



## A Personal Thought on Women's Studies in Taiwan\*

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### I Personal experience as a woman scholar

When I wrote my dissertation on female rural-urban migration, I was not aware of such a term as 'feminism' in the literature of geography. But geography always 'borrows' from other disciplines, and 'feminist geography' therefore comes about naturally among the social sciences. My Ph.D. dissertation, called 'Female Rural-urban Migration — Adaptation and Linkages,' focused on rural women who came to work in Taipei in the late 1970s. I had some arguments with my advisory committee at that time (at the University of Hawaii), about the significance of this issue in the context of Taiwan's development, but received little support. In fact, I found three or four dissertations written by male scholars (Parish, Speare, Huang) who studied only young male migrants in Taiwan, but call their works 'migration studies' rather than 'male migration studies'. As I started my Ph.D. in 1974, leaving my husband and my two year old son in Taiwan, I had not expected myself to invite so much curiosity and criticism from my neighbors and the Taiwanese students in the East-West Center. It was very clear that the educated women in the 1970s in Taiwan did not pursue their careers without some degree of animosity, and by going abroad for a Ph.D. was at that time unheard of. At times, I thought, I would give up my studies, but most of the time I was determined to reach my goal. In 1980, having come back to Taiwan to do fieldwork, to teach and to do research, I left my husband and son again and my daughter in

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\* Based on a speech delivered at a panel on "Decades of Feminism in United States and Taiwan Academy: Issues and Challenges", Women's Research Program, Population Studies Center, May 7, 1999. The author appreciates comments by Chueh Chang on the first draft, and her special thanks goes to Jonathan Walker and David Schak for suggesting editorial changes on subsequent drafts..

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the care of my parents, so that I could complete my dissertation which was finished in 1983.

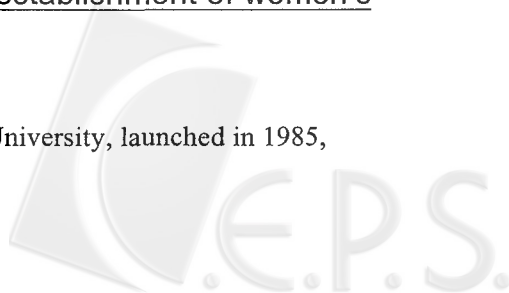
Personally speaking, my story has been a feminist experience and a struggle in the path of autonomy and self-determination. My mother, who died last year, was in part a good example of a 'feminist' in her time, but the term was not used. She supported all her three daughters to get good education, and said: "if you own money and property, you can be robbed, but no one can steal education and knowledge from you". All her daughters lived up to her wish to be economically independent after they were married, something that she could not do in her life-time.

There are many issues that we can derive from our personal experiences, within the family, at work and in the society, if we look at ourselves with feminist consciousness. About fifteen years ago, Wellesley College had a mother-daughter workshop at their Center for Research on Women, and participants shared their mother-daughter experiences with one another. This inspired me as well as others to work on our own mother-daughter experiences. I therefore once planned to do this with Hiroko Hara from Japan and Pilwa Chang from Korea. Unfortunately, for various reasons, it has not worked out.

It was a challenge working in an all male faculty starting in the early 1970s. I knew from the start that I had to work twice as hard to prove my ability, as the youngest member, a female, and someone who was not graduated from the department. I was lucky to be working among open-minded men, who did not expect me to pour tea for them! However, I knew that I was sheltered by two facts —that my father and my husband were both professors. As some of the faculty knew them both, they often asked me about them. It became a common subject of conversation, and sometimes to my annoyance, they often asked what the two men (my significant others) were doing, instead of asking how I did in my research.

## II First encounter with women studies and the establishment of women's studies program

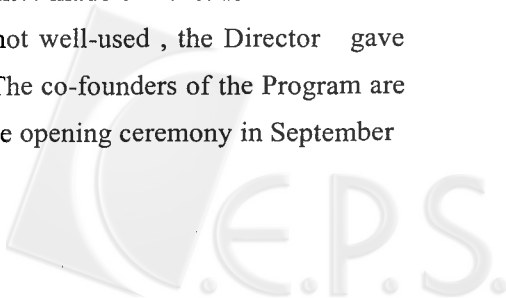
The Women's Research Program at National Taiwan University, launched in 1985,





started fourteen years ago with four members. The working environment here was very different from that of geography where I originally started. We began with sharing information and resources with academe and the public, and little or no hierarchy was felt among us. In 1982, I met Dr. Sheldon Severinghaus in the Department of Geography, National Taiwan University in relation to his interest in the proposed cross-island highway in Taiwan. He noticed my work on female rural-urban migration, and asked me to attend the 'First International Conference on Research and Teaching Related to Women' held in Concordia University's de Beauvoir Institute (July 26-August 4, 1982). Without knowing who Simone de Beauvoir was, I went with another woman, a psychologist who taught at the Chinese Cultural University. She introduced me to the Awakening Society, which was established in 1982 by Yuan-chen Li. After coming back from Canada, I continued to work as executive secretary in the Population Studies Center under the directorship of Cheng-hung Liao. Dr. Severinghaus came to visit the Center one day and asked me if we should have a Conference on Women. The director called an organizing committee meeting comprised of section chiefs and invited Dr. Nancy Chen, a sociologist from National Chengchi University. We all knew someone who worked in the field, and decided that the name of the Conference be called 'The Role of Women in the National Development Process in Taiwan'. The Asia Foundation supported the conference, the publication of the proceedings and a bibliography which I edited with the help of Mei-chi Hsu, a graduate from the Department of Anthropology. At the conclusion of the conference, several women who attended the conference including Yuan-chen Li, Yen-lin Ku, Esther Li Yao, Phylis Lan Lin and others suggested at the conclusion that Taiwan should have a women's research center. In the mean time, Asia Foundation supported four women (Ying-tai Lung, Su-chiu Li, Yen-lin Ku and myself) to attend the Asian Women's Conference in the Philippines (April 22-27, 1985). I wrote a paper on 'Women's Status in Taiwan' which was later developed into a co-authored paper with Yen-lin Ku (Chiang & Ku 1986).

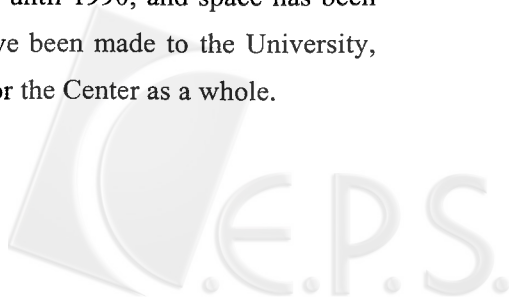
I was not sure whether the Population Studies Center made the best location for the Women's Research Program, but since the Center was not well-used, the Director gave his consent readily to make it an immediate certainty. The co-founders of the Program are Elaine Tsui, Bih-er Chou, Yen-lin Ku and myself. At the opening ceremony in September





1985, Dr. Chun Sun, president of National Taiwan University, came and expressed appreciation for the creation of the Program. The agreement signed with the Asia Foundation was renewable each year for three years, and due to lack of support from the University, it was extended to a fourth year in 1989. When Dr. Sheldon Severinghaus went back to work in the San Francisco home office, Mrs. Edith Coliver took over the Asia Foundation Office in Taipei. Having worked in the Philippines for eight years and taken women's issues seriously, Mrs. Coliver gave sound advice and continuous support to the Program, and cherished the friendship of leaders of women's organizations in Taiwan. At this time, many more new women's groups have been formed, including the Women's Rescue Association (1988), Warm Life (1988) and the Homemaker's Union and Foundation (1989). It was easy to believe that the groups represented different interests and styles, as Taiwan started a liberalization movement that began when the Democratic Progressive Party was formed in 1986 and martial law was lifted in 1987. Women's organizations as a whole took up different women's issues, emphasizing self-growth rather than expressing interests in traditional familial roles. Feminism was one of the main issues, although it was clear that the organizations catered to the interests and needs of different kinds of women. Although not many women subscribed to the term 'feminism' in pursuing their causes, it was clearly a time for a second wave of feminist movement such as what Hsiu-lien Lu advocated as 'new feminism' in the 1970s (Lu 1994).

Led by Chueh Chang in 1990, the Women's Research Program organized many seminars related to women's health, which was an ignored issue in public health. She had been very successful in getting funding from various sources to run the Program, among which were the Education Department, the Hsu Yuan-Chi Foundation, the Lin Po-cho Foundation, the Chinese Women's Business Association, ROC, and the United Board for Christian Higher Education. The University paid for the publication of the *Journal of Women and Gender Studies*, but to this day provides no direct administrative support. This has been the policy toward all research centers of the University. At the Population Studies Center, for example, there was no air-conditioning until 1990, and space has been limited. Several applications for expanding the space have been made to the University, but nothing more has been provided beyond the 80 ping for the Center as a whole.





### III Conflicts and co-operation

My time spent at the Women's Research Program became limited starting in 1990 when I become chair of Department of Geography and Director of the Population Studies Center at the same time. I participated in the activities of the Women's Research Program only occasionally. Chueh Chang, the coordinator, continues the climate of inclusiveness to this day. By being part of her network of scholars, we are in touch with one another even though in different universities. Her style goes beyond the 'quiet revolution' of my day. By participating often in social activities of different women's organizations, she is trusted and well-regarded by them. This has definitely helped the women's research program to shed its image of being an elite organization, one that in my time feminist groups such as the Awakening Society viewed with skepticism. As a geographer trained in the 1970s, I followed the tradition of scientific research by believing that 'science seeks the truth in an objective, rational manner through a process of controlled inquiry' and 'scientific researchers' answers are always objective, verifiable, and impartial, and whenever possible, they have mathematical precision' (Lloyd, Lounsduy, Frazier 1992). I also wrote in an article which stated: 'rather than an outcome of the women's movement, women's studies in Taiwan was born of socio-economic changes of which womens' roles played an important part. As an academic discipline, women's studies has found its position in the humanities and social sciences and has won its position through scholarly interpretation of women's issues. It is, therefore, an arm of the women's movement' (Chiang 1995). The distancing from other feminists inside and outside of academe by my 'objective' stand and 'scholarly' ground led to criticism by Ku (1992) and antagonism from a few individual feminists. My study about women, without challenging male dominance in the academic world, was unintentional, but reflected a personal style and the felt need to establish women's studies as serious scholarship as top priority in the competitive academic world. Even though I was publicly challenged by feminists a few times, I did not think it is necessary to retort in harsh terms, as I believe that opposing views should be tolerated and that misinterpretation by the public can be avoided. I also believe that the terms 'feminist' and 'women studies' should be defined in as many ways as deemed necessary; and that no feminist should exercise hegemony toward others with her/his particular definition. At the Women's Research Program, there has always been co-operation and respect of one another's stances on

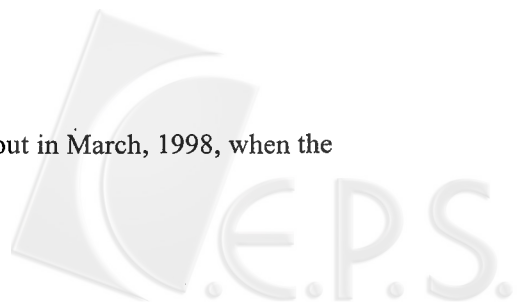


feminism, aiming to bring about progress in the discipline and a social force of change within the University.

In my mind, the top priority is not to resolve different view points but to build a firm institutional base within National Taiwan University. From 1985-1999, a detailed chronology of events was filled with fruitful results that included publications, luncheon seminars, conferences, visits by international scholars, and collaboration with other universities and women's groups. 'Seeds' of women studies were sown and continue to grow over the island. In an article I wrote recently, I pointed out: 'From January 1999, the Center to which it (the Women's Research Program) belongs was renamed the 'Population and Gender Studies Center' in recognition of its status in the institution. Its activities have included the organization of seminars on issues such as women's health, gender education, employment, history, and research methodology. The Center has published a substantial body of literature on women in Taiwan in the form of journals, newsletters, discussion papers and monographs. The most recent publications include an annotated bibliography on women's research in both Chinese and English — this important volume involved the co-operation of a host of scholars. The Center has supported young scholars in carrying out women's research in Taiwan and teachers in other universities to develop curriculum for teaching women's studies. A Women Studies Certificate Program was approved in 1998 so that students who take a set number of courses on women studies in the University receive a Certificate when they graduate. The course 'Gender Relations' had been offered for over ten years prior to 1999 and within that time over 2000 students have undertaken the course. Women's studies has become a well-established field recognized in both the humanities and the social sciences in numerous universities on the island. About eighty courses on gender and women's studies were being offered at various universities in 1998, while seven other gender-related programs have been established. The academic and political wings of the Taiwanese women's movement continue to grow and rise to new challenges'(Chiang 1999).

#### IV Formal acceptance by the University

The Review of the Population Studies Center came about in March, 1998, when the





committee wrote: 'The committee sees the Women's Research Program as highly successful, fulfilling the functions of a Center in the important area of gender studies and women's studies. This highly successful program has no official status as a program or center, however. Its ability to lay claim to space, facilities (computers, photocopier, fax, etc.), and a small operating budget consequently depends entirely on the good will of the director of the Population Studies Center. The Committee does not regard this as healthy and therefore recommends that the Women's Research Program be institutionalized, either as a program within the Population Studies Center, as a separate Center, or in the long term, as an academic department. It should have its own operating budget that is not subject to the whims of a director from outside of the program.' At the board meeting of the Population Studies Center, the agreement to change the name to Population & Gender Studies Center was reached by a consensus. It went through National Taiwan University's senate meeting successfully and was finally approved by the Ministry of Education.

Having reached the stage of becoming a counterpart of population studies, or the 'better half' of the original Population Studies Center, the Women's Research Program thus got herself a good institutional base after fourteen years of existence. It is, in my view, becoming one of the better programs in Asia.

Faced with new opportunities and challenges, women and gender studies at National Taiwan University has progressed very rapidly. The dedication of the Program's committee members representing the disciplines of history, sociology, public health, geography and anthropology, has helped to maintain a balanced program with an interdisciplinary nature. Among the network scholars, many disciplines and universities have been represented and have provided the program with a good support base. Led by a nation-wide feminist consciousness, the discipline of women and gender studies has grown in various universities. Gender equity education is adding a new dimension to education with the opportunity to reach downward into various school levels from the University.

Supported by the Ministry of Education, the impact of gender education will reach far and wide. Even though the elimination of discrimination does not occur overnight, and empowerment of women in different arenas takes time to achieve, one can hope that the





society is engendered not only by gradual social and economic changes, but also by a feminist movement that prevails in academia, of which the Women's Research Program plays an important part.

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