

# Hershatter's Analysis of Virtues and the Construction of the Self

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As an anthropologist who lived in two rural collectives between 1966 and 1978, and later returned to one of them on more than a dozen occasions to conduct longitudinal fieldwork, while reading Professor Hershatter's book I felt that I was once again returning to my own village. There are so many stories in Hershatter's book that are similar to the stories I have heard in my village, and I could also identify the Cao Zhuxiangs, Gao Zhenxians, and Zhang Chaofengs in my village as well. Of course, there are variations in detail and personal characteristics, yet the big story of the book, i.e., how rural women in China acted out their selfhood during the radical years of the 1950s and in later years recalled and made sense of the process, can also be read as an authentic and vivid account of my village in Heilongjiang province. If there is a true and mega-story of the 1950s, I believe Hershatter has nicely captured it and has presented it in a very engaging and elegant style. My hat's off to her!

Among the other themes in the book, I was particularly touched by Hershatter's insightful attention to and penetrating analysis of the role of virtues as these elderly women relayed their stories to the researchers. This reminded me of many conversations in my Heilongjiang village with aunts or elder sisters who repeatedly presented themselves as virtuous mothers, wives, or daughters-in-law. Yet I was never able to fully grasp the significance of why they did this - much less could I understand why they viewed their belief in enduring virtues as an important way to construct and maintain the new self. While blaming myself for my own blindness, I am inspired by Hershatter's approach to the role of virtues beyond the scope of gendered memory.

If I understand Hershatter correctly, her main arguments are: (1) because the state discourse of revolution and socialism did not cover the crucial areas of women's everyday lives, especially domestic work, rural women had to resort to long-existing womanly virtues, such as industriousness, competency, and the ability to harmonize human relations, to construct their own moral selves and to make sense of their new life experiences under socialism; (2) these womanly virtues also effectively engendered the memories of these women, even to the point that they recalled the campaigns, arguably the most radical new

element that the state imposed on rural life, in terms of the birth of their children as representative of the virtue of motherhood; and (3) these virtues enabled these elderly women to maintain a sense of dignity and moral self at a time when most of their previous achievements seemed to have been written off by new ideologies and social practices.

The importance of Hershatter's discovery and analysis of virtues can hardly be overstated. Yet, to what extent using traditional virtues to construct a new and revolutionary moral self during the period of socialist construction belongs only to female labor models and other women remains an open question. I wonder if Hershatter and her collaborators also interviewed rural men, and if they did, whether rural men also resorted to enduring virtues when recalling their life stories. My research in the Heilongjiang village reveals a similar phenomenon among rural men. With this in mind, I would like to make the following additional observations.

First, in terms of both ethical discourse and moral behavior, male labor models and village cadres used almost identical virtues to build their moral selves as well as their moral authority in public life. A male labor model, for example, was similarly measured by his industriousness, competency, and capability to manage human relationships. (Otherwise he would not have been elected as a labor model by his fellow villagers, and he would not have been selected by the leaders). As Hershatter notes, these are enduring virtues that go way back in Chinese history; yet, how one acted out these virtues was conditioned by the dominant socialist-construction discourse during that utopian era. For example, both female and male labor models would have had to attribute their virtuous acts to the leadership of the party-state.

Second, self-sacrifice is a common core of virtues in both pre-revolutionary, mostly Confucian, ethical discourse and in post-revolutionary and Communist ethics. The only change is the actual recipient of the individual sacrifices, namely, the shift from making sacrifices for one's parents or family to making sacrifices for the construction of socialism. In this sense, it is rather natural that both rural women and men resorted to long-existing virtues to make sense of the new self that they were mobilized to construct. The important difference is that rural men were privileged to be fully

engaged in public life and consequently they absorbed more from the state discourse, including ethical notions. As a result, rural men could rely on *both* the new socialist virtues *and* the enduring and traditional virtues when recollecting their actions in the 1950s. Nevertheless, if the researcher goes beyond the political and economic on the exterior to explore the issue of how one was to be a proper and moral person in the new society, chances are that male labor models and other male activists would respond in the same way as their female counterparts.

Third, as self-sacrifice remained intact in ethical discourse, thus connecting the past with the present during the 1950s, it is easy to understand why the female labor models in Hershatter's book did not experience conflicts between the outer expression and the inner core of the self, nor did they endure a resistant interiority to the state discourse. Making sacrifices for something beyond oneself was very likely their true interiority in the 1950s and these sacrifices were reinforced when they were asked to recall their life stories at a time when self-sacrifice was replaced by a new ethics of self-development. This is precisely what happened in my village to a group of old men with whom I routinely spoke during each of my visits to the community since 1989. As time passed, these elderly men became more assertive in expressing their experiences during the 1950s and 1960s. On my last visit, in 2013, a 92-year-old retired schoolteacher played for me an hour-long audiotape, claiming it was an interview he had given to the provincial radio station about his role in the land reform campaign. It turned out that he had actually made the tape on his own and he had forced many villagers to listen to it. When I re-checked my notes from earlier conversations with him, I realized that he had never been critical of the 1950s, but with the passage of time he had become increasingly negative about local cadres and national politics. In his accounts, the Great Leap Famine and the Cultural Revolution were two points when things turned for the worse.

This leads to my last observation, that is, the radical and frequently violent years of the 1950s were also years of idealism and utopianism. Among other factors, a strong sense of being good and doing the right things in the new society motivated millions of Chinese individuals to actively participate in the political campaigns of the 1950s, as is demonstrated by the heroines in Hershatter's book. Given that the women in Hershatter's book and the men in my village both presented their revolutionary actions in terms of enduring virtues, I wonder if there was indeed more of a continuity than a rupture between the old and the new ethics in the 1950s, despite the surface radicalism. Perhaps the rupture with the traditional and enduring virtues did not take place until 1966. This may help us to understand why the first seventeen years of Chinese socialism (1949–1966) hold such a special place in the memories of Chinese individuals who lived through the 1950s.

In short, the important role of long-existing virtues that centered on the notion of self-sacrifice during the radical

period of socialist construction has been seriously understudied and under-appreciated, and it may eventually be lost as the definitive feature of virtues has taken a radical turn in the post-Mao reform era. It is to Hershatter's credit that she has rescued this part of history, which will surely inspire many scholars to pay more attention not only to virtues but also to how Chinese individuals—women and men alike—made sense of their lives and remade their moral selves under the radical socialism of the 1950s and beyond.