought that China should have an “Oppose Violence Against Women” forum. Therefore, the non-governmental forum committee instructed the Chinese Women Judges Association¹⁶ to organize a forum on “opposing violence against women.”

I remember, on March 8, 1995 when I attended the Copenhagen summit meeting we celebrated the March 8th International Women’s Day by participating in various activities which the conference held. Each person was sent a small pink mask. We all wore them. We also sang a song called “Look at the world through women’s eyes.” At that time some Chinese participants did not agree with this slogan and said: “The quality of women is so low – should we really trust women’s eyes? We should look at the world through ‘social eyes.’” Actually this slogan advocates a perspective. When we look at the world in the way that we are used to, from a masculine point of view, we may overlook the discrimination and inequality in this world. Therefore, we must have such a new perspective. If every person puts on “a pair of glasses” and looks again at the world, then we would be able to see that there are still many instances of inequality, inhumanity, violations of human rights and unfairness. Then we could change these things and the world would be more beautiful and magnificent. This kind of process has enabled my research to incorporate new perspectives and given it inspiration.

Chen: In your opinion, based on your experiences, what sort of changes did this bring to the field of women’s studies in China?

Liu: 1993 was a turning point in my life. I left the army and came to this research institute to work. In the past eleven years, both my field of research and the social environment have undergone a great change. There has been remarkable progress. The extent of this progress cannot be described simply using a few sentences. I will give you an example. After the Population and Development Conference¹⁷ in 1994, I wrote an article. It dealt with how during this meeting the international women’s movement was reconsidering the two sides of the way population policies affected women. At the meeting, I participated in a tribunal organized by women at the NGO forum in this meeting. We call it a mock court. It was a series of activities that took place over a period of ten days. I went every day to listen and came back later to write a summary of

cultural improvements in society.

¹⁶ China Women Judges Association: Founded on May 7, 1994, the China Women Judges Association has 29 group members and 17,528 individual members. It aims to unite women judges across China to study the law, enlarge professional knowledge, improve the qualities and status of women judges, reflect women judges’ voices, and protect their legitimate rights and interests. It also publicizes the law and provides people with counseling services on the law.

¹⁷ Liu Bohong is referring to the United Nations’ International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in September, 1994.

the proceedings and my thoughts on this NGO forum. In the summary, I especially introduced the international women's movement's reflection on how some countries' population policies had negative implications for women's health. For example, some countries (regardless of whether the country encouraged population growth or limited it) tried to implement population and development policies by controlling women's bodies. This harms women's physical and psychological health. The form and degree of this damage may not be recognized. Before I had never considered this problem, and thought that my country's population policies must benefit our people. Actually, at that time China sometimes used coercion and inhumane methods. Now when we hear about these methods, they sound ridiculous, just like how ridiculous the Cultural Revolution seems to us. Many people have seen the big slogans pasted on walls in the countryside, such as, "It would be better to have another grave than to have another baby born," "If you want to hang yourself, we will give you the rope; if you want to poison yourself, we will give you the poison." It was almost as if you had more than one child, you should die. It did not matter how you were punished; nothing could be too excessive. Some places organized "national policy teams" (family planning is the basic state policy) and they recruited some demobilized soldiers. It was like what the villagers used to say – what do the cadres at the local level do? "They instruct people to plant grass and grow trees and catch women pregnant for the second time." "They urge people to produce grain and encourage them to terminate their pregnancies." The people in these national policy teams were stationed in front of women's houses in the middle of the night. Pregnant women would usually hide during the day and return home at night. However, the teams of cadres were extremely vigilant and they only needed to see a light on in a house at night and then the national policy team would be sent into action. They would grab a woman who was several months pregnant, carry her off to the jeep, take her to the county hospital, induce labor and then tie her tubes. At that time we thought that in order to carry out the national population policy we had to adopt certain measures. Otherwise the population problem would become unmanageable. We only knew that if women gave birth to fewer children women's housework burdens would be lightened and they could participate more in society's development. This was true. But we realized that only looking at this issue from this one perspective was insufficient. At the international population and development conference, people emphasized that population development must first and foremost be humane and also improve the status of women. This encouraged us to think about how to formulate policies that would better suit the interests of ordinary people. How did you make policies that were first and foremost humane and paid attention to women's health – policies that did not treat people like livestock but instead recognized their humanity? Thus, I wrote this summary article and talked to some women officials about this. Later I heard that this was passed on to the upper levels of the government. The director of the national birth control committee of the time told the department director who was in charge of the science and technology aspect of the national birth control to speak with me. The department director asked me not to say things like this and that I should write about birth control according to the rhetoric of the United Nations and the national birth control committee. I said that we were not accusing China of carrying out birth control policies while sacrificing the health of Chinese women; we wanted to be sure the government understood these matters so that they could improve policies.

The All-China Women's Federation was also very interesting. They have a place that receives letters of complaint and calls for help from the people. These complaints include surgeries for birth control that have resulted in the woman becoming disabled. This was all that the Women's Federation could do; they could not solve the problem easily. Now there has been progress. The country has formulated "The Population and Birth Control Law,"¹⁸ and has also limited the administrative authority of the birth control workers. They may no longer tie a woman's tubes without her consent and the woman must also consent to any sort of surgery related to her reproductive health. Women now have the authority regarding matters of their own body and birth control. I really think this was very big progress for our country.

Since 1995, the birth control committee has improved its work. It tries to offer high-quality service to women and inform women of various options. They also asked me to be on the Expert Committee of the State Family Planning Commission¹⁹ for their fifth and sixth sessions; I was the only representative from the Women's Federation. They also consulted with me on how best to do gender analysis of the quality of birth control service and how to implement policies that are women-centered and provide services of high quality. They also wanted to know what I thought about the serious problem of the sexual imbalance in the number of children being born and how I regarded the problem of gender equality with regards to birth control. Even though their understanding of the issues were not as deep as ours, they had made a very big change in how they viewed these issues.

Some people once asked me: "You have seen so many problems. Do you still have confidence in the government?" I replied, "Of course I have confidence!" I say so because I really have witnessed the government's progress and change regarding the issue of birth control. The government's population policies are taking account of the common people and transforming their perspective so that they now regard people as the most important aspect of policy making. I have said that the high quality of birth control services for women is equally significant as the system of "contracted responsibility linking remuneration to output" for farmers.²⁰ The government has introduced the concept of reproductive health, has implemented high quality services for women, and is

¹⁸ Population and Family Planning Law of the People's Republic of China: Adopted at the 25th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress on December 29, 2001. The "general provisions" says: this law is to bring "about a coordinated development between population on the one side and the economy, society, resources and environment on the other, promoting family planning, protecting the legitimate rights and interests of citizens, enhancing happiness of families, and contributing to prosperity of the nation and progress of the society."

¹⁹ The two Expert Committees of the State Family Planning Commission hold cross-disciplinary discussion meetings and workshops on a regular and frequent basis.

²⁰ This system is called the household responsibility system. The household responsibility system was a contracting system that revolutionized agriculture in the early Deng period. Rather than contracting to large agricultural collectives, some local leaders began dividing up the land among work units or families and then sub-contracting production quotas to these smaller units. One particularly popular method was called 'contracting everything to family,' wherein families had to sell a set amount of produced goods to state officials at stipulated prices, but anything produced above these quotas could be sold at higher prices to other buyers. *Source: The China Handbook: Regional handbooks of economic development: prospects onto the 21st century, Hudson, Christopher. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997.*

currently introducing the concept of gender. They have seen that if they do not take the gender perspective, they will not be able to solve the problem of imbalances in boys and girls birth rates. Part of this recognition can be seen in their campaign, “Love and Take Care of Girls.” Recently I also heard the news that the national birth control committee’s education department has been considering establishing the Gender Research Center of China under the Ministry of Civil Affairs. I would think that this would be first proposed by women’s organizations. However, I was surprised to learn that the government first proposed this idea. When I heard this news I was moved and touched. When they did not know anything about gender issues, sometimes they saw “gender” as threatening and sometimes they wanted to admonish me under the disguise of discussion. Now they ask me to take the position as a gender expert and academic consultant. They listen to our suggestions on how to improve their work. Of course not all of our ideas will be adopted. However, I feel that there really has been a significant change and huge progress.

Chen: So you are saying, compared with other mainstream areas of study, doing research in women’s studies gives you a fairly big space to work. How do you handle situations where your research calls into question or is antagonistic to the generally accepted point of view?

Liu: I think in terms of Chinese cultural tradition, which includes academic policies and ideological control, China really has a unique history and its own special characteristics. China is not a western democratic country; it is a socialist country where the party leads everything. Based on these circumstances, no matter if it is feminism (*nuxing zhuyi*)²¹ or gender egalitarianism, in China this kind of work needs scholars who have conscience, ideas and intelligence, and who can make strategies and ways of operating based upon our national conditions within a scope of what the government and society will accept. Scholars have many ideas and suggestions and everybody probably uses all kinds of different methods, and thus, their results may also be different. As for me, I am the vice president of the All-China Women’s Federation Women’s Research Institute. Therefore I am one of the administrative officials of this organization. One of my greatest responsibilities is to promote the research results in the field of women’s studies so that they bring about the greatest degree of transformation that is possible. Therefore I do my best to find opportunities and channels that are acceptable within the existing structure to enable women’s studies research to affect policy-making. When the government was

²¹ Feminism – Literally the ‘ism’ of the female sex, this is a new translation which emerged in China in the early 1980s. The term has less political but more biological connotations than ‘nuquan zhuyi’ which also translates as feminism. Source: *Chinese Women Organizing*. Hsiung, Ping-chun, et al., eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Currently there are two translations for the English term “feminism,” *nüquan zhuyi* and *nüxing zhuyi*. Ping Chun Hsiung, et. al, eds. in *Chinese Women Organizing* (2001) define *nüquan zhuyizhe* as woman-rights-ism person, or feminist. Since *quan* can also mean power, the term can be interpreted as the ‘ism’ of women’s power. Although the CCP claims gender equality as a basic principle, it has defined feminism as bourgeois. In the Chinese Communist Party’s discourse since the 1920s this term can have negative connotations associated with bourgeois values. This term is primarily used to refer to Western feminists. In contrast *nüxing zhuyizhe* is woman-ism-person, or feminist. Literally the ‘ism’ of the female sex, this is a new translation of feminism that emerged in China in the early 1980s. This term has less political but more biological connotations than *nuquan zhuyizhe*.

working to revise China's Marriage Law,²² I participated in this process as the representative for the Chinese Women's Studies Association. All of our suggestions were not accepted, but some were. Although very many of our opinions and suggestions were not accepted, we have made progress since in the past we would not have even been able to be a part of this process at all.

In the mid 1980s China's policy of reform and opening caused some intellectuals to spontaneously emerge with strong consciousness of group identity and subjectivity. Facing some of the problems in society, they really had a sense of social responsibility and an intense desire to organize and participate in decision-making. But I think that a kind of mechanism and a kind of clearly articulated view only emerged at the Fourth World Women's Conference.

In 1999 I spoke at a workshop on Chinese women's organizations at Oxford University. After the conference, I revised my talk into a paper called "The Development of China's Women's Non Governmental Organizations." In the last part of the paper, "The Trends in the Development of Chinese Women's NGOs," I argue that China's women's NGOs need to deal with "three kinds of relations."

The first is the relation between NGOs and the state. In fact, the relationship between women and the state has been an important theme in feminist research in recent years. I think that in order to strive for gender equality within the kind of system that our country has, we must utilize top-down mechanisms created by the state and also bottom-up mechanisms. Look at what has happened in the field of sports. The development of sports in China actually depended upon the state and could only rely on the resources of the state. If we want to achieve progress in women's development, we must make our agenda enter the mainstream as an aspect of government work; this is the local circumstance in China. Obviously it is impractical for us to create our strategies without taking into consideration this particular circumstance or to approach the government with harsh criticism or accusations. Instead we should establish a good partnership with the government in order to enable the government to understand, support and encourage our position. We need to use the government's top-down administrative force to promote the progress of women. This will be more effective than only relying on the limited power of women's organizations. Of course we cannot overlook the strength of the women's groups.

The second relation that we need to effectively handle are relations between various women's organizations, especially between the All-China Women's Federation and other women's NGOs. The All-China Women's Federation is based on a kind of top-down system. To a certain degree it is lacking some of the characteristics of women's NGOs in other countries, such as independence, an intimate relation with the women that they

²² Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China: Adopted at the Third Session of the Fifth National People's Congress on September 10, 1980, and amended in accordance with Decision Regarding the Amendment (of Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China) passed at the 21st Session of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress on April 28, 2001.

represent, and an equal and democratic internal mechanism. Moreover after the Fourth World Conference on Women, the older generation of women's leaders either retired or passed away. The new generation of women's leaders still does not have much experience with these kinds of NGO activities. There might be a tendency to manage the All China Women's Federation with more and more bureaucratization and to use a more and more governmental style. In addition, the Women's Federation is also facing challenges from society. For example when recently the Women's Federation proposed legislation that would make the retirement age the same for men and women governmental employees, they encountered disagreement as well as criticism from many women, who charged that the Women's Federation only represents "upper class women." On one hand this conflict reflects the diversification of women's interests. On the other hand it also reflects that the Women's Federation is somewhat separated from women and not identified with by women in society. Under the new historical conditions, how should the Women's Federation represent women's interests? How do they maintain independence and autonomy in their work? How do they position themselves? How do they bring about thorough change and get rid of meaningless campaigns and performances as well as condescending attitudes in their attempts to "direct and manage" women? These are really challenging problems. Currently the function of the government is changing. Its emphasis has shifted from one of management to one of service. The Women's Federation has not exhibited a similar sensitivity to the necessity of change. They are still saying that we need to manage, organize and coordinate. They are still treating other women's NGOs with a condescending attitude. This is not right.

The third relation that needs to be addressed is that between women's organization leaders and the women within an NGO. How organizing principles and mechanism are established is also very important. The organizational structure of the Women's Federation has an extremely big shortcoming. They are responsible to those above them, instead of being responsible to those under them. But this is also a duplicate of our government mechanism, a duplicate of the bureaucratic apparatus. Administrative ranking matters very much there. I remember at the Fourth World Women's Conference in Huairou, Beijing, at the NGO forum, Huang Qizao appealed to each provincial delegation that NGOs are equal and should not be treated differently according to their size. This was because in various delegations from the provinces, the "first lady" (the provincial governor's wife) or other female senior officials always observed the rules of seniority. They did not want to ride the shuttle bus with other representatives, did not want to eat boxed lunches, and always tried to enjoy special privileges. In China the hierarchical system of rank is deeply rooted in people's minds, including women. They have internalized this notion and thus are not aware that in a non-governmental organization for women we must obtain equality and break down the practices of hierarchy. Although people have different job responsibilities, we should not establish a new hierarchical system. They did not understand this truly critical aspect. Thus these women could not truly establish real equal and democratic relationships with other women. When we work to establish women's NGOs, what should we do? Do we replicate the system of seniority and create a new patriarchal and hierarchical system? Or should we employ negotiation, democracy, elections, and adopt a policy that institutes rotation of decision-making positions and power-sharing? This is an issue that I brought

up in that essay. I hoped to challenge the patriarchal system and develop new democratic relations. I believe that those organizations that are organized in the old manner will not last.

In addition, I think that it is really important for Chinese women activists to establish mutual trust, mutual understanding, mutual appreciation and tolerance. It is important to create a kind of sisterly bonding based on shared values and ideals. Otherwise, if our relationship is filled with public and covert vicious competition – some people jokingly say, “This is a Chinese characteristic” – then women’s NGOs cannot develop in the long run. This idea of “three relations” that I proposed at the Oxford seminar later gained much attention and agreement from people.

Chen: Throughout this process, have you had any regrets?

Liu: In this process... Yes. I will give you an example. When we held the Beijing World Women’s Conference, China had the most representatives – I think there were more than five thousand people. However, I can truthfully say that very few of our representatives understood how the conference was operating. Afterwards I interviewed a few Chinese women and men who had participated in the Beijing World Women’s Conference. Very few of them knew about the “Beijing Declaration” and “The Platform for Action.”²³ Rarely did they know about the Chinese government’s pledge and responsibilities. Even fewer of them knew about “mainstreaming gender” (a global strategy of advancing gender equality) and the twelve strategic targets. These included various levels of the Women’s Federation cadres. I don’t think we should criticize these individuals. This is a problem of our system. This system does not enable us to truly enter that kind of decision-making and participation mechanism.

Chen: Why?

Liu: When there were conferences on women, we tended to pay attention to performance – I call these people “the faction of praise and admiration.” We liked showing to the world a graceful performance. We were accustomed to approaching international events in this way. These women cared a lot about their appearance as if they were attending a fashion show. They did not treat such occasions as a chance to discuss important international issues. The goal of these conferences is to think about how to include women’s voices (including Chinese women’s voices) in the decision making process, how to make policies that integrate the idea of gender equality and conform with the laws of societal development. Actually the non-governmental forum is a kind of pressure group. On the international level it is a kind of mechanism that tries to ensure democratic

²³ In 1995, Beijing hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women. Representatives from 189 different countries agreed that inequalities between women and men have serious consequences for the well-being of all people. The conference declared a set of goals for progress of women in various areas including politics, health, and education. The final document issued by the conference (called the “Platform for Action”) had this to say: “The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and should not be seen in isolation as a women’s issue.” Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace, Beijing, 15 September 1995.

policy-making. Based on our cultural background, realizing this is extremely difficult. In addition, we also had many difficulties in terms of participation.

In the majority of cases, when China sends officials to attend international conferences or activities, they are restricted in various ways. When there is a limit to the number of people who may attend or a limited amount of resources, going abroad becomes a kind of privilege or a kind of benefit. People are chosen from the top downward, according to seniority. This time you will go, the next time he will go, or perhaps people who are not busy in their work will be chosen to go. Often it will be a senior or an old employee who has not had the opportunity to go abroad for many years. Thus, people are not necessarily chosen based on their understanding of the issue, their research or their needs for information. Thus, they are not obliged to do anything after attending the conference. The next time a totally different group of people will be sent. Therefore, our representatives do not know what is going on out there; nor do they know much about China regarding a certain issue. Thus, they don't know what to say at the conference. The more you do not get your ideas represented, the more you feel that you are marginalized. You listen to others who have a thorough understanding of the subject and are able to eloquently discuss it. You do not know anything. You might feel that you are better-off sightseeing and shopping than participating in the meetings. Often you find that on the one hand relatively fewer Chinese have the opportunity to participate in international activities; on the other hand, the few people that do get to participate in international activities are simply touring around in a foreign city. This is generally what I have seen.

When we began making preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women's NGO forum, I jokingly said that the Chinese women who were going to participate in the international activity could be summarized by three characteristics: First, they stayed on the outskirts of the activities; second, they remained huddled together; third, they did not voice their opinions. When you looked into a conference room, the people who were sitting closest to the entrance or who were on the sides and those who were sitting in the very back definitely were Chinese. Why? It was easy for them to leave if they wanted. They were not there as active participants. Since they did not have much knowledge on the subject, they did not have the confidence to participate. Also, some people were not even interested. I mentioned that their second characteristic was that they huddled together. When Chinese people go abroad to attend a meeting or to participate in an international conference held in China, they do not cherish the time and opportunity to exchange ideas with foreigners. Instead they huddle together with other Chinese representatives. Of course there are many reasons for this. For example, there may be cultural or language issues, and different ways of interacting with people and different degrees of participation. Others seem to know each other in the same circle, while you are a newcomer. How do you initiate conversation with other people? The third characteristic of Chinese is that they do not voice their own opinions. They don't know enough to join the conversation, because they know nothing about the topic that everyone is discussing.

In this kind of marginalization, a strange phenomenon occurs. On the one hand there are

very few opportunities to participate. On the other hand when opportunities do occur, we are unable to take full advantage of them. An example of this would be the Fifth East Asian Women's Forum which was convened in Hong Kong December 19-21, 2003. The East Asian Women's Forum was established in 1993 as part of the Manila Asian and Pacific Women's Non-governmental Forum. It was designed to be a forum for exchanges, dialogue, consultation and policy-making mechanisms between East Asian women's NGOs. Many Chinese representatives attended from many different venues. They came from various NGOs and from different areas or different cities. They were supported by different international foundations or by their work units. Altogether there were about forty to fifty people. Apart from the local Hong Kong representatives, the group from mainland China was probably the largest. However those who truly took advantage of the benefits of attending the conference and persisted to the end until we finished the discussions about the "Manifesto" and "Work Agenda" probably numbered around thirteen or fourteen people. All of the rest of the people were sightseeing and shopping around town. Thus, as I have said before – we do not have many opportunities to participate in conferences and when we do send representatives, they do not fully take advantage of their opportunity to participate.

Gu Xiulian²⁴ once said to me, "Bohong, you and some others go abroad very often and you should find a way to deal with this situation. There are so many activities in the international women's movement and there are so many schools of feminism, but we are not part of these. You must try to do something about this and represent our voices in international forums and establish the status of Chinese feminism." No matter what Chairwoman Gu's specific goals were when she made such a request, I think that if we continue to "participate" like this, perhaps Chinese women will never have their voices heard.

Again we have to think about what our goals are when we participate. We always think about how best to put on display Chinese women's "elegant demeanor and graceful bearing." It seems as if we do not have any problem in this aspect and fare better than women in other countries. When we speak, we like talking about all of our accomplishments and only superficially touch on areas where there are still problems. We propose a suggestion, but it has no real substance. It is empty – there is no way to actually put it into operation. Also we like using words that other people do not understand. Actually there is no way that we have fewer problems than other countries. For example, we have a fairly high rate of domestic abuse. The difference between us and other countries is that we are not willing to face up to and acknowledge the problems that we do have.

Chen: Facing this kind of situation, what do you think you personally ought to do?

Liu: I think one of my most important responsibilities is to introduce this kind of feminist mechanism and to urge Chinese women to join. I believe we have to reconsider the nature of the women's movement in this process. How do we deepen our analysis of gender issues? How do we then honestly put forward some views and suggestions to solve

²⁴ Gu Xiulian is the chairwoman of All China Women's Federation.

problems that are occurring on institutional, legislative, and policy levels and that have become the mainstream? We have to, on one hand, make sure that gender issues enter the macroscopic plan of economic and social development in China. On the other hand they must become part of the concerns of all kinds of international development treaty so that we can bring changes to social development and women and men's lives. This is the true essence of the women's movement.

As for me, my duty is to push forward these kinds of changes. For instance, after the World Women's Conference I participated in China's "Beijing + 5"²⁵ activities. (These were activities surrounding the Fourth World Conference on its fifth anniversary). Now we are promoting activities that commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women –the "Beijing + 10." Our goal is to change our women's studies and gender research from simply celebrating accomplishments to research that promotes the mainstreaming of gender perspective. I am not saying that we can never praise achievements. We should theorize our practices and experiences and share China's contributions with others. However, what is more important is that we must try to find a way to solve the existing problems in China. We have to find appropriate ways to deal with the problems. We have to gradually develop the law, policies and the government mechanisms. Really, this is the most important aspect of our work. Also we should get rid of the method of looking at issues in isolation and too narrowly. We are rather accustomed to only dealing with one issue as such but much less familiar with examining what kind of implications that dealing with this issue would have for bringing about systemic change. When we go to participate in an "Oppose Domestic Violence" forum, we only care about what effective methods others have for dealing with this problem. But we do not pay attention to this issue as part of the women's movement and key to the policy-making mechanism. If we did not incorporate anti-domestic violence into the United Nations Human Rights Joint Declaration, into the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and into the Beijing Program for Action, then the influence of the call to fight against domestic violence would be limited in terms of its influence and impact. Eliminating domestic violence cannot be dealt with by treating it as an isolated, very specific methodological problem. If we examine the mechanisms, the institutions and the processes related to this issue, we will be able to generate more fundamental and important impacts.

Chen: So what you are saying is that becoming part of the process and the mechanisms is more important. Regarding this, do you have any special thoughts and special resources?

Liu: As the Vice President of the Women's Research Institute of the All China Women's Federation, my position at work probably enables me to have some opportunities and

²⁵ Five years after the Beijing World Women's Conference, in a 23rd special session of the United Nations General Assembly, "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century" reviewed the progress the world has made towards achieving the goals set out by the Beijing conference. This conference has come to be known as the "Beijing +5" conference. Delegates found both progress and obstacles. The delegates made further agreements to continue carrying out the initiatives of the 1995 women's conference.

various channels of influence. I am one of the people in charge of this research facility. Because I am regarded as an expert in this area, my suggestions may have a certain amount of influence on some of the department leaders. If your calculation starts in 1949, the All China Women's Federation has been established for more than fifty years. During these years, why was it that in the 1970s and 80s the international women's movement began to slowly establish the concept of gender but the Women's Federation did not know about this? The All China Women's Federation gradually learned about this concept only after the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in China. One of the reasons for this is that the All-China Women's Federation's international activities had to conform to the policies of foreign relations. Only in the overall framework of Chinese diplomatic activity could they hold international activities. Wives, daughters and other female relatives of our leaders participated in these activities. These activities were not developed independently based on the needs of women. There was no way to widely and deeply get involved in the international women's movement and the process of promoting the development of women by the United Nations. But now, as experts, can we open up a door and remind the All-China Women's Federation and the related government departments to improve this aspect of the problem? As experts, to a certain degree and under certain conditions, we may play such a role. Through my research and teaching, I can continuously bring up these ideas and make people realize that actually knowing the kind of mechanism and system is more important than knowing the solution to a concrete issue. In fact this is also advancing the construction of democracy in Chinese politics. In the 1980s when I was a graduate student, I enthusiastically joined in the research and studies on the reform of the Chinese political system. It is a pity that later this was discontinued. Now perhaps we will be able to realize such an ideal by bringing gender equality into the mainstream. So as for me, this is a meaningful and engaging responsibility. Luckily, my position at work enables me to have a lot more opportunities and more access to resources than most people have.

Chen: Do you think that the Fourth World Conference on Women was an important milestone for Chinese women's studies?

Liu: I think so. After the 1980s, China's women studies were in a process of continual growth and development; there were different development phases. After the Fourth World Conference on Women, I wrote an article that discussed the influence of the World Women's Conference on women's studies in China. I thought that the Fourth World Conference on Women gave a strong push to women's studies in China. It has resulted in qualitative changes in China's women's studies, including the subjects of study, theoretical frameworks, research methodologies and its interactions with the women's movement. Of course we should not overestimate the impacts of this Conference. We should note that "gender" as a perspective or analytical tool is not part of the traditional Chinese culture. Thus, it will experience a process of confrontation and assimilation with traditional Chinese culture

For instance, take the project that we are working on now, "Mainstreaming Gender into the Mechanisms of the International Labor Organization." One of the very important tasks of this work is to translate the phrase "mainstreaming gender" into a Chinese term

that we would all agree on and would fully convey the original meaning in English. We have worked on the project for over a year and a half, but still have not found the appropriate Chinese translation for this concept. Some people suggested this concept was equivalent to “the equality of the sexes as the basic national policy,” but we felt that this was not quite the same as the concept of mainstreaming gender. Some people suggested understanding it as “mainstreaming gender equality,” however we still thought there was a distinction. Actually, this also illustrates that a gradual process of assimilating a foreign idea into a cultural tradition faces tremendous challenges. Wang Zheng²⁶ has said that within China many people use the concept of “gender consciousness;” but the intentions might be totally opposite. Some people use it to advance the idea of gender equality and to crush traditional sex roles. Others use it with the intent of constructing or emphasizing traditional sex roles – women should act more like women and men should act more like men. These two usages are clearly opposite.

In our culture, people’s understandings of gender consciousness are extremely complicated, because the social environment where people exist is extremely multi faceted. Therefore I feel that while women’s studies research has made incredible developments, it also faces very big challenges. We cannot expect to instantly achieve in all areas to the ideal levels articulated by feminist advocates. But we must work hard to achieve these ideals. This, of course, is extremely difficult. You must both respect peoples’ ability to comprehend these ideas, and also continuously discuss the relations and the differences of our understandings so that we can propose constructive suggestions – this is the work that I do. For example in my projects I look at how we see gender equality and gender justice as well as how these concepts are related to and different from “the equality between the sexes” in popular ideas. In fact the popular slogan of “the equality between the men and women” at a certain level does not conform to the internationally accepted demands of gender equality. These two ideas do not have the same foundations, the same standards or the same institutional systems. Thus, I think we have a long way to go before we could develop a concept that has insight into the future and is relatively reasonable based on different social and cultural contexts.

Chen: The subjects that that you are currently working on – are they in this direction?

Liu: Yes, they are. We call the project with the International Labor Organization the “3 + 1” program. The “3” refers three-part structure in labor organizing . In China this encompasses the government’s labor and social security department, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, and the Chinese Enterprise Confederation.²⁷ The “1” is the All-China Women’s Federation. We gave our own project a set goal. We hoped that through this project, we could shift our conceptualization of women’s development from “Woman in Development” (WID) to “Gender and Development” (GAD). Our

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ The Chinese Enterprise Confederation is a non-profit national organization consisting of enterprises and entrepreneurs. Its goals include protecting the rights of enterprises, professional disciplining, and services to enterprises.

government and the Women's Federation have tried to solve the pressing, real problems faced by women. But they do not pay enough attention to changing gendered structures and systems. For instance, the Women's Federation has promoted activities such as "constructing good families with five kinds of harmonious relations," "two studies, two competitions," "women's outstanding achievements" and so on, including the empowerment campaign. All of these programs are carried out within changing gender relations and the structures. Also, in their work to help the laid-off women to gain employment again, they encourage these women to do service work in their communities. This places these women in non-regular employment. In the employment structure they are engaged in the lowest level of work. The Women's Federation's goals stop at meeting the government's goal of reducing the rate of unemployment and helping these women find work. However, no one has considered the deeper issues of social security, career development, women's decreasing position in the employment structure and the traditional view that men should tend to matters outside the home, while women should be concerned with matters within the home. This kind of mentality still finds its way into programs for women's development. It simply adds women in development; it regards women as the object of development and the development of women as a means of the government to realize its goals of social development. How do we transform our way of thinking about development issues to be people-centered and women-centered? How do we make women as the subjects of development? How do we change the gender structure, the system and the institutions as well as change the unfair divisions of labor and social roles when we promote women's re-employment? How do we achieve a new understanding of development issues through these kinds of work? All of these concerns about women and development are included in our projects. Because the current conditions of society, culture, education, and also some systemic reforms in China have not achieved a certain level, we cannot all of a sudden achieve the levels promoted by GAD.²⁸ But since human society has already developed to the stage where GAD can be our goal, we should try to implement the high standards in GAD when we consider the issue of WID. We cannot always consider these matters in isolation. This is one of the ideals of our project, but we are not sure to what degree we will be able to achieve this ideal. However, we continue to work hard at this. This work includes how to best convince leaders of the Women's Federation and the leaders of the three parties involved in the system. We are frequently asked to give lectures. When we give lectures we introduce our new research on such topics as how to use gender to analyze policies, how to change and improve policies, and how to bring gender into the mainstream, etc. This work is extremely tiring. Sometimes I will jokingly say, "This work is like leaving your own land uncultivated while plowing the fields for others." What I mean is that we do not have the time to complete any of our own projects, but everyday we still have to go to give lectures. Sometimes this conflict is indeed a problem.

Chen: What sort of progress have you seen in the research regarding your attempts to "mainstream gender"?

Liu: In these past ten years of research, we have continuously probed into exactly what

²⁸ GAD, or Gender And Development, is a new approach to gender equality in development programs. The Women In Development (WID) approach emphasizes "women" not "gender".

factors have impacted the recognition and implementation of the concept and ideas of gender equality. Later we discovered that the dominant ideology and cultural tradition of “men and women’s equality” in China not only provide the foundation for understanding “gender equality” and mainstreaming gender but also pose certain barriers. Our project has delved into the relationship between the idea of “mainstreaming gender” and the popular conceptualization of “the equality between men and women.” What are the connections and differences between them? We have carried out an investigation of this topic. This investigation included questionnaires, discussion with focus groups, individual interviews and workshops. The participants in the investigation were from the “3 + 1” department staff, male and female officials and so on. The results revealed very many interesting phenomena. For instance people are accustomed to thinking that the gender issue is only a women’s issue and that solving the women’s issue is the responsibility of women’s organizations. Therefore, due to the marginalized status of the Women’s Federations in society, gender issues have been marginalized and women’s issues have been marginalized.

We believe that at the first level, gender issues are issues for all of society. It is an issue for women and men and is not just a women’s issue, an issue of one sex. It is not hard for us to see that nearly all women’s issues have some relation to men. For instance in the abduction and sale of women, men are generally the abductors and women are the ones who are abducted. Another example is so-called “selling sex” – if there were no people who frequented brothels, then there would not be any prostitutes. Yet another example is that of women’s political participation. Male cadres appoint almost all of the female cadres. Thus, this is a problem of masculine power and masculinist social structure. If we do not have this insight, and merely regard it as a women’s issue, then we will never be able to solve these problems. This is the nature of the problems we face.

The second level is deciding what mechanisms we should use to solve these problems. We think that we must bring this issue into the mainstream. We certainly want the government and the highest leaders’ political pledges. We want the government to regard this issue as an important one that they must act upon. A consideration of gender should be an integral part of all policy making. Only then will gender be truly mainstreamed. The government needs to be actively involved; it does not count if the government only takes out some money, gives it to the Women’s Federation, and then expects the Women’s Federation to bring about all of the necessary changes. Considering the current position of Chinese women’s organizations, putting the onus on the Women’s Federation to do things would only bring about further marginalization. This is a problem of approach. Of course at the same time as we emphasize mainstreaming gender, we also cannot deny a “two-front strategy.” What I mean is that we cannot abandon the projects specially targeted for women and the supports especially for women’s organizations. However these are two different matters.

The third problem that we need to pay attention to in our research is the discrepancies in the standards for gender equality at the international level and the standards for men and women’s equality in China. Based on China’s cultural background, a lot of people think that men and women’s equality means “Men work outside the home and women work

inside the home.” Some take the man as the standard as can be seen in Mao Zedong’s statement: “The times are different; men and women are all the same. Anything that a male comrade can do, a female comrade can also achieve.” This view takes the male comrade as the standard. Moreover this male comrade is not someone who has broken through the traditional sex roles or freely developed. The practices in accordance with this view have resulted in a “sexual sameness” that neglects the physiological characteristics of women and men. Deep in our culture actually lies the treatment of women not equally as “person.” This kind of phenomenon is universal and occurs from the top level of government all the way down. For example some of our leaders always say, “All levels of the leading cadres have to be vigilant to guard against the temptations of money, authority, and beautiful women.” In this speech does “all levels of the leading cadres” also include female cadres? A Women’s Federation’s comrade from the city of Shijiazhuang in Hebei Province told me that even Women’s Federation’s documents sometimes had this kind of language. We asked various leaders to fill in a survey related to issues of gender equality, in order to see their way of looking at equality. A lot of cadres agreed with the following statement: “Urban people have urban people’s equality, while rural people have rural people’s equality. Equality for rural people and equality for urban people are not the same.” They believe that the city and countryside are at different levels of development. Thus equality was accommodated into hierarchies. Many people also agreed with the statement: “Men should do work that is suitable for men, while women should do work that is suitable for women. In this way men and women can both display their own advantages.” However, what kind of work is “suitable” for men? What is “suitable” women’s work? This view of gender equality is actually in line with the old practice that “Men are best suited to be leaders, while women are best suited to be secretaries.” Traditional sex roles in society and the current disparities between the city and countryside have naturalized “a ranked equality.” This is the view of equality that some communist party members have. This kind of view of equality obviously is behind the times. But many of us still follow it. Currently many countries and a lot of international organizations all have their own definitions of “equality.” We should thoroughly study these definitions. For instance, the International Labor Organization’s definition of equality is that gender equality refers to men and women’s equality in terms of their rights, responsibility, opportunity, access to resources, recognition and incomes. It allows both men and women to fully, comprehensively develop and not be limited because of their physiology. This is the meaning of gender equality. Before we could research this well, some people are ready to jump on the topic and talk about it. This has not only ruined the intellectual atmosphere, but also failed to help to find a solution to the problem.

Fourthly, I think the concept of gender equality in other countries and China’s concept of men and women’s equality are built on different foundations. The international concept of gender equality is established within the framework of the basic human rights. For instance obtaining dignified work is each and every person’s birthright. The government should provide opportunities and services for each person. Also birthing rights are part of the basic human rights framework. This includes the basic human right to give birth to a girl. The law should not be used to naturalize the view that giving birth to a girl is not valuable. But our concept of men and women’s equality is still built upon the idea that

the government makes decisions for the people. When they decide to give you a right, you then have that right. For instance, male and female officials have different mandatory retirement ages. Gender mainstreaming encourages us to set up a progressive, comprehensive view of human rights.

The fifth level that needs to be addressed is that the methods of gender analysis and the traditional analysis of women are different. I am not going to get into this topic too deeply. The results of these two different methods of analysis lead to vastly different conclusions. The investigation of Chinese women's social position has basically been carried out in order to put forth a bright façade. I say this because the investigation did not include the two most discriminated against and most sensitive groups of women. The investigation only included women from eighteen to sixty-four years old. The disparity in the birth rate of the sex of Chinese babies is the most prominent in the world;²⁹ many girl babies are not wanted. Also the problem of increasing poverty among old people, especially old women, was not acknowledged. The study did not investigate either of these two phenomena. It avoided the most sensitive questions affecting the status of Chinese women. The investigation also was restricted in its mode of thinking. This mode of thinking was "If Chinese women's status has not been enhanced, then hasn't the work of the Women's Federation been for nothing?" However, we could think about this question from another angle: "If we did not have the work of the Women's Federation, then perhaps woman's status would be even lower." What is gender analysis? It analyzes the existence of disparities between men and women and the reasons for these disparities. It aims to reduce the disparities and gradually realize gender equality by changing the system and the policies.

The sixth aspect concerns whether or not women and men are the subject of development, what positions men and women – both sexes – have in development and whether they can participate in the development decision making and in the process of decision making whether their voices can be heard. As a result of development will their rights be strengthened? Will their skills be sharpened? Will equal, cooperative partnerships be constructed so men and women both "win?"

The seventh question is in regards to the prerequisites for development. Economic development cannot automatically substitute for gender equality. Without economic development, we do not have the prerequisites for women's development. But the current problem is that as the economy has developed, women have not developed at the same rate. Some have even sacrificed women's development so that the economy could develop. This is not only unfair but also not sustainable.

The eighth question is very important. There are different analyses of the causes of gender inequality. The traditional view is summarized in the "old five reasons." The first is class; the second is private ownership; the third is the level of development of productivity; the fourth is the influence of traditional ideas; and the fifth is the belief that women's quality is low. These five reasons do not offer a breakthrough in analyzing gender inequality. The gender mainstreaming position argues for analyzing gender

²⁹ Current statistics show a 118:100 sex ratio in China.

systems and gendered division of labor while considering multiple factors such as society, politics, the economy, culture, class, ethnicity, nation, the market, communities, family, etc. Therefore it enriches and encourages the understanding of the complexity of gender issues.

Our research has found that the ideas of mainstreaming gender and gender equality have placed greater demands on us than China's traditional idea of men and women's equality. Within the country it is now popular to say, "advance with the times." We should also advance with the times in terms of theorizing men and women's equality. We can do this by studying the successful experiences and ideas of international society, and working to enhance the level of social development and the women's movement in China. We should abandon lofty slogans and empty campaigns. Others do not understand what we are doing. The more we only speak lofty words, the smaller our circle of supporters will become. The result of speaking within our own circles and entertaining ourselves is less support from society and declining popular trust.

Chen: How do you regard this kind of shortcoming? How do we bring about a change in this area?

Liu: In our research we find that Chinese culture has a problem. We call it a "great inferiority complex." China has a rich and glorious history and is well-known for this. We have a kind of intense national pride and feeling of superiority. When something appears in international society that is not proposed or invented by us, we always fear that we are falling behind. Thus, we always tend to say that we have everything and we are good at everything. As soon as the international community raises the issue of gender equality, we immediately say, we have "men and women's equality." As soon as they raise the issue of mainstreaming gender, we say we have "the basic national policy." As soon as they raise the issue of sustainable development, we say we have the policy of "tackling both problems." I will give you an example. Two days ago I met a Canadian female project design expert. The Canadian Agency for International Development planned to support the Chinese Supreme Court in their attempt to advance gender equality in the legal system. She discussed this matter with officials from the Chinese Department of Justice. All of the Chinese officials at present were men. After she introduced the goals of the project, those officials kept laughing. She asked the interpreter what they were laughing at. The interpreter said that when speaking of the matter of men and women's equality, it should be the Chinese that pass on their experiences to other countries. They did not think it was necessary to turn to Canada to help China. These Chinese officials simply did not understand the situation of gender equality in Canada. They only thought that China already does this especially well. This is exactly what I was referring to when I said that China has a "great inferiority complex".

Although Chinese women's position has been declining according to the United Nations' rankings, Chinese officials think that Chinese women with a relatively high status are not rare. This kind of "great inferiority complex" causes people to think that everything they have is good, and it causes them not to be willing to learn from other people. Internationally, many indexes of sustainable development have been set. But we are still

regarding the economy (GDP) as the most important. Now the Central Party Committee and the government have started to talk about scientific methods of development and have just started to emphasize the people-centered approach. However this is still quite far from a truly scientific conceptualization of development! At the very minimum we need several generations to bring about political democratization. There is a long way to go to realize a scientific conceptualization of development. But I think that a way to get at this issue and promote this process would be to advance gender mainstreaming. This is not only a theoretical question; it is also is a very important practical issue, a political issue, an issue of worldview, and an issue of values.