

A Response

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A book leaves the author's hands after years of intimate entanglement—often after a final wrestle featuring the wielding of sharp instruments as well as feelings of unrequited love, despair, and relief. Then it begins an afterlife that is both public and curiously inaccessible to its author. Reviews offer an occasional hint of the pleasure or annoyance it has engendered in one reader or another. It is unusual, however, to get a sense of the book's effect on a community of people who themselves are wrestling with closely related issues.

I want to thank Jacob Eyferth and the H-PRC organizers for giving me a rare glimpse of what *The Gender of Memory* has been up to in its afterlife. Jacob invited me to comment on creative misreadings, the importance of place, the gendering of memory, and how a focus on rural women changes our understanding of Chinese socialism. I'll do that, and then add a few comments about the continuing importance of their stories even amidst the rapid disappearance of the world described in this book.

First, the question of creative misreadings. I see a lot of creativity in these reviews, but nothing I would call a misreading. The readers have done exactly what I hoped—picked up something from the book and taken it off to their own intellectual terrain to think with. Aminda Smith, whose research on thought reform takes her deep into the archives of the early PRC, ruminates on how even official documents offer us traces of non-state voices, some of them using state language to narrate stories that might otherwise be completely lost. Harriet Evans, whose work on Chinese mothers and daughters explores subjectivity and generational difference, calls our attention to discrepant temporalities “muddled” in women's narratives (in the sense of a muddled drink rather than muddled thinking). Yunxiang Yan, whose own extended residence in a Heilongjiang village has generated a rich account of how farmers imagine and seek a good life, sees similarities in the way older villagers mobilize the language of virtue and self-sacrifice to assert their own worth. Jacob Eyferth, in the midst of writing a book that examines how cotton production and women's textile work helped underwrite the modernization efforts of the early PRC state, takes note of the many kinds of value-creating but unpaid work that women performed in the home. So does Alexander Day, whose work on the peasant question in post-

socialist China has helped us understand the ways that political thinkers have imagined rural labor in successive visions of Chinese modernity. Irina Mukhina offers a comprehensive account of the many (and mostly dismal) similarities between the mobilization of Soviet rural women and their Chinese counterparts. Alessandro Portelli's contribution is as poetic and incisive as his own work with oral narratives. He invokes the tart formulation by Pietro Clemente that “no one is less alone” than a woman telling a story about herself to listeners who will reshape and retell it. As an ensemble, these generous and generative readings remind me that although we ourselves often work alone, we are always in conversation with others who are puzzling over related topics.

Second, the importance of place. Mukhina rightly concludes that no single study can get at the regional variations that marked socialism. In *The Gender of Memory* I observed that “all socialism is local,” but the collective years amount to more than a pile of individual occurrences, and our understanding of how center and locale interacted across time is woefully incomplete. I am comforted that some of what I described about Shaanxi communities sounds familiar to Yan, but one set of similarities does not permit us to assume a self-same “China.” Place mattered. We know, for instance, that provincial leadership during the Great Leap Forward made an enormous difference in whether a particular locale experienced starvation or merely hunger. We know that when communities produced a woman labor model, the mobilization of ordinary women, their working life, and their subsequent memories of the collective incorporated her as a prominent reference point. Where there wasn't such a model, ghost stories and other modes of non-state narration were more common. But other forms of variation under socialism elude us: for example, how the lives of farming women were shaped by cropping patterns, proximity to water transport or mountains or cities, local religious practice, ethnicity, and marriage patterns. I am far from the only person to have thought about the countryside, but still we know remarkably little about daily life in the collective years, less than we do about rural life in the Qing dynasty or the Republican era. One can hope for a phalanx of curious scholars, fanning out to rummage in rural archives and talk to their elders. But this kind of research is becoming more difficult, not least because

the women and now the villages themselves are rapidly disappearing. Without local accounts, it is too easy to fall back on assumptions that an expansive developmentalist state transformed a vast peasantry in broadly predictable ways. That kind of generalization makes for anodyne history, squeezing all the specificity and unevenness (not to mention gender) out of the collective years. But it is in that zone of friction¹ where an ambitious state project met local contingency that actually existing socialism took shape.

Third, the gendering of memory. Yan suggests that perhaps memory is not as gendered as I have argued. He notes that the language of virtue was as important in the far Northeast as it was in Shaanxi, observing that male labor models, like the women I interviewed, also talked about hard work, skill at human relations, and self-sacrifice, albeit now for the state rather than the family. Since so few men of that age cohort survived when I began my research in Shaanxi, and none of the men I did interview invoked virtue in their accounts, I have nothing definitive to say on this score. Yan's man with the self-made tape recording of his role in the land reform, buttonholing villagers to make sure they heard what he had to say, offers a poignant instance of a man reworking his account of the past to help him make sense of the present. But in his assertion of his own past accomplishments, I still see the persistence of gendered difference. I cannot imagine any woman I interviewed, no matter how politically involved, staging a mock radio interview about her role in the land reform as a means of asserting her worth and her virtue. Many women made forceful cases that they had performed admirably in difficult circumstances, but their language was most often that of indignation that their hard work, particularly in the gendered roles of daughter-in-law and mother, was no longer recognized or reciprocated. They were not making a direct critique of the Great Leap Famine or the Cultural Revolution; they articulated their dissatisfaction with the collective years in a more personal register through tales of hoarded food, quarrels with dining hall workers, and individual resilience.

As Portelli notes, the domains in which women lived meant "different experiences to remember, different spaces in which to remember and share memories, different functions of memory in society." Women's memories of socialism were grounded in a domestic space that still remained their purview and their responsibility across the collective period. Their memories were shaped as well by changing interactions with a public realm of collective production and politics that drew them into long days of work outside the home, and evening political meetings where they brought their sewing in an attempt to shorten their night shift of family needlework. I appreciate Portelli's recognition that this endless round of spinning, weaving, and sewing was not only a burden (though it surely was that), but also an outlet for creativity and a small source of pleasure. As Eyferth has also discovered, nothing elicits stories of a lost social world more quickly than asking a woman to show off her collection of embroidered pillowcases, woven handkerchiefs, and decorated shoe soles.

Gendered division of labor and gendered memory are surely linked.

How does a focus on rural women change our understanding of Chinese socialism? To begin with, it gives us a whole new set of voices, which become audible under less-than-ideal conditions. The voice of a labor model such as Zhang Qiuxiang was packaged by Women's Federation cadres, who fashioned a coherent account of her life story and farming techniques. Portelli's comparison of Zhang Qiuxiang to Rigoberto Menchú is instructive—behind the assertive singularity of *I, Rigoberto Menchú* is a group of co-creators. In the case of Zhang Qiuxiang, I join the earlier group of Women's Federation scribes as the latest "cultural mediator and professional narrator."

The question Mukhina raises about how my outsider status might have affected the stories I heard is of course one worth considering. And yet all stories come to us through their storytellers. The stories Gao Xiaoxian and I elicited from old women are an improvement over no stories at all. In collecting oral narratives at the last possible moment before the narrators disappear, I have resigned myself to the contaminating effects of my presence. After all, each of our historical tools of investigation and interpretation, not just oral narratives, are similarly contaminated. Perhaps contamination, like the richness of the microbiome each of us carries around, plays a role in keeping a community of interaction alive.

Putting women at the center of how we evaluate rural socialism is not just a matter of enriching the chorus by adding women's voices. Across rural China, women's visible and occluded labor made socialism possible. Socialist construction in China was undertaken in difficult circumstances by a nascent state that had few means of funding industrialization. It accumulated the resources it needed in large part by extracting crops produced by undercompensated farmers. The terms of extraction were severe. As Eyferth's current work on Shaanxi is beginning to show, after the state had taken its quota to clothe the cities and to sell for foreign exchange, women farmers clothed and shod their families with the leftover gleanings of cotton bolls, and with whatever portions of the crop they managed to conceal. Put crudely, Chinese socialism was built in large part on the exploitation of the countryside by the cities. And among rural dwellers, women were perhaps the most thoroughly exploited. For their work in the collective fields, they were paid less than men, yet it was that work that freed men's labor to construct dams, build railroad beds, and later work in small rural industries. Even as women moved into daily agricultural production, they saw no diminution of their domestic burden, which was crucial to the operation of the rural economy but barely talked about and never compensated. They were no longer permitted to sell the home textiles they produced, cutting off an important source of family income. State success in reducing infant mortality increased the physical and financial effort required to raise growing numbers of children. In short, women were a

linchpin of the extractive strategy on which socialism depended. By the time the state began to put a few more resources back into the countryside in the 1970s, the women I interviewed had already expended years of effort on productive and reproductive labor—a distinction that may make sense for accounting purposes, but that took an undifferentiated toll on their bodies.

The fact that many old women spoke positively of Liberation and of their own industrious contribution to their families and communities does not contravene this exploitation, which even today is largely unvoiced and untheorized. Women found the collective years good in comparison to the unstable prerevolutionary times in which they had grown up. They appreciated the relative physical security of the 1950s, and the disappearance of rapacious bandits and rogue soldiers from the landscape. Famine became a less regular feature of rural life—excepting the terrible human-caused catastrophe of the Great Leap Forward. Rural women, like rural men, were for a time caught up in the vision of abundance that the Great Leap promised. Still, across the collective years, peasants as a class contributed more to socialism than they received in return. And peasant women, their reproductive labor largely unnamed and unaddressed, gave daily living testimony to what Day calls “the limits of revolution in the face of productivist pressures.”

This is a troubling and insufficiently recognized legacy of inequality, and like most legacies, it does not lie entirely in the past. The era of economic reform has changed many things about rural China—land tenure, access to credit, ability to work away from one’s home community. The standard of living has risen, even in relatively poor interior areas such as Shaanxi. Distances have shortened: a village that took five hours of hard driving on rutted roads to reach in 2001 is now less than two hours from Xi’an by highway. In Shaanxi as elsewhere, across the years of reform the countryside has been hollowed out, as able-bodied laborers have decamped to seek work in coastal cities, Xi’an, and abroad. Farmers, including many young and middle-aged women, have become the reserve army of labor drawn into export processing zones, construction sites, sanitation crews, the servant class, and the sexual service sector. Exploitation of the rural labor force, now detached from the land as migrants, fuels capitalist development as it once fueled socialist construction.

Those who cannot travel or have no labor power to sell, including the aged women who helped build socialism, have become residual and superfluous elements in a shrunken landscape. Even in the mid-1990s, the villages where we interviewed had a peculiar population, sardonically referred to in China as “the 773861 army”—“77” denoting the aged, “38” the women (March 8 is International Women’s Day) and “61” the children (a reference to June 1, Children’s Day). And now the villages themselves are beginning to disappear, as towns expand into the surrounding countryside. Farmers are relocated into high-rises to live on remittances from their

children and limited payouts from the sale of collective land. China is making rapid steps toward a form of rural privatization that is likely to produce further inequality and environmental degradation.

Soon not only the old women, but also the very landscape they helped to create, will exist only in memory—and memory, as we have seen, is unreliable, complicated, and entangled with our consideration of the present. That entanglement with the times in which we live now convinces me that we must continue to think hard about what rural socialism was, who built it (albeit not always under conditions of their own choosing), and the forms of equality it could not articulate or ameliorate. As we undertake that task, the stories of rural women, however imperfectly transmitted, are an important guide.

¹ Anna Tsing, *Friction* (Princeton, 2005).