

Contemporary Chinese Studies: Gender, Voice and Change Conversation with Maria Jaschok, August 2014

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Dr Maria Jaschok



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Summary

This interview is partly an intellectual biography of Maria Jaschok, a renowned scholar of contemporary China, partly a rare account of the changes in Western approaches to the study of China over the past fifty years. It also touches on relationships of mentoring and collaboration among scholars and in the field. Prominent themes are the history of gender studies, the question of “muted groups” and “voice” and the valuable international networks established since the Seventies by the Oxford Centre for Cross-Cultural Research on Women, comprising anthropologists who later founded the International Gender Studies Centre, of which Maria Jaschok has been Director since 2000. The Centre has been based at Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford, since 2011.

Maria Jaschok

Research Fellow and Director of the International Gender Studies Centre at Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford, is also affiliated to the Oxford China Centre, Interdisciplinary Area Studies. Her research interests are in the areas of religion, gender and agency; gendered constructions of memory; feminist ethnographic practice; marginality and identity in contemporary China. She is involved in on-going collaborative research projects in central China. She has published widely on gender, Islamic feminism and indigenization of religion in China; for instance, among her more recent indicative publications: “*Outsiders Within’: Speaking to Excursions Across Cultures*” (in Christina Hughes, Ed., 2000, *Researching Gender. Situated Knowers and Feminist Standpoint*, vol.1, Sage Publications, London); “*Sources of Authority: Female Ahong and Qingzhen Nüsi (Women’s Mosques) in China*” (in Masooda Bano, Ed., 2012, *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, Brill, Leiden); *Women, Religion, and Space in China* (2011, Routledge, New York); “*Gender, Religion, and Little Traditions: Chinese Muslim Women Singing Minguo*” (in Mechthild Leutner, Nicola Spakowski, 2002, *Women in China. The Republican Era in Historical Perspective*, Lit Verlag, Münster); “*Sources and methods for research on women and Islamic cultures in China, 1700-1900*” (in 2003, *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, vol. I, Brill, Leiden); *The History of Women’s Mosques in Chinese Islam: A Mosque of Their Own* (2000, Curzon Press).

Introductory note by Vanessa Maher¹

The International Gender Studies Centre grew out of the Centre for Cross Cultural Research on Women, CCRW, founded in Oxford by a group of women anthropologists in 1983. Its first Director was Shirley Ardener, whom I had met in the Seventies. She was already known for her incisive theoretical contribution to the new feminist anthropology and for the ethnography she had carried out in the Cameroons and Nigeria with her husband Edwin Ardener in the 1950s and 1960s. In the introduction to her edited volume *Perceiving Women* (1975, Wiley, London) she examined the concept of “muted groups” as it applied to women. The volume included her chapter on sexual insult and women’s militancy in the Cameroons as well as a chapter by Edwin Ardener on the “lack of voice” of women in the ethnography of the time (“*Belief and the Problem of Women*”, first published in 1972).² For many years the Oxford Centre for Cross Cultural Research on Women was largely self-financed. Based in Queen Elizabeth House, together with diverse research groups and postgraduate courses, it was a hive of activity, hosting Visiting Fellows from various parts of the world, organising seminars, workshops and producing books, many of them edited by Shirley Ardener herself. In 2009 Shirley Ardener was awarded the OBE (Order of the British Empire) for her services to anthropology. I spent some months at the CCRW in 1984 and a year in 1986/1987 as Visiting Research Fellow. In subsequent years I kept in touch. During a period of leave in 2011, I attended the seminar series on “Muslim Women in China”, organised by the current Director of IGSC, Maria Jaschok. I also witnessed the IGSC’s Trentennial celebrations and its move from Queen Elizabeth House to Lady Margaret Hall, an Oxford University college originally founded for women. The Directorship of Maria Jaschok, a renowned scholar of China, has ushered in a new phase of which she gives an account in this interview and which will be of interest to Italian anthropologists. I have provided some explanatory footnotes since the subject matter may be unfamiliar to many readers. The bracketed references within the text are intended to provide a time-

¹ See end-note for profile of Vanessa Maher

² I was a member of the London Collective of Women Anthropologists in 1972 when the first version of Edwin Ardener’s article came out, causing a certain furore. V.M.

line and refer to only a few of the publications of the authors mentioned. These are detailed in the bibliography at the end.

Vanessa Maher: How did you get involved in the International Gender Studies Centre?

Maria Jaschok: *Well, at the time I was far away geographically from the UK. I was working in China, commuting between Central China, Henan and Hong Kong. I was working on the first stages of a manuscript on women's mosques in Chinese Islam that became the first of a series of publications on Muslim women in China. At the time there was nothing written on Muslim women's mosques in China. It was many years before we were ready to publish: first we had to do exhaustive research and field work. The very geographical area we had to cover was enormous because the Muslim community is scattered all over China. Working through the feminist and the gender studies literature in order to follow up my particular interest in the organisation of space and the collective organisation of women, I encountered the publications by members of the Centre for Cross Cultural research on Women and in particular Women and Space. Ground Rules and Social Maps edited in 1981 by Shirley Ardener. Of course, the series was very interesting. I noticed the authors and the editors of the series who were working closely with Berg publishers. On the theme of women and space I felt I needed to raise some issues. I wrote to Shirley Ardener, hoping my letter from China would get to her. Of course, Shirley being Shirley (I didn't know her at the time) not only replied in due course via airmail. She also suggested, in her wonderful way, "By the way we're also running research fellowship programs and if you were ever so inclined you might find that our Centre could provide you with a place to write, resources and a community of support". That was the starting point, my contact with the CCRW. It was quite early on, around 1997 or 1998 and before I thought of joining IGS. This meant that when I wrote to Shirley, I was still only in the early stages of writing. The book came out in 2000 but by that time I had already spent a term as a Visiting Research Fellow of CCRW and that was a good experience. My preoccupation at the time was to get that manuscript to a stage where it could be submitted to publishers, working flat out. It was a co-authored book so I was working in Chinese and English. My co-author was a Chinese social scientist (The history of that collaboration is interesting in itself and is detailed below).*

So my entry point as far as CCRW was concerned was as a writer needing a facility, a community, resources, all of which I found at the Centre. I received a very positive impression of that community and a sense of "sisterhood", of affinity, a link that lasted long past that one term. When I left the Centre I kept in touch and was even invited to give the commemorative lecture in honour of Barbara Ward.³

VM: Oh yes, I remember she worked in Hong Kong.

MJ: *Exactly. She did fieldwork and taught in Hong Kong. She was an inspiring anthropologist. When I arrived in Hong Kong, Barbara Ward had already passed away. But she was remembered fondly as someone to whom the individual mattered and the community she studied mattered. She wasn't there just to get her publication out. And that impressed me. I thought "My goodness, these informants remember her after all these years, because of the friendship and respect she showed towards them".*

³ Barbara E. Ward (1919-1983) was a British anthropologist who carried out fieldwork among boat-people in Hong Kong in the Fifties and later in Indonesia .

VM: She was at Cambridge when I was doing my Ph.D. She asked me to supervise some of the Newnham undergraduates in social anthropology, so I occasionally had lunch with her. I remember her as an admirable person, very observant and easy to talk to.

MJ: *I heard so much about her when I was in Hong Kong as a student doing fieldwork for my Ph.D. thesis. I've never forgotten the impression made on me as a student. When the villagers talked about her, I wasn't only finding out more about my topic, which was domestic slavery and concubinage, I was also developing an idea of appropriate methodology: how to be sensitive to a situation which is foreign to me. Barbara Ward raised important questions. What is the relationship you set up with people in the field, how do you justify entering into the lives of people who haven't invited you to do that, and from whom you ask such huge favours? How do you justify that to yourself? And from these questions stem observations, not only about the people you meet in the field but also about the older generations of anthropologists and social historians. You don't work on a blank canvas, as if there had never been another anthropologist there before you. I've learnt so much from older scholars. That also happened when I met James Lee Watson, who was an important scholar of Chinese lineages in the New Territories of Hong Kong. He was teaching Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London (SOAS) when I entered the M. A. in Chinese Sociology and Anthropology. We never lost touch. Later on he went to Harvard and became the Fairbanks professor of Chinese Studies (Watson, 1975,1977). He retired a few years ago but just recently sent me an article of reflections on his early work in the Sixties and Seventies when he was doing fieldwork in Hong Kong and the New Territories.*⁴

VM: A few chronological things to fill in. Where did you go to university and when?

MJ: *I grew up in Germany. My parents felt I should have a chance of spending a "gap year"⁵ abroad, before going to university. They expected me to attend a German university, but my interest in England and English literature was well known to them. My father was quite an Anglophile, and they decided to send me abroad, to London, which was quite rare at that time. I was only eighteen, nearly nineteen. I decided I liked living in England very much. I also liked the education, the tutorial system, which compared favourably with the German system at that time, where there were massive numbers of students crowded into a lecture hall and the Herr Professor was a distant figure. The academic establishment in Germany was very hierarchical. I was interested, quite early on, in the English university system and got permission from my parents to study here. I opted for Sussex University, where I took a degree in International Relations, in the School of Social Sciences. I didn't enter a Chinese Studies degree at the undergraduate level. It was when I was doing Foreign Policy Analysis with a visiting American professor, who was an expert on the Cold War and especially on Cold War perceptions of China, that I got interested in China, but not from a Cold War perspective. Actually, I was frustrated by my teacher's refusal to consider foreign policy except from the viewpoint of a particular superpower agenda. My question was (we are talking about the late Seventies): What about viewpoints that would take into consideration Chinese national interests, fears and trepidations? What are we learning about China? There was huge interest in this vast country, but we knew very little. The little we knew at that time about the Cultural Revolution was romanticised, ridiculously so. But we had to ask whether what we were being taught at university level was adequate, whether we should be receiving such a tunnel vision of the rest of the world. China and Russia in particular were seen from the vantage point of the Western powers,*

⁴ New Territories: a peninsula of Hong Kong, one of three regions besides Hong Kong and the Kowloon peninsula.

⁵ "Gap year": year of "leave" which some students take between finishing school and starting university.

with their values and normative systems. Anything which did not match those particular norms was dismissed as inferior or dangerous. That got me so angry: I decided I needed to challenge this view, but I couldn't do that unless I were better informed. Sussex had a tutorial system which I loved because we were encouraged to argue our views and challenge received ideas. That unpromising beginning, the sense of frustration because of this professor's dismissive approach to non-Cold War interests meant that I had to read up on China. This was around 1975.

VM: Your professor had probably been trained during the period running up to the Vietnam War.

MJ: *Yes, absolutely. Now I know I could have challenged that view in a different and more nuanced way, but as an undergraduate you do the best you can. I am pleased, looking back, that I didn't accept a blinkered viewpoint and thought it was my right to question it. At that time foreign students studying in the UK, even from European countries, were classified as "alien", but I considered that I was first of all a "student" rather than a "foreigner" and that I had the right to ask critical questions in a tutorial, even if they weren't welcome. The research I had to undertake in order to ask those critical questions gave me a huge interest in China. Once I started out, I was "hooked", as they say. I even briefly joined the Sino-British Friendship Association which was so popular at that time. A lot of people called themselves the "friends of China" which was a bit extreme since none of them had been there. People had to study China at a distance, but many had a rose-tinted view of China. A romanticised view. That was my entry point, when I was in my second year at Sussex. And I had to make a decision. Would I take Chinese studies seriously? In that case I had to study the Chinese language. I didn't realise how hard that would be, but I knew I wasn't bad at languages as I was already educated in a second and third language.*

The second formative experience was my encounter with Joseph Needham, the great iconic figure who towered over everything to do with Chinese Studies.⁶ I wrote to him and he invited me over to Cambridge to spend the day talking about my plans. He impressed me so much so that I began to believe that everyone who studied Chinese culture had his extraordinary broad ranging humanity.

VM: Jack Goody's work made frequent reference to him, so I came across him in that connection.⁷

MJ: *So you know what I'm talking about. I spent a wonderful day with him. He could so easily have sent me off after half an hour, but his genuine curiosity for my interest in China, his wish to be helpful and offer constructive suggestions, led me to take certain steps and eventually brought me to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London (SOAS). My supervisors there were all great admirers of Needham. Was this serendipity? For me it was decisive and inspiring to meet Needham, that particular representative of Chinese studies. It set the bar very high and subsequent experience didn't always match that, but I will always be grateful for his humanity, his interest in a young person. His wonderful, exemplary mentorship impressed me and influenced me in my subsequent career as a researcher and a teacher. It set me on my career in Chinese Studies: the study of the Chinese language, Chinese history, then Chinese sociology and anthropology. I was supervised by the great historian of the Tai Ping rebellion, Charles Curwen.⁸ Tai Ping was a quasi-Christian*

⁶ Joseph Needham (1900-1995) British scientist, historian and sinologist, known for his research in biochemistry and in the history of Chinese science. He launched and edited the first seven volumes of the monumental work *Science and Civilisation in China*, which has now reached the 27th volume.

⁷ Jack Goody (1919-) British anthropologist. See Goody, 1996.

⁸ Charles Curwen, historian of China, worked in China between 1946 and 1954

rebellion.⁹ Charles Curwen was someone Joseph Needham recommended after many hours of conversation with me. Initially I had thought of going to Cambridge, but Cambridge then did not offer degrees in modern Chinese Studies. Needham was aware of the circumstances of my interest in China, the books I had read. He thought that Cambridge wouldn't give me the academic support I needed, whereas SOAS would be ideal because of the scholars who were teaching there and their particular interest in 19th and 20th century China.

VM: Had they studied with Needham?

MJ: They were people he had mentored and with whom he had many conversations. Joseph Needham was part of the inter-faith dialogue of Christianity and other religions and so was Charles Curwen who became my first tutor at SOAS. They were left-leaning liberal intellectuals, interested in the Maoist ideal, deeply identifying with Chinese national aspirations but not always sufficiently aware of the brutality of the Communist era. These things emerged later on. I became acquainted with that circle of intellectuals through Joseph Needham and SOAS.

VM: You moved to SOAS halfway through your degree?

MJ: No, I finished the degree at Sussex. I went back to Sussex to talk to my teachers about my plan for the future, and they tried to dissuade me. They were convinced my future was in philosophy for which, moreover, there were scholarships - unbelievable when I think of my students' situation now. We had the Frankfurt School and Habermas influencing us at Sussex, which was a fantastically lively, radical, progressive and intellectually challenging environment. I loved it. I thought about that later on. Would I have been better off staying at Sussex? But they didn't have the courses in Chinese studies which interested me. SOAS proved tough in many ways, because we had to work very hard to cope with the Chinese language. Many students had been there from the beginning of their university studies, but I only decided after I got my BA that I would enter Chinese Studies. I did a Master's degree first and then was accepted to do the Ph.D. I then did an additional language course because when you enter the Ph. D. you have to use primary sources and quite a bit of classical Chinese. Most of my research was in Hong Kong and the Territories, where they speak a rather classical Chinese, not the newspaper style. It wasn't the modern Chinese.¹⁰ I really did it all the hard way.

The feminist student would have appreciated more supportive mentoring from sympathetic tutors. But, alas, my feminist ideals and convictions had to tide me over negative experiences. Chinese Studies at the time were very male dominated, and so was the culture of the School. The great icons of learning were men. There was misogyny even in the classroom, but that was true of most subjects, not only of Chinese Studies. As a student that was something you had to deal with at that time. But mixed with that ambivalence over the quality of mentoring, although there were some shining exceptions, because of my interest in revolutionary 20th century China, the role played by women fascinated me greatly. I was unaware, at least initially, of the many rose-tinted representations of China of which the women's liberation narrative formed a prominent feature.

⁹ The Taiping rebellion was launched by the followers of a millenarian movement against the Manchu Qing Dynasty in the name of Jesus Christ. It gave rise to a devastating civil war lasting from 1850-1964.

¹⁰ Standard (modern) Chinese is a simplified form of Mandarin, taught in the schools of the People's Republic of China. There are many regional dialects. Cantonese is the official language in Hong Kong and the Territories.

*Women driving tractors, women as “half of the sky”.*¹¹ A wonderfully orchestrated propaganda came out of China and became the subject matter of academia. That was also the great time of feminist anthropology, of the Rosaldos¹² who had such an impact on us students (Rosaldo, M., 1983; Rosaldo, R., 1986,1989). I think a tension was set up between our personal experience - for example of sexual harassment - and the aspirational standard we set for ourselves. We weren't just going to put up with it or conform to the idea that we weren't fit for Academia, that we would just become foot soldiers as it were. The genuinely inspiring, critical and revisionist writing on aspects of women's experience of Maoist-style liberation started appearing from the late 1970s onwards, coinciding with the slow opening up of Chinese society to the outside world.

VM: What do you mean by revisionist history in this context?

MJ: *I refer to the attempt to review critically the received historiography, in this case officially sanctioned narratives of the experience of women under the Communist revolution and even earlier in the liberated areas which the Communists took over before 1949, before they assumed political control and became the government of China, and also up to 1959. It is a revision of that early Western literature which was naively optimistic. It saw much of what was coming out of China as positive, and accepted what turned out to be unduly positive representations of the situation of women, under Communism and during the years of consolidation. That had a personal effect on us; it set up certain expectations for ourselves. For us the role of women in China wasn't just an academic interest, it also became something that we absorbed existentially. We read about the way that women could do more than be mere handmaidens of the revolution. The early literature suggested that they could be genuine comrades, participants and co-workers in the task of revolutionising the country. That idea was extraordinary and inspiring. It suggested that our experience in the European context wasn't necessarily replicated elsewhere. There were alternatives out there where revolution for women was more than empty words. This perception inspired those who were closely involved in contemporary Chinese Studies. It was like experiencing revolution vicariously. We felt part of something new and exciting, and that had a very personal effect which went far beyond a mere academic interest. It left its mark on all of us at that time.*

VM: And who were “us”?

MJ: *I'm thinking of a group of about eight or nine Master's students, many of them women, interestingly enough, taught by a Chinese studies expert “Woody” Watson (James Lee Watson), who taught Chinese anthropology and sociology. He put us in touch with young American scholars. He was genuinely interested in issues of gender. He brought us well-known writers we knew from our reading of Chinese gender studies literature: Margery Wolf, talking about gender and family relations in the New Territories (Wolf, 1972), Phyllis Andors on patriarchy and the social revolution in China (Andors, 1981), Judith Stacey on the “unfinished liberation” of Chinese women (Stacey, 1983), among others. They were his personal friends. He brought them into the classroom and we enjoyed the privilege of asking questions of these authors. The impact on us was extraordinary, but what we didn't take into account was that it was all happening at a distance. It wasn't our society which was changing. We were not feeling personally the impact of Chinese policy changes or law*

¹¹ See Broyelle, 1972. “Half of the sky” referred to the Chinese adage “Women hold up half the sky”.

¹² Michelle Rosaldo 1944-1981 and Renato Rosaldo carried out important ethnography of the Ilongot people of the Philippines. Michelle made a pioneering contribution to the anthropology of gender. Her husband Renato Rosaldo has written important works of ethnographic and cultural theory.

reforms. We were feeling vicariously the best side of it but not what was oppressive and a source of disappointment to many Chinese women who had given their energy and talents, and many their lives, to the ideals of a genuine social and cultural revolution. So we had the best of both worlds, the excitement and the ideals, without having to deal with the downside, the oppression and the consolidation of power during the years of compromise, when extraordinary concessions were renewing the conditions supporting continued subordination of women.

VM: Who made the concessions?

MJ: *Many Chinese female and male intellectuals and revolutionaries who had given much of their life to the revolution. Promises had been made which were quickly broken, as they found out, simply because the “interest of the nation had to come first”, that is, before the interest of women who could all too easily be co-opted into the overriding agenda of a national project. That was very clearly spelled out in the archival documents that I read and which I made myself go back to later on. But when I first began my studies I was reading the literature on China through a lens of optimism which heightened the intensity of my own personal engagement with China. Much later in my subsequent career as a researcher I had to go back and reflect upon this literature in a different and more nuanced way. So it was complicated: the personal, the existential and the academic experiences were interwoven. You must know that among the people who taught us in my early years in British academia were members of the Peace Corps movement who considered their foremost identity to be that of “friend of China”. In the years following Deng Xiaoping’s economic liberalization, these friends of China too were beginning to feel disenchanted.¹³ The years of revolution had been replaced by years of repression and a dictatorial autocratic regime built on the foundations of an enduring system of Confucian gender morality. The sacrifices were taken for granted, the years of starvation, the persecution of the great contributors to the revolution and the victory of the Communist Party. In the end, too many idealistic revolutionaries, women among them, were castigated and branded as enemies of the revolution. All these events slowly filtered into the seminar room, only reluctantly critiqued by supporters of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, but it took my own personal experience when I was doing fieldwork, visiting and living in China, to bring home to me the troubling significance of these developments. When I was doing fieldwork in Hong Kong, around 1980, I had the opportunity to go into China proper, not long after the Cultural Revolution.¹⁴ You could visit China but it was difficult to approach anyone. It was so unlike the society I thought I knew after studying the literature. There was a more critical literature already coming out from certain publishers. But my own rather sobering encounter with China “on the ground” made me ask myself a number of hard questions about my motives for entering this area of studies and my relationship with the country I was studying.*

VM: There were connections also with the women’s movement in Britain, for example in the writing of Delia Davin, who studied in China in the Sixties.¹⁵

MJ: *Yes. Delia Davin was very important. Indeed, I had contacted her before I decided to enrol at*

¹³ The Peace Corps is a volunteer organisation run by the United States to provide technical assistance in “developing countries”.

¹⁴ Cultural Revolution. A political movement (1966-1976) aimed at purging traditional and capitalist elements from Chinese society, destroying “old” customs, cultural habits and ideals and reimposing Maoist thought.

¹⁵ Delia Davin is a British sinologist and President of the British Association of Chinese Studies.

SOAS to ask whether someone with a social science background should consider entering Chinese Studies. She strongly recommended me to do so because she thought Chinese studies needed more social scientists. Then she taught at Leeds.

VM: In Italy at the time there was Eduarda Masi who did important work on China (Masi 1968,1978), also Enrica Collotti Pischel (1972)and Renata Pisu(1999). Did you come across them?¹⁶

MJ: *The fact that I did not meet with these important scholars tells you of the influence we were under at that time. Like many of my fellow-students, my inspiration came from American academia which was dominant particularly in my area of research. It is still correct to say that in many ways Chinese Studies continue to be dominated by American academia. We went to the conferences of the American Asian society, AAS, for instance, rather than to European conferences. We were more exposed to the likes of Margery Wolf and Arthur Wolf and other American anthropologists, the Johnsons (Elizabeth Johnson, and Kay Johnson and husband)¹⁷ than to European scholars. Moreover, the exciting conferences and workshops seemed to take place in the United States. And, last but not least, the funding, scholarships and resources to support Chinese studies also came largely from the United States. But the SOAS legacy with its mix of Needhamites and non-Needhamites left us with one conviction: that we had to have lived in China, and done fieldwork, before we went into teaching; that is, we couldn't teach straight after our Ph.D. I decided early on that I wanted to spend some time in China, however difficult it might prove to be. It was quite tough in the 1980s, when I was young, only recently out of university. That decision to live there was important. On and off I lived in China for many years. Life in China became quite difficult because in later projects, such as the one I took part in when I was helping to set up Chinese Studies in Long Island University, we encountered more official barriers. I should just say that I did my apprenticeship in China, and I'm convinced that it was the making of me as a sinologist because I did it in a most personal if sometimes quite difficult way. I taught in China, I did research, I participated in academic and social events, I made friends and acquired a large network of social contacts.*

VM: Did you teach anthropology?

MJ: *No, at that time the only way I was able to teach in a university was to offer supervision in English literature and "general studies". My university of choice was Zhongshan University in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province. I had done my doctoral research on concubinage and domestic slavery but you couldn't just do research in China; you needed a role, a justification for your presence. So I offered to teach as a so-called "foreign expert". My responsibility was largely to supervise graduate dissertations, and Master's theses, mainly in English – and I was attached to the English Language Faculty. The dissertations were in literature and "general subjects": literary appreciation, "industrial novels", socialist critique etc. I was asked to do this because the Chinese staff didn't want to be too closely associated with subjects that might get them into trouble. The*

¹⁶ Eduarda Masi (1927-2011) was an Italian sinologist and scholar of Chinese society and literature. Renata Pisu is an Italian translator and journalist (1935-) who lived in China for many years from 1957 to 1964; Enrica Collotti Pischel (1930-2003) was a political scientist who specialized in the study of China and Vietnam. Apart from Renata Pisu, they did not pay particular attention to women or gender.

¹⁷ Elisabeth Johnson was a sinologist specialised in the history of Chinese art. Kay Johnson writes on women and the family in relation to the Revolution(1985).

Eighties were still the time of anti “bourgeois liberalism” campaigns. University campuses were not safe from campaigns, interrogations, inquisitions. Students had to be careful. Those who were daring enough to choose a particular subject matter were then lucky enough or unlucky enough to have me as a supervisor. Often I had very little background in their subject matter. I could supervise a thesis on Emily Dickinson but I was more uncertain when it came to “industrial novels”. But that was my role and it was a fascinating learning experience, inside the actual university. You saw the inner workings of a society which was in the transitional stage from enforced revolution to a slow gradual liberalization. A very slow process of change was taking place that brought with it uncertainty, precariousness and faint hopes of a better future. There were attempts to stabilise the country and strengthen the economy, yet politically, culturally and existentially, the scars left by the Cultural Revolution and all those political campaigns had not healed. Their repercussions in the universities were barely addressed. This situation left unspoken personal angst, silences among colleagues and a sense of the frailty of progress made. These were very sobering experiences for me. I needed to understand the experience which Chinese people had had of the Cultural Revolution. It contradicted the optimistic representations that I had entertained when I was a student in Britain. It was at that time that I started getting letters from former fellow students telling me they were opting out of Chinese studies. They felt that the China they experienced in the field was not matching up to the China they had imagined in their student days. But I felt I owed it to myself to learn more and that the personal learning could benefit my study of Chinese society. I could not stop as I was already too deeply involved with a China that had moreover acquired most personal associations for me: of friendship, of poignant discoveries of human courage and heroism. And which also provided me with much critical self-reflection. So I remained in the field and with the choices that I had made when still a young ignorant student.

Then I went through a second phase of immersion in the society and in all the complex processes of confrontation or closure to that experience. Many Chinese refused to face up to what had happened because they couldn’t process it. They couldn’t talk about it because the people who had been punishing them and physically assaulting them in the famous criticism sessions were working with them now as colleagues, in their Faculty and in their Department. For example, while I was there, there was an older professor of 18th and 19th English Literature who had been made to work in a pigsty as a punishment. When he came back to the University, the former Red Guard who had put the dunce’s cap on him, who had criticised him as a bourgeois, decadent capitalist – a black element - corrupted by Western ideals and values, was now a young lecturer in that same department. They never discussed what happened but they had to collaborate, in order to make the educational reforms work. That was very striking, sometimes even troubling, the capacity of people to work together with former adversaries when the memory of cruelty and cowardly conduct was still so fresh in their mind.

VM: What about the link between Chinese studies and gender?

MJ: *First of all, there was the wonderful anthropological literature we were able to read at university and discuss in our seminars, inspiring all of us young students. Then, as I intimated earlier on, I had to start facing up to the sober realization that on closer examination, things hadn’t been quite so straightforward for many women who lived during the years of the Chinese civil war and the time of Communist government consolidation, during the 1950s. After the Communist Party came into government in 1949, government priorities were the consolidation of state power and control over a vast nation rather than keeping its promises to the women who had participated in the early years of the revolution and continued to do Party work after 1949. To serve the interest of women would have endangered the national project of marshalling national resources to strengthen the country against its enemies, perceived and real, whether internal or external. My focus of interest became: how were women continuously marginalised? My research questions shifted to an*

interest in “voice” in the political, public and civil spheres of society. What conditions were needed for women to develop a collective “voice” that would have repercussions on the most intimate spheres of their lives? How could they break through the silences I felt around me and articulate the experiences they were part of? Issues of marginality, silence and voice gave rise in turn to perplexing methodological implications. How could an outsider/researcher approach concerns and questions that were on the one side deeply ingrained norms, values and convictions and on the other side politically sensitive? Women’s liberation had never been one of the main pillars of the Communist Party’s legitimacy. At that time it became also important to me to develop a methodology that would respect diversity of contexts in which women construct specific narratives of emancipation that might be different from mine. I began to develop a collaborative methodology, to define my idea of reciprocity and the mutuality of learning. What would that entail, given the often unequal relationship between Western researchers and local researchers?

This again needs to be put in context. In the Nineties, the whole question of women’s history and Chinese women’s history was no longer dominated by Anglo-American voices such as those of Delia Davin, Elizabeth Croll (1978),¹⁸ Margery Wolf, Judith Stacey, Phyllis Andors. Chinese voices, and other so-called Third World feminist voices, increasingly came into the debates. These were often women who had gone abroad to study, at Harvard, Berkeley or at other universities, bringing different perspectives and positionalities, so that the need for dialogue became increasingly evident and necessary. The range of subject matter and topics in Chinese Studies increased greatly, to the benefit of us all, but in my case, these developments also convinced me of the need to engage in more collaborative research projects.

I will single out a particular formative experience which shaped my quest for a methodology more suitable to the research I planned to do. This was when I joined a small group of Chinese feminist scholar/activities at a time when Women’s Studies in China became a contested and at times divisive debate. Women’s Studies in China can be said to have started in 1985, when the first Women’s Studies Centre was set up by Li Xiaojiang. It developed into a nation-wide phenomenon in the course of the Nineties, in great measure due to the charismatic leadership of Li Xiaojiang.¹⁹ She was an iconic figure who dominated Women/Gender Studies discourse in China for several decades, with an influence that extended into Anglo-American feminist circles. She convened important conferences, edited major volumes and wrote influential cultural studies of female representation in elite and popular historical narratives. A well-known intellectual dissident, she nevertheless succeeded in attending conferences abroad, making herself the most eloquent voice on matters relating to China’s gender politics. Li Xiaojiang, together with a small group of women academics and activists, established China’s first ever International Women’s College and a Women’s Museum which was also intended as a research institution.

VM: When was this?

MJ: This was in 1994 in Zhengzhou, the provincial capital of Henan. It was a very daring act to set up such institutions during a rather volatile period when the Chinese Government was preparing to host the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, fearful of the impact of a large number of foreign feminists on China’s gender regime that had been so effectively controlled over many years. When I joined that small group of women, I left my position in Long Island University, a large undergraduate university in the USA, to become part of an exciting adventure. I was the only Western academic in a small team of women academics, seeing an opportunity for unprecedented

¹⁸ Elisabeth Croll (1940-2013) was born in New Zealand but taught Chinese Studies in Britain, with a particular focus on the social life of Chinese women.

¹⁹ Li Xiaojiang, pioneer of women’s studies in China. See Li Xiaojiang, 1983, 1999.

contributions to higher education and to Women's Studies in particular. There were a lot of difficulties in setting up the College. The campus was the former Women's Cadre School, where historically women cadres had been trained, in preparation for roles in government institutions, and in particular for leadership roles in the All-China Women's Federation. So that campus was given over to this venture, to the Women's International College and the Women's Museum. It is quite fascinating to think that a government-owned space gave way to a radical feminist initiative. The whole enterprise was extraordinary. Building a suitable curriculum, training and appointing suitable teachers and enrolling students for a most unorthodox educational organization required enormous alliance-building, organisation and patient preparation. This could only happen because there was a forceful and charismatic figure behind this project, Li Xiaojiang. Without her connections, her extraordinary strength, her conviction in a rightful cause, her charisma, and the force of her influence over the women around her, there would have been no Women's International College. She addressed with ease the hundreds of women who thronged the lecture halls, and she brought to these women a recurrent, and enthusiastically received, message. It was time for women to take their lives into their own hands, whether as thinking or as doing creatures. It was not enough, she would always say, to be given things, to be given entitlements, to be given rights. How could women dream of acquiring the status of equal partners, of claiming "half of the sky", if they had become dependent on hand-outs from a patriarchal state? That was not liberation. Women had grown complacent in their dependency and she was the voice, she said, to wake them into a state of collective energy.

Li Xiaojiang then did something which surprised everyone. She appointed me as Vice-Principal of the International Women's College and the Deputy-Director of the Women's Museum. And for a few months everything went well. The students had enrolled in large numbers; the first research projects for major exhibitions to introduce the new Women's Museum were also under way. The plan was for both institutions to turn into major sites of learning, not only for international research, not only for international students, but also for local research and local educational needs. In my role as a Museum Deputy-Director, I started a research project on a rural woman artist in Shaanxi, Ku Shulan, who found her voice through her extraordinary talent as a paper cutter. Her paper-cuts were more like collage-type works of art, highly complex in style, yet very traditional, though somewhat subversive, in content. I was interested in Ku Shulan's reputation as a woman possessed, a wupo, or witch, who enjoyed renown as a healer and notoriety as a creator of magic healing potions. Her art and exquisite poetry which depicted powerful female deities and strong women and her confined life as a brow-beaten wife of a husband known for his violence were to provide the stuff for a major exhibition. We hoped that this would encourage delegates attending the World Conference on Women in Beijing to travel to Zhengzhou. That was our hope.

It went terribly wrong. How? We had had tremendous support, part locally, part internationally. Everyone offered their help. The Smithsonian offered support for the Museum, and so did the Museum of Mankind in London. We had much of the infrastructure needed for the College and the Museum already in place. Students were enthusiastic and looking forward to many more years of learning. What defeated us in the end was a combination of internal and external obstacles. At the heart of our endeavour stood a charismatic figure who promoted emancipation, critical political engagement and the assertion of individuality, but on the other required blind obedience from the women who were entrusted with the task of implementation. This inherent tension developed in the course of time into a crisis. People who had been carried along on the waves of aspiration and inspiration felt themselves doubly betrayed in the end: by their own optimism and by the perception that their role in the experiment had always been conceived of as limited.

My own situation was an interesting one because I was placed in a senior and politically vulnerable position. It was unheard of for a Western academic to be in an administrative position in the Chinese educational system and it became a reason for criticism, serving the agenda of those who were most eager to close us down. Another issue was the accusation that we were engaging illegally in women's rights' activism. According to our accusers, women were already blessed with

rights and entitlements in China and our educational and research projects were at heart alien to the history and aspirations of Chinese women. So it ended rather sadly and acrimoniously, with the closure of all institutions and confiscation of much of our research. It was a painful process.

VM: How long did it take?

MJ: *There was nearly a year of interrogations, self-criticism, complaints and allegations which made the actual closure of the institutions the most orderly of the many episodes that constituted a lengthy process of disorderly unravelling. Whereas the closure happened very quickly, there were many factors which made the process of closing us down take an eternity. We had to deal with the students and their need for continued, uninterrupted study. There was faculty and support staff which needed help. Well, there was the embarrassing fact of a Western academic, who had lived through the whole event. I wasn't just a foreign expert. Indeed, the anomaly was that I was the Vice-President of a College which had received official permission to open its doors only in the previous year. In the end, the Museum artefacts were confiscated, the institution was dissolved, and I had to move out of the campus too. I left China just before the Beijing World Conference to join the Centre of Asian Studies at Hong Kong University. The closure of a promising project, and the nature of its closure, was difficult for me personally you can imagine. I had given up everything because the plan had been for a permanent position, a lifetime's work. To see such promising institutions being dismantled in that way was worse for me than the temporary confiscation of my possessions or my personal situation.*

But a wonderful thing happened at that time which was to shape my work for many years to come. It was just before I left for Hong Kong, when I was left more or less to my own devices. I was in a state of limbo. I used my unoccupied time to walk around the city of Zhengzhou and on one of my long walks I caught sight of something I had never seen before: a large sign on the wall of a modest building which read qingzhen nüsi, women's mosque. I suddenly also noticed in the vicinity of this mosque women getting out scarves from pockets and shopping bags which they put over their heads before crossing the threshold into the mosque (at that time very few Hui Muslim women in central China women wore hijab). Other women wore white hats similar to those worn by non-Muslim women and so they didn't stand out. Muslim women hadn't been visible to me, because they lived in a very different part of the city which I thought I knew so well but didn't. They moved in very different circles, yes, in a parallel universe to the one in which I had been immersed. I was in a large city which was very secular and moved in a university environment where many of my colleagues were indeed contemptuous of those of religious faith. The women believers were considered feudal and backward. Religion was mentioned only when feminist scholars talked about past ills. Nor did religious faith form a part of our university research and so it became visible to me only, and suddenly, when I was disconnected from those institutions that had both hosted and also effectively confined me. I was extremely curious, and eventually I was given permission to visit a particular mosque. Initially, there was usually an official sitting at the back of the room to make sure I wasn't being a troublemaker again. But this practice soon ceased, and the attitude became: "Oh, she just wants to find out about women!"

So it was this first discovery, this first visit that opened up a new area of work for me and made for the realization that no comprehensive study of any depth of women's mosques, whether in Chinese or in any other language, existed. There was no documentation of the fact that China's Muslim population had given rise to traditions of women's own mosques. Moreover, these mosques were presided over by nü ahong, women imams, proud of the unique contribution they made to Islam. I asked myself: How was it that we in the Women's Museum, of which I had been Deputy-Director, had left these women out of our women's histories? In the large oral history project that took shape in the first year of the Museum, Muslim women, like other women of faith, were not visible. We had many discussions about women's voices in history, about the process of gaining

voice where women's voices had been muted, but we had excluded those women of faith as somehow not part of the modern era, assigning them to bygone times. That realization sent me back to do some very necessary exercises in reflexivity.

So, this first visit to a women's mosque led to my first meeting with a woman *ahong*, a female imam, and then I just continued to visit until I became a familiar face. Very quickly, the *ahong* suggested that I should meet a researcher in the sociology of religion from the Academy of Social Sciences²⁰ in Zhengzhou. She had also been visiting her, asking very similar questions. As the *ahong* put it to me "Why should I repeat myself? Why don't I ask her to come along so that I can answer your questions at the same time and not tire myself out!" This inquisitive woman turned out to be Shui Jingjun, a researcher affiliated to the Henan Academy of Social Sciences. She was totally flabbergasted to find me with Guo Ahong, because although the Academy wasn't far from where we had the Museum, she had stayed away from us. She didn't think much of what was happening there. She was Hui (one of the ten ethnic minorities which make up China's Muslim population) and Muslim herself. We began to talk. Of course I was interested in how not only academia but also Chinese mainstream women's history had completely ignored religious women. There was very little on Muslim women in China. To begin with, Shui was very diffident but eventually I suggested we collaborate on a research project. That relationship with Shui was key to our subsequent research. She became a research partner, co-author, colleague and friend.

VM: What about Barbara Pillsbury? That was a long time ago in the Seventies.²¹

MJ: *In the Seventies Barbara Pillsbury couldn't do fieldwork in China and she was forced to confine herself to researching Muslim women's situation in Taiwan (Pillsbury, 1981). Her work became important to us, and she identified the double burden of marginalized identity these women were carrying, in terms of gender and of religion. Whilst she couldn't get into China to do the fieldwork, this was no excuse for the others who came after her, like myself. So there I was in China, doing good work on a number of research topics, I think, but I didn't see what was missing, what information waited out there to be discovered, until I embarked on my seemingly purposeless walks around the inner city of Zhengzhou. I was struck by the discouragement which came from a number of my Chinese colleagues when I announced my intention to fill a huge gap in our knowledge. They said, "Why are you doing this? This religion is a feudal residue; these are women of the past; why don't you study modern women such as successful entrepreneurs and scientists who demonstrate the progress Chinese women have made?" If women professed religious beliefs, they were backward by definition.*

On her part, Shui had been approached by a number of Canadian, or Western, academics and she had declined invitations to enter collaboration. She wasn't going to be a token native collaborator who just had to deliver the empirical material, she told me, and then leave the important task of analysis and interpretation to her Western colleague. It took more than a single conversation to understand, and overcome, our mutual wariness.

VM: Turned into an "informant". A bit like Boas did with Ella Deloria for example, though that was a more continuous collaboration. In fact there is a discussion about the authorial status of many so-

²⁰ The Academy of Social Sciences, established in 1977, is an important research organization in the People's Republic of China, with branches in the different provinces.

²¹ Barbara Pillsbury (1943-2012), a student of Margaret Mead at Columbia University, was an American anthropologist who wrote on Muslim women in China, especially Taiwan, and subsequently devoted her energies to the promotion of women's health worldwide.

called “informants”.

MJ: *Yes, for too long we have travelled into our intended community of study as resource-rich outsiders, purchased local knowledge and expertise at an advantageous price, taken the information back home, dismissed the local story-teller as redundant and never bothered to return to give an account of ourselves to those who shared their life-stories with us. Shui didn't want to enter into such an unequal relationship. So for us the relationship required hard work and critical self-reflection. There was no automatic or immediate relationship of trust for us. We had to work through that. She asked me why I wanted to work on Hui Muslim women in China, given that my previous research and collaborative involvement concerned largely Han Chinese women and their secularised paradigm of modernity. Moreover, Shui also knew of my religious identity.*

VM: What is your religious identity?

MJ: *It's Catholic. My wider background is Jewish but I was brought up a Catholic. So these were difficult questions to resolve and present to each other. We had to work through a long discussion over what we meant by a fair and equal collaboration. How were we going to work in a way which was based on mutual respect, to define a methodology which would be acceptable to both of us and to the women and men we studied? How would we do the research, the fieldwork, the interviews and what division of labour could be termed collaboration? What was the best way to effect joint work and what were the questions to be asked, and how did they differ for each of us, because of our respective backgrounds? So for me that opened up a whole new area of investigation in Chinese Studies which had paid precious little attention to the nature of our partnerships with Chinese researchers.*

VM: In Chinese studies, is your name associated more with the work on women's mosques or with this kind of collaboration with a Chinese scholar?

MJ: *More publicity has been given to our work on women's mosques, Islamic patriarchy and gender in China. There is a very small group of people working in that area, and ours was the first study of its kind. We continued to publish findings from our research on female-led Islamic sites and added writing on the nature and process of our collaborative research and authorship within a feminist theoretical framework.*

VM: There is the problem of agenda setting in research and what different participants think important. For example, our research on migration in Turin was initially supposed to focus on the labour market but ended up devoting more attention to religion because of the interest of the migrant researchers. Another interesting question is about culturally variable gender constructs and what people want to change. It is not always clear in any particular instance what women from different backgrounds mean by feminism.

MJ: *Yes. Research design, formulating questions for interviews and suitable methodology – it was all up for discussion. More so because of the lack of scholarship in our area of study and it was up to us to set the aim and objectives of our project. We couldn't reference anything. We had to literally walk the length and breadth of China. We took forever. How else could we gauge the impact that the first educational initiatives had had on women historically? How could we reconstruct the origin of women's mosques? How could we reconstruct the first tentative educational instruction behind curtains in the privacy of imams' homes and the path from that to the development of women's*

mosques? We had nothing to rely on but the knowledge and memory of informants. We argued about directions of research and disagreed on interpretations as well as on our role as researchers. Of course, Shui addressed an audience of fellow-Muslims as well as Chinese officials when it came to writing. My audience was elsewhere, requiring at times different sets of questions and contextualisation.

VM: Did the Muslim women know any Arabic? What language did they use for religious purposes?

MJ: *They used Farsi, ancient Persian. This has been the language used historically in women's mosques and even to this day some Farsi scriptures are read. Now Arabic is coming to the fore because the borders to the Muslim West have opened, and Arabic is the language of a shared faith and of communication, whether for pilgrims or for commercial transactions. Arabic is thus also a source of career choices. Only recently have Muslim women started to learn modern Arabic at Islamic Colleges. Some women's mosques are now offering basic language classes to women but also to men. To return to the subject of collaborative research: the years that it took to do all the research, to provide documentation, the fieldwork, interviews; it meant that the two of us had plenty of opportunity for discussion, for interpretation. Certain activities we did together, others we divided up, otherwise we would never have finished our work. And from time to time we invited colleagues of Shui, sociologists and economists, to join our research and consider findings from within their disciplines. The whole process was extraordinarily instructive. Everything was subject to critical examination: our own convictions and assumptions, our religious backgrounds, our respective family histories, and more. All this became food for thought and reflection, helping to hone our approach. This could be very painful and very personal. Yet it was important to bring different narratives into the final co-authored text and make our divergent viewpoints clear to our respective audiences.*

VM: What language did you publish in?

MJ: *Chinese and English. The first publication came out in English and once it was out, we looked at some of the reviews to get a sense of how the study had been received. We then applied for a grant to help us bring out the Chinese-language publication.²² And that was lucky timing. There was a window of opportunity at that time because later things became very strict again, and we might not have been able to publish the book in Beijing. We published it with Sanlian Publishers in their Harvard Yenching Academic Library series. The idea of this series was to bring to the fore promising Chinese academics. It provided a little breathing space for dissenting authors. Working with this publisher was a well-known Chinese editor who was close to retiring age and the last job she took on was our manuscript. She had to do battle with the Ministry of Education and the National Islamic Association to get their permission to publish all the chapters. They wanted to exclude or alter a number of chapters, especially mine, but the editor insisted on the integrity of the book. It took us two years to get it published: it came out in 2002. I am very proud that we took our time to get the Chinese edition right and the language was important. Accuracy, fluency, readability; all this took time. It is often the language that lets you down when you read Chinese textbooks translated from a Western language, but we, the authors, worked closely with the translator and the editor. It was worth the effort, beautifully produced, the integrity preserved, we had the advantage of a political window of opportunity and the professional support from a most*

²² Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun Shui, 2000, *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam*, London, Routledge/Curzon. Followed in 2002 by a Chinese (revised) version: Shui Jingjun and Maria Jaschok, *Zhongguo Qingzhen Nüsishi*, Beijing, Sanlian Chubanshe Harvard-Yenching Academic Library series.

able editor, and we were lucky. The fact that we published in Chinese meant that the study was accessible to all communities and individuals who featured in our work and that made an enormous difference.

VM: Were the Muslim women able to read it?

MJ: *Younger women are literate in Chinese. Those who couldn't read would ask someone to read it aloud. Their feedback transformed everything. We received an award and the book was quite highly regarded. But the comments from our informants meant most to us. Of course, there was criticism from the more orthodox Islamic quarters, for talking too much about gender, Islamic gender regimes and not enough about Islamic values of submission. But, on the whole, the book had pleasing resonance and is still used in university courses all over China. I think the collaborative aspect of the book was appreciated. We are starting on a new project this summer. We are going to look at the religious and cultural tradition of sound in China's Islamic mosques, trying to understand also the function of sound in reconnecting Islamic communities with their past. My contribution will be the salvaging, recording and interpretation of jingge, a body of Islamic chants which formed part of the rich tradition of women's mosques in central China. These jingge constituted also the conduit of Muslim family morality, jiatingdao and women's morality, funüdao. So there is a wonderful body of chants which have never been properly recorded or written down.*

The collaborative approach to fieldwork was intrinsic to our ideal of conversations in the field as sites of insight and discovery. But our on-going conversation was also appreciated by our informants who became friends and active participants in conversations and more, in the shaping of our, that is, their, stories.

VM: Can you say something about IGS and the Oxford seminar series on Muslim women?

MJ: *What we have just discussed, I think, links up with the discussion over the impact of IGS in a most interesting way. I was appointed the Director of IGS in 2000 when it became the International Gender Studies Centre because members of the Centre for Cross Cultural Research on Women felt it was important to widen our area of enquiry, debate, research and teaching to incorporate Gender Studies (including, for example, Masculinity Studies); they wanted to have it "opened up". Apart from the continuous IGS core activities, we facilitate seminars, conferences, special lectures and workshops. We pride ourselves on generating a culture of openness and critical discussion which is felt and truly appreciated by everybody who comes to give presentations or to attend our lectures. The Centre provides important services to the College and the wider University community through supervision, tutoring and lecturing. At any given time, we feature particular research projects. Our current research clusters relate to Myanmar/Burma and China. We are now preparing two more research clusters, one of a comparative cross-cultural nature, the other concerned with Eurasia, the former Soviet Union. Of course, with each Director, the research profile and geographical area of investigation and debate shift somewhat, according to her specialisation. That is inevitable. Before me, the Centre was focused predominantly on African Studies and migration studies. Whereas under my directorship, given my background in Chinese Studies, East Asia and SEAsia have come to feature more prominently. Also, because of my China connections, Visiting Research Fellows have also come from China, but not exclusively so. In my first years as Director, the project I brought to IGS was funded by the DFID, the Department for International Development of the UK Government. The funding underwrote an international research consortium, with researchers from Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and China. I joined as the lead China researcher responsible for multiple research sites in Muslim contexts in China. Our brief was to revisit core concepts in Development Studies, importantly empowerment, agency, gender, and social transformation. We asked how much*

sense do these key drivers of development make across different cultural contexts? We compared both the different minority Muslim contexts and those where Muslims are in a majority.

This large project only came to an end in 2010/2011, coinciding with the move of IGS to Lady Margaret Hall (LMH), one of Oxford's earliest women colleges. This entailed important changes for IGS and its role. When the Centre was set up formally, in 1973, it had been associated with Queen Elizabeth House, a semi-collegial institution which identified itself as part of the growing development studies field. For many years, the Centre happily cohabited with Queen Elisabeth House (QEH). Only in later years, when QEH became the Oxford Department of International Development (ODID), did it become apparent that its institutional direction was increasingly diverging from the enduring cross-cultural and multi/inter-disciplinary approach that is such a marked feature of Gender Studies. Our range of topics, disciplines and methodologies could no longer be fitted into a Development Studies framework. We had to think very hard about the way we wanted to go. If we couldn't see ourselves fitting easily into the evolving academic identity of QEH, where could we fit? So we welcomed the opportunity to have an association with Lady Margaret Hall, LMH, the first women's college at Oxford, which offered us a very open and congenial arrangement, accommodating our many and multi-disciplinary interests. This move turned out to be the right decision and the relationship with LMH has worked very successfully. In 2011, we moved to Lady Margaret Hall, and within a few months, precisely in 2013, we marked our 30th anniversary with a great many festive events. Throughout, however, we have continued our close collaboration with ODID. After all, quite a large number of IGS Research Associates situate themselves within Development Studies. And I still co-convene an M.Phil. Option in Gender and Development at ODID. Of course, our primary institutional tie is with LMH, and I am glad to observe that we have recently concluded a successful review of IGS at LMH which was signed off by the Governing Body of LMH in the middle of last summer. We are now looking forward to the next stage of our association with LMH.

VM: The first stage has just come to an end?

MJ: Yes. The first Letter of Agreement was of three years of duration during which we were to see whether the collaboration would work to the advantage of both. For both institutions this sort of association was a first. The College had never taken a research centre into their fold and we had never joined a college before. Our institutional review, lasting several months, and involving all our members included academic research and teaching as well as our practical and financial situations. This was quite a critical and detailed review, involving many discussions and interviews. My Director's Report went to the Governing Board of the College, and I was interviewed by the College Academic Planning Committee, chaired by the Principal. There was a great deal of satisfaction with the work we have done, with the Gender in Burmese Studies program we have set up, the funding of a Junior Research Fellowship, the funding of a Visiting Research Fellow in Burmese studies, and with our various research awards and grants. The appraisal of our general activities and progress made in ensuring sustainability of the Centre was most satisfactory. We are now looking forward to a further five years with Lady Margaret Hall.

VM: How about the association with Aung San Suu Kyi (patron of IGS)?²³

MJ: Daw Aung San Suu Kyi exhorted us to add gender to the Oxford Burma Program "mix" when

²³ Aung San Suu Kyi (1945-) born in Yangon, studied in India and Great Britain, where she married an scholar of Oriental Studies and had two sons. She returned to Burma (Myanmar) to become the leader of a non-violent movement for human rights and against the oppressive regime in her country. She received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1991.

she came to receive her honorary doctorate in June 2012. She used that occasion to address the Oxford community, asking for their greater engagement in educational development in Burma. She has been our Patron since 1996. She asked us at IGS, "What can the study of gender contribute to the transformation of education in Myanmar?" As a research institution, we took on board the request for more evidence-based research, always keeping in mind our emphasis on gender-critical perspectives. As a result we set up a Junior Research Fellowship in Gender and Burmese Studies. This is the first Fellowship of this kind and we established it together with LMH, going jointly through the entire application and selection process. The new Research Fellow has just left to do her fieldwork in Myanmar, and I will join her in October to co-convene a workshop with colleagues at Yangon University. We also applied successfully for a Body Shop Foundation grant to support a Burmese activist/academic doing research on the pawning industry in Burma, and how the poor, in particular women, are locked into a dreadful cycle of pawning, debt and dependency. I was fortunate to get financial support to support my travel to Burma, in order to make connections and establish the basis for further academic collaboration. Our work forms part of the official Oxford University's Burma Portfolio. Oxford enjoys a special relationship with Yangon University, which Aung San Su Kyi wanted. My aspiration is to support Burmese colleagues in order to establish a national Burmese Women's Memory Archive, to gather narratives from women of diverse ethnic and religious contexts in Myanmar so as to enrich but also critique officially sanctioned narratives that fill the storage rooms of the nation's archives. Such an oral history project demands a lot of institutional and financial support to make it sustainable. We shall have our first oral history methodology workshop in October in Yangon. In addition to the Burmese Studies Program, we have supported Burma-related events and hosted speakers on relevant topics. You might say that LMH quite inadvertently has become a critical site for Burmese studies, something which most certainly had not been foreseen.

VM: Are there any researchers interested in Burma other than those connected with IGS?

MJ: *Fortunately, by sheer serendipity, a stipendiary lecturer of law is closely associated with LMH. His work concerns constitutional reform in Burma. Another colleague is a Junior Research Fellow at LMH who is working on the situation of Burmese refugees in Thai and Malaysian refugee camps. So there is a critical mass of people working on Burma-related topics and issues.*

VM: What about the language?

MJ: *We have two Burmese researchers who provide an important grasp on Burmese perspectives. We have joint seminars and joint round tables on Burma. So unexpectedly there are several people in Oxford interested in a critical in-depth research engagement with Burma. That development was important for IGS and has had unexpected but welcome consequences, giving us access to certain resources and opportunities which are serving to enhance our overall impact. So you might say that whilst committing ourselves whole-heartedly to developments in Myanmar/Burma, IGS gains from the Burma connection and from our linkages with other contributing faculties and colleges within the University, where we provide more the social science and the gender perspectives.*

VM: How do the other scholars in IGS who aren't involved with Burma fit into this?

MJ: *We are an eclectic and diverse community of researchers sharing common values and causes, and we are interested in subjects also outside our comfort zone of specialisation. This means that non-Asianists among my colleagues happily join debates and events and bring their perspectives to*

bear on scholarship on Myanmar society. Actually, there is much appreciation of the fact that forming part of the Oxford University's Burma Portfolio is not a bad thing for IGS. This has given us desirable publicity, networks and support of different kind, including funding. Thinking pragmatically, it has given access to the University's central projects and thus to important connections and decision-making processes. However, besides the Burma project there are other research clusters in the making, as stated earlier, as well as preparations for closer linkages with academic institutions in order to establish a large Fellowship Program. The work for us is on-going. Happily so.

VM: *Well thank you, you've covered everything.*

The interview took place on 1 August 2014, Bodleian Social Science Library, Oxford.

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