

Lessons We Need to Learn

Aminda M. Smith, *Michigan State University*

IN *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*, Gail Hershatter introduces readers to seventy-two women who came of age in tandem with the Chinese Communist revolution. The book's scholarly contributions are manifold. Because I am one of several roundtable participants, however, I will limit my comments to an element of the book that is particularly relevant to scholars working in the rapidly growing field of New PRC history: Hershatter offers a powerful critique of the notion that Maoist political rhetoric was *merely* rhetorical. Although she has been developing this critique for at least two decades, in this book she not only makes her strongest case against the "mere rhetoric" perspective; she also models a productive method for locating unexpected meaning in the discursive remnants of Chinese socialism. While Hershatter is not alone in arguing for the utility of politically charged PRC sources, it is nonetheless striking how many of us still believe that if we interview enough witnesses, find enough archival documentation, and read everything with, against, and perpendicular to its grain, we might be able to get at the 'truths beneath the veneer' of Maoist discourse. In response to that conviction, which continues to animate PRC history, *The Gender of Memory* offers a sharp rebuke. The textual and oral traces of the early PRC period "do not necessarily tell us what we want to know," writes Hershatter, "but perhaps they offer us lessons we need to hear" (235).

The lessons we need to learn are related to a methodological tendency that stems from a specious truism: published and archival sources from the PRC period are particularly unreliable because of the all-encompassing political culture within which they were produced and preserved. This judgment often extends to oral histories as well, if the narrators articulate their memories using the seemingly formulaic frameworks provided by the state. Fortunately, there are few serious scholars arguing we should jettison all texts and voices with Maoist inflections – indeed to do so would be to throw away the bulk of our source material. But our acceptance of the 'unreliable sources truism' has meant that the primary methodological mode in PRC history is to offer 'against the grain' readings of Maoism. We hunt for the voices that seem to contradict, or speak outside of, the discourse of the state. Our faith in this method has been only partially blunted by a half-century or

more of philosophical and historical inquiries (including Hershatter's) suggesting that the boundaries between state and society, and between discourse and reality, are nebulous.

Even if we concede, however, that one should make a distinction between the elites (who wield the most political power) and the masses (who wield less), there is still a deeper problem with reading against Maoist discourse in an effort to uncover some grassroots truth underneath it. As Hershatter noted in 1993, the method of reading against the grain was honed in a Marxist historiographical context, and as such it can produce strange results when applied to the discourse of a self-described Marxist state.¹ The Maoist technique of speaking bitterness, for example, was a pedagogical tool, designed to teach people to read their own life histories 'against the grain' of the imperialist, capitalist, and feudal conceptual frameworks that enabled and justified oppression. Notably, then, many of the counter-narratives in bitterness accounts do indeed hint at oppositional politics and popular traditions, but those hardly stand apart from Maoist discourse – they were a key part of it, as elements the Party believed it was targeting.

And although speaking bitterness gave people a formula for reinterpreting the institutions and traditions of China's pre-revolutionary society, the resulting accounts only sound formulaic if we forget the daily hardships faced by poor people in early-twentieth-century China. For most of the women Hershatter interviewed, discourse and reality produced each other, as the Communist Party gave people the tools to narrate traumatic lives marked by hunger, death, loss, illness, and conscription – real events that "otherwise might be unspeakable" (62). Bitterness was so real that, as Hershatter points out, those who spoke it "were the lucky ones" because they survived to tell their stories (48).

In fact, Hershatter shows that rural women's lives were punctuated more by intimate hardships like infertility, hunger, and dangerous childbirths, and less by major political events. And we might thus be tempted to use the bitterness account, against itself, to undermine the official rhetoric. For even in the case of committed revolutionaries, the personal was not always political. This is well illustrated in the case of the activist, Feng Sumei. Feng fully understood that the new Marriage Law prohibited parents from arranging unions against the will of their children, but she did not find in the

law a solution to her own dilemma as she deliberated over whether to enter into a marriage that her parents had orchestrated. Although she was politically active, Feng did not see her marriage as a political question. For her, the choice was between pursuing her own desires and maintaining a good relationship with her parents (113-16).

Of course the historian should pay attention to stories like Feng Sumei's, which reveal the missed connections between Chinese society as reflected in Party discourse on the one hand, and the diverse social relationships of individual Chinese people on the other. The analytical error occurs when we decide that one of those understandings is more closely connected with 'reality' than the other. When we see the bitterness story as a rhetorical container for truths that existed independent of it, we miss the point. The methodological mistake is precisely the belief that we can mine bitterness accounts for apolitical descriptions of 'real' life, that if we strip away the Maoist language, what is left is the meaningful aspect of the memory or experience. For even as the personal and the political sometimes operated in different registers, it was never clear that one was always more meaningful than the other: while in 2001 Zhang Chaofeng recounted, with little affect or elaboration, the time she accidentally lit a month of her impoverished mother's wages on fire (1), Shan Xiuzhen betrayed more emotion when she reported, in 1997, that one of the things she most regretted was her loss, during the Cultural Revolution, of a photograph of herself with Chairman Mao (233).

The Gender of Memory demonstrates that when politically active women faced loss and difficulty, they regularly "turned to revolutionary models for solace" (205). And long after the 1940s and 50s, when women revolutionaries were cast aside by post-reform-era "family members and a wider society that depended on, expected, yet generally failed to recognize much of their labor," those women could reassert their own value with the political discourse that had vaunted and empowered them (232). Thus, when we dig right past political rhetoric, in the hope of finding some truth hidden beneath it, we risk discarding the very truths we seek. While the words of Hershatter's interviewees regularly complicate, and even seem to disprove the core claims of Chinese Communism, Hershatter warns us against giving into that smug "aha" and imagining we've discovered "the man behind the curtain" (216).

The Gender of Memory provides several examples to illustrate the risks involved in rushing to the 'rhetorical veneer' interpretation. In Chapter Two, for instance, Hershatter's interviewees regularly repeat the Communist claim that within pre-revolutionary "feudal" society, women were perpetually confined to domestic spaces and denied the right to public lives, their mobility literally restricted by their bound feet. Yet, even as these women "remember themselves as shut away at home," the "details of their stories suggest otherwise," full as they were of unbound feet that carried women farmers into the fields, women refugees over ice-capped mountains, and young girls to the far-away

villages of their future husbands (44). Clearly, these apparent contradictions call "into question the iconic figure of the sequestered woman who was able to 'stride outside the household door' only with the arrival of the Party" (39). But Hershatter cautions us against the assumption that one of those competing claims is truer than the other. That assumption ignores the way that these seemingly contradictory narratives were both truths for the women who told them. As *The Gender of Memory* shows, the seclusion narrative "remains a powerful explanation of oppression even for people who never experienced it" because women could mobilize that rhetoric to assert their own value on two levels. First, they could claim to have been the sort of "respectable and virtuous" women who should have been subject to exclusion, and second, they could insist that they were revolutionary, and non-feudal women who rejected such treatment (63).

Hershatter demonstrates the new kind of analytical conclusion that comes from taking both sets of truths seriously when she proposes an alternate reading of an anecdote that appears time and again in revolutionary rhetoric. *In the prerevolutionary society*, it is often said, *if a woman were alone in her house and a knock came at the door, the women inside would reply, "No one is home."* When Hershatter's interviewees repeated this story, she observed that in a world where women do all of the labor and roam the countryside begging for food for their children, where men are conscripted and killed and mostly absent, "the statement 'No one is home' is not a sign that a woman denigrates her own personhood. It merely suggests that she has been left to fend for herself" (64).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, many of the rural women in *The Gender of Memory* have once again been left to fend for themselves, this time in a post-revolutionary society where many people, from historians to the Party elite, find a commitment to Maoism quaint, meaningless, and even dangerous. That denigrating perspective is particularly troubling to Hershatter whose work was motivated by the knowledge that these women and their stories would soon be lost forever. Indeed, it won't be long before historians of the early socialist era have nothing but written sources, and the bulk of those will employ the Maoist language that has long aroused our suspicion. Hershatter certainly reminds us of the silences in that record, even when it includes oral histories, but *The Gender of Memory* also leaves me optimistic about the value of those unreliable sources.

Hershatter dispels the myth that the truest truths are those that run counter to, or exist outside of, the discourse of the state. She refutes the all-to-common belief that if we find the right sources, we can peek beneath that rhetorical veneer and catch a glimpse of 'real' experience under Chinese socialism. *The Gender of Memory* illustrates the ways that rural women fashioned their subjectivities by drawing on and creating both Maoist frameworks AND local cultural understandings. Their experiences cannot and should not be disentangled from discourse, even when the former seems to vitiate the

latter. We may not be able to resolve the elements of memory that we find contradictory or to understand the power of political claims we find unsatisfying, but our incomprehension would only matter if it were our own conceptual world we sought to capture.

¹ Gail Hershatter, "The Subaltern Talks Back: Reflections on Subaltern Theory and Chinese History," *Positions* 1:1 (Spring 1993): 103-30.