

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

**SITE: CHINA**

**Transcript of Wang Xingjuan  
Interviewer: Zhang Jian**

**Location: Red Maple Women's Psychological  
Counseling Center, Beijing  
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**Wang Xingjuan**, born in 1931, was an editor at the Beijing Publishing House for many years. After her retirement in 1988, she started the first women's hot line in China. This initiative has grown into The Maple Women's Counseling Center, where Wang Xingjuan is director. She is internationally renowned for creating and sustaining one of the earliest women's NGOs in China. The Center is currently expanding its services to include not only direct services to women, but also intervention activities that aim to educate the community. Activists from the Center have linked with local communities to provide gender training workshops to police, judges, doctors, neighborhood committee officials and women's federation officials to raise their awareness on domestic violence and gender hierarchies. Their intervention activism also involves setting up mechanisms in local communities to prevent domestic violence.

Wang Xingjuan was interviewed by Zhang Jian from the Women's Studies Department of the National Women's University of China.

**Zhang Jian (hereafter referred to as Zhang): Wang Xingjuan, thank you very much for participating in this international project, the Global Feminisms Project. For more than ten years you have been involved with this women’s non-profit organization. Actually it has been sixteen years, right? I had hoped that you could begin by explaining how you started on this path, how you became an activist in order to help women?**

Wang Xingjuan (hereafter referred to as Wang): Sure, I also had hoped to discuss some of my own experiences. We established the Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center<sup>1</sup> in October of 1988. Presently we are already in our sixteenth year of operation. In the beginning, the center was called “The Women’s Research Institute of the China Academy of Management Science.” In 1996 we separated from the research institute and changed our name to “The Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center.” This organization has already had a long history. After retiring – in 1988 I retired from the Beijing Publishing House and I took the lead in organizing this center. At that time several other women intellectuals also joined me in creating this organization.

A lot of people have asked me why in 1988 I chose to devote attention to women’s issues. Prior to this time period, I had always done work in the fields of culture and the media at a newspaper or a publishing house. But I had never worked in women’s organizations. So why would I become involved with this and even become the leader to start this kind of non-governmental organization for women? I think at the very beginning I started to pay attention to women because of a kind of deep concern for the situation of women.

I think that you all know that in the 1980s China embarked on its policy of reform and opening.<sup>2</sup> This policy of reform and opening really brought a new kind of life and new hope to the Chinese people. Regarding women, the policy has brought both advantages and disadvantages. As the economic system and the political system change, the status of some women will rise. They are transformed from ordinary workers and peasants to entrepreneurs, leaders and factory managers. People have said that women not only became white collar workers, but also even became higher status “gold collar” executives. However, only a very small portion of women have achieved this kind of success. The majority of women faced a situation where they had to start from scratch to find a position. Many women feel... Women have lost their original economic status and their original social status and consequently are losing their status within their families. As the economic system gradually transforms from that of a planned economy to a market economy, a lot of factories are getting rid of their female workers.

I remember quite clearly that in 1988 – which was precisely the time when I was going to retire – *Chinese Women*, a magazine of the All-China Women’s Federation, from the first

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<sup>1</sup> The Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center is the first national women’s crisis hotline in China.

<sup>2</sup> Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has adopted the policy of “reform and opening” to build more effective political and economic systems.

issue in January to the year's end had a very active discussion called "1988, What Path for Women?" The articles in this discussion raised such issues as: through the process of optimizing the composition of the labor force, women are being stripped of their positions; and after women are "downsized"<sup>3</sup> what path should they take? I still remember very clearly that one of the articles talked about a female worker who was downsized and then returned home. In the beginning she was really happy. At first she thought, "Thank goodness, at last I do not have to work from very early in the morning until very late at night. I can stay home and be a good wife and mother. Yes, I can help out my husband and take good care of my child." To her surprise, after she returned home, her husband always seemed to scowl at her no matter how well she did at home, because he thought she was dependent on his income and should do a better job doing household chores. Her mother-in-law, who lived with them, also treated her poorly. She looked down upon her daughter-in-law and asked derisively, "Other people were not laid off. How come you were laid off? It must be because you did not work hard in your work unit." Her daughter also looked down upon her. She thought that because her mother was laid off, it brought dishonor to her and the family. This woman wrote down her own experience. She wrote that she had repeatedly paced back and forth at the edge of the river. She felt that her life had no meaningful future and several times she thought that she would jump in the river and end her own life. This was a very typical case for many women. It told about women's feelings. Many women since reform and opening felt that they did not have a meaningful path to follow. They did not understand why society was developing and moving forward, but their status had actually fallen. Women faced very many new questions and problems. At that time I was in the Marriage and Family Research Association of the All-China Women's Federation. They asked me to take the position of the editor of a magazine called *Marriage and Family*. At that time a lot of women came to interview me. They wanted to know why a whole generation of women needed to sacrifice themselves to pay the price for society's development. This issue really shook me up a lot.

Another issue that emerged during this time was women's participation in government. A moment ago I mentioned the discussions in the magazine, *Chinese Women*. Also in 1988, the *Chinese Women's Newspaper* also launched a very big discussion about women's participation in government. At that time China was in the process of reforming its electoral system. In the past there were the same number of seats as there were number of candidates. They were working to change elections so that there would be more candidates than seats. For example, originally if there were nine seats available, then you would be given a ballot with nine names. Everybody would draw a circle around the nine choices. Now if there were nine seats available, you would be given a ballot with eleven names. Two people would not be elected. However, the people that would not be elected were always women. Thus at that time in some provinces and cities there were no women cadres in the four groups of administrative leaders.

**Zhang: You said four sets of administrative leaders; which four sets?**

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<sup>3</sup> Meaning layed-off.

Wang: The four sets are: 1) the National People's Congress; 2) the National Political Consultative Conference; 3) the State Council government... the government; and 4) the Chinese Communist Party, including the municipal party committee, the provincial party committee and the central committee.<sup>4</sup> A lot of provinces and cities did not even have a single woman as leaders to these institutions. An extremely interesting phenomenon occurred in the suburb of Beijing. When they had to elect a Women's Federation cadre they chose a male cadre for this position. Although there were still some women who participated in government, the rate of women's participation was dramatically falling. Therefore at that time the *Chinese Women's Newspaper* launched the discussion about women's participation in government.

I thought... Well, I myself am an educated woman. Before liberation I was a college student at Jinling University in the Chinese department. Then, in 1949 the revolutionary situation developed very rapidly and the Communist Party needed a lot of civilian cadres. I had already secretly joined the school's Communist Youth League. Therefore, as a cadre, I was assigned to the *Xinhua Daily* to work as a reporter. After Nanjing was liberated, the communist army advanced toward the south and toward the southwest. Therefore very few cadres engaged in political work could stay behind, so most of us at Jinling University participated in the work that needed to be done. This was how I started working and I was the last group of people who retired as senior revolutionary cadres.

In my own life experience, I feel that since my ability to work is still pretty good, for me at the time, I was discriminated against not because of my sex, but instead because of my family background. I was given the class status of small landlord because my father had a small business. For people like me, my family background was always called into question.<sup>5</sup> This always affected me when there were issues of personnel placement. However I always worked in a kind of intellectual environment. Originally I was at the *Xinhua Daily*, and then afterwards I went to the *China Youth Daily*. Then, finally, after the Cultural Revolution I went to work in the Beijing Publishing House. My self-confidence is very strong. I think the prejudice against my family background mainly was caused by the leftist policy of that time. Actually my father was rehabilitated very quickly. So he was no longer considered a landlord, but instead given the class status of peasant, a mid-level peasant because he only owned ten acres of land. However, this issue of family background was a burden that I had to continually shoulder.

I did not have any kind of gender consciousness. In the past I also looked down upon the Women's Federation. I thought that the Women's Federation members were all old women with bound feet who made a fuss over nothing important. Yeah, I really looked down upon them and did not want to be a part of what they did. Then, after the Cultural

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<sup>4</sup> The National People's Congress is the legislative body. The National Political Consultative Conference is a political advisory body. Each province has its own People's Congress and Political Consultative Conference.

<sup>5</sup> During the early years of the People's Republic of China, one's family background was taken into consideration at the time of entering schools and in career. Peasant and worker backgrounds were considered the most revolutionary. Wang Xingjuan's father was classified as a "small landlord," which fell in the category of the "oppressors." People with such a class background were often discriminated against at school and work unit.

Revolution,<sup>6</sup> I began to turn my intellectual interest to young girls, adolescents and women. This was partially because I had a very difficult time during adolescence. I can think of two times when I wanted to commit suicide. I was born into a very big family and I had very many siblings. Our economic situation was not very good. I was the middle child – I had both elder and younger brothers and sisters. No one paid much attention to me as I was growing up. Therefore, by the time I got to adolescence, I had an extremely pessimistic view of society. However, growing up like this also taught me to be self-reliant and strengthened my independence. Thus when I was young and going through adolescence, I had an extremely difficult time. If only someone had shown me some warmth, some care and concern, I think I would not have faced the same difficulties when I was growing up.

Therefore, this kind of compassion and caring for women's issues perhaps was always inside me, but it was buried very deeply. After the Cultural Revolution, I heard women's bitter complaints and felt their sense of great loss. They had lost their status in their families. I was shocked – really, really shocked. Therefore in the 1980s I started to research women's issues. At that time I was also editing various book series for women readers, for example, "Book Series for Women,"<sup>7</sup> one of the first such collections in China. I worked together with Tao Chunfang<sup>7</sup> on this project. There were more than ten volumes in this collection and all of them were in great demand. This was the first set of works on modern women and it really paid attention to women's lives. Then, I retired in October of 1988. Actually I left my job position in February of 1988. I was fifty-eight years old.

**Zhang: What was your position at that time?**

Wang: I was an editor of the Beijing Publishing Company.

**Zhang: An editor.**

Wang: Yes, an editor. At the Beijing Publishing Company I edited very many different kinds of books, in fields such as philosophy, economics, and also books for young adults, and so on. I began to research young girls. I wrote many pieces about the psychology of young girls, psychological instruction for teenage boys and girls, etc. Then in 1986 – I just talked about this a moment ago – in 1986 the Marriage and Family Research Association of the All-China Women's Federation hired me to be their vice chief editor, as the editor of the *Marriage and the Family* magazine. Thus, I started researching young girls, then marriage and the family, and eventually women. This was a step-by-step process whereby I gradually came to study women's issues.

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<sup>6</sup> The Cultural Revolution (Abbreviation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), often dated 1966-1976. According to a Central Committee resolution adopted on June 27, 1981, the Cultural Revolution was carried out "under the mistaken leadership of Mao Zedong who was used by the counterrevolutionaries Lin Biao and Jiang Qing and brought serious disaster and turmoil to the Party and the Chinese people." This official view has since become the dominant framework for the Chinese historiography of the Cultural Revolution. During the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, higher education was essentially closed down. Proper ideology was stressed over professional or technical competence.

<sup>7</sup> Tao Chunfang is the Vice President of the China Family Marriage Research Association.

Thus I think... Well, in 1988 I noticed the two big events for women that I just mentioned. The first was that in the businesses' attempt to find an optimum composition of the labor market; many women lost their job positions, lost their social status, and were discriminated against within their families. The second big event was the fall in women's participation levels in government. I thought, since I was retiring, I would have the time to do this work. I also had an interest in this kind of work. Moreover I felt that I had the skills and ability to bring about some positive changes for women. For many years I had always listened to the Communist Party's directives. The party assigned me to work in a place so I worked there and did my job well. After retiring, though, my time belonged to me alone. I could lead my life according to how I wanted. Yes, of course I could have chosen to do something else since I had been writing for many years. I had also written reporting literature.<sup>8</sup> Writing was something that I was good at; originally I had gone to school to study Chinese. But I thought that perhaps I could do some things that would help women. I thought that women were facing extremely difficult times and that I could extend a hand to help them. This would help them to get through this period of reform in society. For women this time was also one kind of labor pain. As society was changing, women faced new and more complicated problems. I do not think anyone at the time was doing research on these problems. At that time there was only the Chinese Women's Marriage and Family Research Association. There were not any women's research organizations.

Therefore I thought that I should do research in this area. After all, why did a whole generation of women have to sacrifice themselves in order to pay the price for the development of society? This should have been something that people were researching but at the time no one was doing this kind of work. I knew this was a bit outside my league, but at any rate, I thought I already paid attention to these questions and problems. Also prior to this, I had already written quite a few articles about women's participation in government and the future of laid-off women. Therefore, I wanted to gather a group of people with similar ideals, to maybe form a non-governmental women's research institute to study these issues. The All-China Women's Federation's Women's Research Institute was not established until 1990. In October of 1988 we established our institute. Thus, we had already been in operation for more than a year before the Women's Federation established its institute.

**Zhang: Was it fairly easy to register and set up your organization?**

Wang: The process went rather smoothly. We registered under the China Management Science Research Institute. This was also an organization that was not established by the state. However, the Science Research Institute was registered<sup>9</sup> under the State Council's Organizational Reform Committee.

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<sup>8</sup> Reporting literature is a literary genre in China. It is non-fictional, reporting in great detail on events and people.

<sup>9</sup> In China, organizations need to be registered officially. In order to be registered, the organization needs a supervising governmental institution. A powerful supervising governmental institution could imply more power and resources for its affiliated organization.



By registering like this, it gave our organization greater legitimacy. We operated as an organization affiliated with a formal, high-level state institution. Thus people did not oppose our idea of establishing a women's research institute. The Science Research Institute also did not need to provide us with any funding or subsidies. We pulled together all of the start-up costs for the organization.

**Zhang: Individuals pooled together their money?**

Wang: Yes, at that time the start-up fees were about 20,000 yuan.<sup>10</sup> I personally contributed half of this money. Tao Chunfang and a few other friends who joined me to create this organization pooled their money to make the other 10,000 yuan. Thus we started this organization ourselves. I gathered many of my friends and colleagues in this circle – for example, Liu Bohong, Feng Yuan, and Hou Zhiming,<sup>11</sup> etc. There were also many others. At that time I invited them all to my house and told them that I wanted to establish this kind of organization. Xie Lihua<sup>12</sup> was also there. I told them that I wanted to organize a non-governmental organization for women. They all strongly supported this idea. The All-China Women's Federation also supported us. At that time Zhang Guoying was the head of the Women's Federation. Zhang Guoying sent Guan Tao, the head of women's research and the Chinese Marriage and Family Research Association of the Women's Federation, to our meeting to say congratulations. This was a symbolic expression that showed we had the support of the Women's Federation. They also made us an association member of the All-China Women's Federation. (She laughs.) But the Women's Federation support was only in spirit. Thus, the process of keeping our organization operational was extremely difficult.

Our first research project was about the trends in Chinese women's employment. The State Council carried out an experiment in thirteen provinces and cities. They attempted to bring about the optimum composition of labor in factories by laying off workers. We went to these places to carry out a questionnaire survey and wrote our first research report. We found that women workers disproportionately bore the brunt of layoffs. Even if a female worker was re-employed, her position in the occupational structure had been lowered. At that time we proposed possibly having short term employment, or even a kind of part time system where two people each work half of the time. For example one person could work the morning shift, while a different person worked in the afternoon. We put forward many different proposals. This was our first research project. Because I had read the articles in the Women's Federation magazine, "1988, What Path for Women?" I paid attention to the predicament of female workers.

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<sup>10</sup> As of October 2006, the exchange rate is 1 U.S. dollar  $\approx$  8 yuan.

<sup>11</sup> Liu Bohong is currently the Deputy Director of the Women's Study Institute of China under the All China Women's Federation. She was also interviewed for the Global Feminisms project. Feng Yuan is a journalist of the *Chinese Women's Daily* who has played a leading role in setting up the organization of women's media watch and gender consciousness training group. Hou Zhiming is Deputy Director of the Red Maple Center.

<sup>12</sup> Xie Lihua is Deputy Editor of *China Women's News*.

Our second project was women's participation in government. We conducted our investigation at higher levels in the government. More than two thousand questionnaires were conducted with people above the office level. The funding for this was all money that we had gathered in order to research women's participation in government. We wanted to find out the way of thinking of women in leadership positions and the difficulties they faced. Moreover, precisely because we could understand these issues, we later held many – about eight or nine – sessions for trainings for Chinese women leading cadres. We started these kinds of trainings, which were the first in China. We worked with the *Chinese Women* magazine and used their institutional title. But in fact, we did all of the work.

**Zhang: What were the main things that you addressed in the trainings?**

Wang: In addition to general subjects like managerial techniques, the main content of the trainings were analyzing the difficulty of women's participation in government using a gender perspective. We looked at the discrimination against women in society and the phenomenon that oftentimes women in leadership positions were placed there as secondary instead of powerful players. We talked about what sort of attitude women leading cadres should adopt when facing these kinds of problems. At the time there were very many women who simply were not willing to participate in government exactly because of problems such as these. Based on our investigation, we worked with the *Chinese Women's Newspaper* to offer the first symposium on women's participation in government. We also published a book called *Chinese Women's Participation in Government*. These all were some of the earliest activities that we engaged in.

Then after we completed this work, there was... At the time we mainly did research on women, since no one was paying attention to these issues at the time. But doing research, publishing a book and publishing our findings in magazines was not our goal. Actually one of our goals was to influence decision making. However, we did not have much power and our voices were still too weak. We could not gain access to have our appeals heard directly, so that they would reach higher authorities. I had a foreign friend ask me, "Teacher Wang,<sup>13</sup> everything that you have achieved up until now – You spent a lot of time, energy and resources carrying out investigations and research. Do you think that it has been useful? Was this truly useful in helping women's development?" Wow, I really felt like she had asked a great question. I thought about the answer for a long time. I thought that our research should be different than that done by other research institutions such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Their research is more theoretical in nature and oftentimes is distant from reality. But what we research are current issues. We study issues that are currently the most urgent and the most pressing questions of the day that need to be solved. The goals of our research certainly are not only to be published. We hoped that our research would help women better understand why they now are in this kind of situation and how they can change this kind of situation. They need to know how to keep up in the ever changing society. You cannot pull the historical wheel with you into the future; you cannot dwell in the past time period of a planned economy, full

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<sup>13</sup> This is a literal translation of the custom in Chinese to address someone's teacher/professor/mentor. The Chinese word for "teacher" conveys a sense of respect.

employment and the iron rice bowl. It is impossible to do this. However, some women still think that they are public servants, and that the state will take care of them and should take care of them for their whole life. These women have not adapted to the competition and downsizing that is a part of a market economy. Therefore we felt that we must work diligently to try to influence women. We hope our research will help women to better understand the current situation under the market economy and to change their way of thinking and their perspective.

Based on this situation, we had to decide what to do. We were a very small non-governmental organization. We did not have many resources and barely had the means to do anything, including ensuring the survival of our organization. We did not have extensive social resources or economic resources; we were lacking material resources. What did we have? We had human resources. We had a group of people like me – women who were enthusiastic about working to improve women’s lives. They were willing to extend a hand to help their sisters, share other women’s concerns and provide help for them. Therefore, I thought that implementing a hotline would be the best way to help women. To do this, we only needed to have a room, to put in some telephone lines, and to train a group of volunteers. The initial capital investment might be small, but it could deliver the biggest benefits. As long as the hotline was operational then women would only need to spend the cost of a telephone call. After she dialed in to us, she could pour out her troubles and worries. We could explain to her why currently women are in the position where they are facing so many difficulties and give her advice on how to face so many of the new issues that had arisen. Yes, we thought the hotline was the best course to follow based on our circumstances and resources.

Then in 1992, I was in the United States. An American friend of mine was helping me. She told me that there was a foundation that could help me; this organization gave funds to small non-governmental organizations like mine. At that time we did not even have a bank account number, but she said that we did not need a bank account for the foundation to subsidize our work. She asked me what I wanted to apply for. I told her that I wanted to apply to establish a hotline. I applied for ten thousand dollars. In the first year the foundation gave us five thousand dollars. Thus, I opened a personal bank account and the five thousand dollars was deposited in my account. I used this five thousand dollars to get the women’s hotline up and running.

**Zhang: This was in 1992?**

Wang: October 1992 – no it was September 1992. At that time some people said that this women’s hotline would not be successful since Chinese women did not use telephones very often. However, as soon as we got the hotline up and running, it was really busy. This was China’s first hotline especially for women. The hotline was extremely popular.

**Zhang: Was the process of setting up a hotline for women in China relatively easy at that time? Was there a special procedure?**

Wang: No.

**Zhang: I remember at the time the women's hotline caused a very big stir in society.**

Wang: Yes it did. Since this was the first hotline for Chinese women I think all of the media reported on this. Xinhua News Agency printed an announcement. Chinese Central Television and Central Radio Station had reports in their prime time news programs. Papers in all of the local areas covered this story. Thus as soon as we opened, the telephone never stopped ringing.

**Zhang: Was the hotline for the whole country?**

Wang: Yes, the whole country. We even got some telephone calls from Japan, and cities like Stockholm, Sweden.

**Zhang: Were these people who called from other countries Chinese?**

Wang: Yes. They were facing some problems that they did not know how to deal with. As soon as they heard that there was this women's hotline, they called in. Yes, it really did cause a very big stir. We also all felt really happy. At last we had created a space where we could provide services to help women. Some people said that only a small percentage of women would be able to make a phone call to us, so later we decided to expand. So we established an expert hotline, a second women's hotline, and then later a hotline for women senior citizens. We also set up a recording that dealt with legal issues pertinent to women. This recording was available twenty four hours. Apart from the time when one of the staff was there, the answering machine could automatically operate. This recording informed women of their many rights and interests protected by the law. In addition, this year on March 8<sup>th</sup> we added a domestic violence hotline. From these hotline calls we learned that many, many women were experiencing difficulties and troubles and needed to obtain help. Perhaps they are willing to turn to the hotline for help, both because it is confidential and also possibly because the hotline is simple to access. The volunteers do not ask the women their names, their addresses or their work units. The women only need to make a phone call and explain their situation. Then the counselor will try to understand their situation and show concern. Moreover, the counselor will try to help the woman analyze her situation a little and transmit some pertinent information. The counselors try to diminish the stress levels of the callers and also work to help them explore new paths for their lives. Yes, these hotlines really do have advantages for women.

**Zhang: As you offer this kind of help to these callers, what are your principles? What kinds of thoughts are guiding you?**

Wang: To tell you the truth, at the time we started the hotlines, I did not have very much knowledge about feminist theory. I had not really read much on this. Actually I started from a very basic principle – very simply, I was concerned about the plight of women. I believed that women should be able to support themselves and be able to stand on their own two feet. Yes, it started like this. I did not first study feminist theory and principles

and then start my work. Instead I first paid attention to women's status during the reform era and felt that women should strive for their rights. When I became more aware of the difficulties they were facing, I wanted to do my best to help them improve and help them to be able to realize true equality and obtain equal rights. It started like this.

Then afterwards, I participated in some discussions regarding feminism, especially Professor Qiu Renzong's seminars. Every year he held two seminars on feminist theories. I do not know if you have ever participated in one of these seminars or not. As for me, this seminar was enlightening. The seminars covered a wide range of topics such as feminist ethics, feminist philosophy, and feminist view of science. He held these seminars twice a year for some years. These seminars were not directly helpful for me, but I started to become more familiar with these topics...

**Zhang: When was this?**

Wang: Qiu Renzong started offering the seminars in 1992. I think he held them for four years. The Ford Foundation subsidized him. Qiu Renzong specializes in ethics at the Philosophy Division of the Social Science Institute. He researches feminist ethics in all kinds of different domains, such as women's reproductive health rights, domestic violence against women, and women's rights in the family and household. The seminar topics covered many different areas. I attended his seminars every time that he offered them. Thus, I started to learn and better understand feminist theories. I am quite interested in these theories.

I believe the thing that really moved me the most was when I went to India in 1995. I think it was in 1995 but maybe it was 1994. I went to India to participate in a feminist conference on domestic violence. This conference really got me thinking about how to use feminist theories to guide the operation of the women's hotline. At that conference there was an Indian feminist... Well, women's status in countries like India and Thailand is much lower than that of women in China. However, feminists in these countries have done massive amounts of work in striving for women's rights and interests. I still remember very clearly something that this Indian feminist said. She said that you could not easily turn over an oppressed woman to a psychologist. (She laughs.) She said you could not easily refer the abused women to psychologists because they don't have feminist consciousness. At that time it was not referred to as gender consciousness; instead we called it feminist consciousness. Because psychologists do not have feminist consciousness they would treat an abused woman as if this was a humanist concern but not a gender concern. In fact this kind of treatment causes the second injury to the abused women because it often places the blame on the victim. At the time I had already started the psychological consultation hotline. I thought that we were helping women. But if we did not have gender consciousness, feminist perspective, then we in fact, we might have been hurting these women callers. Oh, up until this point I had really not thought of this.

After I came back from India, I read more books and articles. Moreover we had a very interesting seminar. A woman...One of our counselors introduced a case she had for our discussion. The counselor said she had received a telephone call from a divorced woman.

This woman had not been married long before she discovered that she was pregnant. Soon after she realized she was pregnant, she found out that her husband was having an extramarital affair. Based on these circumstances, she wanted to have an abortion. However the husband vehemently disagreed with her and told her that if she had the abortion, he would divorce her immediately. She thought that she was newly married and was not mentally ready for a divorce. So she thought maybe she would be able to save her marriage after the birth of their child. Thus she gave birth to the child. The birth of their child could not save her marriage; it eventually fell apart. At the time of her divorce, because her son was still very small and only a year old, she was given custody of the child by the court. However at the time she was very sick; she had contracted nephritis. Moreover, her wages were very low and she felt that she was incapable of providing for her son. She filed an application so that the father would have custody of the baby. However the courts said that she must take care of the baby because he was still too young to be separated from his mother. She had no choice but to try and take on this responsibility. In addition after the court ruled that she was to take care of the baby boy, her ex-husband often did not pay child support. The mother's health continued to deteriorate and she was often in the hospital. In addition she was laid off from her job. For five years she did her best to take care of her child. When he was six, she filed an application in the court to put him into his father's custody. So she petitioned the court to look into her case, however they refused. Since she was the child's mother they thought that it was unreasonable to not even want your own child. Thus, she made a call to the hotline. She wanted to know why the courts would not consider her request since she felt the child would be better off in his father's care. Do you think that the courts were right in their judgment in this case? This was the case.

How did our counselor respond to this caller? She agreed completely with the judge. Since the woman gave birth to the child, she should assume responsibility for him. She should fulfill her responsibilities as a mother. Even if you seem to face insurmountable difficulties, you should try and find a way to overcome them, since you are the child's mother.

When we discussed this case at our seminar, many people pointed out shortcomings in what the counselor told the woman. They said that the counselor did not have enough empathy for the woman's situation. They said the counselor's attitude did not show enough understanding; however, most agreed that her basic perspective was correct. This then launched an animated discussion about why a mother has these responsibilities to her child but the same is not expected of the father. In this situation why did not the father take care of this child? Why was it only assumed to be the responsibility of the mother? Why was the mother found to be at fault for wanting to place her child in the father's custody? Why should she be blamed? Why did not anyone blame the father for not taking the child? We thought this was a clear case of where we lacked gender consciousness. Thus in this case, you could have two completely different viewpoints. We thought using this case as an example really broadened our minds as to how we think about these types of issues.

Therefore after we had discussed this case, I invited Feng Yuan, Ge Youli, and also Du Jie<sup>14</sup> to give our counselors gender trainings. I felt that if the women's hotline volunteers did not have gender consciousness, then there would be no reason to have a women's hotline. Because these volunteer counselors must be able to see things from the woman caller's viewpoint and must give compassionate consideration for the woman's situation. This is how it should be, right? We shouldn't find fault with the women and reinforce the wrong ideas about these women. From this point on, we have continually trained our counselors to have gender consciousness. Originally when we had started training the volunteers, we did not train them in this way; we did not even address gender consciousness. Now our first training class is on the spirit of voluntary work and our second class addresses gender. These two classes are required. The volunteers sometimes do not attend all of the other classes; however these first two classes are absolutely required.

I think having a gender perspective is extremely important for our counselors. The discussion about the case I just mentioned showed huge differences. Many people think that because we give psychological consultation we already have a humanist approach, a human-centered approach. They assume that taking the person as the center includes women and that there is no need to emphasize women specifically. We need to explain to people why we should take a woman-centered approach. Women are marginalized in society. Taking a gender-neutral humanist approach often masks the male-centered reality, and can even further harm women. In our later trainings...But sometimes we have disagreements within ourselves. There are some supervisors who are against training counselors with gender theories. However, I think our approach using this principle, absolutely must not change.

We have started re-training staff for the newly-launched domestic violence hotline. We told people who wanted to work on this line that they needed to apply and go through another training. We train them with gender theories, women-centered perspective. After this kind of training, they will come to understand how their choice of words could traumatize the callers again and what kinds of questions that they should not ask. For instance prior to the training they might ask the woman, "Why did he hit you?" But we believe that asking this kind of question suggests that a woman can be hit when there is a reason. In fact no matter what happened, there is never a reason for hitting a woman. Hitting another person is breaking the law and violating the other person's human rights. For instance the husband's "reasons" might include such things as his wife talks incessantly, she returns home late, she does not prepare good food for dinner, etc. The husband and wife can argue and make compromises, which doesn't break the law or violate human rights. But hitting a person is illegal and could be a very serious crime. These are two issues of a very different nature. A person is never permitted to hit a woman because she talks too much or because she has made you angry. I feel that after these gender training classes, our counselors also gradually come to have a gender perspective. I think along with the opening of the hotline, we have instilled gender consciousness into our volunteers. They then use this to help the callers.

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<sup>14</sup> Du Jie is a researcher with the Women's Studies Institute of All China Women's Federation.

By embracing the idea of reliance on oneself and striving to improve oneself women can stand up. We must help women develop this kind of self-confidence. This should be one of the principles of the consultations provided by our women's hotline. This is a part of the work that we do. In fact putting this hotline into operation has helped many people. We have been in operation since 1992. By the end of last year (2003), we had answered about 75,000 calls. Each call was a different case. Actually if you count up until this March, we already have answered 80,000 calls. Every day we answer about thirty calls; thus every month we answer several hundred calls – approximately six hundred per month.

**Zhang: How many hours per day does the hotline operate?**

Wang: Eighteen hours per day.

**Zhang: Eighteen hours. How many hotlines do you have?**

Wang: Three hotlines.

**Zhang: Do they all operate at the same time?**

Wang: Yes. In the evenings all three are operational.

**Zhang: As far as I know, your organization, the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center not only has these hotlines but also at the same time works on a lot of other projects.**

Wang: Right, right.

**Zhang: I remember that you gave gender consciousness training to police captains, police officers, court personnel, judges and doctors in Tianjin. Can you talk a bit about why you thought that they needed training? Furthermore, what effect do you think that these trainings with women-centered contents and a gender perspective had on these people and institutions?**

Wang: Actually the project in Tianjin was called "Community Intervention into Family Problems." Why was it called this? Like what I just said, our women's hotline is not only a site where we provide a service for women but also a window through which we listen to their voices and concerns so that we could better understand their issues. Thus, we attempt to bring together the research on women with service for women. We received very many calls where women had various issues. They tell us that they seek help from their husbands' work units about the custody of their children and domestic violence. But the work units did not do anything. They have called 110<sup>15</sup> but they also did not do anything. They went to the local police station and they said they would not intervene into domestic matters. These women said that they have nowhere to turn to for help.

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<sup>15</sup> This is the phone number to call when there is an emergency and is similar to calling 911 in the United States.



Why do women as a group have these kinds of worries? Why aren't women's rights protected? We studied four hundred cases where women encountered various family problems, such as divorce, property and inheritance rights. In these cases these women all sought out help from society, but they did not find any support. We spent two years thoroughly analyzing these cases. The results of our analysis have shown that society is currently in a time of transformation from a situation where people are part of their work unit<sup>16</sup> to a situation where people are a part of society or part of a community. During this transformation process, many of the previous functions of a work unit have changed. In the past a work unit was responsible for everything from birth to death, including taking care of the old and the sick. Currently work units, especially privately-owned and foreign enterprises, do not take responsibility for these matters. State-run industries also are not willing to be responsible for these matters. This is something that must be managed by the community. But communities simply have not realized that their functions must change with the times and that they should take on part of this responsibility. Therefore, a vacuum has formed in the provision of these services. This is why we need community intervention, i.e. communities have to establish intervention systems. How can they go about establishing this? Our research suggests that they definitely have to use a new perspective and while taking a humanist approach, they also have to have a gender perspective. This kind of new idea has uprooted some of the Chinese traditional ideas and has the power to shake up society and change people's ideas.

**Zhang: This change could guide the perspective of many of the leading figures in society – for example authorities such as doctors, judges and police officers.**

Wang: The most important thing is to try to bring gender into the mainstream – the mainstream of society and of the community. This is the kind of work that we do. The results of our research also suggest that many people do not take into account women's rights and interests because they still hold traditional ideas of gender roles. They still believe things like women are inferior to men, men should lead and women should follow, men should work outside of the home while women should work inside the home, and men should be the head of the household and women should obey their husbands. Yes, they often still hold the traditional idea of “the three obediences and the four virtues.”<sup>17</sup> Many still believe in the old saying: “Even an upright official finds it difficult to settle a family quarrel.” No one is willing to get involved. Yet in public, for example in the street, if a man hits a woman, then the local police station can intervene immediately, right? They will take the man to the local police station to administer some kind of punishment, like a warning, a fine or even holding him in a cell. However any violence that occurs in the home is thought of as a domestic issue, a private family affair. This does not establish the woman as a person in the same way that a man is a person. The woman should have an equal standing within the family. Men should not hit women

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<sup>16</sup> In China, especially before the 1980s, everyone called his or her workplace the “work unit” (a literal translation of “workplace” in Chinese).

<sup>17</sup> According to Confucian ethics, the “three obediences” include a woman's obedience to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage, and to her son after the husband's death. The four virtues are morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work.

and women should not be hit by men. Many people do not have this kind of perspective. Instead they have inherited feudal society's customs and ideas of morality.

Therefore we think one of the most important tasks is to initiate this kind of gender perspective that takes people, both women and men, as its core. We certainly must change the traditional way of thinking. If we do not change this way of thinking, this situation...then it is impossible to protect women's rights. Therefore I feel our greatest accomplishment of this project was to change how people think. In three years we have conducted eleven sessions of gender training workshops. Initially it is very difficult to get these workshops going since in the beginning people generally do not accept these ideas. Actually some of the police were all right. Since most of the police officers' level of education is not too high, after the training, especially exercises and a workshop, they changed their way of thinking relatively easily. However it has been harder with other people, especially judges. They believe that they are well educated and that they only need to follow the principle "in the eyes of the law everyone is equal." They feel that taking on a gender perspective is wrong. Therefore the first time that we trained a small group of judges, we could not even continue our training. The judges confronted our coordinator and the training was interrupted. We could not continue the first day of training. That evening I asked to speak with some of these judges. We talked until after eleven o'clock. (She laughs.) The second day we finished the training awkwardly. This clearly shows the collision of ideas. A lot of the judges thought these women suffer because they did something wrong. These people need to be reprimanded. These women must have been unreasonable and made a scene; they must just be troublemakers. To make the family harmonious, the husband must beat the wife until she becomes obedient. Many judges shared such assumptions. Thus we held four trainings for the local police and four trainings for the judges. In the end, their perspectives were changed. We also held two trainings for doctors.

A judge once said something typical. He had always thought that some women were simply trouble-makers. These were all private affairs and he was unwilling to interfere. But we told him why women often press charges and then later withdrawal them. This is because of the way that gender relations operate. We gave them a thorough explanation of various cases that we had encountered. In the end, they finally acknowledged that some women change their minds because their resources are insufficient and they are influenced by traditional ideas, such as "a woman should only marry one man," "no one that gets a divorce can be a good person since good people do not divorce," and that a good woman should always consider her family first and always take care of the needs of her children and shouldn't think about her own interests. After the trainings some of the judges came to believe that all of these traditional ideas that they had held were mistaken. One judge told me about a case. A woman was abused by her husband and filed for divorce. Before the judge delivered the verdict, the woman suddenly withdrew her case. It was because her husband threatened her – that if she divorced him, he would harm her family. In order to protect her family she withdrew her suit. The judge told the woman: "I don't want you to withdraw your case because if you stay in this marriage you will continue to suffer." However, when he heard of her situation he told the woman: "I understand why you withdrew the case. You withdraw because you don't have other

options. Currently there are no laws to protect you if you feel that your life is in danger. We cannot guarantee the safety of your family if you get divorced.” The judge said the court has not obtained the power to prevent these kinds of criminal activities from happening. But he said that after the training, the judges came to be more understanding and more sympathetic. He explained this very well. There was also a court official. He was the one to lead other judges in the first training class to confront our teacher. Afterwards he participated in our trainings three times. He said he had to catch up. Afterwards he did very well in the trainings. There was a huge change in these judges. They even offer legal consultations to women who cannot win in court, telling them how they should file the law suit in a better way. They felt that their entire outlook had been changed.

There were very many cases like this. In the past some doctors would say to the abused women, “You were not hit that hard. You only need three stitches. Is it really worth so much crying?” In the past this is how these women were treated. Nowadays doctors would look at this as a possible case of domestic abuse. They would introduce the woman to our network. In addition to treating her physical injury, they would also give her other help. For instance they would advise her to keep a report of her injuries and to go to the local police station to file a case. They would suggest that she document this instance so that in the future, if she finds herself in a position where she has to prove these things, all of these reports are evidence. And finally for some psychological help, they should introduce the woman to our Tianjin “Half of the Sky Homeland.”<sup>18</sup>

Having a gender perspective changed all of these people. Gender perspective is a new way of looking at things. This perspective is slowly entering into the mainstream. Moreover we must also teach these ideas to members of the community – for example, the cadres of the women’s representative group and the residents’ committee. Only then would the ideas of democracy and equality exist in our communities. This year we have already held three training sessions. From March to May we will have another five training sessions. These trainings are all for cadres from the residents’ committee, judges and police officers of experimental areas. These are in fact gender trainings. We are trying to make people understand that traditional ideas are not innate; women are not born to be abused. Abusing women is tolerated because social opinions, evaluation, expectation and requirement for the two sexes are biased in terms of gender. Our trainings make a distinction between physiological sex and gender. They discuss how gender influences our perspective and our way of looking at women. The participants came to realize that “the women-centered” means respect and equality. Therefore, now when they deal with an abused woman, their attitude has completely changed.

In the past they thought that these women were making trouble out of nothing, that they were all shrews. They described these women as uneducated and hopeless. Women sometimes asked for help because of domestic abuse and then later recanted their story. Sometimes women want the residents’ committee to support them and other times they

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<sup>18</sup> The “Half of the Sky Homeland” is a program implemented by the Tianjin Women’s Federation with the help of Maple Counseling Center. It provides legal counseling services to women who have experienced domestic violence and collaborates with other institutions to empower women and protect women’s rights.

want the Women's Federation to be in their corner. But often, after a while women will change their minds and say that they do not want anyone to intervene. Then she is hit again and she comes for help again. As soon as he does not hit her, she changes her mind again. It is often like this. The judges felt that these women were hopeless; they deserved no help. After our trainings the judges can better understand these women's situations, respect their choices, and moreover try to promote their growth. A residents' committee cadre said, "Now I understand. We must help by allowing women to recover their self confidence." When she said this, we felt especially happy.

**Zhang: Was this the project that you did in Tianjin?**

Wang: Yes, the project in Tianjin.

**Zhang: Does your organization have branch offices in other places?**

Wang: We have helped eight or nine women's hotlines in the country. Moreover all of these hotlines use a gender perspective. Eight or nine such hotlines.

**Zhang: What is the relation of these hotlines with your organization?**

Wang: We do not have official relations with them. They said they wanted to become our branch offices. We do not seek this kind of recognition. These other hotlines can be named whatever they want. If you are willing to tell others that the "the Red Maple Women's Hotline" helped you, that is okay. If you do not want to say this, that is also okay. We don't care. We feel that we only help to initiate a process whereby more people pay attention to women's health and more people give women the emotional support.

I often say "When a person encounters some sort of difficulty, if you stretch out a hand to help him or her, then that person will be able to deal with his or her situation a little easier." I know this from my personal experiences. When I was young and facing the most difficult time period in my life, I really could not find anyone at that time to turn to for help and support. I had turned to religion, for instance, to see if it would help me through this difficult time. Later, actually it was the Communist Party, the communist ideal, which pulled me up. Therefore I feel my current work is also a kind of personal ideal. After I retired I did these things because I wanted to. I did not do them to gain prestige or to gain profit. I did these things because of the ideals that I have. I hope more people can find happiness. When a woman is having difficulties, if I can give her some help or stretch out a hand to her, it costs me nothing but gives me a kind of feeling that I have achieved something. It really makes me feel very good. Although I am very busy everyday, doing this kind of work really makes me feel happy. (She laughs.) Our volunteers all like saying: "We do not like calling our work 'selfless sacrifice,' we help people to help ourselves." When you help others, you also personally grow. Even now I feel as if I am still developing. In the past I was the kind of person who sat at a desk all day and wrote. An intellectual, I was not involved with management in any way. Now of course I am still studying how to best manage our organization. I am over seventy years

old. Actually I am seventy-four and I am still studying and learning new things about management, for example, how best to respect others, how to effectively communicate with my staff, and how to drive everyone to continue to work hard. (She laughs.) In the past I did not know how to approach or best handle these kinds of management techniques.

**Zhang: How many people do you have on regular staff currently at your organization?**

Wang: Now I only have six people.

**Zhang: Six people. And the volunteers?**

Wang: At our highest point we had more than two hundred volunteers; we trained more than two hundred people. Now we have about seventy or eighty volunteers.

**Zhang: How about the stability of the organization's personnel?**

Wang: Not good. Because our funds are insufficient, we pay very low wages. We want everyone to have a volunteer spirit. The other day I calculated some of the statistics for our volunteers. Approximately seven percent have served for more than ten years. Twenty one percent have served for more than five years. I must say that we have a core group that are really steadfast and dedicated and make up the backbone of our organization. After we moved our organization to a place that was very far from the original location, we lost about twenty or thirty people, but this could not be helped.

**Zhang: What sort of plans do you have for the future development of your organization?**

Wang: Of course I have some tentative plans. Today I told them that I already have a prospective plan. What is our objective, our mission? Our mission is to pay attention to women, especially promoting women's health in mind and body, and advocating women's comprehensive development. We do not only seek to solve a woman's present hardship, to alleviate some of her psychological burden by giving her an opportunity to open up to us and pour out her feelings. In the end we must help women to be self-dependent, to strive to be stronger, and to stand up for themselves. We must promote women's growth. This is our final objective. Then, what type of organization should we become? I think that our organization should become an authority on telephone psychological consultation services. We should become an established, authoritative organization that promotes women's psychological health. This is our second goal. Third we should also become an influential organization on the research and study of women's psychology. We receive so many calls from women. We understand their psychological state; we also understand how we can help them. We think we should take on this kind of responsibility.

Therefore I feel that we still have a lot of room for growth since the women's hotline is only one part of the Red Maple Women's Center. I have only started to pave the way for others. More people should continue to develop this path. Moreover this road should gradually extend because there is a social need. More and more people have mental and psychological diseases. People suffer from increasing psychological problems. They need a place where they can obtain free psychological help. In my work, although since we started twelve years ago we only have been able to help seventy or eighty thousand people, I think what is important to us is the process, not necessarily the result. Helping one person is only helping one person. With China's population at about 1.3 billion people, we have only helped a very small number. Yet we work very hard at this. Since we give our best efforts, we feel very happy. But because the conditions that we work in are not great, it is very difficult to keep good people. For instance, we cannot pay a lot of money to invite a psychology expert to work as our director. It is really difficult for us to retain some outstanding talented people. This is because the salaries we pay are too low. Yes, these are some of the difficulties that we face. But as I said before, there will always be some dedicated volunteers. Approximately seven percent of our volunteers have served for more than ten years and twenty one percent have served for more than five years. This means that we are capable of getting devoted people together. From this group of people we will be able to select some who are the most dedicated and competent to take over the leadership. Therefore, I should say that I still have a lot of confidence that our work will continue.

**Zhang: In your organization aside from the volunteers and the staff who have made this organization develop and expand, you also need financial support. Where do these funds come from?**

Wang: We apply for them.

**Zhang: Where do you apply or what channels do you use to obtain funding?**

Wang: Well, the government has not given us a single cent.

**Zhang: So far, they have not given any funding.**

Wang: Right. I apply for all of the funding. This is why it is so difficult for me. I have to get funding. I also do a lot of the research. In addition I design our projects. Finally, I, myself, also have to study.

**Zhang: But when you apply for funding – what sorts of places do you apply to?**

Wang: I mainly apply to overseas foundations. We have tried very hard to look for domestic funding sources, however we still have not found any. I even proposed the chance to name our hotlines. Whoever provided enough funding for our hotline for a year would then be able to name the hotline. However we have not succeeded yet. We need to work harder on this.

**Zhang: On a different topic, what sort of relations do you have with other women's groups in the country?**

Wang: We have a lot of connections with other women's groups. For instance we continually do exchanges with the Shaanxi Women's Research Association. We learn from each other. They really do a good job there. Also we work closely for example with the Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Aid Services of Peking University,<sup>19</sup> the organization led by Guo Jianmei.<sup>20</sup>

**Zhang: a legal consultation center?**

Wang: Right, our relations are extremely good. We have some cases...

**Zhang: ...that you turned over to that center?**

Wang: Right, right. I turn some of these cases over to them. They then help the woman with her lawsuit. Some of the domestic abuse victims do not have money. The people at the legal consultation center help them with their case. We have also established a connection with the anti-domestic abuse intervention network. The All-China Women's Federation women's rights and interests department and also the Beijing Women's Federation rights and interests department both give us their full support. They have told us that if we have some especially complicated cases, we can call on them to intervene and they will try to help. I feel that society supports us and gives us a lot of help.

**Zhang: You offer emergency help to women and put into practice a gender perspective. However from a theoretical approach how do you see the development and actual activities that put into practice the feminist ideals, especially taking on a gender perspective, on the Chinese mainland? What do you think about this and how would you evaluate the current situation?**

Wang: Oh, I think that the World Women's Conference really pushed forward China's women's movement. It really helped a lot of people to look at things from a feminist point of view. This was a huge advancement.

**Zhang: You are referring to the 1995 conference?**

Wang: Right, right. The World Women's Conference was especially important to the women's movement in China because people came to see that the Marxist view of women and the feminist point of view were not contradictory. When people realized that these two ideas were compatible, the World Women's Conference helped gender perspective enter the All-China Women's Federation leadership. Do you remember – I do

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<sup>19</sup> Shaanxi Women's Research Association is an NGO devoted to feminist research and activism. It is very active in central China. The Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Aid Services of Peking University is an NGO that focuses on promoting legislations that protect women's rights and interests and provides legal services to women.

<sup>20</sup> Guo Jianmei is the director of this center and a professor at Peking University Law School.

not know if you participated or not – prior to the World Women’s Conference they had especially criticized this trend. For example, they criticized Li Xiaojiang<sup>21</sup> and other theorists as if they introduced Western feminism to guide the women’s movement in China in the wrong direction. The Women’s Federation considered this wrong and wanted to criticize these people. Actually these criticisms did not have much effect. Moreover, after the World Women’s Conference Huang Qizao<sup>22</sup> stated publicly that the Women’s Federation should look at issues from a women’s perspective. What is a “women’s perspective?” In fact it means a gender perspective. In these past few years, I think the idea of gender has entered into the mainstream of society and has entered the mainstream of the Chinese central decision makers. This is a very big development and sign of progress. Don’t you agree? For instance there is a new provision in the revised marriage law that prohibits domestic abuse. This illustrates that the law makers have accepted a gender perspective. I think this was a very important example of our achievements. When the marriage law was being revised, in the first five or six drafts, the prohibition against domestic abuse was not included. The drafters thought that social laws should not include such content. But, in the end, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress passed the revised version that contained this provision. Why did this occur? The judicial committee of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress adopted a gender perspective. Our government also made a Five Year Plan for the development of women – the first plan was from 1995 to 2000. Now there is a ten-year plan for women’s development for the years 2000 to 2010. In fact, the announcement of the outline also exemplifies that the idea of gender has been brought into the mainstream of government decision making. In addition the State Council has established a department for issues concerning women and children. This is also an example that gender perspective is influencing the mainstream for policymakers and legislators.

Of course I feel that there still is much more to be done. Gender perspective needs to affect more aspects of society, especially the institutions that administer justice. Although there are laws that protect women, some judges and the law enforcement personnel still do not have a gender perspective. Therefore, they haven’t implemented the laws effectively. So I think gender training... Well, when we hold the gender training sessions for the lower level personnel, sometimes they say to us, “We think that having this training is good for us; however you should also train our superiors and the higher level leaders.” We told them that that we were also holding these kinds of trainings. (Laughs.)

**Zhang: (Laughs.) It looks like for you the task is important and the road is a long one.**

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<sup>21</sup> Li Xiaojiang was one of the first scholars in 1980s that started rethinking women’s issues and feminist theorizing. As one of the founders of the discipline of Chinese (mainland) Women’s Studies, since the 1980s, Li Xiaojiang has been carrying out pioneering work in Women’s Studies. Through her efforts, the first series of western feminist articles and rethinking works on Marxism about women’s liberation were published. She has been engaged in institutionalizing Women’s Studies in academia and establishing women’s NGO in China, and has made outstanding achievements in the education, academic field and women’s development.

<sup>22</sup> Huang Qizao is Vice Chairwoman of the All China Women’s Federation.



Wang: Yes, but we are also very confident. I think we are really making rapid progress.

**Zhang: But I remember...many people are saying that during this process, since you started to pay attention to the topics regarding women and doing research on women, sometimes you find yourself, as an individual, in a very difficult situation.**

Wang: Mmm, yes, sometimes it has been difficult. Starting a non-governmental organization in China was a relatively new phenomenon. In China the political system has all kinds of restrictions. Non-governmental organizations must try to survive by adapting to this condition. The government wants to put these organizations under its control. I have no strong background or powerful backers. I only had great enthusiasm and followed a kind of idealism when I created this women's organization. And I am trying my best to keep it alive. Society did not understand. I think this is actually very natural. Therefore there was a time when it was really very difficult; indeed it was very difficult. But, because I am a communist party member, I believed that in the end, our society and our government would understand that in fact my work would benefit society. Many people have the misconception that "non-governmental organization" implies "anti-government organization." They do not trust these non-governmental organizations and they are always wary of them. I was not worried about things like this; I thought in the end they would come to understand. Eventually, I think...it probably took only a year or so to change the situation. Moreover, finally, some of the central ministries and departments and some leaders of the Beijing municipal party committee made explicit statements of support. They told me to act bravely; the party supports me and the government supports me. They told me that the things I did would contribute to maintaining the stability and unity of society. Therefore I could survive since in fact we have obtained the government's acknowledgement and society's recognition. This process is very natural. I am very lucky. I improved the situation of our organization so fast. The hardship did not affect my spirit. (Laughs.)

**Zhang: Is your organization still affiliated with the China Management Science Research Institute?**

Wang: No we are not affiliated with any institution.

**Zhang: Are you registered independently?**

Wang: Yes, we are registered with the Industry and Commerce Bureau.

**Zhang: Registered with the Industry and Commerce Bureau?**

Wang: Today I went down to the Industry and Commerce Bureau for my yearly registration.

**Zhang: Since you are a non-profit organization, why do you register with the Industry and Commerce Bureau?**

Wang: Oh right.

**Zhang: Do you also have to pay taxes?**

Wang: No, we do not pay taxes. Those people at the Industry and Commerce Bureau know, because we now do not have a supervising institution, so we cannot register with the Bureau of Civil Administration. Actually we should register with the Bureau of Civil Administration.

**Zhang: Right.**

Wang: But now we cannot register with them because we do not have a supervising institution. But we are striving to find one.

**Zhang: A higher level authority?**

Wang: Yes, we are hoping to find a supervising institution.

**Zhang: Then even though you are registered with the Industry and Commerce Bureau, you do not have to pay tax?**

Wang: We have never paid taxes to them. We tell them at the Industry and Commerce Bureau what we do. They are very understanding. Actually today I went to the industry and commerce company to do our registration again. The Industry and Commerce Bureau people said, "We know your women's hotline. It is against domestic abuse." Their attitude towards us was very good. They all knew that actually we are unable to register in the Civil Administration Department so that we had no choice but to stay registered with the Industry and Commerce Bureau.

**Zhang: Didn't you have a supervising institution earlier?**

Wang: Later we had to become an independent organization.

**Zhang: Became independent?**

Wang: Yes. And we changed our name in 1996 to "Maple."

**Zhang: Mmm, right. From that time you became independent.**

Wang: Right, right.

**Zhang: Then you started to register with the Industry and Commerce Bureau.**

Wang: Right, right. We went to register with the Industry and Commerce Bureau. In fact, we were the first non-governmental organization to register with the Industry and

Commerce Bureau. I created this path and now many other organizations follow suit. Xie Lihua and her group also registered with them....

**Zhang: I know other NGOs are all registered there.**

Wang: Right, right. A lot of organizations registered with the Industry and Commerce Bureau.

**Zhang: This is a Chinese characteristic.**

Wang: Right, right. The first group to register was ours.

**Zhang: Mmm, it seems as if you have done a lot of firsts. (Laughs.) You created the first women's non-governmental organization. Of course the Women's Federation also says that they are an NGO. Do you have anything else that you would like to talk about regarding feminist research and practices?**

Wang: I think we have incorporated many different streams of thought into our work. Of course there are differences among them, but I do not think we need to pay too much attention to the differences. We should pull from some of their most essential ideas, for instance, the ideal of realizing gender equality. We are not concentrating on the theoretical aspect – spending a whole lot of time doing this kind of research. I think we can leave this work to theorists. What I am doing is utilizing gender theories in practice, making them enter our society and people's lives, changing their ideas and getting into the mainstream. Mainly I do this kind of advocacy work. Therefore I rarely participate in the kind of feminist conferences that only address very theoretical issues. I do not have enough time to participate in all of these. But I think that my concern is how to use the essence of feminist theories to change women's status, change people's ideas, and enter into the decision-making process and the social mainstream. So possibly I am different than other people. However, I do not only do this kind of practical work; I also do gender research. My research is closely related to our work on psychological consultation and women's psychology. I have written some papers and have also had some of these published. These pieces all use a gender perspective. I have not done that many.

**Zhang: You have already been extremely successful.**

Wang: I could do more.

**Zhang: It is really admirable that you have maintained the organization for sixteen years. And your organization is still expanding...**

Wang: But we really need a next generation to continue this work. It has been very difficult to find a successor. You know, this job is really difficult – too difficult. Today I still have to come everyday and deal with all matters big or small. Actually I should not have to do all of these things. I should be able to focus on my research again and write and publish more. Research is something I am good at. In fact, at the time when I started

the research institute, I mainly wanted to do research. However, recently I have spent very little time on research. I have to do a lot of organizational work, look for funding, and also work on various projects. I spend the majority of my time on this kind of work. I would really like to have a little more time to write. One of the things I want to write about is my experience with this small NGO in the past sixteen years, the hardship that we have gone through. I think we need to let people know what kinds of difficulties a Chinese non-governmental organization has to deal with. Actually the things that I talked to you about are very general things. We have not talked about all of the most difficult issues.

**Zhang: Yes. Your sixteen years...**

Wang: Understanding from society.

**Zhang: Right. Your reflection on this process of sixteen years cannot all be covered in such a short time. Therefore we are eagerly looking forward to reading your book. It will be useful for later women's organizations so they can draw lessons from your experiences.**

Wang: Right, right.

**Zhang: Thank you very much for your support of our project.**

Wang: I'm glad to help. Your project also supports me, right?