

Analyzing the Program for the Development of Chinese Women – through Interaction with Chinese Researchers of Women’s Studies in and after 1995

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The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China stipulates the basic principles for promoting gender equality in the country. Also, under China’s Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests, women’s rights are preserved. In addition, three versions of the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (hereinafter, the “Program”) have been formulated so far as a domestic action plan to present specific visions and political challenges. According to the section “Women and Education” in the latest version of the Program (2011–2020), the main goals are to further raise the penetration rate of women’s studies courses at higher educational institutions, implement political measures to increase the level of women’s studies, establish programs and courses of women’s studies at universities, encourage those concerned to develop human resources specializing in women’s studies, and to conduct assessments of educational contents and courses from a gender perspective. This indicates that the Chinese government is working very hard on the education of women’s studies. My more than ten years of interaction with Chinese researchers of women’s studies makes me strongly feel that incorporating these targets in the national action plan is the very fruit of their struggling efforts.

When I first encountered Chinese women’s studies in 1995, namely at the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, the first version of the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (1995–2000) was released to the public. However, this version did not include the terms “women’s studies” and “gender.”

In the 1980s, with the launch of economic reforms in China and the transition from a socialist planned economy to market-oriented economy, many women’s issues began to be revealed. To solve these problems, which could not be taken care of by the existing Marxist feminism, in both theory and practice, Chinese women’s studies made its start as a research movement in the private sector. In the 1990s, women’s studies aimed to depart from the marginal scope of academia and join the mainstream. When an NGO Forum was held together with the World Conference on Women in Beijing, a private women’s organization promoting women’s studies research and other activities was authorized as China’s first NGO. Although this NGO faced many difficulties at first, things began to change when the policies of the socialist market economy started to get underway, negotiations to join the WTO were launched, and bold reform proposals were made for the politics, economics and culture with due consideration for globalization.

The ideology of the world women's movement highlighted in the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action gradually began to affect women in China. It was at this time when, as a foreigner, I was invited to join in the circle of Chinese women's studies. One of the major characteristics of Chinese women's studies in those days was that those engaged in the studies carried out their research and interactive activities after working long hours at their main jobs, or on weekends and national holidays. Promoting grass-roots activities, I also experienced this Chinese style. It is said that in the initial stage of Chinese women's studies, women strove to strategically take care of small gaps generated by the Chinese economic reforms, and this developed into a new public sphere. My interaction with women in China makes me feel that the public sphere has led to a large chain affecting even outside the country.

On the momentum of these reforms, the second version of the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2001–2010) was released. This version is positioned as an innovative plan established from a global perspective. This was the first time the section "Women and Education" clearly referred to the following ideas: incorporating gender perspective into teacher-training courses to reform curriculums, educational contents, and teaching methods; establishing higher educational programs regarding women's studies, a philosophy about women based on Marxism, gender and development; and strengthening gender awareness among both educators and students. This indicates that women's studies and gender research have achieved the transition from being just a minor sphere to becoming mainstream and



Hunan Women's University – women's university reopened after Chinese economic reforms

obtaining an appropriate position. At the beginning of this century, many networks were established nationwide with a view to full establishment of appropriate systems. Unlike a mass movement method, a traditional form of organization under socialism, establishing these networks was quite a new effort. In this process, courses in women's studies and gender research were opened at several universities. In fact, independent educational departments and programs specializing in women's studies were established at Peking University and China Women's University.

The establishment of such independent departments, which has been difficult to

achieve even in Japan, was made possible because instructors were passionately engaged in educating the next generation in an excellent way and their outstanding achievements were demonstrated both at home and abroad. Additionally, Professor Shi Jinghuan, an expert in girls' education (also executive vice president of the Institute of Education, Tsinghua University), played a major role in conducting research to reveal the relationships between curriculums and gender issues, which has considerably affected the reform of curriculums at educational institutes. It can be said that these efforts were reflected in the direction and the development targets of the third version of the Program (2011–2020), mentioned at the beginning of this report.

The development of Chinese women's studies and gender research in this century will be promoted among newly emerging women's groups—rapidly increasing highly educated women and female instructors. The number of such women increased rapidly in the latter 1990s, when the policy of university popularization was introduced. Also, the development of the studies and research will strongly affect the formation of such women's identities and the reestablishment of their sense of belonging.

Although the development of women's studies in China is welcome news, this also suggests that the country still has many, various, and complicated gender issues. In some cases, statistics indicate that a narrow gender gap is observed in school education, while actually more serious and deeper gender inequality is being concealed. Moreover, there is the problem of class division between highly educated women and those who are not. Amidst this situation, how will women's studies in China approach gender gap issues and other challenges of the 21st century, and pave new ways to solve these problems? I would like to continue to see what will happen.