

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

**SITE: CHINA**

**Transcript of He Zhonghua  
Interviewer: Wang Jinling**

**Location: Lijiang, Yunnan**

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**He Zhonghua**, born in 1937, is from the Naxi ethnic minority in Yunnan. A professor of literature, she established a women's studies center in the Academy of Social Sciences in Yunnan in the early 1990s. After she retired, Professor He set up a minority women research center in Yunnan. She has been involved in many research and activist projects, ranging from improving ethnic minority women's health in poor areas to empowering women to participate in rural development and community management.

**Wang Jinling (hereafter referred to as Wang): Today we have come to visit Professor He Zhonghua in Lijiang, Yunnan. Professor He, thank you for doing this interview with us. First, would you mind telling us your name, when you were born, and some of your experiences when you were growing up?**

Professor He (sitting, in ethnic clothing.): My name is He Zhonghua, and my ethnicity is Naxi.<sup>1</sup> I was born in 1937, during the Sino-Japanese War.<sup>2</sup> Up until the time when I was eleven years old, I grew up in a small mountain village called Shigu near the Jinsha River. My hometown was Gucheng. Only after I turned eleven did I return to my hometown, Gucheng in Lijiang. Basically I attended elementary school, middle school and high school in my hometown. Prior to fifth grade I was in Shigu and then from sixth grade straight through until I graduated from high school, I attended school in Gucheng, Lijiang. This region has been the main area that claims a large Naxi population. It also has many Han people. Those Han peoples, whose ancestors came to the area a long time ago, all wear traditional Naxi clothing and speak the Naxi dialect. They call us “the native people” and we call them “the Han people.” We live together in peace and harmony. So we have always all been extremely friendly to each other. This area also has very many other ethnicities. On the other side of the Jinsha River is the Tibetan ethnic minority area. Also on the side where Mt. Small Xiaoliang is, there are the Yi ethnic minority people. In addition the Bai people live in this area with us. In fact the environment is like living in a big family full of people from different ethnic groups. Because Lijiang is an area where a lot of Naxi people live, it has become the only autonomous county for the Naxi ethnic group in the whole country. The Naxi ethnic group’s autonomous county is Lijiang. In the past this area was called the Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County. Now after Lijiang has turned into a city, it is called the Yulong Naxi Ethnic Autonomous County. So I grew up surrounded by Naxi culture. My parents and all of my ancestors are all Naxi peoples. Thus, I have very strong feelings for the culture and many other aspects of our ethnic group.

**Wang: What did your parents do?**

He: My mother was an ordinary Naxi woman and lived on... Well, we lived in a small rural town. She mainly was involved in the small handicraft industry. Take a look – this thing that I am wearing on my back! This is my mother’s embroidery.

**Wang: Oh! How beautiful!**

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<sup>1</sup> Naxi is one of the minorities in the People’s Republic of China. The Naxi people generally inhabit in Yunnan Province, a province in the southwestern China. These people and their lands were integrated into China gradually since several hundreds years ago. The Han people, the ethnic majority in China, constitute about 93 percent of the population.

<sup>2</sup> The Sino-Japanese War, part of World War II, started in 1937 when the Japanese invaded China and ended in 1945.

He: My mother took care of me when I was young. She left this to me when she passed away. She made her living by making embroidery and selling small goods. As for my father, he went to the front lines in the war against the Japanese when I was one year old. So, I don't remember him. I have heard that he was a teacher at the village elementary school.

**Wang: So, you never even saw your father?**

He: Right, I never even saw him.

**Wang: So you were raised by your mother?**

He: Right, I was raised by my mom.

**Wang: Did your mom have a very big influence on your life?**

He: Yes, very big. I was born and grew up in a Naxi ethnic area that had Gucheng as the center. Starting from the period of the Ming Dynasty<sup>3</sup> this area began to be influenced by the Han culture. At that time we were ruled under the tribal chieftainship system.<sup>4</sup> The headmen's surname was Mu and the average people were surnamed He. Later we began to accept and take on Han culture. Then, in the first year of Yongzheng,<sup>5</sup> 1723, the border areas all changed from the tribal chieftainship system to the standard Chinese bureaucratic system. The central government sent officials to govern ethnic minority areas. So at that time these officials implemented the policy of "civilizing ethnic minorities with Chinese culture." It means they proposed that the native people "learn the Han written language and imitate the Han customs." In order to accept the Han cultural education, changes were made to some of our ethnic customs. We had to follow the Han customs.

So the culture was like this. Take for example my mother's Naxi ancestors. Since the policy of changing from the tribal chieftainship system to the standard Chinese bureaucratic system was implemented, ordinary people's children started to have the opportunity to go to school where they would be taught about Han culture. Also the imperial civil service examination system<sup>6</sup> opened opportunities for scholars to have an official career. My maternal family produced a Hanlin.<sup>7</sup> In the history of our Naxi people there were only two Hanlins, from the Yongzheng era to the early twentieth century when the examination system was abolished. There were also very many *jinshi*,<sup>8</sup> but I cannot

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<sup>3</sup> The Ming dynasty, which lasted from 1368-1644, was one of the dynasties of imperial China.

<sup>4</sup> The tribal chieftainship or *tusi* system was a system of appointing national minority headmen during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties.

<sup>5</sup> The Yongzheng period of the Qing dynasty: 1723-1735.

<sup>6</sup> The Chinese imperial government held civil service examinations regularly to recruit bureaucrats from the educated. This was abolished in 1905, several years before the last dynasty was overthrown.

<sup>7</sup> Hanlin was the name used to call selected imperial students (who had passed the highest level of imperial civil service examinations) that entered the prestigious imperial Hanlin Academy. These *hanlins* were more likely to have a successful political career and therefore were highly regarded.

<sup>8</sup> *Jinshi* refers to successful candidates in the highest level of the imperial examinations.

remember the exact number. On my father's side, my great-great grandfather was an imperial student by virtue of special selection – through the imperial civil service examination system. In the past the Han peoples believed it was important to build marriage alliances with families of similar socio-cultural status. Thus, the influence of Han culture on the upper echelons of the Naxi people was very deep. My mother was born and grew up in this kind of environment. Well, my grandmother got married when she was seventeen years old; this was an arranged marriage. Her family took on the customs of the Han people and her marriage was arranged. Later, because she didn't give birth to a boy, my grandfather married several other women since he was the only son in his family.<sup>9</sup> Therefore my grandmother, who was left destitute, took my mother and my mother's younger sister to the waterfront area of the Jinsha River in order to make a living. Later, after my aunt, my mother's younger sister, got married, my mother and my grandmother lived together. Then I was born. My family was special since it consisted of three generations of women. My grandfather married concubines and they lived in his hometown, while we lived in the Jinsha waterfront area. After my mother got married, my father left home to fight in the war. Therefore my mother took care of my grandmother and lived with her. I also was a girl; so these women of three generations lived together.

**Wang: So your mother only had one child?**

He: She had given birth to a boy, twelve years before me. But, he didn't survive.

**Wang: So, in fact, it was only you.**

He: Yes, just me; I was an only child.

**Wang: So, since you grew up in this kind of environment, did your mother and grandmother have a big influence on your life?**

He: They had a tremendous influence. My grandmother had a really strong personality and was the kind of person who was always ready to defend the weak against injustice. Therefore, in her hometown, there are still stories told about her. When I was young my mother had to go out and make a living for us so my grandmother took most of the responsibility for raising me. Therefore I was taught about a lot of medicinal herbs and also many stories about the Naxi people. My grandmother taught me all of these things. Since the time when I was very young, I grew up being told Naxi stories. Therefore I learned of the Naxi culture at a very young age; my grandmother was my earliest teacher. But later, when I had not yet turned ten years old, my grandmother had to leave to take care of my aunt, the daughter of my grandfather's concubine. My grandfather had married several women in the hopes of having a son, but none of his wives had boys. Therefore my grandfather took a man into the family as his son-in-law<sup>10</sup> for that concubine's daughter. After she got married to him, they had a child. My grandfather's other wives all had already passed away and my grandmother was the only wife who was

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<sup>9</sup> It was very important for a Chinese family to produce male offspring to carry on the patrilineal line.

<sup>10</sup> Traditionally when a woman married she would go to live with the man's family.

still alive. So he took my grandmother back in order to take care of the household. So from that time forward I lived with my mother. She really had the greatest influence on me. She was extremely honest, kind and very industrious; she was also very tolerant. All of her qualities have greatly influenced me. The other situation that had a big influence on me was the special composition of our family household. Basically my grandmother was a widow with a living husband; my mother also found herself in this situation; compared to that of a widow...<sup>11</sup> Thus, at that time my mother was bullied by other people in the clan, because she gave birth to a girl. If I had been a boy we would have had a very different status in the family. In addition she was looked down upon because my father was not at home. Later, I remember I wanted to attend middle school. Since my mother felt the Jinsha waterfront area was not very safe, she wanted to move back to our hometown but at the time they did not allow her to do so. They told her to wait until my father came back and only then would they allow her to return home. I always thought that they bullied my mother. At that time, I remember wishing that I had been born a boy.

(They change the location of the interview. He Zhonghua is wearing traditional ethnic dress and standing.)

He: During the time period when I went to elementary school, middle school and high school – before I went to college – I grew up in the Naxi area. So, even though we studied Han culture, we were immersed in Naxi culture in our surrounding environment. I grew up in this kind of environment and never really felt like I was different. Then I went to a college in Chongqing,<sup>12</sup> which is the present day Southwest Normal University. Before I was ten years old we moved from the Jinsha River's grand canyon area to the city of Gucheng. The move to the city really broadened my perspective and way of looking at things. Then, I moved from Gucheng to Chongqing. Chongqing was a place of strategic importance in the southwest and therefore further broadened my vision. From an intellectual perspective it was the feeling of moving from the edge of the well to the edge of the sea. Thus, I felt really happy and very lucky, since before the establishment of the new China<sup>13</sup> very few Naxi women had the opportunity to go to college. After all, this was extremely rare. So I was very lucky to be offered this opportunity to attend university. At the time the country was advocating the equality of men and women and the equality of the different ethnic groups. I directly benefited from these government policies. Therefore I was able to set foot in the treasured halls of academia. At that time I was a student in the Chinese language department and eagerly took in everything that I could. The Han Chinese culture is broad and profound and this rich wealth of knowledge excited me beyond belief. It also caused me to even more deeply love the big family of the Chinese nation. Meanwhile, historically ethnic minority areas were considered to be barbaric and backwards. Because the lack of a mutual understanding in addition to some discriminatory government policies in the old times, people on the outside really had very

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<sup>11</sup> Their situation was often even worse than a true widow.

<sup>12</sup> Chongqing has been an important political and economic center of southwestern China. During the Sino-Japanese war, it served as the capital of the nationalist government.

<sup>13</sup> People often use “the new China” to refer to the People's Republic of China, which was established in 1949.

little understanding of ethnic minorities. Although at the university the learning environment and the teachers were excellent and my classmates were all really good to me, sometimes they raised some questions that were so ignorant that I did not know how to deal with them. I really came to understand how little others knew or understood about ethnic minorities. So as an ethnic minority I felt I had a kind of sense of responsibility to my people. Since I had the opportunity to enter an institute of higher education, I must repay my people by helping others gain a better understanding of the real situation of ethnic minorities.

(They change the location of the interview. He is wearing ethnic clothes and sitting.)

Yunnan is a province in the border area that has many different ethnic groups. Twenty-six different ethnic groups, twenty-five of which are ethnic minorities, have lived on this land for generations. Each ethnic group has its own unique and rich culture. As I said earlier, these cultures must be made known to others. Therefore, there are many ethnologists and anthropologists in Yunnan province who are making such efforts. So, as a woman, I studied the cultures of ethnic minorities, with a special emphasis on the Naxi culture. This was because I was already quite familiar with Naxi culture. I felt that I was well positioned to study the language, culture and mentality of the Naxi people. Moreover, I also had the opportunity to enter the Chinese language department to study and this was another advantage. Therefore I took full advantage of my resources. I would count as one of the earliest people who paid attention to the cultures of ethnic minorities.

In my research, I felt that women have played a unique role in creating, preserving, inheriting and promoting ethnic minority cultures. However, their role had not been recognized. Therefore I focused my attention and research on women in ethnic minority groups. During this time, that is, for more than the past twenty years, I have traveled to nearly all of the ethnic minority border areas in the province. I would like to briefly introduce several of the ethnic minorities. (She shows some pictures.) These are the Yi people – all of these people live in Yunnan; these are the Tibetan minority peoples. Here are the Lusu people. All of these pictures were taken when I was doing research, so you can see me in there. These are the Jinuo people; these are the Pumi people; here are the Dai people, here are some Mosuo people of our Naxi ethnic group. There are also many other ethnic groups, but here I will not introduce them in detail.

(They change the location of the interview. He Zhonghua is wearing a black jacket.)

**Wang: Professor He, in yesterday's interview, you talked about how you came to pay attention to the cultures of ethnic minorities. Then you discussed how you came to emphasize minority women. Did you change your research focus through some projects?**

He: I myself went through a process when I changed from the study of ethnic minority cultures to that of researching minority women. In this transformation from studying culture to studying women, my focal point was women's culture within ethnic minority



groups. This was the period before the 1995 World Women's Conference.<sup>14</sup> I took part in...I wrote some articles. The earliest one was about the Naxi Dongba culture.<sup>15</sup> It illustrates the evolution of female worship in the Dongba culture. I examined the evolution from female worship to male worship as well as the changes in women's status in this process. I started from this project and then moved on to study other ethnic minorities, because there are similar cultural phenomena in these ethnic minorities. Even before the World Conference on Women, I had already participated in and helped organize the project of compiling a book series on women's culture in ethnic minorities in Yunnan. In total, there were more than twenty volumes in this collection. Basically each volume was dedicated to a different ethnic minority. I was a participant in this collective endeavor. After the 1995 World Conference on Women, I had a clearer understanding of many things. My own experiences paralleled this process. First in my own research on minority cultures I came to know many organizations. At that time some overseas foundations, like the Ford Foundation, sponsored some poverty projects and a forestry project. In the implementation of these projects, they required...they as sponsors required that one-third of the participants in the project must be ethnic minorities and one-third must be women. This was a special requirement. Therefore, the people in charge of these projects tried to recruit people like me – those that were both ethnic minorities and women – into the projects. During the process of participating in this project, my role was to continuously pay attention to issues like women's status and their roles in the forestry project. This is my research in real world projects. In the meantime, I conducted my research on culture as well. I went to the grassroots level to better understand the situation. At that time, this effort enabled me to step out of pure academic research and go to the grassroots level to learn about the basic conditions of women's lives in these areas. Looking at this from another angle, I felt that many of my resources, including the research materials and my research projects, came from them. Therefore I should repay these peoples in my research. I cannot regard them merely as the providers of my research materials or my research objects. Therefore, after I had this kind of experience, I gradually changed my focal point from culture to practice, which involved projects of ethnic minority women's development.

It was after the 1995 World Conference on Women when I especially felt the importance of women's participation in society. Thus, I applied for a project in this area at that time. The project investigated the participation and development of ethnic minority women in Yunnan province. That project involved more than a dozen ethnic minorities. So I went to visit many places. The investigation had a tremendous impact on me, both emotionally and intellectually. From this time forward, I could not help but become more engaged in this kind of work. I have basically invested all of my energy towards working on projects. When I had any free time I would reflect on what I have felt and what I have realized during the process and then wrote them down. This is basically what I did in the process. For these two years, I have become more involved in these processes. I have also personally developed where I came to understand that we should not consider ourselves

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<sup>14</sup> He Zhonghua is referring to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing, China in 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Like the Maya in South America, the Naxi developed a culture closely tied to religion, known as Dongba, and passed down a system of hieroglyphics by word-of-mouth.

as the messiah. Instead, we should share achievements, experiences and hardship with our sisters. I feel that we must look at things from their perspective; we should not be condescending. Right? This is extremely important. I really think that this is extremely important for my research. I have learned a lot in this aspect. Later I will discuss this issue a bit more.

Then... Well, my long-term examination of Mosuo<sup>16</sup> women was... From the very beginning of this research until the completion of the book, it took more than twelve years. In these twelve years, at the beginning I was still working. If my goal was to gain a higher title or academic post, then I should have published this book before I retired. This would have helped me gain a higher position. But, at that time I thought, since I was investigating the changes in the matriarchal system of the Mosuo people in modern times, a kind of cultural change that requires a relatively long period of time to investigate, I could not complete this project in one or two days. Otherwise I would not be able to grasp the true nature of the changes. Therefore I gave up these concerns and decided not to write. Instead, for many years I simply tracked the changes; every one or two years I went to visit my chosen research sites and the women there. So by the time the book was finished I had already retired. I had some friends who really did not understand why I decided to do things the way that I did. They asked me why I did not just write the book sooner. Actually, I did have a lot of research materials. At that time I felt that as a responsible researcher, I should not think about the individual benefits but instead should focus on leaving behind authentic research for the next generation. Now sometimes it is really a kind of consolation to me that the Mosuo people highly evaluate my work because of all the efforts I put in it. When young scholars go to Mosuo villages to do research, the Mosuo people tell them: "If you want to introduce our culture to others, please be careful. You should look at Professor He's book and write about us truthfully just like she did. The director of the Women's Federation for the Mosuo people<sup>17</sup> once spoke at a provincial level conference: People have written a lot of articles about us Mosuo, but it was only Professor He who really got to know us. She stood with us together and spent a lot of time with us; she helped us to say the things that we wanted others to know about us." Wow! I really feel this is the highest praise that I could receive. Although I have given up a lot of things, I feel...I can console myself in this way. But I am also not saying what I have written is terrific, because in no way am I perfect and after all, I have not lived among these people and also did not live in that area. So I acknowledge that there are still cultural barriers that I have not overcome. But, I recognize that the only thing that I can do is to work very hard at overcoming these cultural barriers. I cannot impose some monolithic ideas and frameworks on their culture. Right? Therefore, in order to understand what these women are thinking, what these women are doing, why they want to do things in the way that they do, I cannot look

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<sup>16</sup> Mosuo is an ethnic minority in the Yunnan area. It has maintained to some degree the so-called "matriarchy system." Mosuo people traditionally do not practice monogamy but "Walking Marriage." Women occupy a very special position in family and society because they define the family line and only women can inherit. Western scholars have been especially interested in studying the Mosuo family system, but Mosuo women believe that these scholars have not accurately portrayed their lives.

<sup>17</sup> The Women's Federation has a multi-level administrative network, parallel to the government administrative structure. Therefore, there is a Women's Federation for the administrative region where the Mosuo people inhabit.

at these things from my own perspective. I need to think about these issues from their point of view. Learning to see from their perspective was my greatest gain during the course of my research. So this is a... The most important aspect of my research was to pay attention to their development and changes. This is especially important in the time of economic globalization. In this kind of situation, we have to recognize that these ethnic minority areas do not exist in isolation like they did in the past. There have been a lot of outside cultural influences that have entered this area. Native cultures are facing unprecedented challenges. In this kind of situation, cultural adjustments and integrations are worth the consideration and research of social science scholars. I think that this time period, when a society is transforming, is extremely precious; therefore we need to pay particular attention to this kind of cultural phenomenon. This is the cultural aspect. Also when we look at this from people's point of view, both men's and women's communities are facing various transformations in ideas, roles and other aspects. They also face a lot of difficulties. So in the process of my research and projects, I deeply felt that there was the need to enhance woman's abilities. Women should first of all improve themselves. Like the old saying says, "If you want to work on iron you have to build yourself strong." Right? In addition women must actively participate. We cannot simply import outside ideas without taking into consideration our own experiences. I think this approach is too superficial.

So I did all these... In the last two years, I participated in the American Nature Conservancy's "Photovoice" project.<sup>18</sup> As for the original intent of the Photovoice project, it attempted to... The American Nature Conservancy and the Yunnan Provincial government collaborate to form a nature protection plan for the "Three Rivers Area"<sup>19</sup> of northwestern Yunnan. This area was especially precious because of the diversity of animals and plants and its dense multiplicity of cultures. Many things that have already

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<sup>18</sup> Photovoice is a community involvement concept which provides cameras and film to local people in order to document and communicate their environment and cultures. After selecting four to five villages interested in using Photovoice, The Nature Conservancy holds meetings to explain the project and selects volunteers from a range of ages in each village. Participants receive cameras, film and basic photography training. Over the course of a year, they capture images of their everyday life and work, religious rituals and family activities, with a focus on their interaction with the surrounding environment. At regular meetings, the groups share their photographs and discuss the issues and themes they illustrate. At the end of each project, copies of the photographs with their stories and themes are presented to conservation site planners, public officials, local communities and other stakeholders. The specific goals of the Photovoice Project are to provide a concrete way for local people to record what they value about culture and nature and to define how natural and cultural resources can be protected. It is well-suited to remote rural areas where people have had minimal access to education and few opportunities to give voice to their own, perspectives. The project aims to give communities a chance to shape policy. Villagers need a forum to have their voices heard in order to increase their stake in the outcomes of conservation planning. Finally, the project offers a process to document natural and cultural resources in a rapidly changing China. For additional information see the Nature Conservancy homepage: <http://nature.org/>

<sup>19</sup> The Three Rivers Area is recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage. Consisting of eight geographical clusters of protected areas within the boundaries of the Three Parallel Rivers National Park, in the mountainous north-west of Yunnan Province, the 1.7 million hectare site features sections of the upper reaches of three of the great rivers of Asia: the Yangtze (Jinsha), Mekong and Salween run roughly parallel, north to south, through steep gorges which, in places, are 3,000 meters deep and are bordered by glaciated peaks more than 6,000 meters high. The site is an epicentre of Chinese biodiversity. It is also one of the richest temperate regions of the world in terms of biodiversity.

vanished in other areas of the world still exist there, in terms of both nature and culture. Therefore in order to make a plan, cameras were given to the local farmers. They decided what to take photos of on their own; we did not tell them what sorts of photos they should take or not take. We told them the goals of the project. They would speak about their thoughts, their perspective and what they wanted to say through the pictures. After we did this, in my gender perspective, I felt this was a part of women's capacity building. Moreover, it can also be considered an attempt to enable women to directly participate in significant policy-making. This is the way that I look at this project. Well, today I am going to visit He Yunying – one of our “photographers.” She has taken some great pictures. Many of these pictures have been featured in some publications and magazines around the world. The Yunnan television station also asked her to come to the station to discuss some of her thoughts and feelings about protecting the environment. Feedback on this has been terrific.

(They change the location of the interview. He is wearing a black outfit and a native woman from Yunnan is with her.)

He: This is the Photovoice project. We began the project in 2002 and now it has already ended.

(Conversation in a minority dialect. Below is a summary of their conversation):

Gele Village of the Haibei Administrative District, Lashi City, Yulong County of Lijiang, Yunnan Province

Yunnan woman: After we participated in the Photovoice project, we came to realize the importance of protecting the ecological environment and to love our nature even more deeply. We not only acted on our own initiatives but also influenced people around us. When we took these pictures, we had a lot of thoughts. For instance, the fish stock has been depleted; this is partially because of pollution. After we applied agricultural chemicals we washed the bottle caps in the lake. This caused the water to become polluted. In the past we did not pay attention to this, but now we have come to realize that this is a problem. We gained confidence in ourselves through taking pictures. In the past things that we did not even dare to think about, nowadays we have the courage to take action. Now my family has contracted a part of a mountain where special mushrooms grow. During the course of a year we must live on the mountain for four or five months to take care of the forest. When we pick the mushrooms, we make a profit of about four or five thousand yuan<sup>20</sup> per year.

He: These are some pictures about protecting the environment that she took. These pictures have been highly praised in other places. And she herself... She has become more confident in herself.

(They change the location of the interview and are now in Yuhu Village.)

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<sup>20</sup> As of October 2006, the exchange rate is 1 U.S. dollar ≈ 8 yuan.

**Wang: Professor He, could you now talk about another project that you are engaged in here?**

He: This village is called the Yuhu Administrative Village. The project we are working on here is called the “Photographic Story.” Why did I choose this village? This village...for me... I have chosen it based on my experience and relations with this village. The first time I came to this village was in 1993, for a tourist development project funded by the Ford Foundation. So this is what brought me here for the first time. This village in the Lijiang dam area was very impoverished at that time. Its topography is quite high. Among the villages in the Lijiang dam area, it is the closest to Snow Mountain; it is a village under the foothills of the Snow Mountain. The area is quite poor because among other things, the soil quality is barren, the climate is rather warm and the altitude is quite high. In addition, although it has some natural resources, they were not wisely used. So there are many reasons that have contributed to the impoverished condition in this village. After all these years, the most drastic change is that it has found... This village is located within the scenic district of the Yulong Snow Mountain. Because of this, it has a lot of resources. So in this couple of years, it has found a good way to develop; that is tourism. And tourism has facilitated the development of the whole economy. For example, look at the houses. Their changes are really moving for me. Every time I come they seem to have changed and gotten better and better. Thus this is why our Photographic Story project takes place here. Our project uses the picture as a method. We give cameras to the local villagers and let them show how they want the environmental protection and community development to be done. Then the final goal is to prepare a plan for a comprehensive community development project.

**Wang: So through the pictures people could find their demands and explore their potential?**

He: Right, explore their potential. At that time, we thought...Well, I had participated in some projects carried out by foreign organizations. This time we ourselves are in charge of this project. From the perspective of researchers, we want to explore the way to localize some foreign methods and concepts. In addition, from the villagers’ perspective, this is a means of participation. This project and the Photovoice project are different in that the latter project was designed as an environmental protection project. The final goal of the project that we are doing now is to publish a handbook. We try to explore how to use photos as a method, using photos as a tool of research and a means to collect information. Moreover this kind of information comes directly from the grassroots level, from the field. Using this method, like we have for the previous two years, one thing that we learned is that when we as social sciences scholars do fieldwork in the country, we – for example I myself – always design some methods and questions that I want to ask. Then, actually the villagers are telling us stories that have already been framed by our minds. After we get their stories, we put them into our papers and practices and in this process they are filtered by our views once again. Right? In this way we are always the ones that take the initiative and the villagers are always passive. They are not participating as subjects. Now we want them to be the main subjects in the project, and

we want them to be able to express their demands and their wishes directly, and also reveal their own points of view.

**Wang: This would be especially important for women – in the past their voice was not heard.**

He: Mmm, when we were designing this project we had a principle for selecting our participants. We wanted an equal number of men and women, people representing the elderly, middle aged and young generations, and those from all levels of socio-economic backgrounds. We also wanted the composition of the group to be diverse; the village level cadres should not make up more than ten percent of our group and instead it was mainly composed of ordinary peasants. These people are those whose voice can hardly be heard in community planning, especially women – their voice in the public domain is not heard. So this time we want them to directly voice their opinions, through pictures. Moreover we pay more attention to the stories behind the pictures and how these women see things. So when we planned this project we especially emphasized the issue of gender consciousness. Therefore in a certain sense – yesterday I might have discussed this – they are direct participants in the planning for the entire community, the community development plan. Therefore essentially this is a way of promoting their abilities. Therefore I feel this project is representative. Why is it representative? This area originally was a very impoverished village. After the development of tourism, it became a rather wealthy area. It not only became wealthy, but also people's mental outlook improved. So it was not only an increase in people's income, but changes that occurred in many different areas. The people who participated in the tourism industry were both men and women. The most well-developed service was horse riding guides. Visitors ride on horseback and they are led by guides into Yulong Snow Mountain. Men and women, old and young, served as guides. The proportion of women was rather large. They directly participated in these economic activities. In the past women did housework and worked in the fields. That was their space of activity. Now they were engaging in the market. Therefore, their mental outlook in various aspects changed in a very big way. As we carried out this project, impoverished women gradually became more and more well off. Thus, within this project there were a lot of things that we felt were really worthy of further thought.

**Wang: I assume that there are also some local experiences.**

He: Yes. I have just discussed one of the reasons why I chose this village. That is the problem of poverty. We wanted to see how to make changes in an impoverished area so that it could slowly become better off. Another reason is that... I have mentioned it earlier. I feel a kind of emotional attachment to this village. I first came to this village when I participated in a project in 1993. At that time, the area was rather poor. At that time the government started to prohibit cutting down trees. This area is at the foot of Yulong Mountain and very close to the forest. Local people used to rely on lumber to subsidize the economy. Lumber became the main source of income for people's livelihoods. But, lumbering resulted in barren land and the agricultural products from this area were not very good. In addition it was hard to preserve the water and soil; it

mainly was sand and stones. Moreover there is the factor of global warming. Thus for many different reasons people's lives in this village in the Lijiang Dam area were quite impoverished. This made a very deep impression on me. Another deep impression was...From women's point of view, when we started the project of eco-tourism, we insisted on a gender perspective. So...At that time, the road looked nothing like its present condition. It was barely passable and the water was shallow. The road and water passage became one. Drinking water came from that area where people walk and horses pass. Therefore this directly impacted the quality of water in the area and the health of humans and livestock. There was also another problem – the water source area. We can go in a while and see the lake. In the lake there are salmon. People raise them to eat. Local people do not raise this fish; a work unit raises them. The abandoned fish, animal manure and other dirty things all flow into these ditches. Therefore these pollutants are a very big problem; the pollution is very bad. Therefore after the conclusion of our project, the project group used project funds to repair a canal. Several years later I went to this village and found the greatest change. The government allocated some funds to build direct pipes from the mountain that bring water to each household. Therefore their water is clean now. I am moved by the way the village looks now. In addition, I came here in 1996 after a great earthquake in Lijiang. During that time I also went there to help with disaster relief. Everything really was in terrible disarray. The dilapidated walls and crumbling buildings were a horrible scene of devastation. In the few years following this tragedy, you could still see the damaging effects of the earthquake. Many houses collapsed but people could not afford to have them repaired. This happened to a lot of families. But last year when I arrived, I simply could not believe my eyes. Oh my gosh! How could there have been such drastic changes? Therefore I have become very interested in seeing the community develop.

The final goals of our “photographic story” project were to publish a handbook and create a development plan in this community. This plan was designed to protect the local ecology; also it sought to protect and respect the cultural diversity of the area when deciding how to develop the economy and to raise the standard of living of the inhabitants. This was our thought. But actually it was not our plan but instead the plan that naturally came about after these photographers took the pictures of their community. From the exhibitions of their photos, all kinds of information were collected. Naturally the blueprint of a future plan for development came into being.

**Wang: Then different groups of people worked on this together?**

He: Right, we all worked together on this.

(They change the location of the interview. He Zhonghua is with a woman from that area.)

He: This woman's name is Li Jinxin; she has worked for nineteen years all together as a village cadre. The second time that I came here she had stopped working as a village cadre. Mrs. Li, how many years had you already stopped working?

Li: I had already stopped working for twenty years.

He: So twenty years later, the people in the village elected her again; they wanted her to work as the village party secretary. Then this time we asked her to become one of our photographers. I wanted to ask her to talk about how the changes had impacted the women in the village and also how she feels about the photography project.

(Conversation in a minority dialect. The following section is a summary of Li Jinxing's words. )

Li Jinxing, a Naxi ethnic minority from Yuhu Village (Yunnan Province Lijiang City Yulong County Beisha Township Yuhu administrative village):

“The photographic story” project is a very good project. In the past other people did not know what kind of ideas I had. Now through these pictures we can let the government know our opinions. Although I am not so young anymore, I can still do some things. I like doing this kind of work.

In the past our village was rather poor. Now the tourist industry has developed and our lives have improved; this has brought benefits for women. Here this region is half mountainous; the climate is horrible; and people have a difficult time making ends meet. The women had to go to Snow Mountain to chop down bamboo to make brooms in order to make a little money. This was physically demanding for women; it had also destroyed the ecology. Now they can make some money by leading horses for the tourists. This has not only increased their income and lessened the burden for women, but also has protected the ecological environment.

(They change the location of the interview to the canal.)

**Wang: Professor He, this is the canal that your project worked on, right?**

He: Right, right, right. This is it.

(They change the location of the interview to the Lijiang Research Association of Ethnic Culture and Gender.)

He: These are the core members of our organization. We worked together on some projects. Besides working on the projects, we have also done some theoretical research. Considering current and future development, we want the old, middle-aged and young to work together. We feel the happiest when our male colleagues are also represented and have participated. This person is the representative of our male colleagues. We also have other male colleagues. Moreover, our current and future research emphasis is using a gender perspective to look at such topics as ethnic minority women, the development of



ethnic minorities, natural resource management and environmental protection. In addition, while implementing the projects we want to continue to think about theories.