

SPECIAL SECTION: WOMEN, TRADITION, AND AGENCY

Making Documentary for Social Change: Feminism in and out of the Classroom

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Editors' Note: The following article is a condensed text of Dr. Ai Xiaoming's keynote address at the 2008 ASIANetwork Conference in San Antonio.

I. Being Introduced to Film

In 2003 we started to prepare a performance at our university of *The Vagina Monologues*. Because the students would graduate in 2004 and there would be no more performances, I wanted to have a videotape... so that we could use it as supporting material for our teaching.

In the same year I saw Hu Jie's documentary, *In Search of Lin Zhao's*

Monologues: Stories Behind the Scenes, interviewing faculty and students. At that time I didn't know how to use a camera. From that programme, I learned two things. One was that a single camera was not enough, and the other was that I was not satisfied with relying on Hu Jie's camera and his ideas because he was not familiar with feminist thoughts. We had lots of debates—whether to edit out this or edit in

support girls from a poor area for education, did the performance in a women's prison.

II. Focus on a date rape case: *Garden in Heaven*

Soon we decided to make *Garden in Heaven*. The title of the documentary was taken from the memorial website of Huang Jing, a music teacher who taught in a primary school in Hunan province. She was found dead, naked with wounds on her body after her boyfriend spent the night with her. The police said she died of a heart attack but ignored the forensic analysis done by independent medical jurisprudence experts concluding that she had no heart disease.

We had been involved in advocacy work for the victim's family since 2003. After we finished the program of *The Vagina Monologues*, I thought we could make a documentary on the case. At least we would be able to let more people know what happened.

By tracking how this case was covered by media and how the mother of Huang Jing went to appeal for justice, the documentary tried to capture the signs of change going on in China during a period between 2003 to 2005, before and after the new provision on respecting and protecting human rights by the state was written into the Constitution: We wanted to document growing awareness of human rights, women's struggles against judicial corruption, and women's actions to fight against domestic violence. The film presents how difficult it was for the victim's mother to bring the date rape case into court

[O]n International Women's Day 2004, a woman graduate was murdered here on our campus.... We launched a campaign on date murder and stopping violence against women. Hu Jie videotaped the event, and we showed it to the students who joined campaign. And when I saw the program he edited, I realized it was powerful to use video.

Soul,¹ and I invited him to show the documentary and give a lecture. At the same time, on International Women's Day 2004, a woman graduate was murdered here on our campus. There was an internet debate, and many students thought it was the woman's fault. Perhaps she did something wrong and caused her boyfriend's fury; many male students blamed the victim. We launched a campaign on date murder and stopping violence against women. Hu Jie videotaped the event, and we showed it to the students who joined the campaign. And when I saw the program he edited, I realized it was powerful to use video.

I thought I could invite Hu Jie to videotape *The Vagina Monologues*. So we put it on stage again, just for the camera, and we started to make *The Vagina*

that. He thought it was not good from an artistic perspective; I thought it was very good, very powerful. We had raw footage, such as an interview with a woman prisoner who killed her husband after long suffering from domestic violence. The interview raised points students needed to confront—that was how I started to do camera and editing myself.

We have distributed more than 200 copies of the above two programs to support women and gender studies on campus. Some are well used and have generated more innovative activism, such as the white ribbon campaign to halt violence against women and the performance of *The Vagina Monologues* which has been on stage in Shanghai, Wuhan, and Guangxi. I heard that girls in a private high school, who undertook to

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and what controversial issues were raised during the process in the campaign for Huang Jing. It also shows the impact made by people through Internet. By highlighting the effort made by legal assistance and advocacy from women's organization and other NGO's, we recorded the cultural debates between women and the law, and the roles that activists can play—all the while igniting continuous discussion in the audience about what is date rape and what changes women can make for defending their rights.

III. Documenting women's action as a way to produce new knowledge in the classroom

I have learned much from studying provocative films about women and films made by women. I like *Rosie the Riveter*, *Antonia's Line*, *Born into a Brothel*, *Killer's Paradise*, etc. However, I am not satisfied in just introducing these kinds of film representations to our students. I long to build a bridge between feminist theory in the classroom and the real life struggle of women in Chinese society.

I finally had the opportunity to build this bridge in Taishi Village and later on in documenting the AIDS issue.²

Taishi Village was not planned. The year 2005 was the tenth anniversary of the Beijing Women's Conference, so we applied to make a film about what women's NGOs had achieved in ten

strike and sit-in. It was close to the university where I teach, so I went to the village in the first week of September. My last interview ended up with the attack on us, and that was edited in the film as the final scene.

I met with intense pressure after this documentary was made, from both the higher authorities and the university. The film touches so-called sensitive



Both photos depict scenes from *Taishi Village* documenting rural women in struggle with local authorities.

rural women as illiterate people who don't care about political rights and can't speak out are all wrong.

When I started to hold the camera, I had a clear goal in my mind: the camera is a powerful medium through which I can expose women's status/ circumstances/ struggle to the public.

Above all, these experiences and struggles should be considered as the source of knowledge production. They have to be absorbed into gender studies and I have to think about and respond to the relevant questions in class with the students. We cannot escape from them, because this is the life of which the students will become or have already



issues: conflict between villagers and police, activists' involvement, and corruption in land seizures. It was not allowed to screen at the film festival.

become a part.

Most of our films show concern for the problems of women and gender, which also shows the transformation of my own conceptualization. My deepest reflection focuses on how feminism responds to the current social conflicts; or, more concretely, whether we should incorporate into the classroom the teaching of real-life problems and even the intense social conflicts and crises. This is also the question confronting the so-called feminists on the campuses of mainland China. Should we include women's difficulties and dangers in classroom teaching? Should we respond to the appeal for civil rights of women suffering discrimination and oppression? Should we try to participate in the practice of independent media practice? Should we take up the new cultural experience to challenge the rigid and dogmatic routine

I myself feel lucky to have been the maker of Taishi Village. I had the chance to explore how and why rural women demonstrate concern about their basic rights, and how they actively participated in free election. Their image as strong women with a strong will showed the stereotypes of rural women as illiterate people who don't care about political rights and can't speak out are all wrong.

years. But that plan fell through because we could not follow the activities in those organizations, and some participants we trained to use the camera had changed their roles. Then in September of that year I heard about the Taishi women's hunger

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Her most recent publication is *Love in a Fallen City* (New York Review; Penguin Modern Classics, 2007), a collection of fiction by Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing) in translation.

Sewanee: The University of the South

Harold J. Goldberg, Chair of the Asian Studies Program, has received a grant from the Appalachian College Association for his research project on "Competing Voices of World War II in Europe." His book entitled *D-Day in the Pacific: The Battle of Saipan* (Indiana University Press) is a selection of the History Book Club and the Military Book Club.

St. Lawrence University

Mark W. MacWilliams, Religious Studies Department, published *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime* (M.E. Sharpe, 2008).

St. Olaf College

A translated collection of Professor of History **Robert Entenmann's** essays has been published in Taiwan, along with essays by other scholars: Yan Huayang [Robert Entenmann] et al., *Zhongguo Tianzhujiao lishi yiwenji* (Collected translated essays on the history of Chinese Catholicism). Gu Weimin, trans. Taipei: Jidujiao Yuzhouguang.

Rika Ito, Japanese language and linguistics, and **Karil Kucera**, art history, were both tenured and promoted to associate professor in February of 2007. **Phyllis Larson**, chair of the Department of Asian Studies, was promoted to Associate Dean of the School of Interdisciplinary and General Studies.

University of Evansville

LaShone M. Gibson, senior associate director of the University of Evansville's Institute for Global Enterprise in Indiana, has been honored by NAFSA: Association of International

Educators with the Dorothy Brickman Award for Outstanding New Professional to International Education. The award is given annually to an individual who has been in the profession less than three years, yet has already made a significant contribution to her campus, to NAFSA, and to the field of international education.

University of Redlands

Hongwei Lu, Chinese language and literature, was tenured and promoted to Associate Professor of Asian Studies. **Jianjun He** will join the Asian Studies Program as assistant professor with teaching responsibilities in Chinese language and culture, beginning fall of 2008.

Virginia Wesleyan College

Steven M. Emmanuel, Batten Professor of Philosophy, received the Martin Luther King Jr. Peace and Justice Award for his work in Vietnam and in his local community.

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of education, which shows no concern for real life? To sum up, should the gender studies today involve practice in real life and in transforming society, or just be limited to the classroom while avoiding conflicts and contradictions? To put it in a different way, should we respond to practical issues when we teach students the basic concepts about women's rights, so that they will not fall into disempowerment when confronted with the conflicts between an ideal of equality and the reality of inequality, but be neither empowered to promote transformation and to seek ways of change? Among all these questions, the most important point is that engagement in real-live issues challenges both us as individuals and the power relations of gender politics on the campus.

I feel a great honour to be here as a keynote speaker at the ASIANetwork conference. I am here to say thanks for all I have learned from you in the classroom as a visiting scholar in the Introduction of Women Studies at the University of the

South. I will share with you the voice from another continent where Chinese women embrace feminist thought from the West and enrich it with their local experience. I will be even more pleased if you will bring these works to your classroom and discuss the issues with your students in this globalization era.

For more information about the documentaries made by Ai Xiaoming and Hu Jie, please visit:

www.visiblerecord.com
or email to
dvd@visiblerecord.com
Tel(852)25407859
or contact
film@cuhk.edu.hk

Endnotes

¹ Lin Zhao was a woman, a college student in Beijing University. In 1957, like many intellectuals, she responded to the call from Chairman Mao to comment on the policies of the Communist Party. Several months later the whole situation changed, and she and many of that generation were classified as rightists, so she lost the

chance to continue her study, was sent away, and finally was sent to prison. In prison she wrote diaries with her blood, writing about many political ideas. She was sentenced to death in 1968, in the early years of the Cultural Revolution. ... Hu Jie got copies of the letters and diaries from her friends and other survivors, interviewed them and made a documentary about it.

² We made two documentaries on AIDS issue. One is *Care and Love* and another is *The Central Plains*. *Care and Love* draws its inspiration from 'Investigation of HIV/AIDS in Xingtai', a feature article written by Wang Keqin, a senior journalist at *China Economic Times*, which tells the story of Liu Xianhong, a woman villager who contracted HIV through a blood transfusion during childbirth. The film documents how she publicized her story, filed a lawsuit with her 8-year-old son against the local hospital and eventually received compensation. The Central Plains, the ancient Zhongzhou Plains, refers to Henan province. *The Central Plains* records the history of rural people and other marginalized groups in this region caused by critical poverty and the loss of control of blood safety. On the land of tragedy and death, despite various risks, there are men and women fighters endeavoring to reveal the truth and fight against the disaster.