

Rural Women in the Chinese and Soviet Countryside: A Comparative Perspective

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HERSHATTER'S work, as the title suggests, deals with the actual lived experiences of early socialism in the Chinese countryside during mid-20th century, and it narrates the life stories of seventy-two elderly women to address the topic through the prism of gender. As a Soviet and gender historian, I was immediately drawn to this study; I wanted to see if any broader themes that I have discovered in my own scholarship on rural women in the Soviet countryside in the 1920s, '30s and thereafter would be paralleled by the experiences of women in Chinese countryside at an equally dramatic time in Chinese history. Moreover, I've done extensive oral history fieldwork and know firsthand the challenges – and rewards – of restoring the past events from the imperfect recollections of those who witnessed them and lived to tell the stories. Hershatter's promise to let the women speak about their own lives was thus equally intriguing to me, though I came to the manuscript as an outsider to the field of Chinese studies.

Indeed, my expectations have been fully met. It was rewarding to see that many of the frameworks that I've utilized and seen in Soviet studies are remarkably familiar to what one encountered in China, even surprisingly so. The similarities began with the historiography of "building the radiant future." For a long while, much of the written work on building socialism both in China and the Soviet Union was drawn based on official records, and thus official voices dominated in those narratives. Even when women had a chance to speak, they were typically urban women or rural celebrities (*stakhanovites* in the Soviet context and activists and labor models in China), and not your average peasant. Much of my own professional quest has been to challenge this mainstream, i.e. male, official, and urban narrative of Soviet history, by bringing rural women and their voices to center stage, and thus Hershatter's goal to do the same for Chinese history resonated deeply with me. Similarly, the imagery and stereotype of women as being backward and confined before "the great turn" vs. liberated and independent after the new regime is equally painfully familiar to historians of the Soviet Union. In China and the Soviet Union alike, historiography and the official discourse often painted a dichotomous picture of a woman confined to the domestic

sphere and abused by backward, primitive and medieval practices before the Great Liberation, and as a new woman after the coming of communism. The reality, of course, has proven much more complex in both cases. Women typically exercised more agency than they got a credit for before the divide, and they did not uniformly embrace, and at times even resisted, the policies and realities of the new era. As a matter of fact, as Hershatter asserts, there was a great deal of continuity - from before the liberation into the 1960s and even 1980s.

Even though some of the changes that took place in the Soviet context happened two or three decades earlier compared to the similar transformations in the Chinese countryside, the gap that separated the official discourse on women's greater involvement in the public sphere, especially paid employment, and the persistent gender divisions of the village life was remarkably similar. When it came to waged labor and the public domain, "the operative assumption was not gender equality, but gender difference" (145). Despite the years of gender-equality propaganda, women in both countries were restricted in their employment choices, de facto if not de jure, and were paid less (usually 30-50% less) than their male counterparts in comparable positions. When collectivization hit the countryside full swing, women's entry into collective farming did not provide relief for most women but actually created a double burden of collective work and domestic responsibilities that these women had to carry. Since the Soviet system allowed for private garden allotments to coexist with collective farming for several decades, women in the Soviet countryside often carried a triple burden: of public work, domestic chores, and then working their own land in the afterhours. Yet heavy as this labor was in any context and time, "no one in the rural environment – cadres, men, or the women themselves – questioned the division of labor that consigned most [domestic labor and household chores] to women" (186).

The so-called "feminization of agriculture" (11) that accompanied collectivization was a real-life outcome in a setting where able-bodied men were in short supply. In fact, the presence or absence of able-bodied male workers was a major variable in these women's lives, not only for the labor

that these men performed but also because they functioned as a safety net for women and improved the latter's social standing. Women routinely faced threats and physical abuse from soldiers and vagabonds, and they were constantly at risk as women, wives, widows, and mothers. Recognizing hardships that women endured in these capacities, policies of the new state were aimed at protecting women as wives and mothers, not just workers. New-style midwifery and attention to women's reproductive health was the hallmark of both regimes, and these policies brought real and substantial improvements to many rural women. Women's Federation cadres in China echoed the work previously done by *Zhenotdel* (Women's Department) workers of the Soviet 1920s, though this was not a result of intentional borrowing. Even the Marriage Law of 1950 resembled the so-called "post-card divorce" policies of the new Soviet state of two decades prior, which liberalized the marriage and divorce laws and made them more equitable for both genders (though many of these Soviet policies had been reversed with the Abortion Ban and new family code of 1936).

The new age of rapidly expanding market reforms in the last two decades has been equally destabilizing in both contexts. In post-Soviet Russia, scholars' attention has been increasingly drawn to the phenomenon of the "dying village," when only elder women remained attached to village life and farming while the majority of the younger generation left the village to find more lucrative and physically less strenuous jobs in urban centers. The same forces shuttered the structure of the family-centered universe of the Chinese countryside. The new domestic life became "a realm of marginalization for many elderly women" (270), not the least because "the domestic realm has been reconfigured in a form that excludes and penalizes the older women who kept it running in the years of its public invisibility. Some are in dire circumstances. Having taken dutiful care of their husbands' parents, they now find themselves, as they age, discarded by their own grown and married children, who are caught up in the attractions of a new definition of modernity centered on the acquisitive, ambitious, and consuming family unit" (277). Though women nearly universally acknowledge that everyday life became easier for their children than it was for them, they nonetheless lament the loss of family values that bonded them and their relatives together.

Inevitably, this is only a small part of a much larger story of local, lived and thus subjective experience of socialism in any nation. As a matter of fact, the study reminded me of the serious limitations that we as scholars face in our work, especially in terms of the geographic scope of our projects and available methodology. Thus, even though Hershatter seems to be fully aware of the fact that "the category 'woman' or even 'rural woman' is marked deeply by variations in age and locale, each with its own array of subordinations, norms, and transgressions" (287-8), a single study cannot possibly demonstrate this variation in locale on a truly nationwide scale. Regional variations affected the memory of socialism, and a broader geographic scope of the

project (beyond central and south Shaanxi villages) could have revealed new nuances of that process. Moreover, Hershatter without any doubt utilizes oral history masterfully; her collection techniques and interpretive frameworks are close to flawless. Yet just as I've written in my own work that it helps to be a native speaker, a local, and a cultural insider when doing oral history, the flipside of the same coin created substantial challenges for Hershatter. Even though she was fully aware that women and all locals "were exquisitely attuned to the pragmatic advantages of having the first-ever foreigner reside in their village for a few weeks" (18), Hershatter could not affect or undo this reality. This brings us to a substantial – and unresolved – debate on whether foreign researchers construct and inform their research findings merely by pursuing a particular research agenda, and whether these women say what they think this foreigner wants to hear.

Yet overall, the study left me wondering about the evolution of historiography over the last two decades. I have no doubt that when Hershatter began her research in mid-1990s, little had been written about peasant women in the countryside and even less had been done on the history of subjectivity in China (i.e., in terms of oral history compilations). This lack of scholarship allowed Hershatter to conclude that "The Party-state's claim that it freed women to move from 'inner' to 'outer' domains, where 'outer' was privileged as the domain of paid work, political visibility, and liberation, bears rethinking" (287). Yet judging from my own field, I see that there has been a steady, if not to say massive, rise in interest and publications on the given topic in the last decade and even more. Scholars of gender in the Soviet context had broken down assumptions that women's liberation was uniform and universal, and they brought to light real life stories of women, peasants, and peasant women, and studied the diverse realities of socialism for different social groups. I wonder if the same might be the case for Chinese studies. Furthermore, Hershatter's central argument, or rather a research question and a discursive point, that I saw in the study was "the question of whether Chinese women, and rural women in particular, had a revolution" (31). The author answers the question by saying that "yes, in the sense that space and time, as they lived and understood them, were profoundly reordered in the 1950s. The revolution they had, however, was shaped in particular ways by gender, understood not as an immutable property of humans, but as an ensemble of practices that were differentially addressed – and neglected – by revolutionary policies" (31). While this finding is important and noteworthy, it is in no way groundbreaking and pioneering in the field of Soviet studies. Beginning in the 1980s, the gender scholars of the Soviet experience have been doing just that, expanding our knowledge of the socialism-in-the-making as a set of human – and gendered -- practices and limited realities.¹ I hope that this well-researched and skillfully executed study will do for Chinese studies what select scholars' work on social history from below did for the Soviet field over the last twenty years.

¹ Natalia Pushkareva, *Ruskaia zhenshchina: istoriia i sovremennost* (Moscow: Ladomir, 2002); Irina Mukhina and Liubov Denisova, *Rural Women in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia* (London: Routledge, 2010); Beatrice Farnsworth and Lynne Viola, eds., *Russian Peasant Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).