

Gender and the Collectivization of Rural Labor

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GAIL Hershatter's *The Gender of Memory*, built from oral history interviews conducted over ten years from the mid-1990s, investigates the lives of rural women in Shaanxi in the 1950s. In doing so, Hershatter shows the centrality of the category of gender to the reorganization of rural labor in the 1950s as well as the state's lack of understanding of and focus on overcoming the divide between domestic and remunerated labor, a key weakness in the collectivization of rural production in the 1950s. While not the only topic addressed by the book—in fact, as in the title, Hershatter highlights methodological and theoretical questions of gender, narrative, time, subjectivity, and memory in the use of oral histories more than the reproductive-productive labor divide—the issue of a gendered division of labor is the quiet but sustained foundation of the book. This is a history of labor and its incomplete transformation—the limits of revolution in the face of productivist pressures.

Whether looking at the work of midwives, women political activists, and labor models; the feminization of agricultural production; handicraft labor; childcare, cooking, and sewing; or the collectivization of some domestic labor in the Great Leap Forward; Hershatter brings to light the incomplete collectivization of reproductive labor that accompanied the deficient theoretical conceptualization of domestic work. While the Women's Federation at times promoted the recognition of domestic work as labor, this view was continually marginalized and only had significant effect during the early phase of the Great Leap Forward; for the most part, women's reproductive labor remained unrecognized and unremunerated as the state attempted to extract surplus from the countryside for urban-based industrialization as cheaply as possible. In fact, in a highly gendered process, it was collectivization that introduced and then sharpened the divide between paid and unpaid rural labor. This was a process that also led to the collectivization of sideline production, which continued into the reform period in the form of TVEs even with the return to household production in agriculture, showing the gendered nature of the process in the 1950s to be an important backstory to the contemporary rural moment.

This is in part a story of the feminization of agriculture and

the marginalization of handicraft production. In the chapters "Farmer" and "Model," Hershatter shows that as women increasingly entered into and took over agricultural production from the mid-1950s on, handicraft production for the market declined. The handicraft market had originally flourished in the post-1949 market revival. With collectivization, women still produced cloth and clothing for their families, as unremunerated labor, often at night, while they spent most of the day between work-point remunerated agricultural work and other unpaid domestic tasks. This shows the real power of the state to increase the absolute mobilization of rural labor while keeping costs low. Some handicraft labor was collectivized into remunerated co-op labor, but most was not, as the party pushed collectives to focus on agricultural sidelines. As Hershatter states, "Work points earned in the fields became the only legitimate measure of [women's] economic contribution" (139), and even work points were usually allocated according to the gendered criteria of who one was more than how much one actually produced. The issue of rural labor mobilization and accounting is central to any real attempt to understand how the political-economy of Mao-era China operated, and it has not received the attention it deserves. Hershatter's account brings key details to light exactly because of its attention to gender. Although a more sustained theorization of labor and its valuation and mobilization is needed, this is not Hershatter's project. In particular, it would be interesting to spend more space considering the implications of the shift from household accounting of production to the work point system under the collectives, which were assigned to individual laborers.

Furthermore, labor models helped bring about the feminization of agriculture, most importantly for the geographic areas of the study, in cotton production. Men were displaced from this work and moved into other productive labor such as infrastructure work and collective sidelines. But even as cotton production by women became a highlight of state propaganda, it did nothing to overcome the gendered division of productive labor and domestic work; in fact, "the gendered differences in daily responsibilities" remained unarticulated and "stubbornly endured" (227). Over time, "farming was no longer feasible without" women (153)

and, as agricultural surplus funded China's industrialization, the gendered division of labor and women's agricultural and domestic work played a crucial, but usually unrecognized, role in China's economic development (265).

As the state put more energy into mobilizing women for "productive labor"—meaning agriculture—it never focused to the same extent on "changing the conditions of their reproductive labor and childbirth" (157). In the chapter "Midwife," the double meaning of the term "reproduction"—meaning both childbirth and, more broadly, the reproduction of labor power—comes to the fore, although more could be made of the relationship between these two aspects. Here Hershatter's work touches upon an issue that was central to the feminist movement of the 1970s in the west, which called into question the unpaid nature of reproductive labor. In the Chinese case, even though the system was not organized around a capitalist system of value, the marginalization of reproductive labor continued. Despite important improvements, as with other state projects that focused on aspects of women's lives, the funding for the professionalization of reproductive health did not match state rhetoric. Even as the socialization of birth and postpartum care came to be seen as a route to the mobilization of women's productive labor and as an economic benefit to the collective, resources were scarce and their allocation inconsistent.

Likewise, in the chapter "Mother," Hershatter argues that women's domestic labor was made even more invisible in the 1950s than it had been at earlier times, sharpening the divide between unpaid reproductive labor and remunerated productive labor. In other words, as women moved more firmly into the productive sphere with the feminization of agriculture, women's domestic labor that crucially reproduced labor power was pushed into the margins. While Hershatter notes that during the late imperial period the domestic realm was not private, but was seen as a foundation of social order, one wonders if what happened during the collective period (except during the early moments of the Great Leap Forward) was ironically its privatization, as domestic labor disappeared from view into the darkness of night. In the categories of the state, "labor (*laodong*)" came to refer to agricultural and collective-sideline work, while domestic labor came to be devalued as "domestic tasks (*jiawu huo*)" (186), a categorical divide that seems to have been only briefly and inconsistently challenged by the Women's Federation (195). While Hershatter spends very little time on this sort of theoretical debate, focusing her analysis on the voices and memories of her informants, it would be interesting to hear more about this sort of dispute. Compared to other forms of domestic labor—most of which could be accomplished at night—childcare received more attention and was seen as important to mobilizing women to work in the fields. Yet, while childcare was sometimes collectivized, little resources were expended upon it even as daycare workers began to be paid work points in some places.

Without denying the tragedy of the Great Leap Forward

(GLF), Hershatter's chapter on the Leap departs from the usual focus on its death toll, a focus that limits investigations into and depoliticizes the complex movement. Not only was the GLF the moment in which the long-term trend of the feminization of agricultural labor was "consolidated" (237), but it was also the time that the socialization of women's reproductive labor went the furthest. If the early years of collectivization had kept women's reproductive labor hidden, during the GLF it briefly became visible. The collective dining halls (together with the backyard steel furnaces) have come to symbolize mismanagement and utopian dreams gone awry, but at the time they represented the most visible recognition of women's reproductive labor. The socialization of domestic labor was known as the "five changes," meaning collective cooking and dining, collective clothes making with sewing machines, birthing stations for childbirth, collective childcare centers, and the machine milling of flour (246). These changes were to help bring about the liberation of women's labor power for agricultural production, which was to be further feminized in the process. Even at its more radical moment, this project was not funded by the state; instead, these new institutions were to be constructed by "relying on the masses" in a very uneven process (246-7).

In the failure of the GLF, socialization quickly gave way to survival, for which women's labor was again crucial; the socialization of women's reproductive labor and its revolutionary implications were buried for good. Yet it is only with an analysis that centers on the gendered division of labor and hidden accumulation, such as Hershatter's, that such a radical moment comes into vision. Even so, many questions are raised that are not answered. Was this a moment of too much too fast or its opposite? In other words, would an earlier and more sustained focus on radical initiatives such as the "five changes" have meant that the mobilization of women's labor would have been more successful? Were the "five changes" too utopian—as the collective dining halls are usually understood—or not utopian enough? Why was the party so conservative in its understanding and practice of transforming the gendered divide between reproduction and production? Was it because of a lack of understanding, of resources, or of motivation? From Hershatter's study, overcoming the gendered divide between reproductive and productive labor certainly seems like a crucial foundation to liberating rural labor and productivity as well as bettering the lives of rural inhabitants.

All of this begs the question of liberation of labor for what, a question that Hershatter does not shy away from. As Hershatter argues, women's rural labor—productive and reproductive—was responsible for the "hidden accumulation" that underwrote China's industrialization (265). Here further questions are raised. One could take this to imply that the party-state created a new gendered division of labor that it used to further its extraction of absolute surplus for industrialization. And from the perspective of the reform period such a narrative is compelling, even if a bit teleological. A more open narrative lets us see both the limits

and the possibilities of the 1950s rural moment, centered as it was on a gendered system of labor. Nonetheless, Hershatter's focus on the evolution of the gendered process of labor remuneration during the early revolution imparts a new complexity to the subject, one that demands further equally nuanced investigations.