

Narrative, Temporality and Subaltern Experience

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NARRATIVE, as Ricoeur noted, is at the heart of human experience.¹ Developing this theme in his *The Otherness of Self*, Liu Xin argued that ‘what makes a particular kind of narrative structure possible is a certain mode of temporality.’² *The Gender of Memory* puts the oral narratives of elderly rural women at the heart of an exploration of a period of China’s rural revolution that barely features in the dominant themes of official historiography today. Their narratives are shaped by temporalities that unevenly overlap with, depart from, and implicitly challenge the main timelines of official history. But these temporalities do not pre-exist their narratives; it is through these women’s stories that we can apprehend temporalities that are absent from archival and other textual accounts, and that reveal at least some elements of the subaltern experience. As memory, the individual narrative is always singular, shaped in place and time by the singular circumstances of family, gender and generation, and so on. Its orderings are not in themselves the stuff of history writ large. But it borrows from, is reinforced by and reshaped by others’ memories of shared events; it becomes part of a collective narrative rooted in social experiences of the past and continually reproduced in response to the concerns of the present.³ Its contents—events and experiences, in time and place—are articulated in vocabularies that draw on the conceptual and discursive repertoires to which the narrator has access. The language used to narrate memory thus becomes inseparable from the event itself in revealing the different temporalities organizing knowledge and experience that are absent from the historical record.

Few women who participated in China’s land reform movement of the early 1950s appear in the archive as named persons. Labour models aside, farming women such as those from the Shaanxi villages of Gail Hershatter’s study feature in the official paper trail as little more than generic categories and numbers—contributing to increased crop yields, attending literacy classes, practicing new techniques of midwifery, exemplifying (or not) the benefits of the Marriage Law, and mediating shifting fertility and child mortality rates. The language of the Party-state contained in the archive is of little help to describe these women’s domestic and social lives, or how these were affected in everyday life by the Party’s policies, plans and localized presence in the processes

of land reform. However, when given names by the oral historian who listens to their stories, these women do much more than bring to visibility activities and concerns that are missing from the record. Their narratives do not simply fill in the gaps left by the political imperatives of an archive constructed according to the dominant temporality of the Party-state’s initiatives. The gendered quality of their memories structures temporalities through events and vocabularies that are unmarked by the priorities of ‘campaign time’. This raises important questions about the meaning of ‘liberation’ for rural women who experienced the momentous events of land reform and collectivization—the initial question that inspired Hershatter and her collaborator, Gao Xiaoxian, to undertake this work. It offers a way of seeing the world through a lens surely shared by millions more rural women than those of Hershatter’s Shaanxi villages—it constructs a history of rural revolution that cannot emerge from other sources. It helps explain a key paradox of China’s revolutionary history, notably of enthusiastic participation in revolution through practices, attachments and vocabularies ostensibly at odds with its goals. Crucially, it highlights the oral historian’s capacity to hone her craft as an ethical project of recognition of subaltern subjects absent from the record and now marginalized by China’s mainstream post-socialist modernity. The ethnographic tools of the oral historian’s (and anthropologist’s) methodological kit grant access to identifying the exclusions at work in the conflicts between temporalities, and to revealing the subaltern as a subject of history.

Hershatter addresses the issue of temporalities through the notions of ‘campaign time’ and ‘domestic time.’ Campaign time establishes 1949 as the key marker of everything ‘before Liberation’ from the main events of state initiatives in the years that followed. Until the late Cultural Revolution, when the ‘17 years’ between 1949 and 1966 projected the Cultural Revolution as another key temporal divider, the official historiography of the rural 1950s traced a linear march of progress from land reform, often coupled with implementation of the Marriage Law, through the mutual aid teams, lower and higher stage cooperatives to the Great Leap Forward and the communes set up in 1958. In contrast, domestic time foregrounds women’s activities in and near to the household. By the Great Leap Forward, the mobilisation

of villagers to smelt steel, increase grain yields, and build reservoirs, childcare centres, collective dining halls and maternity clinics relocated women's domestic activities to the spaces and language of 'campaign time'. Domestic time did not stay still either, since alongside caring for the elderly and growing numbers of healthy children, the everyday demands of women's domestic labour changed together with the expansion of the collectives, the disappearance of household-based sideline activities, and the collapse of the communal dining halls. Yet, with the exception of the publicity celebrating the Great Leap's 'Five Changes'—to set up collective dining halls, mechanise sewing, set up birthing and childcare centres, and mechanise the milling of flour—there was no public language that women could draw on to account for the other activities of their domestic labour: preparing food, staying up late at night to make shoes and clothes, tending to aging parents-in-law, dealing with childhood sicknesses and deaths, scarcity of food, and coping with husbands' complaints. And even when 'liberated' from what official documents, including the official journal of the All China Women's Federation, often called the 'trivialities' of domestic work, women continued to shoulder the tasks of the 'Five Changes' in their newly collectivised settings. Women therefore 'reached for an older language of performance under duress' (29), harking back to the popular stories of womanly virtue to express their ideas about being a good woman, daughter-in-law, wife and mother.

The temporalities at work in women's memories of land reform and collectivisation in *The Gender of Memory* thus draw unevenly on different vocabularies. Labour models recalled their leadership of women's cotton cultivation teams and their efforts to mobilise women to work in the fields and explain the reasons for birth control to a hostile audience in terms that echoed the language of 'campaign time'. Other ordinary women who were not drawn into the state's projects as activists of land reform centred recollections of their pasts on their households and domestic work, frequently showing little interest in the key events of campaign time. Yet others combined an activist attachment to the language of campaign time with other older attachments to the moral and filial standards of the pre-liberation period. But there was no absolute distinction between them. Rather, what emerged was a muddle of temporalities that were simultaneously embodied and affective—rooted in the bodily, physical and emotional hardships of pregnancy and childbirth, sickness, scarcity and death—inflected by the 'feudal' values of popular tales and childhood songs circulating before 1949, and convergent with the public language of state. Few of the women voiced overt criticism of the state, yet the memories of ordinary women told of their past sufferings through a language of virtuous self-sacrifice that implicitly challenged the exclusions of campaign time. Conversely, a labour model such as Cao Zhuxiang absorbed the language of campaign time to such an extent that her subjectivity could not be understood separately from it (234).

Guo Yuhua and Sun Liping have argued that mobilising

villagers to 'speak bitterness' was one of the state's major techniques to transform the rural population into subjects of the new China.⁴ Through the language of 'speak bitterness' rural subjects acquired a new mode of self and collective identification as active agents of rural revolution, defined in the dominant terms of campaign time. *The Gender of Memory* tells another story. All village women were familiar with the 'speak bitterness' mode, and traces of it were present in all their accounts. Several decades after the 'speak bitterness' model was formulated as a political tool, Hershatter's analysis tells a more complex story. Maybe this is where the difference between the oral historian, long acquainted with her interviewees, and the public audience of speak bitterness, matters. Until the arrival of Hershatter and Gao to interview them, the village women who appear in this account, were rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to 'speak' the bitterness of their pasts outside contexts staged by the state. 'Speaking bitterness' for them did not indicate recognition of the hardship they endured in the household and family during the early 1950s. Moreover, now, in old age, some with sons who deny them support and sometimes in dire circumstances, they recount the bitterness of their lives in the 1950s not as the rehearsal of a defunct state imperative but as the key thread of lives which have never been fully recognized by the state. The recollection of loss is spoken in a language that echoes not the discursive performance of 'speak bitterness', but rather a gendered temporality of the past that follows the embodied, physical and emotional contours of 'domestic time' that has never been recognized as it should have been.

There are few oral histories of 1950s China, rural or urban, and even fewer of the rural or urban subaltern. One of the most recent, Zhou Xun's *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Famine* suggests a distinction between the 'truth' of the individual oral testimony against the obscurantism of the 'party line' in archival materials.⁵ Such an assumption is commonly upheld in the distinction, so often made in analyses of China's recent history, between the state and the civil (non-state), the official and the popular. However, it would be facile to imagine that memories that depart from the official language of campaign time are somehow more 'truthful' and nearer to the subaltern experience in what they reveal about women's interior lives. It would be equally facile to think that individuals who used the party's vocabulary to identify themselves in domestic circumstances were somehow not revealing of the 'true' self. The 'flat' tones Cao Zhuxiang used to describe her daughter's wedding and her own decision not to attend initially took Hershatter and Gao Xiaoxian by surprise. Her use of the discursive language of the state seemed to them empty of the affect she surely must have felt on such an occasion. But in trying to understand her tone, Hershatter argues that for labour models such as Zhuxiang, the language of rural activism became totally central to her sense of self and what she accomplished. Many, probably most, aspects of life during the 1950s for women such as Zhuxiang are no longer—maybe have never been—accessible to the historian. Yet the conflicting temporalities that emerge from her and

her ‘sisters’ narratives open up a path for considering at least some dimensions of the subaltern experience, including its diversity and its uneven relationship to public authority.

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: Chicago University

² Liu Xin, *The Otherness of Self: A Genealogy of the Self in Contemporary China*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2002): 135.

³ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

⁴ Guo Yuhua 郭于华 and Sun Liping 孙立平, “孙立平: 诉苦——一种农民国家观念形成的中介机制” [Speaking Bitterness: A Mediating Mechanism for the Shaping of Peasants’ Concept of the State] *Zhongguo xueshu* 4 (2002): 130-157.

⁵ Zhou Xun, *Forgotten Voices of Mao’s Great Famine: An Oral History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).