

The Historian's Craft

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“A spider sewed at night \ Without a light \ Upon an arc of white” (Emily Dickinson). “In women’s narratives of the collective era, needlework is the activity that most epitomizes the incessant, ephemeral, and occasionally creative temporality of domestic life. Memories of collective field work are interwoven with accounts of late nights spent sewing...” (183).

I couldn’t help being reminded of Emily Dickinson’s poem when I read these lines from Gail Hershtatter’s *The Gender of Memory*. Granted, Emily Dickinson’s spider is mainly metaphorical (“Of immortality / His strategy / Was Physiognomy”), while the needlework of the rural Chinese women whose memory is the basis of this book was, and is, very concrete. Yet, while Dickinson’s metaphors are always rooted in a deeply lived experience (she carefully sewed together in little booklets the loose sheets on which she had written her poems) certain traits of Dickinson’s image return in Hershtatter’s description of Chinese women’s needlework: alone, at night, unseen – but also “creative”. In people’s cultures – and especially in the culture of rural women – work is also a means of self-expression, the useful and the beautiful, craft and art, are never fully separate. And perhaps the most compelling metaphor of the vision and failures of socialism told in this book is the attempt to socialize needlework and create sewing groups during the “Great Leap Forward” (247-48).

The connection with Emily Dickinson is not, I hope, just a personal literary quirk. Rather, it is my way of approaching the implications of Hershtatter’s title. What does “the gender of memory” mean? One may be misled into some kind of essentialist mystique, but Hershtatter, like Dickinson, makes it very clear that the specificity of women’s memory is based on very tangible historical and social differences. The “women’s sphere”, as it used to be described, means different experiences to remember, different spaces in which to remember and share memories, different functions of memory in society. All are constantly undergoing historical change, and all are in evidence throughout the book.

On the one hand, Hershtatter notes, “The domestic space is not a self-evident, easily delineated physical space, but rather a cultural and ideological domain” (185). Indeed, as the book carefully explores, what was domestic and private was subjected to constant revisions and rethinking before, during

and after the revolution: “The domestic, in that sense, was not all private. Late imperial statecraft writers ceaselessly promoted women’s handicraft labor as crucial to the health of the agrarian economy and hence the stability of the state”; on the other hand, “Even while de-emphasizing the domestic realm, the [...] socialist state transformed it in ways more thoroughgoing and profound than any previous regime” (184, 186). Thus, the history of rural China for women hinges on these changes to an extent that seems much ampler than in the memory of men. The women featured in this book experience dramatically the ambivalence between the opening up of public spaces and the creation of new role models, and the persistence of private, domestic, familial duties that are, at best, paid superficial lip homage or, at worst, stigmatized as “feudal”.

The interaction and tension of the private and the domestic spheres also generates new memory spaces and new ways of remembering. The women who followed Zhang Qiuxiang “around the fields, patiently interviewing her and transforming what she said into maxims, then teaching her to recite them until she became a fluent speaker” (261) may be an extreme case of institutional construction of memory. Yet, even this “manipulation” could not have been conceived if Zhang Qiuxiang hadn’t had something to say. As Hershtatter points out, it would be wrong to read this scene as “the state, like the man behind the curtain in *Wizard of Oz*, caught in the act of producing and packaging an apparently authentic, grassroots labor heroine” (216). Indeed, the reverse is also true: behind the curtain of the official state narrative stands a real person, who really talks (“what she said”) and really works, with a real life experience that is the ultimate origin of all this apparatus. Zhang Qiuxiang may be “packaged” but is not “produced”.

And anyway: she is “packaged” by the “painstaking daily work” of other women, who also exist as persons, not just as extensions of the will of the state. Indeed, this is the process through which most public personal narratives, from Malcolm X to Rigoberta Menchú, are produced through and by cultural mediators and professional narrators. As the Italian anthropologist Pietro Clemente insists, “no one is less alone” than the autobiographical storyteller. There is no such thing as an “authentic”, pristine, uncontaminated personal narrative. Even the most personal and private of memories is

ultimately told in dialogue with what Maurice Halbwachs described as “the social frameworks of memory.”

Of course, as Hershatler's example, and her entire book, demonstrate, the “social frameworks” are different from epoch to epoch and from place to place. The presence of the state in revolutionary China may be more or less pervasive than the impact and ideology of the financial markets in the globalized West, but it certainly works differently. For instance, the way in which unschooled Zhang Qiuxiang finds her public voice through the work of the Women's Federation is different from the way many of our oral history sources in the West find their own voices also through the experience of public schooling and education – though we do not tend to couch that in terms of “manipulation” or interference. Indeed, as in the work of Spanish oral historian Mercedes Vilanova, literacy acquired in public state schools is perceived as essential to personal freedom and to the development of full citizenship; in rural China, perhaps, one woman who “could not read or make a speech” may “[f]ind her wings” (217) through other, state- and party-sponsored channels. And of course her “freedoms” may be different: the search for a very basic “freedom from want” on the one hand, and a publicly recognized involvement in the collective effort on the other.

One asset of Hershatler's book, in fact, is how it stays away from ideological prejudices. “The dismissive commonsense knowledge of Chinese socialism, like earlier waves of revolutionary sympathy, is too simple” (216). One of the ways in which her book, and oral history in general, complicate our vision of society lies in the fact that what we gather are individual narratives. In the so-called “totalitarian state” (a formula that Hershatler does not use), individual experience is supposed to be smothered to the point of becoming almost non-existent; this book shows how individual women made personal lives in a difficult and complicated context. Hershatler organizes each chapter around a social role (widow, activist, farmer, midwife, mother, model...) and identifies each of these roles with the story of a person who is representative not in the average, statistical sense, but precisely because – like Emerson's “representative” men – she gathers in her exceptional individuality most of the possibilities and options of her social environment (to quote Pietro Clemente once more – all personal narratives are both “a story in the culture” and “the culture in a story”). The result is a dialogic (dialectic?) relationship between the social construct and the personal subjectivity that shows once more how the role shapes the individuals, and how the individuals shape the role. Perhaps most oral history is about this.

Finally, two points about the book's approach to memory and oral sources. Hershatler is very much aware of memory as a process – not a trace but the constantly reworked interpretation of that trace, as she writes quoting Le Goff (22). Thus, while she painstakingly fact-checks all statements and narratives with other sources (her research on archives and printed sources is impressive), she makes use of the errors and silences to investigate the relationship that each

narrator has with her past, the meaning of the past in the present. These are stories of personal growth and change; while these women have never been silent either in private or in public, their stories have never been told in this way and to this type of listener. The very fact of being interviewed, and by a foreigner to boot, induces each narrator to rethink her experience and try to make sense of it for her listener and, rising to the interviewer's challenge, for herself.

In several passages, Hershatler reminds us that these stories, in the form in which we have them, are the result of another dialogue, that between the narrator and the interviewer. The interview is the result of a complex personal and social relationship: “To suddenly appear at an interview and ask about a lot of internal [*neibu*] circumstances, I feel that it was not necessarily possible to get answers” (231) – also because narrator and interviewer are often not mutually aware of what one is seeking and the other has to tell (“I didn't tell you anything you didn't ask me about,” says one woman, when asked about why she hadn't mentioned her performing in Chinese opera, p. 22). One of the deep differences between oral history and even the best types of journalism is time. On the one hand, one does not just go and talk to people, but stays a long time or keeps returning. And then, on the other hand, one does not write immediately, pressed for newsworthiness, but spends time making sense of what has been said and researching its background. The result is the three times that make up this book: the 1950s *about* which the narrators speak; the years between 1996 and 2004 *in* which they speak; and the year 2011 in which the book was published. To which I would add 2014, in which I had the pleasure of reading it.