

Gender and the Politics of Everyday Life

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AS the book's title and subtitle indicate, Gail Hershatler's *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* engages with two distinct yet related questions. The first one is methodological: to which extent can individual narrated memory, with all its well known limitations, help us to fill the gaps in the official historiography of the Chinese Party-state, and perhaps challenge official narratives? The second is substantive: how does our understanding of the Chinese revolution change if we put a doubly marginalized group, rural women, at the center of our inquiry? (6) Much of the strength of the book comes from the way Hershatler braids these two questions together. For the purpose of this review, I will address them separately.

First, what are the uses and limitations of memory as a source for the historian? Hershatler makes only very cautious claims in this respect. Oral narratives are not a repository of truths about the past: they are "called forth under specific circumstances, unevenly recorded, selectively remembered, and artfully deployed ... as indirect commentaries on a troubled present." They "need to be valued as a history of the present," as a way to understand how meanings and interpretations have changed over time and are reconstructed at the moment of the interview, not as a way to uncover meanings that existed in the past (23). What individual narratives can do is to "confound and complicate and sometimes derail" (3) dominant frameworks of interpretation. Inaccuracies and inconsistencies are to be welcomed because they help us to see the world the way the storytellers did, and because they point us to contradictions in the official record. What oral narrative can give us is an account of "the narrators' effort to make sense of the past and give form to their lives,"¹ as well as a sense of the larger politics of memory that shape and sometimes distort individuals' memories, but not, it seems, a picture of what the past was like. Hershatler explicitly disavows "big feminist recuperation projects" that aim to make the invisible visible (23) I admire Hershatler's caution, and yet I feel that "making visible" what had been rendered invisible is precisely what she does. I came away from the book with a sense of relief from epistemological angst: yes, worlds that have been written out of the official historiography and that are rarely talked about today can be reconstituted and made

comprehensible to us. And, yes – the subaltern can speak with a clear and distinct voice, if only the historian is willing to listen.²

I agree with Aminda Smith's comments in her review that it would be mistaken to read official records or oral history materials "against the grain," to seek to peel away the layers of state rhetoric in search of true, authentic voices. What we have to look for are not "the real selves of a real past" but the "shared world-making projects" of the collective period: the processes through which "new women were brought into being, not by state fiat, but by the labor of cadres, the women themselves, their village communities, and regional or national reading and listening publics" (235). This does not mean, however, that all we can ever grasp is the politicized discourse of the Party-state and that we should content ourselves with a reading of that discourse and its internal contradictions.

Nothing, perhaps, in Hershatler's account is untouched by politics, but politics did not permeate all aspects of life in the same way and to the same extent. In my own interviews with rural women, in the same part of central Shaanxi and touching on similar questions, I found that large areas of everyday life can be discussed without eliciting much mention of the state and its politics. These include most aspects of social and biological reproduction in the household, including menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing; almost all aspects of domestic labor; social interactions with neighbors and family members (unless they involved class antagonism or became so abusive that they called for official intervention); and many aspects of public work in the collective. Some of these aspects were of little interest to the state. Others – family life, domestic work, biological reproduction – were of central interest to the state but systematically cordoned off from discourse, marked as topics on which the state did not pronounce and for which there existed no public language. One of the strengths of Hershatler's work is that it devotes so much space to dimensions that appear humdrum and apolitical but are in fact central to an understanding of the revolution and the socialist state.

One of the key methodological lessons I learned from Hershatler's book is that, even though we cannot and should not try to escape state-inflected language, we can chose

where we want to situate ourselves on the continuum from politicized to not-so-politicized (but not, therefore, apolitical) topics. Somewhat paradoxically, it is often the desire to recuperate the authentic voice of local actors that leads us into territory where all discursive positions are already occupied by the state. Interiority and narrative consistency – the ability to give an account of one’s life as a coherent sequence of actions motivated from a stable self – are cultural technologies appropriate for modern, industrial capitalist societies; as Hershatter rightly says, we have no right to expect them from rural women in the collective era. A narratable self would also have been difficult to achieve for rural women whose lives were in part controlled by others and who learned early on that the quality most prized in them was not being true to their “inner self” but the capacity to constantly retool themselves by learning and unlearning skills and roles in response to the ever-changing needs of their natal and marital families. In such a situation, it seems to me, narrative consistency can only come with formal schooling: it is through education (and, recently, mass media) that people learn to conceive of their lives as “projects” of self-improvement and to synchronize them with the history of the nation. This explains why old men (who tend to have some education) narrate their selves with greater ease and consistency than women, and why women born after 1949 also seem to be able to do so. For women of the generation Hershatter considers here, the ability to narrate one’s life as a story of development and overcoming could only come from public speaking, which meant, in the context of Mao-era China, from participation in the public rituals and rhetorical practices of the socialist state.

Hershatter offers a lucid account of how “speaking bitterness” gave rural women a language to discuss their lives. Like all languages, it both enabled and constrained its speakers: speaking bitterness helped rural women to think through suffering and oppression, make sense of the past, and construct roles for themselves as virtuous victims, dignified by suffering and empowered by the knowledge that they were on the right side of history. Speaking bitterness never worked well in expressing the bitterness experienced after 1949, be it individual pain or the collective suffering in the famine years. Experience of the speaking bitterness campaigns shaped the way rural women talked about later suffering, but the format was too firmly tied to a state-sponsored chronology of liberation to be transposed to later times (203-204, 260-62).

Speaking bitterness is only one mode of recalling the past. The more we get away from questions of identity and interiority and move into the realm of material life and practice, of what people did rather than what they were, the less we hear politicized and state-inflected discourse. Hershatter demonstrates in her book the absolute centrality of work in rural women’s lives – work as a painful burden, but also as a mode of social interaction, self-expression, and integration with the state. If Hershatter’s main methodological contribution lies in her analysis of the politics of memory, her main *substantive* contribution, in my view,

lies in her examination of the various experiences of rural work, in particular gendered reproductive work. I am not claiming any special ontological status for work as a realm of true experience, and I am aware that work, too, is subject to systematic misremembering – as Hershatter shows, certain types of work were systematically misremembered because they did not fit the official framework of “feudal seclusion” in the old society (36-37, 61-64). My point here is simply that work is of obvious interest and importance for the historian who wants to understand the lives of rural women (and, for that matter, rural men and urban men and women); that facts about work and material life are recalled more easily and often in greater detail than those on more abstract topics; and that talking about work can offer entry points on other issues, including subjectivities.

One example of the latter, drawn from my own research, is the “dowry interview.” Like Hershatter, I found that diffuse and confused memories can come into sharp focus if linked to a material reference point. For practical and sentimental reasons, many women in rural China preserve their dowries, together with clothes they made or purchased later on and assorted scraps of textiles. Women often remember with astonishing precision who spun the yarn and wove the cloth of a particular garment, when it was made, how much labor time was spent on it, where the cotton came from, who was present at its making, etc. Going through a chest full of old clothes is not only fun but also brings out detailed memories of labor processes, gift exchange networks, and affective ties stretching back many decades. Discussing old clothes can serve as a launching point for more detailed discussions on work regimes and material conditions of life under the collectives. Textile work is also one of the few areas where women could experience mastery and control over their own lives and could achieve something like a coherent life story – a sense of the self that remains true to itself but develops over time. On the one hand, domestic textile work was cyclical and repetitive; it brought exhaustion, lack of sleep, and physical pain, all of which added to the blurring of women’s memories. (263) On the other, there is a clear sense of progression in women’s narratives about their growing textile skills. Textile work, unlike farm work, could be seen as a “career” with several distinct stages, from the young girl who learns to spin to the old woman who prepares grave clothes for herself and those close to her.

I am not advocating here a shift away from politics and towards a “subpolitical” realm of everyday work and life. To the contrary, I see the workplace – which for rural Chinese women includes the home – as the place where value is created and appropriated, where domination and subordination are most directly experienced, and where the state roots its power. In rural China, and perhaps elsewhere, it was largely in and through work that gender roles were created. It was also in and through work that liberation was practiced and experienced, as it was activists and low-ranking cadres who enthusiastically built the new world of socialism with their hands (72-77, 137-38).

Much of Hershatter's analysis is taken up with the politics of work, both in the collective fields and at home. She charts the feminization of agriculture through successive political and infrastructural campaigns, the ways the work point system systematically undervalued women's work, and the persistent double burden of public work and household chores. One of the central themes here is the role of reproductive work in the building of Chinese socialism: the work of giving birth and raising children, cooking meals and washing dishes, weaving cloth and mending clothes – as well as the work of building and maintaining social relationships, caring for the sick, helping others to overcome grief and loss, and so on. Feminist economists such as J. K. Gibson-Graham have long argued that our definition of the capitalist economy is deficient: “what is often seen as *the economy*, that is, formal markets, wage labor, and capitalist enterprise, is merely one set of cells in a complex field of economic relationships that sustain livelihoods in regions throughout the world.”³ Perhaps the same deconstructive work needs to be done for socialism: here, too, “the economy” is typically understood in terms of wage labor, commodity production, and creation of surplus value. This leaves out unpaid household work, barter, gift giving, nonprofit work, childcare, care for the elderly, and a myriad other activities that should by right be included in our understanding of the economy. As Hershatter shows (and as Alexander Day underlines in his comments), collective agriculture never completely replaced private household plots, handicraft production for home use and market sale, black market trading, dowry exchanges, and mutual aid between households. Perhaps the socialist economy is best seen as a layer cake, with a dominant public sector sitting atop a black and grey economy, a gift economy, and a household economy that produced not only labor power but also a large part of the goods and services consumed in households.

One of the most basic textbook models sees “the economy” as a circular exchange between firms and households: firms buy labor from households and sell them commodities; households sell labor to firms and purchase commodities. What is so striking about the Chinese case is that households (that is, women performing unpaid and invisible work) not only produced the labor needed for collective work (their own, that of the children they raised, and that of the men they fed and clothed) but also did so with very little flowing back to them in material terms. In the case of cotton textiles, rural women not only grew the cotton that made the textiles that accumulated the funds and earned the foreign exchange that paid for socialist industrialization. They also clothed their families with the work of their hands, at no cost to their state. Their labor – working double shifts at night, after men and children had gone to bed – was unpaid and invisible, and the raw materials they used were often scraps that could not be profitably extracted and processed by the state. This made it possible for the Chinese state to keep the rural population undersupplied with textiles (and other consumer goods: until the 1970s, almost all goods consumed by rural households

were produced locally), to channel scarce resources to urban populations, and to build the foundations of export industries that would expand rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s. In a very direct sense, the unpaid work of rural women built the China that we see today. Hershatter's book is a fitting tribute to their work.

¹ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: SUNY, 1991), quoted in Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 22.

² For more on this point, see Gail Hershatter, “The Subaltern Talks Back: Reflections on Subaltern Theory and Chinese History.” *Positions* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 103-130.

³ J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xiii.