

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

SITE: CHINA

**Transcript of Wang Cuiyu
Interviewer: Gao Xueyu**

Date: May 2003

Location: Shanghai Women's Federation

Translated by: Kim Dorazio

**China Women's University
No.1 Yuhui Dong Lu
Chaoyang District
Beijing 100101 China**

Tel: 86-10-84659006

Website: www.cwu.edu.cn

Acknowledgments

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Wang Cuiyu, 69, is a retired Women's Federation cadre who has involved in many organized activities locally and nationally to promote women's social advancement. In the 1990s and early 2000s she was the executive secretary of the Shanghai Association of Women's Studies, an organization affiliated with the Shanghai Women's Federation. While promoting research on women in Shanghai, she also played a leading role in a national organization for women's career development. When women's unemployment became an increasingly acute issue in the economic reform, she set up a women's school in Shanghai to provide vocational training for laid-off women. Her activism illustrates how women in the official women's federation have been able to initiate projects that address the needs of various women's groups and to work closely with women activists outside the official organization. Her narrative also demonstrates how the Fourth UN Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 provided new frameworks for women activists in China.

Wang Cuiyu (hereafter Wang): I was born in Ningbo City in Zhejiang¹ to a very average family. When I was six years old, my mother passed away. The environment in our household became very trying.

Gao Xueyu (hereafter Gao): How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Wang: At the time there were four of us in our household. My eldest sister, since she was small, had lived with my grandmother. I had two older brothers and another older sister who lived at home. Before long my elder sister passed away because she had contracted a lung disease. When I was little I also had a lung illness for a time; however my sister died because of this. During the time the Japanese were in China, one of my older brothers was gunned down by the Japanese because they thought he was a resistance army soldier. So after my mother passed away, only one of my older brothers and I were left in the house. My father, who at the time depended on his small business deals, was especially lonely and later remarried. At that time Ningbo City was just like elsewhere in feudal China;² feudalistic ideas were still very strong. Since within a time span of one or two years, my mother had passed away and my older brother and sister had also both died, I was accused of being a “*bai hu xing*.”³ This was because people believed that I had caused my family to suffer a whole series of misfortunes. This kind of attitude and thinking stemmed from my step mother, who represented feudalistic morals that were prevalent at the time. Thus, my childhood was very difficult. When I was four years old my family was in the cigarette business. Therefore, from morning till night I would sit on a stool and make cigarettes. I could do this really quickly. I had no childhood and no time to play. So when I was young I did not know how to play; I only knew how to work. Later, my father’s small business did not do well so I went to a factory to do child labor.

Later after China won the anti-Japanese war,⁴ my older sister came back to Ningbo, to my grandmother’s house where she had grown up.

Gao: Where was your grandmother’s house?

Wang: My grandmother’s house was also in Ningbo. My sister had attended elementary school there and then had attended a sports school and then a nursing school. She had become a midwife and moved away. She had learned that our mom, sister and brother had passed away. So she wanted to return home to see our grandmother who had raised her since she was small. As soon as she saw how thin and pallid I had become and how I was suffering, she asked my father if she could take me with her and let me attend school.

¹ Ningbo is a city in the Zhejiang Province (lower Yang-tze region).

² The official discourse and the Chinese public often use “feudal China” to refer to pre-1949 era (before the People’s Republic of China was established and a socialist system was created). People often use this word to describe a family where women are not respected or their rights are ignored.

³ In Chinese astrology the *bai hu xing* is an evil spirit. Once you come into contact with this spirit, bad luck is supposed to follow you.

⁴ The anti-Japanese war, as part of World War II, took place mainly from 1937-1945.

Gao: How old were you then?

Wang: This was in 1947.

Gao: So when you were young, you had never attended any sort of formal schooling?

Wang: No, I had not. My older sister saw that I had never attended a day of school and saw that I was being oppressed in both my home and at the factory. She said: “I already work, so I will take care of my younger sister.” So she took me with her. At that time she did not have a home either. Wherever she went, I also went with her. Sometimes she deposited me at her friends’ houses. I then attended school and baby-sat for her friends.

Gao: How much older is your sister than you?

Wang: She is fifteen years older.

Gao: So at that time she was already in her twenties?

Wang: Yes, she was. For a few years, living with my sister, I attended two or three years of school. I skipped a few grades of school. I did not start in first grade; instead I started in third grade and stayed in school until fifth grade. At that time Nanjing was liberated.⁵ Yes, at the time of liberation I was in Nanjing. In this way I started to become educated. In school I was a very good student. At the time when I was almost ready to graduate from elementary school, Nanjing was liberated. In my elementary school there were many college students from the Jiao Tong University⁶ – those who were involved in student activism came to advocate the ideas of the Chinese Communist Party and the liberation of China. I was very happy and encouraged. At the time I vowed that from that day forward I would definitely study very hard.

At this time, I ran into another problem. My older sister had gotten married. She had her first child. She also brought my older brother, who had become an apprentice, to live with us.

Gao: Did you and your brother go to live with your sister at the same time?

Wang: No, it was not the same year. He went later; I went to live with my sister first and my brother came to stay with us in 1948, right before liberation. At that time my sister saw that my brother, who was an apprentice in Shanghai, was undergoing difficulties. He made candy in Shanghai but the pots that he had to work with were extremely hot. Being

⁵ In this interview, “liberation” refers to the takeover of a city or region by the Chinese Communist Army (People’s Liberation Army, abbr. as PLA) from the hands of the Nationalist government. It also refers to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.

⁶ Here Wang Cuiyu is referring to Shanghai Jiao Tong University, a university jointly run by the Ministry of Education of China and the Shanghai government. It is one of the oldest and most influential universities in the People’s Republic of China.

an apprentice in this industry was a very difficult life. My older sister, who had been working a few years, felt that her financial situation was not too bad. So she not only took me with her, but also took care of my brother. When she was dating her future husband, she told him that she had a requirement that must be met before she would marry him. She wanted to be able to continue to take care of her younger brother and sister. My future brother-in-law agreed.

Gao: What kind of person was your brother-in-law?

Wang: He was not a bad person. He came from a family that was relatively well off. Before liberation in 1948 he went to the United States to study. He studied medicine and was a really great guy. He came back to China just in time for liberation and then married my sister. By 1949, the year of liberation, they already had a child together. You can imagine that he had taken on a fairly big set of responsibilities. This guy who had studied abroad in the United States was married to my sister who was a midwife. They had a child together and he also had to take care of his wife's younger brother and sister. In this kind of situation when he had to make a choice (between me and my brother), my brother-in-law chose to be responsible for my brother. He told me that it would be better if I went to work. At that time there were cultural work groups everywhere and I could have found a job. My older sister did not know that he said this to me. After he said this to me, my feelings were a little hurt.

At that time I was in school and even though I was thrilled about liberation, I did not want to take a job in a culture work group and still wanted to stay in school. Later I talked with my teacher about my situation. I told my teacher about my experiences in my childhood. Why did I have to rely on my brother-in-law? What problems was I facing? At the time I had a teacher named Wang Hao. He had originally spent some time at the Tao Xingzhi⁷ Yucai School. My teacher said, "I will introduce you to a school in Shanghai, a school established by Tao Xingzhi. This school especially catered to orphans. You may study there, because costs for food, books, tuition and clothes were all free. You could work and study at the same time." After I heard this, I was really happy. I said to my older sister: "My teacher has told me about a school in Shanghai where all of the school expenses are free; you have a lot of responsibilities now." At the time my older sister did not agree with this plan but I persisted and said that I wanted to go. Later when she saw me off at the train station she said to me: "Your wings have been hard but now you want to fly on your own." In her heart she was very hurt. She said she had originally thought that she would take care of me from elementary school, through high school, and then college. So she was hurt that I wanted to leave her. At the time I could not tell her what her husband had said to me. Although what my brother-in-law had said to me was hurtful, I could understand where he was coming from. However, I could not tell my sister what he had said to me. So I went by myself to Shanghai and entered the Yucai School. Since we had just been liberated the conditions at the school were very good. Although at the time Tao Xingzhi had already passed away... at the school we still all called each other brothers and sisters. We called male teachers "older brother" and female teachers "older sister." In this way we created an atmosphere that was similar to a

⁷ Tao Xingzhi was a famous educator in China.

big family. Most of the students at the school were orphans. A minority of the students' families had a little bit of money. These families paid a small amount of tuition. I was a top student. So everything was free for me. Actually, in the past Tao Xingzhi had made some connections with overseas donors. My photograph had been sent to them. Overseas there were some who wanted to offer assistance. I only discovered this after I had grown up, and especially after I myself had established a school for the disadvantaged. At the time I did not eat very well at all. Since the school was originally in Chongqing, many of the people and students were from Sichuan and Chongqing. They all liked to eat hot, spicy foods. Everyday they fed us cabbage and hot peppers. As a result I ended up having sores all over my buttocks.

Gao: Was it because you were having a reaction to the spicy food?

Wang: Yes. I ate these kinds of meals everyday. Everyday I would study and also do physical labor. At the time we were growing things in the field.

Gao: At the time how big was the scope of your school? How many students were there?

Wang: There were more than one hundred of us. At that time we were very happy. We also went to the countryside to be "little teachers." Tao Xingzhi advocated the practice of "little teachers." We would go to the countryside and help farmers learn Chinese characters, etc. In this school I felt free from worry and felt love everywhere. During this time, I did receive an education of love. In addition this school was the Party's democratic stronghold. Therefore I was deeply influenced by the democratic ideas and the party's revolutionary ideals. So I entered the school in 1949 and stayed for about two years. During this time I was really able to lay a foundation for myself. I felt that this was the first time that I was thoroughly liberated. I felt my individuality was fully set free. I was completely free from any worries and did not feel constrained in any way. Even though our lives were difficult at this time, I really felt a strong sense of independence. So, this describes my situation at the school.

The Korean War⁸ broke out in 1950. Exactly because I had established this kind of foundation, I really loved the new government and really loved new China.⁹ So, when the War to Resist United States Aggression and Aid Korea began, many students

⁸ The Korean War from June 25, 1950 to cease-fire on July 27, 1953 (the war has not ended officially), was a conflict between North Korea and South Korea. Some consider this Cold War-era conflict to have been a proxy war between the United States and its allies, and the Communist powers of the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. The principal combatants were North Korea, supported by People's Volunteer Army (PVA) of Communist China, and later Soviet combat advisors, aircraft pilots and weapons; and South Korea, supported principally by the United States, the United Kingdom and the Philippines, although many other nations sent troops under the aegis of the United Nations. In South Korea, it is often called "6-25" (the date of the start of the conflict), or, more formally, *Hanguk Jeonjaeng*. In the United States, the conflict was termed a police action, as the Korean Conflict, under the aegis of the United Nations rather than a war, largely in order to remove the necessity of a Congressional declaration of war.

⁹ By the time the Korean War broke out, the Chinese Communist Party had established a new government in China after defeating the Nationalist government and its armies (1949). People often refer to the post-1949 China as "the new China."

participated in the “December Ninth Campaign.” This campaign was to mobilize students to participate in the military cadre school and then go to Korea. During this campaign, I suddenly felt that this time I did not want to stay in school but instead wanted to go to Korea. Years ago my brother-in-law urged me not to attend school. However, I went to join the Yucai school. But now, I wanted to quit school because I wanted to defend our homes and protect our country, wanted to protect the new government and our new China. So I was the first to get on stage in a mobilization meeting and take a stand. I said, “I really enthusiastically loved attending school” – at the time I was pretty good at my studies in literature and I also read many world famous authors like Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, etc. – “and I really loved literature and I originally thought that someday I would become a female author. But currently our country is seriously threatened so I decided not to continue my studies. I want to educate myself among the flames of war and write under the baptism of revolution. In the future I will become an author.” The time when I went to do this, I fell and stumbled.

Perhaps because my performance in the campaign was outstanding – I really did this out of my strong feeling that we needed to protect our homes and defend our country, in the end they did not make me go to the cadre school. If I had gone, I almost definitely would have ended up in Korea. This campaign was organized by the municipal youth league and the district youth league in Dachang, which is the present day Baoshan. At the time my school was in the Baoshan area. The municipal youth league saw my performance, especially when I ran onto stage, stumbled but then still delivered my speech about how I had come to Shanghai to study. So they allowed me to stay in school. I became part of the first group of cadres in the municipal youth league.

Gao: Was this the Communist Youth League?

Wang: I entered the Communist Youth League in my school.

Gao: What year did you join the League?

Wang: It was in 1949. Even though I really was not old enough, this was the first group and I became a member of it. Since I was a league member and my performance was also remarkable, I did work for the league as a committee member in the Dachang district. At the time, they were just about to begin land reform and the building of democratic government. Because of this, I went to the countryside to do work in land reform and helped to build democratic government. Later I transferred from the district league committee to the league committee for the city suburbs. This was the Shanghai suburban youth league. My work was connected with the countryside. I was there until 1954 when the suburban youth league was abolished. We were then divided and sent to different work units. I, along with the man who would become my future husband, was transferred to the city league committee and worked there until the end of the Cultural Revolution. I was then transferred from the municipal league committee to the Shanghai Women’s Federation.¹⁰

¹⁰ The All China Women’s Federation has its national networks and branches at all administrative levels in China. In Shanghai, it is called the Shanghai Women’s Federation.

Gao: What year did you begin to work at the Women's Federation?

Wang: That was in 1978.

Gao: And what year did you get transferred to the municipal youth league?

Wang: 1954. So In 1954 I went to the municipal youth league. Then I officially left in 1978. During this period, following the party policy, I went to the countryside to work as a teacher for eight and a half years. I feel that during these fourteen or fifteen years as a cadre of the Communist Youth League and as a member of the young people's work teams everyone was really full of vigor and vitality. I, myself, was also continuing to develop in my work, both in the countryside and in schools. In addition through my work in the Communist Youth League, I came to know my future husband and friend, Ye Zukang. We entered the Party together when we were eighteen years old. Then we dated for about five or six years. Then in 1959 we got married and soon had a child. At the time I felt very fortunate to have my career, my family and my love. Other people always said that we were such a happy couple. He really had a lot of talent.

On the eve of the Great Cultural Revolution, after I studied at the Central Party Youth Corps School, I did research on pedagogy at the youth corps school and was engaged in youth education. Even though at that time I also was impacted by the Cultural Revolution, it was a massive movement and everyone was impacted. I did not feel as if it had any special impact on me. At the time all of the old cadres had been treated unjustly. I was rather young and did not have any real worries. They made allowances for the things that we did.

Later after the Cultural Revolution and after I went to the Women's Federation, two situations emerged. This was when I started to get interested in feminist issues.

Gao: Feminist ideas?

Wang: Well, let me explain. Perhaps because when I went to the Women's Federation someone at the municipal youth league gave me an introduction or for some other reason; at any rate, the responsibilities that the Women's Federation placed upon me were very heavy. They wanted me to start our work on the senior women intellectuals in the spheres of science, education, culture and medicine in Shanghai. So I worked to establish women's organizations in colleges, cultural organizations, and the academy of science. In this way I felt like I had entered into a splendid world. I came to know a lot of female scientists, female professors, actresses and female athletes. At the time I got to meet and work with many celebrities. I deeply, deeply felt that there was an abundance of talented women in China. It was then that I got to meet women like Qin Yi.¹¹ I also felt very encouraged at the time. During the process of doing my work, I came to realize that their personal development was not an easy one. They had reached the heights of their professions, however when you compared them with those in the mid levels in their

¹¹ Qin Yi, currently in her 80s, is a famous Chinese actress who has more than a 60 year acting career.

fields, they were the minority. The majority of women could not reach the upper echelons of their professions. It certainly was not easy for this small group of women to get to the top. It was like they had to struggle and fight to get where they were – like having to behead six generals at five different passes. It was very difficult for the many talented women, female scientists and actresses at the mid level to get to the top. Women comrades did most of the work on a daily base. However, when it came time for evaluations and promotions, if a man and woman were compared together, inevitably it would be the man who would move ahead. Because of this, often when women comrades would reach this critical stage, they would not be promoted and remain at their mid level positions. Thus women more often became involved in auxiliary work and genuinely important tasks were assigned to men. Women most likely took mid level positions and very few reached the upper echelons. At the beginning I had not been influenced by international feminist thoughts; I was not equipped with any feminist theory. I only knew the idea of “the equality between men and women.”¹² This idea was raised as early as the Maoist era.

At the time, I took several measures. The first measure was that recipients for the “March 8 Red Flag Bearers”¹³ in the fields of Science, Education, Culture and Health must be selected and praised every year. At that time it was almost impossible for women to receive honor titles such as “model workers” and “outstanding workers,” since men and women were evaluated together and only men got recognized. But the honor title of “March 8 Red Flag Bearers” was reserved for women. Although the city Women’s Federation had a limited quota of the number of women they could nominate, each unit and various systems were each allowed to do evaluations and choose recipients for this award! This happened every year. At the city level we granted such awards biennially or triennially. In this way women would be exposed so that they could shine. This revealed their talents. This activity was carried out with great enthusiasm. The Science, Education, Culture and Health spheres were the first to have this evaluation system in Shanghai. The Women’s Federation started from Shanghai where they tried to promulgate this practice. I was engaged in the foundational work for this. I did not have any subordinates. I was both the supervisor and the clerk. I happily busied myself with this work.

In the meantime, I proposed a slogan “Clear out the dust and excavate the pearls.” The meaning of this slogan was that very many women were silently working; they all had achievements but they remained buried. So our women’s organization took on the work of cleaning out the dust so that people’s achievements could be revealed. We did not try to create talented people; the Women’s Federation could not cultivate talents because it was a mass organization. However, during the process of women’s growth, we could seek

¹² “The equality between men and women” (*nan nu ping deng* in Chinese) has been promoted in the Chinese official discourse since the establishment of the PRC. For a long period of time, this slogan illustrates the Communist Party gender view that women and men are the same and thus they should be treated in the same way despite their biological differences. It is used today by some people as the equivalent of “gender equality.” It has been written into laws as one of the basic national policies in China, since the former President Jiang Zeming spoke about it at the Fourth UN Women’s Conference in Beijing (1995).

¹³ This title was created by the All China Women’s Federation to recognize women who had made remarkable accomplishments in their professions. Their goal was to promote women’s advancement.

out talented people, either by selecting the “March 8 Red Flag Bearers” award winners or recommending people to the leaders. We figuratively used the image of “cleaning out the dust.” These women were often buried under the dust and we wanted to unearth them. We did an excellent job at doing this kind of work. We all worked together at discovering talented women. In addition to honoring “outstanding women workers,” we also had the yearly activity of “finding shining women around us.” It was to get together and talk about outstanding women around us and their achievements. In this way we would develop together. In this way we could gain some progress in terms of equal rights. Some women who later became leaders in Shanghai advanced as “March 8 Red Flag Bearers.” This was one thing that we were involved in.

The second thing that we were involved in occurred after 1985. The Women’s Federation called on me to help with establishing a cadre school, probably as a promotion for me. I went to help to establish the first women’s cadre school. The Women’s Federation had not had any women’s cadre school until I went in 1985 to help to establish this. I was the first principal of the school. I went to prepare for the establishment of the women’s cadre school. After it was built, the first matter at hand was to establish a curriculum with courses that aimed to enhance women’s talents. Every woman cadre who came to the school had to attend this training class. At this time we did not have teaching materials. Ye Zonghai, a teacher from East China Normal University, and I initiated the Association of Female Talentology.¹⁴ At the time he had only finished a manuscript, the first draft. Because at that time computers had not come into common use, the manuscript was written by hand. He had already sent the manuscript to Northern Women and Children’s Publishing House, but the publishing house wanted a guarantee of the sale of two thousand copies in order to publish the manuscript. I was just about to offer this class. So I got hold of a copy of his manuscript, proofread and printed it, and then used this in my first semester of class. Of course, the outcome of using this material was very good.

Gao: At the time how many students did your school have?

Wang: At the time the school did not even have a dormitory. My first class was held in a space that we borrowed from a ballet school. It had about fifty or sixty people. Then I held my second class. Eventually because the women’s cadre school was different from other more general schools – it was to train cadres, so every year we had several hundred people. Thus, since we produced some results, many women cadres, some of whom had attended our classes and wanted to take some books back to their branches to teach, there was the demand for the material. In the class you could find, for example, area Women’s Federation presidents. So, I immediately was able to guarantee that the publishing house could sell two thousand copies of Ye Zonghai’s book. Of course some people said: “Are you crazy? You need so much money and the women’s cadre school does not have that kind of money.” Since I chose to use his book in my classes, Ye Zonghai was able to publish his book.

¹⁴ This terminology was coined by this group in an effort to promote women’s career advancement.

Gao: Where did the funds come from to purchase the two thousand copies of the book?

Wang: At that time the country had allocated funds to us that were in total about 130,000 yuan for the year. This was to include the rent for the classrooms, workers' wages and so on. We saved some of this funding for the textbooks.

Gao: So the money came from the funding from the Women's Federation?

Wang: These were the funds that the country allocated. After the women's cadre school was established, I applied to the government for funds for the year, about 130,000 yuan. Until the present day, we still only get 130,000 yuan.

Gao: After so many years?

Wang: Yes! It is the source for the wages, the rent and so on. We only get this much. The Women's Federation does not allocate funds for these things. This was the second matter that I did at that time.

Then I did the third thing. (So I accomplished three things.) The first was every year to select recipients for the "March 8 Red Flag Bearers" award. The second was the campaign of "clean out the dust to excavate the pearls."

The third was to offer a course at the school that emphasized making the best use of their special abilities so that they would learn skills and advance in their careers. This third project was larger in scale and would benefit many more people than the first two projects. After the "Gang of Four"¹⁵ was crushed and after the policy of "reform and opening" – especially after 1985, I think I gradually started to have some feminist ideas for two reasons. The first reason was because of my experiences at work. I really felt that it was not an easy task for women to achieve their full potential. In society the starting line for women's career advancement, along with many other aspects, was unfair. We could also feel inequality in terms of the standards set up for women and the heavy workload for them. The other reason was personal. By that time, in 1983, my husband had passed away due to lung cancer. He left behind two children, a son who had just entered university, and a son who had just finished elementary school. So in addition to finding myself in the position of being a single mother, I also took on the responsibility of preparing from ground zero for the establishment of the women's cadre school. Imagine that. In 1983...no, in 1984 they asked me to help to prepare for the establishment of the women's cadre school.

¹⁵ The Gang of Four was a group of Communist Party leaders in the People's Republic of China who were arrested and removed from their positions in 1976, following the death of Mao Zedong, and were blamed for the events of the Cultural Revolution. The group included Mao's widow Jiang Qing and three of her close associates, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen. The removal of this group from power marked the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Therefore, how did I feel at that time? In my life I had three very unfortunate incidents. When I was a child I mourned the death of my mother. At the time I suffered from the oppression of feudal ideas such as being considered “*bai hu xing*.” I yearned for liberation at that time and sought to be liberated exactly because of my childhood experience. I still remember that in the 1960s, I saw the movie *Red Women’s Battalion*.¹⁶ When I watched the movie I simply found myself with tears streaming down my face. I felt as if the situations that the movie characters found themselves in closely resembled my own experiences. I had just started to work at the municipal committee of the youth league at that time and my new job helped me to heal some of my emotional wounds.

The second unfortunate incident was the death of my husband when I was middle aged. Even though at that time I worked at the Women’s Federation, there were still subconscious feudal ideas that existed among these women in our offices. My first thought was to wonder why I couldn’t be promoted to an office level cadre at the Women’s Federation. Instead they wanted an orphaned widowed mother to start from ground zero to prepare for the establishment of the women’s cadre school. At the time I was a single mother who had to care for two children. I did not have any relatives in Shanghai. We had to start from zero; we did not even have a small patch of land, or a room, and I did not have a staff. We started from ground zero to open a women’s cadre school. At that time I borrowed a place to teach class from the ballet school. This was a place in the countryside. I remember at the time the TV series *A Xin*¹⁷ was showing. Every day I would accompany students to watch this. At that time, my older son was living on campus at his university and my younger son was often home by himself. Nobody looked after him. In my heart I really felt extremely worried and I always thought about him, but I did not know what to do. Why did I have to deal with this? It was obvious that I did not have the ability nor did I have to take on this job. I was, after all, alone and weak. This was the first time that I felt that as a widow and single mother, I was discriminated against and was treated coldly. I did not receive care from others.

I felt that among women often there was a subconscious way of thinking. For instance, when a woman does not have a husband, on the one hand, she receives a lot of sympathy. However, actually, hidden behind this is the idea that the woman does not have strength and does not have someone that she can rely on. Moreover, frequently people had this kind of theory: “You, Old Wang, do not take enough care of your family. You work from morning to night. That is why you suffer from this kind of result.” Later my boss said to me, “If you have to take care of your husband and look after your two children, you can request a long term leave of absence. We can look after you.” After hearing my boss say this I was really hurt. During this time what I most needed was for them to inspire me; I did not want to retreat. They seemed to mean: “When you find yourself in the situation where you feel like you have lost everything, why do you still have to

¹⁶ Also referred to as *The Red Detachment of Women* in English. This popular Chinese movie has won many awards in China. It depicts a group of revolutionary women of the 1930s who rebelled against the oppression of local landlords and joined the Communist Party army to fight for the liberation of the Chinese people.

¹⁷ *A Xin* was a Japanese TV series whose protagonist was named A Xin. The story tells of a woman who eventually becomes a successful entrepreneur after overcoming years of struggle and hardship.

struggle to show you are strong? Go and look after your family.” After my husband died, others said to me, “Well, you will soon be fifty years old. You should go and look after your children, retire early and so on.” During this time, I thought about when I was young and I was looked down upon by others because I lost my mother. They even treated me as the girl who was the root cause of disaster. When I became middle aged, I found myself mourning my husband. Now I was made to feel that I had not done well taking care of my family and that it would be best if I retired early. This left me feeling very uneasy. On the one hand, when my husband became sick, I tried my best so that I did not give up my work. And I also tried my best to help him lengthen his life. Originally, the doctor said that he only had three months to live. However under my care he lived for another three years. During these three years, I would work during the day and take care of him in the evenings. In the beginning I looked after him when he was in our home but later he had to stay in the hospital so I had to sleep in the hospital at night. I only had someone temporarily help me with my son at home. During the day she came to my home and looked after my son when I was at work. We also faced some economic difficulties. I received support from my older brother and older sister, too. So my husband lived for three more years and I was resolute about not asking for time off from my work. I said, “If under these circumstances I pulled back from my work, on the one hand I would have no way of maintaining our home financially. If he really left me, I would not have any way of supporting my family.” After he passed away, people had the idea that since I would be fifty years old soon that I should retire early and take care of my children and ask my sons to support me after they started to work. I believed what was important for us was that I should pursue my own career and my children should make progress in their studies. But we had to struggle to succeed and develop our talent while enduring hardship. I thought that the best way to educate my children was to influence them in subtle ways through my own actions. So, after my husband passed away, I took care of the kids by myself. I said to them, “You both work hard at your studies and mom will also work hard.” I took on all of the house chores by myself. I had stopped hiring the helper by then so I had to go to work during the day and do the house chores at night. Sometimes I would find myself still doing housework at two or three o’clock in the morning. I did not make my children wash a single dish. Later, my older son graduated from university and began to work. I also sent my second son to attend university and supported him until he graduated. Thus I felt that the female intellectuals in the spheres of science, education, culture and health had to walk a very difficult path in order to become successful. Many of us, including me, had suffered setbacks. So I feel that for women to move towards achieving their potential, and realizing their talents, they must have a kind of progressive way of thinking. If they do not, then often they will give up in difficult situations.

Why did I want to establish the curriculum that would help women achieve their potential at the women’s cadre school? This was the time when I myself was undergoing the most difficult time, so this made sense to me. After 1988, I started to foster and develop the Association of Female Talentology. This was also because I was thinking about how there were many women who found themselves in the same situation as me. In the lives of these women, the path to advance had also been very rough. We all had to climb over one mountain top after the other. If we did not have a spirit of pursuing liberating

ourselves and striving for self-strengthening, then women would have no way of getting past these kinds of extreme difficulties in life. Therefore after 1988, I talked with Ye Zonghai about using the study of making the best use of the theory of talented women as the foundation to initiate an organization. At that time, there was the National Association of Talentology and at the local level there was the Farmers' Association of Talentology, the Association of Talentology for Cultural Workers. So we wanted to have our Association of Female Talentology. We submitted a proposal and it was approved after June 4th. In December 1989, in Zhenhai in Zhejiang the Chinese Association of Female Talentology was established. I think at that time, besides the idea that women should strive to develop regardless of all kinds of difficult situations and must have the spirit of self-strengthening and independence, there was a theory that also influenced me. At that time there was a theory that had come from Japan that was called the "Three studies for ten thousand days."

Gao: What does that mean?

Wang: In a person's life there are three periods of ten thousand days of learning. From age zero to twenty-nine years old there are ten thousand days, where the primary focus is studying. This is the time when you are building a foundation. From age twenty-nine to fifty-nine there are also ten thousand days. During this period you are working. You become the backbone of society. In order to continuously develop, you certainly must persist in your studies. Since only by persisting in your studies can you fully develop in the second stage and continuously make progress so that you can climb to the peak, be successful and fully realize your talents. During the third period of ten thousand days when you are fifty-nine years old until after you are eighty-one years old, you become a person who has accumulated the rich experiences of a lifetime. At this stage you not only have little burden but you also have accumulated rich experiences. If you study now, it is a period of ten thousand days when you can soar to a higher level.

This theory inspired me in a very big way. At the time when I initiated the Association, I was about to retire soon. At that time the retirement age for women officials was not 60 but 55 and I was going to be 55 in 1990. I started to prepare for my work two years prior to my actual retirement. Some people asked me, "What are you doing? In the past you were always working. Even though we wanted you to take a leave and take care of your household you did not do this. Now after so much hardship you have been able to support your two sons through their college lives. Now the older has started to work and the younger one is already a sophomore student. This was a feat in itself. Now you will soon retire and you still want to work?" At that time, this theory of three ten thousand days was really inspirational to me. I felt that the greatest thing that China wasted was its human resources. Today, a lot of women retire when they in their forties. A person does not have very long to work in her lifetime and bring to light her value. Even though you are not yet old, you already feel that you are old. At that time no one would retire at the age of 45. When I retired the official retirement age for officials became 60. So I believed in this theory of "Three studies for ten thousand days" and used it to mobilize our sisters all over the country. We raised funds by ourselves. We gathered together to establish the countrywide Association of Female Talentology. So the thinking behind the

establishment of this association was very pure. We wanted to research theories of bringing forth women's talents and guide everyone so that they could achieve their potential. So I continuously spread the theory of the "Three studies for ten thousand days." I told everyone: It does not matter if women are currently in their careers or if they had already retired. This is all artificial. Now in the west there are a lot of people who are seventy-five and have still not retired. Doesn't this prove that the line is artificial? Why do we have to give up to this?

At the time of the 1995 World Women's Conference, one of the major things that the Chinese Association of Female Talentology wanted to do was to organize a delegation to participate in the World Women's Conference, although we did not have someone to back us up nor did we have much funding. I was the secretary general of the association at that time so the association asked me to organize our delegation. After a year of preparation, we did go and participate in the World Women's Conference in Huairou. China had forty-two forums and we were the only non governmental organization that relied upon our own funding. How did we come up with the funding for this? Some of the women entrepreneurs from our group donated some of the money as individuals. After we received the approval from the All-China Women's Federation, they also gave us some funding. At that time we collected more than one hundred thousand yuan in order to complete this important project. We were called "The Chinese Human Resources Development Research Board and the Association of Female Talentology." We were registered under the State Planning Commission. Prior to this we had been registered under the National Human Resources Department. The work we did at that time was extremely successful. After the World Women's Conference, we unceasingly promoted some large scale activities. In Chongqing we held the "Western China Women's Talent Development Research Seminar." Last year, in Jiangxi we held the "Urbanization and Women's Development Research Seminar." We had all kinds of people from every level of society. Young people in their 30s and 40s compose the backbone of our association.

Gao: Which areas did they come from?

Wang: Places like Jiangxi, Shaanxi, Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, Chongqing, Sichuan, Liaoning, Jiangsu and so on.¹⁸

Gao: Like branches.

Wang: Yes, they all have branches of our association. Currently, they all already have provincial level academic associations. There are old, middle aged and young people in these research boards. There are even plenty of people over seventy years old. There are also a lot of young people from about twenty to thirty years old. These people are extremely active in our seminars. The older people have done a lot of academic research. They have been continuously engaged in scholarly research in the field of female talentology for decades. Our research board focuses on academic issues that are all

¹⁸ Chongqing is one of the Municipalities in China. There are four Municipalities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing. These are large cities that have the same administrative level as provinces. Others are names of provinces in China.

related to actual problems. I think after the research association was established, one of our tasks was to adjust to social changes over times. For example, in Shanghai we also held a senior seminar, which addressed “women’s intellectual development in the new era.”

Gao: How often does the association generally conduct large scale, national seminars like this?

Wang: About a year and a half. There is a process to this. If we did not take enough time, the project would not be successful. If we would hold it every year, we would not have enough time to prepare, because many of us are not released from our regular work to take on these other duties and we do not have professional staff. We do our jobs as social work.

After the World Conference of Women in September 1995, in the same year in June, I had established a women’s school for the general populace.

Gao: I think its full name is “Women’s Experimental Correspondence School for Further Studies.”

Wang: The whole process kind of involved several things. When we were forming the Association of Female Talentology I found myself traveling to many different places in the country. I realized that there were many good things happening in the country, but at the same time it remained difficult for women to succeed. I discovered that our country has undergone enormous changes during the process of the implementation of the reform and opening policy. The country had become prosperous and more powerful and the people had become wealthier. However after traveling from place to place I discovered...I had gradually theorized the changes in terms of “three big differences.” The first was regional differences, for example like those of Shanghai and Inner Mongolia. In Shanghai even if a woman was laid off from her job, she would still live in a good apartment building. However there were a lot of women in Inner Mongolia who lived in mud houses. The second big difference is that of the difference in the groups. There is a portion of the people who have become rich since the reform and after all, this is a good thing. However, the rich people seem to grow richer while the poor seem to grow poorer. Thus people are increasingly polarized. Today our government is taking the problems of disadvantaged groups seriously. We all realize that “The countryside is really poor; the farmers are in dire straits; the agriculture is really bad.” But in the beginning of the 1990s when I first discovered this problem, no one was talking about this. Possibly because I came from an average family, I could really empathize with how people spent their days in these places. I felt this especially in 1993, after I had a meeting in Taiyuan in Shanxi province. After the conference was finished, the conference organizers planned a trip to Wutai Mountain for us representatives. I recall that this day did not fall on a Sunday. I saw a little girl who was selling things while she was at the same time reading her book. I asked her, “Today is not Sunday. Why don’t you go to school to study instead of reading and selling things here?” She told me, “Economic conditions in my family are not very good so I had to discontinue my studies. But I really

want to study and go to school!” At that time after I had heard what she said I suddenly thought about how I had gone to the Yucai School because of my special family situation. So at the time I felt that the need for schools like the Tao Xingzhi School had not passed! Why not establish a girls’ school for the general populace and let these children have an opportunity to study while they work! This little girl was engaged in small scale business to support her family while at the same time she was persisting in her studies. After I saw this, my heart felt pain. I thought of my own childhood and I felt that we needed to continue to develop Tao Xingzhi’s idea under new historical conditions. Tao Xingzhi’s idea is captured in his slogan: “Holding total devotion to our cause but expecting nothing in return. Spread love to every place under the sky.” I was a student who came from the Tao Xingzhi School. Currently, I had already achieved so much. So I felt that I should establish this school.

After I returned to Shanghai, I raised my courage and went to the then Shanghai Bureau of Education Office of Societal Strength – it is today’s Board of Education. I introduced myself to them and said that I wanted to apply to run a women’s school for the general populace. The name of the school was to be the “Women’s Experimental Correspondence School for Further Studies.” At that time I did not know it would become an institute. I told them that I did not have anything at the time. I was very frank with them. I said I did not have any staff, did not have even a small room, and did not have a single cent of money. But I possibly had an advantage. I originally was a student of the Tao Xingzhi Yucai School. I was gradually influenced by Tao Xingzhi’s idea of education. I was traveling in the country. I realized that there were three big things that were not balanced. At that time nobody had raised this issue of these kinds of inequality. But today our government always mentions inequality. This is not to say that my theoretical level was that sophisticated, but I was able to discuss this little girl’s situation. I said I could run a correspondence school. This type of school would not need dormitories. I would run ads through the *Young Women* magazine. This magazine was published in Shanghai. The magazine only cost one yuan per issue so it was cheap, but managed extremely well. It was distributed in very remote places and had a distribution rate of over 220,000 volumes. At that time at the magazine publishing house there was an editor named Chen Lili. She told me that the magazine was distributed to many medium sized and small cities and was connected to the countryside. This magazine was extremely popular and young women really liked it. Moreover I told them that the magazine had already agreed to publish my advertisement to recruit students for free. Thus, I used this magazine to recruit students. Then they asked me where I would get the textbooks from. I said the textbook that I would use was *Writing for Young Women*. It was compiled by an editor from this magazine and was published by the People’s Publishing House. The teaching materials were composed of ten lectures for an entire year. Every two months there would be another lecture. It only cost 400 yuan for a year. Moreover I asked a professor from the Textile University to write a book called “Clothing Design and Tailoring.” So we had teaching materials. By working through a Chinese business school, we also had materials for a marketing class. This teaching material was written extremely well. So I would offer three majors and had teaching materials for these courses. But I still did not have any staff. I told them that I was also the principal of the women’s cadre school. In addition I was asked to do office work in

the Women's Federation. So I had a lot of connections in the circle. I was also an initiator of the Association of Female Talentology. So I had an advantage to run this school. This was a correspondence school. I wanted the school to attract students from around the country. I did not want Shanghai to be the emphasis of our work. Why? Because Shanghai already had a women's cadre school and I was its principal. I did not want to replicate something that had already been done. In the first couple of years most of the students were from outside of Shanghai. After they registered, I sent them the teaching materials. After they studied on their own and did the homework, I asked some of the senior level Shanghai teachers to check and grade their work for them. For instance, the director of the editorial department of *Literature Report* graded the students' literature homework.

Gao: Were all of the teaching materials given to the students free of charge?

Wang: Well, at that time I did not have any money. In the beginning, I charged fifty yuan per year. However, if the students wrote to me and told me that they were having financial difficulties, I did not charge them anything. Over thirty percent of the students were in this situation. There was an incident that made an extremely deep impression on me. There was a young woman who had come from Guizhou to find work in Guangdong. At that time my teaching materials cost seventy yuan. She used the money that she had saved from working. She registered for three classes, which altogether cost 210 yuan. She said, "This kind of teaching style, the high level of the teaching material and the careful grading and corrections from the teachers enable me to continue to study while working, even during the time when I go back to the countryside." There were some people who studied language especially well and would be hired by companies. Some of the students wrote articles that were published. There were some people who studied sewing and tailoring and then opened their own shops. Some people became involved in sales. Such were the results of our endeavor. This girl was only nineteen years old at that time. She had long hair. She said, "I don't ask you to waive my fees. I only ask you to give me knowledge. Only by having knowledge can I completely change my destiny so that I do not have to do menial jobs. In reality I have an extremely wide range of interests. I like singing, dancing, drawing and making clothing. If I remain a good student, then I will have many kinds of talent and I will continue to develop in the future." After we mailed the first batch of teaching materials we decided to only charge her for one class and to refund the money for the costs for the other two classes. At about this time we received a letter from her friend. That year Guangzhou Mei Mountain area had been hard hit by a major flood and she had drowned. In the letter it said, "We are sorry to tell you this sad news of the death of our beloved friend. We found this completed batch of homework in her bedroom. We saved this batch of work as a permanent memory of her." The letter also asked if we could still send all of the teaching materials. Later, I did send all of the teaching materials along with a poem that I wrote. I asked her companion to read this at her memorial and then burn it to commemorate her. Her name was Luo Xuelian. I said, "You embraced ideals and hope in your nineteen years. You came from the countryside to work at the textile mill. So you came from the countryside to the city to pursue your dreams. But now you have passed away, but never left us since you will always remain in our hearts." I keep this poem pressed under the

glass top of my table. I said to Chen Ying, my assistant, “We should keep this memory. No matter currently how difficult it is, we must not give up.” It truly was extremely difficult, although the scale of our school was larger and larger. At that time I worked at the Women’s Federation. Chen Ying was a cadre who specialized in labor issues from the Worker’s University. The two of us used our spare time to work on this. All of the school fees that we received we used to pay the teachers who corrected and graded the students’ homework. We only paid them 5 yuan for each homework book that they corrected.

Gao: So these teachers are also for the most part volunteering their time?

Wang: Yes. Among my students, there are about twenty to thirty percent who do not pay fees. I feel that these women themselves demonstrate a kind of spirit that can be called “feminist.” Women must be strong and should struggle for themselves. Later we edited a publication titled *New Buds*. This journal was distributed to our students. Since we are a correspondence school, we can not teach the students face to face. So I wanted to use this journal to encourage them to persist and study, study and study even more!

After 1998 the emphasis of my work shifted from the whole country to Shanghai more specifically. Why did I want to focus on Shanghai? In the past I had a principle. Shanghai already had a women’s cadre school, so I did not want to focus on recruiting students from Shanghai. At that time the Association of Female Talentology was established in an office of the Women’s Federation. I heard numerous stories of people committing suicide at that time. The first case of a woman worker who committed suicide really shook me to the core. This woman worker was laid off from her work and her husband then divorced her. The courts decided to give the child to her. So under these dual stressors, one morning she went to the produce market and bought some green vegetable peels. She then made a bowl of vegetables and noodles for her child. The child went to school and then she hung herself in her home. As for me, hearing about this made me feel terribly pained and miserable. Why did I want to help people that were far away when there were so many people close at hand who needed help? Shanghai had so many women workers who were laid off. Moreover, the numbers of the women in this situation continued to grow. If they would come to my school to take courses, then I believe this would give them some hope for the future. The situation they were in was only temporary. So I talked with Chen Ying and we decided we should return to Shanghai. So we first went from Shanghai to a focus on most of the country and then changed again to focus on Shanghai. We wanted to integrate face to face teaching with correspondence courses. Because of this, in Shanghai we established an education center. The main reason for this was because we targeted laid off women workers. In other areas – I also went to Chifeng in Inner Mongolia, its most impoverished area, and established a correspondence education center. Here we would hold agricultural technology training. There was no way to offer an agricultural technology training class via a correspondence course, because the teachers could not correct homework. Since each area has its own weather and geographic conditions, the teachers cannot work via correspondence. So we offered an agricultural technology class over there. We compiled teaching materials here and then sent them over. Currently we have already offered this

course continuously for the past four years. We have had more than five hundred students in Inner Mongolia take this training.

Gao: Were all of the students women?

Wang: Yes. The costs for their tuition came from a scholarship fund for disadvantaged women.

Gao: How did this scholarship money for disadvantaged women come about?

Wang: I had teaching centers in Shanghai and two other provinces, Chifeng in Inner Mongolia, and Yongxiu in Jiangxi, which was an old revolutionary area.¹⁹ Originally I had also wanted to establish a center in Yunnan, but I really lacked the ability to do what I would have liked. My funds were really limited. I worked hard to get a little funding from the government to offer trainings for laid off women workers in Shanghai. They gave us support because the problem of laid off workers and unemployment became more and more serious but the government did not know how to deal with it. In addition, we worked to get contributions from the Shanghai Charitable Foundation as well as the Hong Kong Bank. Also, we applied to the Global Women's Foundation for funding. There was also some money that we had accumulated ourselves. At that time when the school was being established, I myself contributed ten thousand yuan. There were also two women entrepreneurs who attended the World Women's Conference who both contributed ten thousand yuan. Three of us contributed thirty thousand yuan. We used this money as the base of our funding. In general my school did not maintain a staff or a facility. We would go anywhere there were students. We would temporarily borrow a classroom in order to limit our expenses. The places that we taught were all transitory; none of them were fixed places to teach. This was because it was difficult for these women to all gather in one place. Moreover, the price of public transportation in Shanghai is very expensive. I would spend twenty to thirty yuan on transportation per day. How could these laid-off women workers all gather in one place? We had to go to wherever they were. Up until the present, our school still does not have a fixed location. Currently in Chenghuang Temple²⁰ we have a house that is a little bigger than three hundred square meters. A private entrepreneur saw that we were really down on our luck and lent us the house. This was the first floor of a run down house. When it rains hard outside this room, there is a light rain inside the room. During the rainy season, everything inside becomes full of mildew. The room also has very poor ventilation. When the weather is very hot, the room becomes very stuffy. There are three classrooms. We just have to make the best of the situation. Despite all of these problems, it is better than having no place at all. In this way, I save the rent and I can use all of the funds that we have to help the women workers who have been laid off in Shanghai. Although they

¹⁹ Before establishing the new government in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party and its armies created some rural bases with which to fight against the Nationalist armies. These are often referred to as "old revolutionary areas." They are scattered in many provinces, particularly in Jiangxi, Hunan, and Shaanxi.

²⁰ The Chenghuang Temple area in Shanghai has a long history. The Temple itself began to take shape and prosper during the Ming (1368-1644) and throughout the Qing era (1644-1911), attracting a lot of worshippers. Since the mid-nineteenth century, this area has become one of the important business areas in Shanghai. Today, it is well-known nationally as a historical site, a tourist attraction and a business area.

had a bit of money, it is still not enough. Especially these past two years, I started a family knitting and processing industry.

After going through all kinds of specialized trainings, I later discovered that the employment rate was very low. Moreover, many of these jobs are unstable. How do you deal with this problem? I thought if women did knitting, they could use their free time productively. They would not have to leave their house and could carry on a family processing industry. This program was started in 2000. Three years time has passed. We have seen the establishment of this specialized industry, training courses and then the formation of an organized cooperative. Currently this group is flourishing. I trained more than seventy people at Huangsha Island. In the first year, on average, people increased their income by eight hundred yuan. The second year their income increased by twelve hundred yuan. This year they are really doing terrific. Up to the present, in two months there are already some people who have increased their income by more than one thousand yuan. What is going on? Their skills are getting better and better and their business is increasing. Before they made about half a yuan to a yuan to process an article of clothing but now they make at least ten times what they used to. We have a cooperative – the Huangsha Island Cooperative at Tonghe Street in Baoshan. The members of this cooperative were all Shanghai farmers. There is also the Danqing Garment Cooperative on Pingyang Street. Now they all are developing markets and receive orders on their own. They were all former students who we trained. In the beginning, when the labor bureau established specialties, this was not included. Later they saw that this was a very good channel for part time employment and then they included us. They also gave us a little bit of funding. We have become one of the training bases of Project 4050.²¹

Currently we are developing a training class for ten thousand women who have come from other areas outside of Shanghai. This project is being held by a charitable foundation. They know that we specialize in this area and that we did a great job developing the family processing industry. As a result, they chose twelve spots in the whole city. We are one of them. We currently are training four to five hundred of our sisters who have come from other areas. They originally migrated to work in Shanghai. Later they became Shanghai wives, but they do not work now. Since we have begun the trainings, I have always taught the first class. The basic content of the first class includes such things as me talking about the objectives of the class. I address the issue of how education has become a money making industry, but that this is not the purpose of our school. We do not make any money by offering these classes. I explain how we depend on our own accumulated resources as well as several applications that we have made for funding. I usually tell the students all of these things. The money that we receive from outside funding is all used to make the students' trainings better, so I hope that they really treasure the opportunity to take the class. The second main thing that I discuss is that women must have practical skills. Only then can you obtain the social position and the

²¹ Project 4050 is a project in Shanghai specifically designed to foster entrepreneurship and thereby transform the city's unemployed into small business owners. Project 4050 encourages individuals to start their own small businesses, and then follows through by providing these new entrepreneurs with tax incentives and advice in managing their new enterprises.

position in your household that you should have. You should not admit that you have lost your jobs because you are less capable. You are not less capable; you are making sacrifices for the country which is undergoing the process of a realignment of the social structure. As long as you take your studies seriously, you can start over and have a better development. The third thing that I speak about is economic independence. This really is the only way that women will obtain the rightful position in the household and in society. We stress this point especially to these women migrants. You should not think that because you have gotten married to a man from Shanghai that you will have stability. Why are some people always bullied or treated badly? This is because they do not have their own independent source of income. Even though your husband and your in-laws are very good to you, in the final analysis you are always the person who has no source of income in the home. Thus, it is almost impossible for you to have a very high position in the family household. And this is not even mentioning your position in society. It is impossible for you to become a true citizen of society since you do not participate in the labor pool in society. You do not make the contributions to society that you should. I always discuss these ideas with my students. Thus they have very deep feelings for our school.

Why did I want to work on establishing a school for economically disadvantaged women and organize cooperatives at the same time? Other people said to me, “You educate the poor and do not make any money, and also even have to sometimes use your own money.” The two of us, teacher Chen Ying and I, were busy from the beginning of the year until the end of the year. We worked hard from Monday until Sunday and never took any vacation. We were even busy in the evenings; we were very tired, very tired... But I still moved on to organize a cooperative. Why was I doing this? After these years of trainings, I think that women are stronger when they form a team and organize. If they do not follow the path of collective development, they often find themselves isolated and weak. Moreover I still want to instill in these students a kind of moral character. You have to not only develop yourself and work to free yourself from poverty but also pull your sisters by the hand so that we all can succeed together. One time I had an unexpected opportunity to get to know people from the Chinese International Labor Organization during a trip to Beijing, because of an introduction from Bing Xin’s daughter, Wu Qing.²² This organization was founded in 1937 and was organized by the leaders of the Party. During the War of Resistance against Japan,²³ the main aim of the group was to help impoverished communities. It solved the problems of the poor by organizing them into cooperatives, as well as providing provisions that were needed because we were involved in the Sino-Japanese War at that time. The objectives of the organization were: work hard, work together, unify and cooperate, and common enrichment. Thus, I asked a person from the Labor Organization to come to Shanghai to give the students a training class on the spirit of cooperatives. From this time forward, I organized the students to walk the path of “work hard; work together, unify and cooperate, and common enrichment.” As sisters we should hold hands and walk forward together. At that time when I lectured to the students in class I said, “You have three

²² Bing Xin was a famous woman writer in the early twentieth century. Her daughter, Wu Qing, is a renowned activist and scholar.

²³ The anti-Japanese war, as part of World War II, took place mainly from 1937-1945.

paths of development after you complete the training here. The first path is to try to get a recommendation for a job where they only enroll those who are outstanding. In this kind of work, you must certainly try to adapt. It does not matter if you work for the government or for a private company. You certainly have to adapt to that working environment in order to continually develop. The second path is to start an independent undertaking. In this way you can best realize your own value and talents. However, this path also has the most risks. The third path is to start an undertaking with a unified cooperative group. In this way you can work together for common enrichment. Isn't this a better way of doing things? Everyone can work together and depend on each other. Moreover in your heart, you also must consider other people, and not only think of yourself." Now I feel that there have been many really diligent students who have chosen this last path. Because they share the spirit of unity and cooperation, they have done a good job in marketing.

Gao: So far, how many successful cases are there?

Wang: The Huangsha Island cooperative already has been in operation for three years. The Tonghe Street cooperative has only been in operation for a little more than a year, but it has developed very rapidly. In the beginning, they took orders from local foreign-trade private enterprises that needed some work added products. For instance they made sleeve cuffs for wool sweaters, or neckbands. The additional labor cost was only about half a yuan to one yuan. At that time, the more they made the better they did. However in fact, their income was still extremely low. I also organized people to go out and get more orders like this. But after we did this for a while, we thought that we should think of other means. As a result they themselves designed beaded purses. Then they put their products in the market. This place has now been turned into a base for the production of gifts.

Gao: In the past the cooperative produced things for others. Now are they themselves taking on their own projects?

Wang: Yes. The third cooperative is the Dan Qing garment production cooperative. The name of this cooperative sounds similar to the characters for "Dan Qing."²⁴ But actually the name means "single parent." Several of the core members of this group are single parents. Some are divorced, some have lost their spouses, and some are laid off from work. These several people have come together and cooperated to make clothes. Now they have a lot of orders for processing clothes. These three cooperatives are all operating rather successfully. Wujiao Chang originally had a cooperative. In the beginning they also did very well. These workers were all disabled people. But then they became subject to official intervention. Because the director of the community committee wanted to make this into an achievement in her official career, she decided to support the project. Currently each month they have to pay her a five hundred yuan regular wage and let her be the leader. At any rate this caused people to be at odds with the leadership. Originally these women were united and cooperating for common

²⁴ Dan and Qing refer to two kinds of color that were most often used in Chinese traditional painting. Thus the word is used to refer to the art of painting. It also means "unwavering."

enrichment. Everybody shared in the hardships. After this individual began to take a five hundred yuan salary, other sisters in the cooperative left. Now they can't even complete an order of several hundred items. However in the past, the cooperative used to be able to complete big orders of several thousand items. But the other three cooperatives are very successful. I am now planning to establish a new cooperative here, in the school headquarters, because we can use this place made available by this businessman. We want to organize some of the people that had completed the training classes and can do this business well to create the fourth cooperative. We want to invest ourselves this time and make wool sweaters. We will purchase raw materials, make sweaters and then embroider designs on the wool sweaters. Thus we will go a step further than the other three cooperatives. I have some material about the plan here. Other people have told me what a great job that I am doing, but I do not think that I am doing anything extraordinary. You can take a look at this material.

Gao: How would you analyze and evaluate the development of feminism on the mainland and how do you see its future?

Wang: In terms of feminism in China now, I think I probably have some biased views on it, after spending years on activism. On the Women's Federation's part, there have been consistent efforts to promulgate the basic national policy of "the equality of men and women." They have done a lot of work in this area. But, how do actual women awaken their own consciousness and follow a path of self liberation? How do they themselves go and put into practice the ideas of feminism? I have always thought that their work is insufficient. Our Women's Federation organization always has a kind of inherent insufficiency. The Women's Federation, for the most part, still has to follow directions from the top.

Gao: What influence has international feminism had on your personal development? When was the first time that you came into contact with feminism or heard of this concept?

Wang: This was a time period when I had just suffered a very big setback and I was extremely stressed. I thought that I needed to resurrect myself. At that time I was working at the women's cadre school. One day I met with Wang Zheng.²⁵ She and others were at the women's cadre school to give a talk about feminism. I started to feel that the way that they were discussing the issues had a human face, compared to the way we were talking about "men and women's equality." It also was more stimulating in helping women achieve a kind of self-consciousness. Later, why was I able to establish this organization? Perhaps this had an influence on me. There was also the "three studies for ten thousand days" theory. This certainly had an enormous impact on me. These two things both influenced me.

Gao: During the process of feminist research or activities, what are your greatest gains?

²⁵ 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.

Wang: I feel that there are a lot of things that still need to be done. It seems that the more things that I do, the more things there are that still need to be done.

Gao: You have done so many things and you have worked so hard. Some times when you have time to sit down, do you ask yourself what are the goals of what you do?

Wang: I do not have any regrets. I went from one organization to two organizations. Currently, the first organization has already developed and spread to more than ten provinces and cities. We are united. As for the second organization, this has grown even more. We have trained over ten thousand people free of charge. This has solved many people's problems. I have always thought this work is really worth it. Certainly, I am very tired from hard work. I got married to my second husband in 1990. He is a senior professor at Jiaotong University's agriculture school. We were both the same year and he had also lost his wife. At that time when we decided to get married, I raised a prerequisite for marrying him. I said, "Currently I have already reached retirement age, but I do not plan on ever retiring."

Gao: What did he say to you in response to this?

Wang: I had told him, "After I retire, I probably will have more things to do than before. I have to be in charge of the National Association of Female Talentology. I will need to travel to many different places in the country. After 1994 I also established the women's college. In addition, I still have a lot of work to do for the Women's Federation. These three things have been keeping me really busy. As long as I can still get around, I want to continuously work on these projects." He agreed with my plans. After he had retired, he continued to work on his projects for four or five years. Afterwards because he was limited in certain ways, when he applied for another project, he did not receive support. Currently, on the one hand, he does a great job of taking care of the household affairs. In addition he helps me to handle many problems.

Gao: Does he wholeheartedly support you doing all of these things?

Wang: Yes. But of course, at times he may complain. After all, it has been like this for more than ten years. He will soon be seventy years old. Sometimes he feels a little tired and a little lonely because he is often home by himself. So, sometimes he does complain. I told him that when I can no longer get around, I would then come home and spend time with him. But, now I can still run around and the nature of my work requires that I still run! If I do not do this, then my work has no way of continuing to develop.

Gao: During this process what do you feel has been your greatest loss?

Wang: From a very young age, I did not have a stable family. When I was young my mother passed away, then when I was middle-aged my husband passed away. Afterwards I created a new family. Originally I hoped in my heart for the happiness of a

family life in my old age. But when I look back on my life, if the children also want to enjoy the happiness of a family reunion, would they still be able to devote themselves to work? One of my children went from attending university to working at the university. After finishing his graduate degree at Fudan University, he stayed there to work. My other child is currently attending Number Two Industrial University. Now as society develops, they cannot be content with the present situation. Therefore, they also will need to keep working hard. In society, it will be difficult for them to be able to support even themselves. So I told them, “You struggle for what you believe in; I will struggle for what I believe in! I will struggle until I am eighty or ninety years old. I receive a small amount of pension, so I will always have food to eat.”

Gao: Do your children complain? They love you and they probably feel that you work too hard and that you should rest. After all, their mother is not so young anymore. If she continues to work like this, it is probably not good for her health.

Wang: First of all, do they have the ability to come and look after me? No. Secondly, I have to pursue my goals and my ideals. For instance, now I work for education for the general populace so that many women who find themselves in these difficult situations are able to get educated and become stronger. I also organize them to get rid of poverty together. If I gave up all of these projects, I would feel that I have no goals. I would only get older... get older and have no goals. How would I live in retirement? How do I spend the rest of my life? Working hard is still the most important. The ideal situation would be if the old and young – if everyone would work hard together. If we all support each other and enjoy our family life, this would be the best. But, when you work hard, you find it difficult to find time for your family. You have to deal with contradictions.

Gao: How do you overcome these kinds of contradictions?

Wang: You can only try to get the family together for holidays. Actually there is really no way of doing this.

Gao: What do you personally feel was the greatest difficulty in establishing a school, creating the Association of Female Talentology and providing education for the poor?

Wang: Of course my greatest difficulties have always been in the area of funding. I did not have a guaranteed source of funding. In the beginning when I started, I invested some of my own money. However, since I retired, my living standards become lower and lower in these years. After I had just retired, my wages were seven hundred yuan. There have been a series of adjustments made by the government but now my wages are only one thousand yuan. I also must take my husband into consideration. What if the two of us become seriously ill? I do not want my two children to have to take care of us. Because of this, I only intermittently spend money. I cannot give my own ten thousand yuan like I did when we were just starting out. Now my husband and I together receive only two thousand yuan in pension per month. However an even greater difficulty lies in people's lack of understanding. I frequently have a feeling of loneliness. In the area of

education of the general populace, up until now, the only person that I have found who shares my common goals is Chen Ying. There is no one else. When I first started this project, many people did not support me. This includes high level people like Ye Shuhua. She is a Delegate of the National People's Congress.²⁶ She said to me, "Why do you make yourself suffer like this? You are trying to solve the problems of the disadvantaged groups that even the premier could not solve. So do you really think that you can solve these problems?" I said, "The premier has his duties as a premier. He must solve the problems of the country. I only want to solve the problems of a small area. I am starting a single spark. I can only maintain this small oasis. I will do whatever I can. As long as I can continue my work, I will do so."

I feel that I exist in this world like a flash of light. But how long will this flash of light last? I am also very realistic. I can remain active for another couple of years. When the time comes when I am really not able to get around and when I really have no strength, perhaps this flash of light will be extinguished. But these ten years of history can never be buried. I will not live forever. If some day, some young people can take this light and continue this work, then that would be terrific. If no one does this, then do not worry about it. This is my point of view: I am prepared to face the possibility that this work started by myself has to be ended when I leave. If I become very ill then I will have no choice but to give up.

Gao: I have heard that your health is not very good.

Wang: In these past ten years I have had a lot of tumors.

Gao: When were these discovered?

Wang: In 1975 I had my first surgery. Then I had another tumor in my blood vessel in 1980, before my ex-husband got sick. I had another surgery. Then in 1994, after I remarried, I discovered another. At that time because I was involved in the preparation for the World Women's Conference, I was extremely tired. Since I was running the school and preparing for the World Women's Conference at the same time, I was really exhausted. In 1995, the doctors identified a lump in my breast. I have had numerous illnesses and my physical constitution is not very good. I am also very sensitive. I have always had surgery quickly so that the tumors do not take a turn for the worse. But because I quickly had a surgery, the cancer did not spread. I have had a partial mastectomy. In 1996 I had a tumor in my thyroid.

Gao: So altogether you have had four surgeries?

Wang: Yes. In addition, when I was young I had tuberculosis. My second older sister died from this. She was three or four years older than me but she died and I did not. I

²⁶ Ye Shuhua is the director of the Shanghai Astronomical Observatory, an academician of the China Academy of Sciences, and also a member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (the national legislative body). She was selected as one of the Ten Most Distinguishing Chinese Women in the year 1995 and participated in the UN Fourth Women's Conference.

have also always had serious bronchitis. I have also had hepatitis and chronic stomach inflammation. At any rate, each part of my body has had some sort of problem. But my two children really understand me. My younger son said, “The most important thing for mom is that she keeps doing her work so that she maintains her spiritual strength.” My younger son said to my husband, “Uncle Zhao,²⁷ you let mother be busy! If she is not busy, she will collapse.” As you can see they really understand me.

Gao: At your age and in this kind of physical condition, what kind of responsibilities do you continue to undertake or what role do you play in feminist activities?

Wang: I think now I want to withdraw a bit from the Women’s Federation. First I would like to give up some of this work.

Gao: Does the Women’s Federation currently employ you?

Wang: Yes, they have hired me back after I retired. After having done so much, now I want to concentrate my main efforts on the National Association of Female Talentology and the education of poor women. Second, I want to use my efforts to fully train Chen Ying. She understands my views and shares my goals. So if she is well trained, I may be able to turn over more of the responsibilities to her.

Gao: Is this her only job now?

Wang: Yes. Originally she worked at the Second Industrial University as a woman’s committee party member, but she retired from that post. Now this is her only job.

Gao: Do you pay her wages or is she a volunteer worker?

Wang: She is mostly a volunteer. We pay her five hundred yuan a month. However when we are especially busy, we pay her a bit of overtime.

Gao: Chen Ying really understands you and you have many of the same goals. Was this your influence, or was she originally very interested in working with women’s issues?

Wang: She has a really good heart. For many years she has seen me run around doing different things. She has also witnessed what happened to my family and my health. She felt that she should do some things for society.

Gao: How would you evaluate your own life?

Wang: For my entire lifetime, from the very beginning until the end I have pursued my goals under difficult circumstances. During this process, my life has been full of hardships. However I have always tried to follow the path of striving to liberate my

²⁷ Young people in China use kinship terms to address older people to show respect.

sisters in the country and myself. My path down this road has never changed. Even though I have made very big sacrifices, including when my husband passed away, and so on, these sacrifices also have had links to my work. Throughout this time I have always worked so I often did not take good care of my family.

Gao: Society has preconceived notions of women's roles in the family. It degrades women who work outside and do not devote themselves to house chores. How have you tried to overcome such pressure in order to concentrate on your work? You have devoted yourself wholly to your work. As a woman who cannot look after her family, how do you deal with pressure from society?

Wang: I think I have tried my best in taking care of my family, both my old one and the one that I have now. In my past family, I took care of two parents-in-law and raised two children. My husband's parents did not have work. In my current family our two incomes are certainly not very high, but we exist as company for each other. We are a couple that is experiencing hardships together. I have diligently tried to undertake a lot of the housework. When I was widowed, I went to work during the day and did house chores at night. I think a person must fulfill his or her responsibility to the country, to the people and to their families.

Gao: Other people have called you China's "Jose Maria."²⁸ How do you feel about this?

Wang: I don't know much about this figure. Other people are making this comparison. I certainly have not studied what she did and then tried to emulate this. Only after someone wrote to me about this, did I know that this person existed. But, both of us want to do something about poverty. What I most reject is that there are huge discrepancies between poor and rich, that there are inequalities, that men and women are not equal, and that people in general are not equal. I always thought that one person's actions have the power to affect the whole group. People are concerned about the country and the people. Based on this idea, I feel that although at times I have sacrificed a lot of myself, in the end it is worth it. Perhaps I have done part of the work, and have helped some of the people. If this kind of ideal is something that everybody can accept, then it will spread and help more.

²⁸ Wang Cuiyu is referring to a woman activist surnamed Jose Maria in Spain, who created a new-style professional school in northern Spain on October 10, 1943. This school has developed into a comprehensive university.