

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

SITE: CHINA

**Transcript of Ai Xiaoming
Interviewer: Wang Jingling**

Location: Beijing

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Ai Xiaoming, born in 1953, is a feminist literary scholar who publishes widely and has been active in developing women's studies curriculum and promoting women's rights. Professor Ai is the co-producer and director of the Chinese version of *The Vagina Monologues*, a play staged in China as one of the activities of the Stop Domestic Violence network. She was also involved in an important legal case that popularized the concept of "date rape." At the time of this interview, Professor Ai is Deputy Director of the Women's Studies Center and director of the Sex/Gender Education Forum in Zhongshan University, Guangzhou. She has recently taken on a documentary film project that aims to document women's grassroots activism nationwide.

Ai Xiaoming was interviewed by Wang Jinling, Zhejiang Province, Academy of Social Sciences.

[Wang Jinling (hereafter referred to as Wang): In 2002 we interviewed you and discussed as a feminist, how you started your activities. At that time you mainly discussed this from the aspect of teaching.]

Ai Xiaoming (hereafter referred to as Ai): Right.

Wang: After 2002, aside from teaching, there were a great number of developments in your other activities. Could you talk about this a bit?]

[These first lines not shown in the video.]

Ai: In 2003 our work made a lot of great progress. (Laughs.) That is because in 2003 we first had a rather tentative plan. We invited a famous Taiwanese feminist activist to the university, Professor He Chunrui.¹ She mainly is known as a leader in research on sexuality and feminism. So we invited Professor He and her colleagues to come to Zhongshan University to teach an intensive course on sexuality. From this intensive course, I then came up with the idea of turning this sexuality education into a kind of forum for discussion. He Chunrui's point of view is really provocative and encourages debate; you could say that she is rather radical. I feel that her attention to sexuality is what Women's Studies on the Chinese mainland lacks. Our Women's Studies research and teaching rarely discuss "sexuality." However "sexuality" is exactly one of the points that radical feminism has emphasized. The question of "sexuality" also includes many issues such as "oppression" and "liberation." In addition it pays attention to the many different communities of women with different sexual orientations and other disadvantaged groups of women, for example, the transgender and gay and lesbian communities. Its ideas about sex workers and views on the issue of pornography are also extremely controversial. Thus at the time I had hoped to have a forum for discussion where we could include all of these voices. At the same time this forum would enable us to engage in self-examination about areas where Women's Studies could be doing much more. So after we invited them to teach the course, we then embarked on a process of continually applying for funding so that we could hold a "Forum for Gender and Sexuality Education."² It probably took us a little over a half of a year to do this work. We also looked at different foundations. In the end we found out that Lingnan University had originally been a part of our school. The Lingnan Foundation, which is based in the United States, decided to invest in this project and they gave us support to hold a forum on sexuality education. This "Forum for Gender and Sexuality Education" included three different parts. The first part was to invite foreign women's studies scholars and foreign and Chinese feminist scholars to give lectures. Almost every month we held this kind of activity. The second part was to establish a resource center. The third part was to set up a web site. Thus, even before our funding arrived, when we knew that we had a possibility of assistance, we had already started to organize and set up the web site. Our web site

¹ He Chunrui, (Josephine Ho), an expert on transgender issues in Taiwan, is the director of the Center for the Study of Sexualities at the National Central University of Taiwan.

² Professor Ai uses the term "Forum for *xingbie* Education" here. *Xingbie* in Chinese can refer to sex, gender, or sexuality.

was up and running last September – formally. Actually prior to this, we already started to operate the site on a trial basis. So we had it up and running in September. Up to this point, this year, we have already had more than twenty thousand visits to our site.

Wang: Why did you call it the “Forum for Gender and Sexuality Education” and not “Women’s Education Forum” or “Feminist Education Forum?”

Ai: Because we realized that the issue of “*xingbie*”³ encompasses many different things. It is not only a woman’s issue. It also involves gay and lesbian issues, Queer theory. It also is not an issue that only involves the women’s community; there is also the issue of gender equality. This has appeal for both men and women. So, this is how we thought about this. Education about gender and sexuality could thus be relevant to all people. Of course our main target audience was people on our campus. Actually many of our students in the future will be working for some very important institutions in Guangdong.⁴ They probably are the future of Guangdong – Guangdong’s policy makers and Guangdong’s important participants in social activities. Therefore we hope that before they enter into society and their work positions, they will be educated in gender and sexual equality and will undergo this process. In the future many of them will hold public service positions. When they must take on responsibility they will be able to initiate and promote progressive policies. On the other hand, this school itself also becomes a kind of resource for the community. It serves a very important role in the public arena in Guangdong Province. In many ways the school actually carries out many of the government policies. In various arenas where sex, gender and women’s issues are dealt with, I am practically also a person who carries out government policies and a resource for them because the media often asks me to offer my views on certain issues. If we promulgate this kind of sexuality and gender education on campus, when the students take up important positions and are asked to provide consulting services, they can have a gender perspective. Based on this kind of thinking, we named the forum the “Forum for Gender and Sexuality Education.” Moreover, in this Forum, we specifically created programs like “Gay and Lesbian Thinking.” We also hope that on BBS⁵ gays and lesbian students – they call each other “friends” – will have an opportunity to openly organize their own communities within the Forum and put forth their ideas.

This work on the forum was basically what I focused on most of last year. When I think back, this marked a great change in my work. We held more than ten lectures and a resource center began to take shape. We promoted the web site; because we had a web site, we also had a media outlet. We organized a series of activities related to the launching of the web site. One example of this was the performance of “The Vagina Monologues” last year.

This play, “The Vagina Monologues,” was...It was on February 14, 2000 that this play first came to my attention. At that time the winter semester had already begun for schools in the United States. I was a visiting scholar in the United States at that time. The play

³ *Xingbie* in Chinese can refer to sex, gender, or sexuality.

⁴ Guangdong Province is in South China, adjacent to Hong Kong.

⁵ BBS is an online chat room.

was showing in the United States at that time; it was quite controversial. I saw the conservative party's newspaper, a campus report that was freely distributed. In these papers I read how the play was performed in various schools and saw the stage photos. There were also extremely sharp criticisms from the conservative party, quite a few of them. For example, it ran a full page about the on-going debate about this play in New York. I really thought this was very interesting. It was controversial, so it caught my attention. At that time when I was visiting the States, I was observing the gender cultures on American campuses. For instance, there were courses on campus that dealt with fighting the occurrence of rape. I realized that we did not offer these types of courses. At that time I was preparing to return to China and to offer a Women's Studies course. So I observed their Women's Studies classes and saw how they were taught and what was included in the curriculum. For instance they offered trainings in rape prevention but we did not have these. Later when I went to the bathroom – in the restroom there was a small poster that listed some phone numbers and some hotlines connected to hospitals. So when you went to the bathroom you could see these little posters which gave some very positive, useful information. Since the bathroom stall is a very private place, I feel that this is really an appropriate place to post this information. In restrooms, things like date rape on campus could happen to you; it may occur after you come out of the restroom. The poster gives you a warning and shows that you do have an outlet. You do not need to cry or to shamefully bury this inside of you. So I started to look for this play to read. In addition on line I looked for a series of discussions on date rape since I really feel like this is something that is very relevant to a college campus.

I feel that the culture of college campuses in the United States is one where you could have these kinds of discussions; there are very many positive messages. There are certain web sites that are open to the public such as survivor of rape support web sites. These web sites encourage people to speak out about their experiences and recommend certain books and reading materials which help women get past this very difficult stage in their lives. Included among these books is one about a woman who was home alone. Her husband was away on a business trip when the perpetrator came in through the window, raped her, and then ran away. In the beginning her husband showed a lot of understanding and sympathy for her. They went together to file the police report. In fact, though, they actually suffered from some injuries of which the consequences were very long term. In the end, her husband could not bear it anymore and they divorced. She was alone. Think about it. On one hand she had suffered from the rape and everything that this entailed, including the shame. In addition her marriage failed. Later she got up again and thought retrospectively about her own experiences. She talked about these experiences with other people and encouraged other people to talk about their own experiences. She really was an extremely brave woman and an example for others. There are many rape survivors who can protect and protect their own rights in this way. At the same time by having their voices heard they can expose these crimes. The campus culture in the U.S. provides this kind of education in many ways. They provide you with many places that you can go to ask for help and I believe these methods are really great.

I saw "The Vagina Monologues." The main theme of the play not only deals with preventing violence against women, but also with how women should understand their

own bodies and how they recognize their own desires. There are two different aspects of anti-violence. On the one hand you want to fight against violence, but you cannot teach asceticism, since this only takes you to another extreme and makes you consider sex and desire as something negative. I really feel this does not help women in any way. If we teach asceticism, then women who are in a relationship have even less power to take the initiative and may constrain their own natural needs. At the same time they inevitably turn into a sexual object.

The play “The Vagina Monologues” raises many different levels of issues. So I believe this is really quite good. In addition, as a play it was also rather successful. At the time in the United States – in North America – more than one hundred and fifty schools were showing performances of this play, so I bought the book. At that time I attended a class taught by a Ph.D. from the history department. The instructor did not talk about the play “The Vagina Monologues” during class, but the lecture dealt with how women regard their own bodies, and the relationships of the body, a woman’s identity, and her self. Since I am a literature professor, I looked at a lot of this information from the perspective of literature. From this class I really learned a lot about culture and history interlinked with literature. I myself paid special attention to how literature and art represent women and how they think about the female subject. After I came back I talked to my students about feminist art. I brought various volumes of books of painting back with me and spoke of these works. I felt that my students, especially female students, were really interested in this topic, since our curriculum did not include experiences like this – women’s bodily experiences. We had not really thought about whether we could put on our own performance. Really, we had not given this any thought. Last year Bu Wei⁶ saw several performances. She also hoped that we might be able to participate in the “V Day” campaign, the worldwide campaign of performing “The Vagina Monologues.” These performances which occurred from February 14 to March 8 had already developed into a worldwide phenomenon. During this period from February 14 to March 8, women’s organizations used this opportunity to raise people’s awareness of women’s issues in the entire society and fight against violence against women. This had turned into a kind of global activity. In addition, through these performances, finances were raised which were used to support women victims of violence. This year the focal point was the support of Mexican women, especially women who had suffered from violence and those who were missing.

I really thought that she was making a good decision by coming to ask us to perform this play. We were appropriate for this kind of activity. (Laughs.) Yesterday you saw our performance – you can see that our students... Actually it takes the students some time to be able to really accept some of the theoretical aspects of this play. Among those students involved, most already have studied these ideas for more than two years. There are graduate students who are in their second year and third year. There are also some new students – undergraduates who are in their first year, but there are not many like this. At the very least, all of the students have had more than a year of studying feminism in different classes. As you can see from yesterday’s performance, all of the students

⁶ Bu Wei, a Chinese media professor and researcher, analyzes media use and its impact on marginalized groups.

performed quite enthusiastically. They were not only acting out lines in a play. They said the lines not because I asked them to say those things. But instead they were able to integrate into the performance their own feelings and enthusiasm. They were able to show how a woman in her life affirms her own desires, including giving voice, powerful voice, to women who have had unfortunate things happen in their life. Every time I watched their rehearsal, especially several parts in the play, I would cry. When I saw their formal performance, I also could not help but cry. Yesterday when I watched their performance I cried again. In my heart I think these students are truly remarkable and I am incredibly proud of them. This was performed from March of last year until this year, for more than a year. I really think this was a terrific activity. After I finished this project I really was rather proud of this.

Wang: Were the people who performed in the play mainly students?

Ai: Yes.

Wang: How did you bring together performing in this play and the students' academic work? I mean, you got the students to engage in this play – including their performing and experiences. How did you integrate this with your teaching?

Ai: Actually, as for teaching... the other day at a literature seminar at Tianjin Normal University,⁷ I put forth an idea. When we were discussing pedagogy, I said, "I propose something that might be controversial. I call it "subversive teaching." Because I did not have an available concept to explain my thought about pedagogy, so I thought I could possibly approach this problem from another angle... So at the time I asked them: "We are here to discuss how to teach a literature class. But I want to ask what exactly is literature?" Fifty people could have fifty different opinions of what literature is. A "literary master" in your opinion might be someone who I vehemently criticize. Your "literary master" could be a conservative writer and your literary canon could be the nineteenth-century classics. But I could consider some twenty-first-century works as my canon, right? One person's favorite writer can be someone that another person cannot stand. "One person's delicacies can be another's poison!" (Laugh) How do we teach a literature class? In our students' minds there are a lot of contradictory ideas. One professor teaches that realism is our canon and another professor teaches that postmodernism should be our canon. What exactly is literature? What exactly can be called a classic? These concepts must all be thought about in a new way and redefined. Also, literature itself has an impact; it is a challenging process. It is innovative. All things that are innovative and all things that are worthwhile must challenge the past. Every writer challenges his or her predecessors. Balzac challenged his predecessor and Borges also challenges his. When they challenge their predecessors, they are also in the process of challenging what exactly is literature. Every truly creative writer or artist is actually also challenging what can be considered literature and what can be called art. In this age what are the limits or restrictions placed on literature or on art? How do we break free

⁷ Tianjin Normal University, originally named Tianjin Normal College, was founded in 1958. It was formed by Tianjin Teachers' Colleges for Vocational Studies and Tianjin Farmers and Workers Speeded-Up Education Middle School. It was formally renamed Tianjin Normal University in 1982.

from these limitations? Otherwise, we do not truly have literature or art or civilization. If we rethink about the definition of literature and art in this way, the next question is: how do we teach a literature class? I do not think there is a consensual reply.

Again for instance, it is also true that there are a lot of conflicts of cultural values among us teachers. In our school there was an incident in which a female graduate student was violated. Some professors in their exchanges with students said that this incident should warn female students that they should not date more than one guy at the same time. This is one kind of thinking. If female students discussed this with me, I would talk about how women's human rights were violated; as women, you should know your human rights and how to protect your human rights. Right? So how do you think that we should teach students? Therefore, we must acknowledge that I myself and we as teachers should know that our authority is not beyond challenge; it is not absolute. You are the same as the students. Who do you think that you are? You teach students, but they also teach you a lot. Right? That is to say, we are equal to students and we have to question the idea that students only wait to be inspired and enlightened by us. We used to believe this was correct, but this is not right. If the content of what we teach raises a lot questions, then we cannot use a pedagogy that is based on the idea that we are the authority. We cannot use this method to teach students. We must subvert the teacher-student hierarchy. We cannot say that we are the authority and they are the empty vessel into which we will pour our knowledge. Actually we must consider ourselves equal. The students bring their own experiences and you have your own experiences. You have your fifty years of experience and they have their eighteen years or twenty years of experiences. Your experiences are different. We could also say this is a kind of cultural difference. In other words we have two kinds of culture; one kind is a middle-aged culture and one kind is a youth culture. The students' youth culture is probably from the 1980s onward. During the period of reform and opening in China there have been a lot of influences that have come from abroad. We probably have the old culture of seclusion, the culture of autocracy, and the kind of culture that strangles individuality. Of course we also have a culture that demands liberation. These two different kinds of cultures both have places where dialogue is possible and definitely offer many instances which present contradictions. For instance I may tell a student that her rights could not be violated, but perhaps a male teacher tells her that her rights are not inviolable – for example, the teacher could say, “You have got to know such a good male student. You cannot break his heart and definitely cannot date more than one guy at the same time.” This is an instance of cultural conflict – between that male professor and me. We uphold a feminist culture; he has a masculinist culture. Our cultures face conflicts.

In this kind of situation, I think that we are different subjects in society. Different subjects should be having dialogues and negotiations. Therefore, when you arrive in the classroom, you can only say that in this special domain, I probably have read more books than you have. So I can only pass on this knowledge and some frameworks. But how will the students come to use these ideas and develop their own ideas? This is a process of negotiation that I as the teacher and the students work on together. So what does education actually mean? Education is supposed to eliminate ignorance; it is enlightening. But this process of enlightening and eliminating ignorance, as a part of the entire bigger process in cultural development, is something that young and old people

should do together. I believe that the students have their own areas of ignorance that must be removed and we have our own areas of ignorance that must also be removed. In fact our teaching also is a process of dialogue and negotiation. Based on this idea, I believe that the production and performance of “The Vagina Monologues” was also a pedagogical exploration. You study and learn using hands on process. When we were teaching the class in Tianjin, we also did some demonstrations for the teachers to see. We not only talked about Women’s Studies’ courses; we also used literature classes as examples of how teachers could enhance the level of student participation. For instance, you can turn a literary work into a visual work. If you want to do this, then during this process the students must do research and determine why the author would want to use this imagery. Imagine that I want to look for a way to represent this imagery visually. What type of visual image should I use? If I could choose between abstract and concrete images or between modern and postmodern images, what sort of choices do I make? If I may make a choice, I also will experience how the author’s creative process is also a kind of choice making. From the existing literary imaginations and from the author’s own training in literature, he/she will make a kind of choice. As you go through this process, you are actually experiencing this text and experiencing the process of the creation of literature. You are also studying what is literary production, what is a novel, and what is the structure of a novel.

When the students performed this play, in fact they were also studying and analyzing. This analyzing was done through performing. For instance, how does the student interpret this character? What is this character’s life like? This segment speaks of a pubic hair, and another tells of a young girl’s recollections. Another speaks of a child’s image of her vagina. Thus the students who are performing must consider what sort of reference this will have for different people from different cultural backgrounds. While older people might think of a vagina as a dirty, smelly sewer, a child might think of it as a beautiful snowflake. How are these cultural differences created and how does an author through his cultural lens imagine and create a set of metaphors? When you stand on stage and say this line you know that in your mind you are thinking of beautiful images. For instance the beauty of the dance that portrays the birth process – this “birth dance” was especially well done because we worked on this for a long period of time. The photographic and lighting effects are really amazing. So I feel that this segment was a rather perfect section. When the student does that movement, her hand extends from under her thighs, and her entire thighs turn into the design of a vagina. From a very traditional point of view, this would be considered pornographic, but if you switch your perspective, you could say that this is really sexy, beautifully sexy. But this type of beauty can only be appreciated if you think that sex appeal is beautiful. You have to have different cultural theories to explain this; you cannot use the traditional cultural ideas to offer an explanation. In addition you cannot explain an image in isolation. If you stop for several seconds within the imagery, you may consider it as pervert. But if you watch the whole dance for several minutes then you will come to realize that it is expressing a baby, which comes out from the birth canal. In the birth canal the baby gropes around to find its way out; it struggles. It must find a life path in order to enter into the world. The mother suffers physically during this time, but she is creating an extremely beautiful life for this

world. Through the dancing and the accompanying background music, we can experience the complete process of birth.

In the past how did we represent the process of birth? We have represented this whole process as something quite terrifying. Recently I saw a live broadcast of childbirths on China Central Television. There was a husband who fainted in the birth room and there were some other husbands who did not dare to look. These kinds of images... What kind of message is this? Are we creating terrifying memories? I really oppose this kind of representation. In fact why do we turn the birth process into something that gives us terrifying memories? Moreover we duplicate this image so that men will stay far away from the birthing process, because it is considered so scary that a man will be terrified and his face will turn pale. What is this creating? We are isolating women's experiences. It is isolated to the degree that she becomes like an animal and her birth experience becomes an inhuman experience, inhuman suffering. Therefore during this time the husband wants to leave her; he does not want to participate and he wants to stay away from the terror. I really do not understand why we have to create this kind of terror, this kind of culture of fear! Actually I think this culture of fear places women in a hopeless position. We are able to see many different examples of this kind of situation. For instance, when the woman is having a difficult time during labor and her family members don't know how to deal with this, in the end to whom do they turn her over? They would leave her to a witch doctor or a charlatan that they find on the street or they would leave her to the hospital. Then what happens if she gives birth to a child who has birth defects? They either discard or abandon the baby. If the medical expenses are too expensive, they would get away without taking responsibility. As you are working on the production of this play you actually come to understand and analyze this kind of situation. This is actually a kind of learning process, a better process of studying. I believe from this process, the students have learned very many things. When I can see their performances I know that they have a true understanding of their roles.

Wang: When you talked about “The Vagina Monologues,” there was a lot of discussion about sexual violence against women. Did this have any impact or was all of this linked to your work on the Huang Jing case⁸ or for the White Ribbon campaign?⁹

Ai: Yes, you could say that. As soon as I looked at the Huang Jing case, I thought the issue of sexual violence against women was really extremely obvious.

Wang: How did you first come to know about the Huang Jing case and then later how did you become involved with this?

⁸ Huang Jing was a primary school teacher. She died after her boy friend was trying to force her to have sex with him in 2003. The investigation and trial of this case have attracted a lot of attention and debates in society. Professor Ai Xiaoming was involved in the efforts to call for attention to date rape.

⁹ The White Ribbon Campaign was first initiated by a group of Canadian men in 1991. They wore white ribbons to show their solidarity in the protest of violence against women. This campaign has been taken up in many countries.

Ai: Last year... Well, at the beginning I took actions during the period of the SARS¹⁰ epidemics. Those who suffered from this illness were called “the kings of poison.”¹¹ I really felt this was unconscionably wrong. This was a very obvious example of discrimination. I felt that as a Women’s Studies person I have this kind of sensitivity since, to put it simply, Women’s Studies is against inequality and strives for equal rights. In fact inequality is not only something that only women undergo. Actually, there are many different kinds of inequality such as class, etc. Last year the newspapers publicly called those with SARS “the kings of poison.” This was not simply a kind of discrimination. Imagine that. At that time SARS was not well understood as an infectious disease. So people just really panicked. People rushed out to purchase salt, vinegar, and certain Chinese traditional medicines that supposedly could boost the immune system. The situation had deteriorated greatly. A SARS patient faced the worst: other patients had died; his relatives had died; he was struggling on the verge of death and just survived. But he still must bear the brunt of this kind of public humiliation. I felt this was a very serious problem. So I wrote an article titled, “Advocate Loving Care, Oppose Public Humiliation.” This article, which was published in the newspaper, specifically targeted the problem of discrimination against those people who were infected with SARS. After this was published, at that time the *Southern Weekend*¹² had a one-page editorial called “Comments on Current Issues.” Afterwards they said that for that year, this article was an extremely important article, which opposed discrimination against those infected with SARS. This of course was encouraging to me. Actually, in the past I had also had columns in newspapers, but those mainly were literary criticism and cultural commentary, not commentary on current events. This was a very encouraging experience to me. I then tended to focus my attention on news reports.

Afterwards, I read about the Sun Zhigang case. This was about a university student who was being detained in a holding cell and died there. The next day early in the morning, I wrote an article, and sent it to a newspaper office via E-mail. However, they immediately called me to say they were not permitted to publish my article – the reports on this incident were not allowed to come out. At the time I thought... So I published it on-line. In the article, I called on the People’s Congress and People’s Consultative Conference in Guangdong Province¹³ and demanded a thorough investigation. In the article, I argued that since Guangdong Province had such a large immigrant population and a large floating population from the countryside, we must deal with the problem that they were discriminated against. The next day there were a lot of letters from the readers regarding my article, so I wrote a response and published it immediately on line. I felt the power of the internet to disseminate my message to a lot of people. Eventually there was a very big change in the policy and many intellectuals became involved in this issue. At the time we

¹⁰ Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. In 2003 there was a breakout in some countries, including Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

¹¹ The term “King of poison” is a literary reference to a type of character who used his knowledge of herbs and medicines to poison or harms others.

¹² *Southern Newspaper* is one of the most popular newspapers in China, based in Guangzhou, the capital of the Guangdong province.

¹³ National People’s Congress is the highest legislative body of China. People’s Congress in each province has similar status and functions. The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference is a political advisory body in the People’s Republic of China. Each province has its own Consultative Conference.

were setting up a website. So our graduate students participated in the interviews. I specifically invited Sun Zhigang's family members to come to Zhongshan University. At that time I also wrote an appeal letter to the Vice President of the Political Consultative Conference and to the Vice President of the Guangdong Province Women's Federation. I knew her and this is why I sent it to her and did not send it to the President of the Women's Federation. She passed this on to the Public Security Department Director of Guangdong Province. I also gave this to the People's Delegate¹⁴ of the district of Haizhou. This representative took this to discuss at the district representative assembly meeting. However, this incident did not take place in the area where we lived; it happened in the district of Tianhe. But my colleagues, friends, and students all disseminated this article within their own circle of acquaintances. It continued to spread to many different places. Afterwards many people who had been affected by a similar experience in holding cells talked about this on the webpage. I felt that what was moving were the experiences of ordinary people. It was not scholarly articles but the experiences of ordinary people that truly moved me.

I really think that many average people's lives and experiences shook up the entire country, including some intellectuals who demanded an investigation and discussion of this case in accordance with the constitution. If not for these appeals, which frankly depicted these people's heartfelt experiences, we could never have ended such horrific practices in holding cells. These stories of tears and blood really were too earthshaking to ignore. People learned of these stories through the internet. I feel that this affected our country by showing another face to the world. China also has to observe the international human rights laws and regulations which we participate. Among these there is a human rights document that specifically forbids torture. This incident with Sun Zhigang was an extremely obvious case of torture.

Therefore, the fact that these practices were stopped so quickly actually surprised me. I had never thought that the process would happen so fast and that this case would be handled so quickly. I think part of the reasons was because the information about this case was disseminated on line. I continuously monitored the happenings of Sun Zhigang's commemorative website. Everyday I looked at the developments that occurred in the case and in the end what the courts decided and how they handled the matter. When I was on the Sun Zhigang commemorative web site, I saw a message saying "Those who have helped Sun Zhigang, please help us and help my daughter." After I clicked on this link I saw Huang Jing's mother's letter of request for help. Then I read about what had happened to Huang Jing. As soon as I read this I knew this was a case of date rape.

When a rape occurs in a community, there must be a certain kind of culture that supports rape. Thus, you should analyze the cultural reasons that form the background for this kind of incident. So I then wrote an article. Afterwards, in July, Zhongshan University's medical examiner went to perform an autopsy of Huang Jing's body. At that time her cause of death was inconclusive because of a lack of evidence. We thought that they

¹⁴ A People's Delegate is someone elected by people to the district, provincial or national People's Congress.

would hold a court hearing immediately to definitively determine the guilty party in the crime of rape. So we analyzed the case and determined that there would probably be some debate in the courts. For instance, did penetration actually occur? Should penetration be used to determine guilt? Are the injuries from the rape important? Therefore I wrote an article called “Stop Phallus-Worshipping.” If you use penetration as the factor that determines guilt, then you are considering the problem from the male perspective. You are considering the degree of male invasion, because you define an act as rape only if the penetration is completed. However this is not how women experience rape. From that woman victim’s point of view, first her will was violated and she was psychologically injured. Next is the violence that she endured from the rape. The rape left behind scars on her body. Finally the act of rape directly caused her death. Now do you still need to discuss whether she was penetrated or not? What meaning does several centimeters of skin have? If you use a few centimeters of skin to determine if the rape was carried out or attempted and you do not take into consideration the fact that she died as a result of the rape, you are separating the act of rape and her death. You also have fragmented her body. The rape did occur. But because the penetration was not completed the suspect could walk away and the victim’s death could be determined as the result of heart disease. Therefore, at that time I predicted that during the court hearings this would be taken into consideration – whether she was penetrated or not. So I wrote the article “Stop Phallus-Worshipping.” But, we had not realized that after the Zhongshan University medical examiner made his report, the public prosecutor would not accept it. So this case continued to drag on. During this time, in November we invited Huang Jing’s mother to come to the university. I interviewed her for several hours. My goal at this time was to let other people hear the victim’s voice. At the time the media had a lot of articles that were titled such as “The mysterious death of the naked woman” or “the mysterious death.” These articles all sounded as if this incidence was some mysterious event, some strange story. I thought this was an extreme affront to the dignity of the person who had died. In addition, I also noticed that during this process, her mother as a family member had put in a great deal of efforts. But Huang Jing did not only have an identity as a family member; actually she was a teacher, was a public servant. Then, why did not her work unit come out in support of her? Why did not the teachers’ union speak on her behalf? Why did not the women’s organization come out in support of her? So by interviewing her family members we wanted to stress her role as a teacher and to highlight her public identity. Then, through the voices of her family members we hoped that we could bring her story to the public and to have more materials to analyze her case. On the one hand, a lot of the information that was made available through the media often was quite one-sided. Later I also interviewed the Zhongshan University medical examiner. The Director of the Zhongshan University Medical Examination Center is also the Vice President of Zhongshan University. He went to perform the autopsy himself and I purposefully interviewed him. I hoped to be able to present an expert opinion. In November the verdict for the case was determined. The prosecutor’s indictment had a very important revision of the original wording. The police version said that, “Huang Jing died during the process of what was described above,” which referred to the process of rape. In the prosecutor’s indictment the language was changed to “the above process of rape,” period. “And then the next morning because she was sick, Huang Jing passed away.” This turned the case into two different issues. I feel that the revision that the

prosecutor made had no basis. The police department is responsible for the investigation, so the prosecutor only looks over the case and submits it to the court. On what basis was the case revised? The prosecutor did not participate in the investigation so why did he change this part? When he changed this, he changed an extremely important logical fact. Then, we mobilized scholars to work on this together. Basically the case of Huang Jing was a galvanizing event. During the period when this case was investigated, we organized to write articles at every crucial point. Also this year on February 24 was the first anniversary of when Huang Jing was murdered. At that time there were continual preparations for the trial, but up to this point this still has not occurred.

We certainly wanted to show the facts to the public from a feminist point of view against sexual violence. Therefore, we had to engage in this kind of public education. Therefore, during the first anniversary of Huang Jing's death, we invited attorneys, Huang Jing's family members and the teachers and students from our school, and those from the South China Normal University and Jinan University.¹⁵ Several of the professors who were involved in this case came together for a discussion. Bu Wei and Cai Yiping¹⁶ from Beijing also participated. Later on March 7 at the Capital Normal University, Bu Wei and I wrote a notice of appeal for Huang Jing's case addressed to the People's Congress and the People's Consultative Conference, calling on them to take legislative measures. We wanted justice for Huang Jing. In the end about thirty-seven scholars signed this letter of appeal. Bu Wei really worked hard and put forth a great effort and she delivered it to the political consultative conference. Now they have created a legislative proposal; it is said that they have responded.

Wang: Now you are continuously involved in different activities. According to the traditional views, activism is not what university professors should be involved in. How do you regard your identity as a professor who is also involved in social activism? Also in what way are you able to integrate the two roles?

Ai: Actually, yesterday I was talking about this same matter with Huang Lin. Nowadays there are some people who use the term "public intellectuals." Could it be that there are "private intellectuals?" I think that an intellectual is an intellectual; you may say someone is an intellectual or not, but I do not understand why you want to make a distinction and use the term "public intellectuals." If there should be "public intellectuals," then there must also be intellectuals who are "not public." I really do not understand this. What does it matter what intellectuals are called? (Laughs.) Some people say that intellectuals should not be involved in social activism, but if you look back at history, modern history, the so-called intellectuals have also done many bad things, like the mass criticisms, etc. Isn't this a kind of activism? Isn't constructing ideology a kind

¹⁵ South China Normal University (SCNU) is one of the prestigious universities in China, a member of *Project 211* (one of the top 100 universities in China in the 21st century) and one of the key institutions of higher learning in Guangdong Province. Ji'nan University was founded in 1906 as a national university. It was later relocated to southern China. One of the oldest universities in China, it was also selected into the *Project 211*. It claims to have the largest number of overseas students in China.

¹⁶ Cai Yiping is a journalist at the *Chinese Women's Newspaper*, the official newspaper of the All China Women's Federation.

of activism? However when you look at this from a certain point of view, our style of activism is different from the kind used in the past.

I think women's studies cannot be separated from social practice since women's issues and social activism are really closely linked. If I teach anti-sexual violence ideas, I cannot maintain silence about sexual violence in society. If you see how unfairly cases of sexual violence are handled in society, you would have no way to only teach theory in a classroom. How would you teach? You teach the students these ideas but the students may run into frustrating situations in society. I believe that Women's Studies and feminist academics have a goal. One important goal is to transform the society. Your scholarship should aim to transform society. Of course this transformation is also a cultural transformation that is enabled by passing on these ideas. Why do people discriminate against others? It is because he first has an understanding of another person. If he thinks that the other person is inferior, he can discriminate against this person. Then we maintain this discriminative understanding by raising it to a higher level through public policy and the law. This can then turn into an institution. This institution can systematically deprive you of your rights so that you are silenced. If I want to change this system, I must start to do this by changing how people think. If you want to change people's ideas then you must be able to analyze the ideas clearly. I have the ability to explain them very clearly. Many people do not have the opportunity for education, or are deprived of the opportunity for education. They do not have the means to speak out but we do. You must speak out and have your voice heard regarding public affairs. For instance, last year I continuously spoke out about the Huang Jing case. Also, last year in the Sichuan¹⁷ personnel department there appeared the call not to "assign female secretaries to male leaders." I wrote three articles in a week. I feel that I must explain my reasoning clearly and thoroughly. I have to explain myself really well. Every time that I write an article I have to wait a period of time before I start. Although I am extremely angry, sometimes I have to wait until I feel that I have accumulated enough energy, like a volcano before it erupts. This finally forces me to write. If you want to write well you have to be able to use your energy and to be unusually focused. Only then can you write a forceful, powerful article. In the past I did not have this kind of strength. In the past for instance, I wrote academic articles. Or I wrote an analysis of an artistic work. Sometimes when I wrote I felt that writing put me in a relaxed state; when I wrote I was rather happy because I was able to express my own ideas. Some of the ideas you could use your imagination to express. But when you are looking at some idea critically, especially if this idea has a kind of legal support or a kind of institutional support, you must challenge it. When you want to challenge it you must adopt a kind of extremely tenacious attitude. I don't easily make myself enter this kind of mindset, since doing so is a very stressful process. Moreover you are like a train, because once a train sets out, it has to reach its destination. Once I start writing I have to continue to write until I am finished. That is why I have to wait for a period of time before I start writing. Once I get in this state of mind, I often do not eat and do not drink until I am finished. In addition I have to read what I have written over and over and check each and every word that I have written. But usually articles written in such conditions are powerful. Therefore, through this process of writing, I have realized that words, and discourses, are one kind of weapon.

¹⁷ Sichuan Province is in southwestern China.

Wang: So you have successfully brought together your two hats of academic and activist. In reality, teaching is also a kind of activism. Activism has a lot of educational components within it. What ideas do you have for the future?

Ai: I have a lot of ideas to explore in the future. It seems that there are more and more ideas. My friend has said to me: “What things haven’t you done? What haven’t you studied?” (Laughs.) Now I think that there are too many ideas. I myself won’t be able to examine them all. But, sometimes I think that there are so many ideas that I cannot give up now. Since I have made it to this level, I have certain power, and a certain kind of influence. Therefore, you can accomplish things that other people cannot, for example, applying for resources, writing a project proposal, striving for a bigger responsibility, and organizing a big event. Many of the people around me are still rather young and do not have as much experience as me. A lot of my friends are much younger than I. I realize that sometimes my role is unique and other people cannot take my place. So I think that there are some things that I just have to do that will benefit a lot of people. For example, I engage in applying for grants for our projects. In my department there are many graduate students and teachers in training. They constitute a large work unit and hence our work will potentially benefit a large targeted group of people. If you can make a good plan then a lot of people will benefit. Sometimes I have to make sacrifices.

Wang: Can you talk specifically about the projects that you would like to carry out?

Ai: For example, I would like to set up a women’s human rights education and training center. I went to Canada to study “International Human Rights Law.” Using the human rights framework to do women’s rights has a lot of strengths. In the past we looked at cultures. We looked at women’s rights from the point of view of cultural analysis. What was the problem with this? You must discuss cultural ideas repeatedly. Culture cannot change your way of thinking in a day, but rights are a different matter. Rights are guaranteed by law. Based on your culture you might not agree with the “equality,” but the concept of rights gives me equality. Thus you cannot violate my rights. I think it is very important to use the approach of “rights” and use “rights” as the foundation. Our rights are equal. Perhaps you do not approve of our equality. But it doesn’t matter if you do not approve. You can take your time to think about this. However, if my rights are infringed upon, then I certainly must use the mechanism of the law to protect them. Rights, duties, and responsibilities must be compulsory. Therefore, I hope to promote human rights education, to promote an international human rights standard and mechanism in our society. This year the concept of human rights was also written into the constitution. Now we have a lot of work to do. I hope to set up an education and training center. But our funding greatly determines if this can be realized. This is a big tentative plan. We are also preparing to set up a women’s rights media studio. I now feel that the media’s power to disseminate information is very strong. On the one hand, it turns our achievements into something that can be disseminated. After we recorded “The Vagina Monologues,” we have already showed it in Fudan University in Shanghai, the Tianjin Normal University, the Shaanxi Normal University, the Chinese Women’s University,

the Beijing Broadcast Institute¹⁸ and all of the colleges and universities in Nanjing. It would be really difficult to take the whole acting troupe for the play to so many places that are far away. It would just be way too expensive. But, a DVD can travel easily! This transforms a cultural product into something that can be easily transmitted, via high technology, information technology. In addition visual images can strengthen the powerless people and elevate the awareness of the aesthetic values of our students' creative works. Perhaps there is a student who generally does not attract very much attention. When she stands on the stage, she does not stand out. But when she appears on the big screen as a character, then the sense of the beautiful thing that she is creating will be extremely intense and powerful. Students who have participated in the performance feel their own strength and beauty. This is an extremely valuable gift since it really makes them realize that they are powerful. Moreover our Women's Studies teaching materials also lack visual materials made in China. There are some people who know how to use technology but do not necessarily have good ideas and there are some people who have great ideas but do not know how to use technology. We have already specialized in the field of literature, and we have also been teaching theories of artistic movies. We should be able to bring together these advantages and make good media works.

This year we did the behind-the-scenes documentary of "The Vagina Monologues;" we also recorded the play. Although there are a lot of things that need to be perfected, we have the resources to complete this project; we have the ability to accomplish the product. I have tentatively showed several clips from "The White Ribbon"¹⁹. Originally this was only an activity that we recorded. I never thought that it might become an educational documentary film. Of course this was made possible by the creativity of the artist Hu Jie, whom we collaborated with.²⁰ He is able to make an activity look so powerful to people. I have played this documentary a couple of times and I feel that this film has very good educational effects. So I really want to fully utilize this piece. This year, I hope that in all of the universities in the whole country they can initiate a coordinated campaign to stop date rape and violence. If we can complete "The White Ribbon," then I plan to send it to 50-100 national institutions of higher learning. Each school on November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, will show this documentary, hold a discussion, and initiate some kind of small activity, regardless of how small it is. For instance, we can include such things as telling stories, drawing pictures, making posters, or submitting essays to our website. Or after watching the film, we can discuss what forms date rape has in our society. How do newspapers disclose this kind of incident? What sorts of things can we do to stop this type of violence in society? I feel that if we can do something even as small as these, it is enough; I will have already achieved my goal. I believe that this matter is rather pressing.

¹⁸ Fudan University is one of the most prestigious Chinese universities. The Tianjin Normal University and Shaanxi Normal University are universities that mainly train future teachers, located respectively in the city of Tianjin in northern China and Shaanxi Province. Beijing Broadcast Institute, now called Communication University of China, is devoted to the cultivation of high-level talent and scientific research in the fields of radio, television, film, network, publication and new media.

¹⁹ She is referring, here, to her own film.

²⁰ Hu Jie, an independent filmmaker, consciously uses documentary film as a means to challenge official Chinese historical narratives while providing visual details in order to, in Hu Jie's own words, "remember history."

Therefore, I hope that through the film “The White Ribbon”...In this film, we respond to violence in action. So by disseminating this film we can spread the idea that women’s rights are human rights and that human rights are inviolable – women’s rights to make their own decisions are inviolable. I hope to disseminate these ideas. At the same time, I also want to promote education to solve conflicts, especially emotional conflicts. Students need to have some skills to be able to handle conflicts and to avoid possible further injury. Actually, the perpetrators or those who commit violent acts, the male students, in that moment lose control and resort to violent behavior. For him, he may regret his behavior but it is too late. His family also suffers because they lose their son and this male student has also destroyed his own future. In an instant he has destroyed two people and two families. This also causes serious harm to society. I want to educate the students that we cannot use violence and we must adopt non-violent methods. We should try to solve problems through negotiation. We must educate about transforming violence and find a good way to solve conflicts. When something happens, filled with indignation, you lecture about how women’s rights should not be violated. However you have not given him a means to solve this conflict. When this happens he says, “I am in such pain. What should I do? My feelings are hurt. What should I do?” You must provide him with some means. Thus you must educate people about both of these aspects. We are all quite deficient in teaching these two aspects. This is precisely the question which I am raising. In addition, I also hope that we are able to further spread this activity. “The White Ribbon” aims to appeal to male students and asks them to join us in fighting against violence against women. On one hand I speak from the female students’ point of view and advocate for female students’ needs and rights. On the other hand, I also want to appeal to male students. I want male students to participate and to protect women’s rights. This is my idea for the activity that I hope we can accomplish this year.