

The Gender of Memory:
Rural Women and Collectivization in 1950s China

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Introduction

A decade ago, Xian-based researcher Gao Xiaoxian and I began to collect life histories of elderly rural women in four central and south Shaanxi villages.¹ We wanted to elicit their accounts of socialist collectivization in the 1950s, before advancing age and death silenced their stories. If farmers were about 80% of the total Chinese population in the 1950s, then women farmers were probably close to 40%.² Land reform, collectivization, the 1950 Marriage Law, and campaigns for literacy and public health all had targeted women as objects and agents of profound change. And yet, compared to other groups I have written about—industrial workers, prostitutes, women in the 1980s—rural women and their lives across the “long 1950s,” from the arrival of the CCP to the recovery from the Great Leap Famine, were inaudible, doubly marginalized by virtue both of location and gender. Written records tell us little about the responses of these women to state initiatives, the degree to which their daily lives were affected by 1950s policies, the domains—economic, social, psychological—in which change occurred. In order to understand something about rural women, we need to move beyond policy pronouncements. Until we do so, a central piece of the cultural and social history of the 1950s—the texture and nuance of life, the feel and meaning and local traces of the early years of state revolution—will remain obscure.

Since 1996, on six different research trips, we have collected life histories of 72 women who were over the age of 60 at the time of the interview, as well as a smaller number of men who held local leadership positions in the same villages during the collective period. In one village we re-interviewed a number of women at a ten-year interval; in several we interviewed adult children of the women. We have asked about changes in women’s field work, domestic labor, childbearing, and marriage, supplementing these oral narratives with published accounts, as well as hundreds of government reports and internal memos gleaned from county and provincial archives.³

In addition to supplying an account of an important but understudied population, this project has at least four points of interest for scholars of China, gender, rural studies, and the humanities and social sciences more broadly. First, it traces the relationships between oral narratives, memory, and history. What counts as an event, in memory and in the telling? Oral narratives will always be fragmented: unevenly recorded, selectively remembered, and artfully deployed by our village interlocutors as indirect commentary on a troubled present. Above all, they compel respect for limits and dead ends: reluctant recognition that women's voices offer no direct line to hidden histories, that oral narratives are as contaminated as any other retrievable fragment of the past.

Second, this project explores the ways that memory and revolution are gendered. Gender was an axis of power, difference, attachment, grievance, and collectivity in 1950s rural China, even as the meanings attached to gender shifted profoundly. We usually think about China's twentieth century as divided almost perfectly in half by the 1949 revolution, or liberation. But what happens to our notion of turning points in twentieth century Chinese social and economic life when gender is placed at the center? The historian Joan Kelly once asked in a famous piece, "Did women have a Renaissance?"⁴ If she had been writing about China instead of Europe she might have said, did women have a Chinese revolution? And if so, when?

Third, the project looks at the fuzzy, shifting, and constantly refigured boundary between what we conventionally divide into state and society, asking about the distinction between the state apparatus on the one hand and a more diffuse state presence, awareness of the state, and self-fashioning with state norms in mind on the other. In a period of generally acknowledged state expansion in rural China, where and how was that awareness produced, maintained, internalized, or broadened to encompass formerly unaddressed populations such as rural women?

Fourth, the project addresses an ongoing interdisciplinary and cross-geographical discussion about revolution, repudiation, and postcommunist nostalgia. It traces connections between eras that are conventionally studied separately: pre-Liberation (1949), socialist construction, and market socialism (or postsocialism), suggesting accretions, similarities, and transformations that do not easily map onto conventional historical markers.

The discussion-based format of this seminar is a rare opportunity for me as I begin to write a book based on this decade of research, and I want to make full use of it. Rather than present a fully elaborated draft chapter or a selection of the most gripping narratives we have collected, I will seek your collective wisdom on four of the issues I find most intriguing, even though my thinking about them is bursting with loose ends. They are: 1) the gendered reconfiguration of village space, 2) the relationship of two remembered temporalities, campaign time and domestic time, 3) the embodiment of a gendered “state effect” through the production of women labor models, and 4) the helpfulness of an unlikely, even anachronistic category—transnationalism—in thinking about rural Chinese women in the early socialist period. What unites these themes is their unthinkability without gender, and the paper concludes with some ambivalent reflections about why gender is both absolutely necessary, and necessarily insufficient, to an understanding of rural revolution.

Space

The conventional narrative of women’s liberation by the CCP in the rural areas holds that the revolution made it possible for the first time for women to go out—to meetings, fieldwork, literacy classes, and other households. This required rolling back the forces of feudalism that had confined women to the inner chambers or the natal family courtyard, regarded their appearance before unrelated men as a threat to their virtue or a sign that it was already compromised, and

consigned newly married women to the disapproving and punitive control of their mothers-in-law. “Liberation” for rural women, then, has been figured as movement through hitherto forbidden social space.

This theme of moving out into a wider world does appear in the narratives of individual women. They often express it in the precise language made available by the revolution to express changes in women’s status. One woman after another, for instance, recounts as a personal anecdote how someone came to the house asking if anyone was home, and the woman inside answered, “no, no one is here,” a standard story in government publications indicating women’s low self-regard and the need to raise it. But stories in which home equals confinement and movement equals liberation are interwoven with other more complex notions of space, motion, and safety. Women often associated physical mobility not with emancipation but rather with hardship, danger, exposure, and shame. Some spent part of their childhood on the road as famine refugees; others punctuate their narratives of childhood and young adulthood with stories of concealment from bandits and soldiers. The absence of able-bodied men in the childhood families of many women—men lost to death, work migration, army service or flight from conscription—frequently necessitated that women and girls “go out” to farm, sell yarn, beg, or otherwise eke out a living. “Going out” before 1949, then, was most often associated with stigmatized labor. After 1949, however, women learned to associate pre-1949 “staying in” not with safety and respectability, but with familial oppression and low social status. The historical layering of meanings attached to “going out” and “staying in” helps to explain why women frequently assert that they were confined to the family courtyard before 1949, even as the details of their stories suggest otherwise.

One of the first revolutionary reconfigurations of space was the process by which the arrival of Communist troops, at first indistinguishable from a dozen previous military incursions, eventually came to be remembered as “liberation.” In the 1950s this was quickly followed by the conscious reworking of gendered village space, through literacy classes, newspaper illustrations, choral singing, opera performances and, most centrally, the mobilization of women to participate in fieldwork on a regular basis. This entailed not so much moving women “out” into public village space—as I just suggested, they were routinely there already, if not always happily or safely—as it did laying down an intricate, painstaking tracery of new social networks and providing new language in which young women might articulate the meaning of their activities.

In China, official portrayals of “how women joined the revolution” usually featured a heroic male Party secretary or guerrilla fighter recruiting oppressed young women to the cause (the revolutionary drama-cum-ballet *Red Detachment of Women* being the most famous case in point).⁵ After 1949, village women were often provided with encouragement, resources, and technical expertise by male cadres who were assigned to the villages to work as agricultural technicians and Party political guides. Creating networks and language for women, however, was largely women’s work. In the 1950s, it was performed by Women’s Federation cadres who were sent as part of a larger visiting work team to live in villages for periods varying from several weeks to a year, a practice known as “squatting” (*dundian* 蹲点, literally “to squat in a spot”). Many of these women were themselves barely out of school. Some were new mothers who had left their babies with relatives in order to follow the Party’s directive to go to the countryside and help the rural masses transform local society. In a village, they would go to the fields to work with local women, eat and sleep in their homes (paying them a modest fee), mediate family conflicts, encourage them to go to nighttime literacy classes, organize daycare for them, and talk to them

about the importance of whatever political task was at hand.⁶ In villages with no experienced women farmers, the Women's Federation cadres identified potential models, typically young married women, and organized classes to teach them farming skills.⁷ They often found that women were reluctant to be elected as women's representatives; families were dubious about the effect on their reputations and time spent away from domestic work, while the women themselves had no local leadership models other than the men who had been pressed into service and often abused as local unit heads under the Guomindang regime.⁸ For the Women's Federation cadres themselves, mobilizing work required reconfiguring their own notions of what they could and could not do.⁹

In short, what the revolution meant, spatially, was gendered. Social space—its patterns of use, its meanings, individual understandings of it—undoubtedly changed for all 1950s village residents in the course of land reform and the rapid collectivization of agriculture. But every node on a spatial map was differently configured for women than for men. For any villager, moving across the landscape in the pre-1949 situation entailed danger, but some of those dangers were gender-specific (conscription, rape). After 1949, cadre mobilization of peasant women was aimed at destigmatizing space for them, not just making it secure. This was difficult work for all concerned. A common obstacle to young women's physical mobility after 1949 was the fear on the part of their in-laws that their untrammelled movement around the village would lead them inexorably to demand divorces. The father-in-law who locked the door against a woman returning from a village meeting, the mother-in-law who beat her, the mother who didn't save food for her, the husband who withdrew into sullen silence or exploded in verbal or physical abuse were recurring figures in many interviews. "Going out" remained risky for village women, at least for a time, even as the sources of peril changed.

Over the course of the 1950s, the norms attached to appearance in village space began to shift. Ironically, as women moved more safely around the village space and beyond, learning to reject the notions of respectability that they would have observed before 1949 if family circumstances had permitted, they also learned to misremember the story line of their past as one of confinement, rather than unprotected exposure. In doing so, they obliquely reinscribed the norm of confined virtue even as they denounced it.

Campaign Time and Domestic Time

Frequently throughout the 1950s, formal state campaigns aimed at the rural population rearranged the daily groups in which farmers came together to labor in ever-larger collectives, the means by which income was calculated and distributed, and the gendered division of labor. Taken as an ensemble, these measures introduced what I call campaign time: a new temporality that cordoned off the pre-1949 past “before Liberation” and measured the present by state initiatives and popular participation in them. A major feature of campaign time was the mobilization of women to participate regularly in fieldwork. Women who had never worked in the fields or had done so only when accompanied by male relatives at planting and harvest began to go to the fields daily, usually in the company of other women.

In the collective period, state temporality was not a remote property of national politics. It contained and framed the daily activities of farmers, more proximate to daily social practice than ever before. The collective altered the temporality of the work day by dividing it into distinct periods, each worth a defined number of workpoints, and often followed by a required political meeting in the evening. Financial and political necessity required that women, like men, show up each day to engage in collective fieldwork. And yet, the experience and memories of campaign time, like those of village space, cannot be understood without reference to gender.

For women, the visible productive labor performed on campaign time was inextricable from the invisible productive and reproductive labor performed in the household, in a temporality that had no longer had a language: hidden domestic time. As the range of tasks and responsibilities available to women expanded, their responsibility for cooking, making clothing and shoes, tending to children, and caring for parents-in-law remained constant, unnamed and unremunerated. They came to the fields later than men and left earlier because of meal preparation. Their days in the field were shorter than those of men, and their daily workpoint remuneration (set periodically by the production team, with consistent devaluation of the tasks women performed *because* women performed them) was invariably lower. Their hours of labor, however, were far longer than those of men. The socialization of domestic tasks was not pursued consistently by national or local leadership, who focused their efforts on the collectivization of productive rather than reproductive labor. Since domestic labor was not by and large collectivized, with the exception of seasonal or short-term child care groups, it was more or less rendered invisible, irrelevant to the national project (if not to the individual woman's level of exhaustion).

The framing condition of domestic labor was larger and growing families with many surviving children. In the early 1950s, the end of incessant warfare, a stable security situation, and an energetic state campaign to retrain village midwives in sterile techniques produced sharply improved rates of maternal health and infant survival. The result was families with four, five, or seven surviving children, whose support and care became an onerous burden for most rural families.

For women who have lost track of or never apprehended the finer distinctions of campaign time, who routinely scramble the chronology of mutual aid groups and advanced producer cooperatives, the years in which their children were born, marked off by the lunar calendar and the

twelve animals of the duodecimal cycle, remain the most reliable way of organizing time in memory. We have also found a layering of temporalities around the act of childbirth itself, where progressive, scientific, sterile health care delivery time jostled against birthing stories peopled by ghosts and punctuated by mysterious midwife deaths.

Seldom articulated as a topic in itself, the logistics and emotional tenor of family life were profoundly shaped by the exigencies of campaign time. Although one can find in the archives small pamphlets on how to organize rural child-care groups for the harvest season, child care remained a matter of short-lived local groups, patched-together supervision by grandparents and older siblings, or the risky business of leaving children alone. The oral narratives of village women are punctuated with tales of children injured, frightened by animals, left tied to the *kang*,¹⁰ drowned, or dead of diseases not treated in time. Some parents-in-law, exhausted by the economic and workload burden of grandchildren, moved to separate their living arrangements from those of their sons during the collective period, giving up the vaunted ideal of a multigenerational household and the possibility of old-age support in exchange for immediate lightening of their domestic load. Such decisions further increased the workload of women with young children, while blurring distinct memories of relationships with one child or another. Paradoxically, it is not from mothers but from older men, who spent their childhoods and adult lives being raised by and in turn caring for their aged mothers, that we can glean the most detailed accounts of relationships between mothers and children.

Sewing groups were sometimes organized by the collective, but prior to the 1970s most clothing was produced in the household. Cloth production and needlework epitomized the recurrent, incessant, ephemeral, and occasionally creative temporality of domestic life. Even as political exhortation and financial necessity drew more and more women into the fields to earn

workpoints, home textile and sideline production—once important sources of income—were made impossible as the state restricted rural markets. Prior to 1949, many women had spun cotton and some had woven cloth, embroidered pillows, or made shoes for sale at local periodic markets. Such labor often paid a household's taxes, and in the case of widow-headed households was sometimes the only source of income. In the early 1950s, local officials permitted and even encouraged the formation of women's coops to spin and weave for market, but as collectivization advanced, these groups were subsumed in larger agricultural cooperatives, and home production of textiles for the market ceased. Nevertheless, women remained responsible for clothing their ever-larger families through their own labor in a region where ready-made clothes and shoes were slow to arrive, and machine-made cloth was scarce and rationed. Women's memories of collective fieldwork are interwoven with accounts of late nights spent sewing on the *kang* (an old image of women's industriousness) and shoe soles sewn in evening brigade meetings (a newer one). Women who had specialized skills, such as embroidering the fine pillows that decorated marriage beds, continued to supplement their income by trading embroidery for grain, but these exchanges were informal and not sanctioned.

None of this labor figured at all in the written record of the 1950s. Analysis of the collective period—its accomplishments, shortcomings, gendered division of labor, and transformation of women's lives—must acknowledge that rural socialism made much of women's actual labor invisible. It should also take account of the material products of that labor—not only products for workaday use such as shoe soles and clothing, but also the individually designed handwoven sheets and kerchiefs, embroidered shoe liners and pillow facings, and meticulously sculpted painted dough ornaments that expressed the creative and playful corners of lives in which leisure, or even sleep, were in chronically short supply.

The Great Leap Forward was a moment when campaign time and domestic time collided, briefly and memorably upending every aspect of rural life. This transformational project was itself transformed, in language and in memory, by rural women.¹¹ Although all the women we interviewed understood the term "Great Leap Forward," none of them used it in describing their own histories. Rather, they used the phrase "eating in dining halls," or less commonly "smelting steel" or "panning for iron ore," the main local activities comprising Great Leap policy. They did not see the Great Leap as a unified national phenomenon; their local "campaign time" disaggregated it into constituent elements that had meaning for them. The disaggregation suggests that while national policy had profound effects on rural life, what was remembered—or forgotten—was determined not by reference to national development goals, but by the changes it wrought on domestic arrangements as men were moved out to work on steel smelting and dam-building, while women took over farmwork and briefly (with ultimately tragic consequences) were relieved of cooking tasks.

Linguistic slippage in the wake of the Great Leap is no less telling. As living standards plunged during what was later labeled the Three Hard Years, local chronologies lost their linkage to a national story of progress and diverged, sometimes permanently, from official campaign time. Women used the phrase "the old society," which denoted "pre-1949" in state accounts, to refer variously to the 1940s, to any time prior to the end of the Great Leap famine in about 1963, and (in one case noted by another interviewer) to the entire span of history before the 1980s economic reforms.¹² This suggests that some women regarded much of the collective period as a time of hardship, one since superseded by a radically different (if not always more secure) reform period. Their use of official language suggests an interpretation and adaptation, rather than a straightforward adoption of state categories.

The same can be said of the events that women chose to narrate and those which they confused, rearranged, or forgot outright. In one village, many people recounted how collectivization had progressed until after the Great Leap Forward. Then, they said, the land was decollectivized and had remained that way ever since. Even accounting for the fact that some areas did briefly redistribute land to households in the early 1960s, we were aware that most villages had been firmly reintegrated into the collective fold by about 1964. When we finally obtained some village workpoint records from the 1970s and 1980s, they too made it clear that land had not been permanently redistributed to households decades ahead of the rest of the nation. What remains, however, was the puzzle of why so many women remembered it that way. Had years of childrearing and unremitting fieldwork caused decades to blur? Had nothing of note happened to alter rural arrangements after the early 1960s? Were people reading the longer-lasting transformations of the reform era back into the earlier past, providing a genealogy for household cultivation, which has once again come to seem the common sense of rural life? And why did this village, but not others, bend chronology and event in this way? We cannot answer these questions definitively, but they alert us to the unevenness with which events were absorbed and retold from one village locale to another.

Gender does not explain all of these slippages; “forgetting” parts of the collective era may well vary by community. (A common story told by youth “sent down” to many locales during the Cultural Revolution is that when old peasants were organized to tell past stories of bitter suffering to the new arrivals, they horrified village leaders by talking about the Great Leap Famine rather than the 1940s.) Our decade of interviewing suggests, however, that the milestones of campaign time feature much more prominently in the stories of men than in those of women. Men code-switch more easily, speak of children less frequently, remember more completely (perhaps

because they participated in it more fully) the campaign time of political life. Meanwhile domestic time, which has no public language, makes an indirect appearance in the way that non-activist women (and some former activists as well) order political events most accurately when measuring them against the years of birth and ages of their children at the time. Memories of daily labor, even the language in which that labor is recalled (“farm work,” “labor days,” “workpoints,” “household tasks”), vary quite clearly by gender.

There is nothing “natural” about this divergence in memory and language. It reflects the differential ways in which “male” and “female” were understood, and the uneven degree to which their normative tasks were addressed by state policy and local assumptions. Domestic time was not unchanging. The content of a gendered division of labor constantly shifted across the collective period, but gender was always retained as an organizing principle. Memory’s rearrangement and telescoping of chronology and event is gendered, too—a phenomenon that may reflect gendered differentials in nightly hours of sleep as much as differences in political awareness.

This returns us to the local version of Joan Kelly’s question. Women did have a revolution, 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.¹³

A history of the 1950s written beyond the frame of campaign time will need to take account of the terminology, and the massive changes, that campaign time wrought. But it must also ask what rural women are practiced in remembering, and what they have learned to forget. Clearly, campaign time is incorporated into women’s memories of the collective era, and helps to

organize them. But it does not encompass them entirely. It is supplemented and sometimes dramatically disrupted by other temporalities, as well as by oblique discontent with the policies of the collective era. This raises the possibility that as soon as it leaves the purely textual realm of official announcements and enters extratextual practice, “campaign time” is immediately contaminated with other temporalities, and that it is this contaminated product, recounted in memory, that offers the best possibilities for salvaging the cultural history of the rural 1950s.

Labor Models, the State Effect, and the Self

Those of us who study recent China, particularly from history and the social sciences, tend to write as though the Party/state and reactions to it explain everything. In this formulation the state, an autonomous thing, speaks, often with the face and voice of Mao. Sometimes it speaks in violent intrastate factional conflicts, but still, it is a speaking agent. Society reacts, complying or resisting. The main node of conflict is centered on local cadres, who have conflicting ties to the state above them and the local communities below them.¹⁴ I don’t want to overstate the case here. Some of the most sophisticated work on the PRC state has focused on the complexities of its reach or extension, its disaggregation into disparate and unharmonious layers, and the need to move beyond a state-society paradigm.¹⁵ Still the habit of organizing our own narratives around Party/state initiatives and social resistances as a clearly delineated dyad is a hard one to break.

And yet, the 1950s in China is a very important time to trace what Tim Mitchell calls the “state effect”: the various kinds of work required to install the effect of an activist, transformational state standing apart from and above something called “society.”¹⁶ What was unprecedented was the scope of this work, producing the effect of a state that was present in every village, while transforming villagers, including women, into nationally conscious citizens. If we look at what is conventionally thought of as the edges of state reach: peasant women in western

China, women who seldom left their villages—we can trace the practices of state-making, of that thing that China scholars too often take for granted. We can take the state seriously, but not take it for granted, by exploring its contingency, its unevenness, the many kinds of incessant human labor and workaday practices required to make it seem natural and perduring.

As I have already noted, women villagers were often brought into “the national” by being mobilized, by local and visiting cadres, to do things they had not done before: work year-round in the fields, grow cotton, read, discuss national policy. Women entered new spaces and performed new activities—collective singing, plowing, midwifery with sterile techniques, convincing their husbands not to hoard grain. Many of these village women were officially designated as labor models, selected by “squatting” Party/state cadres as examples for the wider population to emulate. Women labor models are the only rural women who consistently appear as individuals in the written record, and their deeds fill every county archives. The most famous among them traveled to Xian or Beijing for heavily reported national meetings. Labor models, as repositories of community virtue and achievement, were landmarks connecting the space of individual villages to imagined regional, national, and even international spaces.

To become an agricultural labor model or a village leader, a man had to be good, even innovative, at what had always been man’s work. A woman labor model, in contrast, had to do something completely different from what women had conventionally been recognized as doing, even while continuing to do most of what she had done before. Women labor models were modeling shifts in the gendered division of labor, shifts that affected men as well as women, easing the move of men out of agriculture into dam construction, rural industry, and technical supervisory positions. (The feminization of agriculture, frequently bemoaned in the reform era, has substantial antecedents in the collective years.) Rural development cannot be understood

without reference to women labor models, who blurred the boundary between state and society even while embodying the effect of state initiatives.

I propose to consider labor models as a process, rather than as unchanging icons or textual artifacts or, for that matter, subjects of a conventional biography. The labor model process entailed not just laboring, but also searching, speaking, writing, and remembering. Each involved many human agents, not just the labor model or her amanuensis. Labor model stories compel attention to the social production of a woman's life for particular purposes, and to its circulation, transformation, and recollection as the product of many different people and interactions.

Searching: Lineages of Virtue. Many of the rural women mobilized as leaders and eventually recognized as models were locally respected married women or widows, whose prestige derived from pre-socialist accepted virtues of industriousness, sacrifice, and widow chastity. Stories of rural women labor models in the 1950s incorporated these themes and added several more: suffering, attention to the welfare of others, sacrifice for the collective rather than the patriline, and, interestingly, chastity or at least absence of sexual controversy. Like the virtuous widows and exacting devoted mothers in late imperial stories, labor models were active and determined. In the imperial era, publication of the biographies of virtuous women brought glory to their families and communities, even as it promoted models of good behavior for the wider reading and listening public. Something similar can be said of the 1950s, where a village or production team that produced a famous labor model often saw their achievements publicized, first across the liberated areas and later across the province or even the nation. Labor models, like virtuous women in an older regime, became sources of community social capital. At the same time, they embodied and furthered the achievement of goals enunciated by state officials, and in the process gave the Party/state (conventionally referred to in villages as *shangmian*, "the above")

a specific material presence. Like the imperial officials who encouraged the production of gazetteers, PRC officials hoped to promote emulation of labor models by promulgating the record of their heroic activity.

Of course, the differences between older tales of virtue and their 1950s counterparts are substantial. Virtuous women in early China were often lauded for their sage and sometimes audacious advice to rulers,¹⁷ but by the late imperial period, paragons were more commonly praised for their activities in the domestic realm. PRC labor model stories recombine and transform elements from both of these eras. Like the women in early Chinese texts, and unlike late imperial women, the PRC labor model was typically involved in a political project—the building of socialism. Unlike the early Chinese heroines, but like the late imperial paragons, she pursued this project through the careful performance of quotidian labor outside the domestic realm, not through catching the ear of a powerful man (although for the labor models who met Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, encounters with powerful men became part of the story later).

Women in central Shaanxi villages had not routinely engaged in fulltime fieldwork before 1949, although it was common for them to help out during planting and harvest seasons. In some villages, Women's Federation cadres found women who had learned to farm because of family misfortune. Cao Zhuxiang, widowed in the 1940s at the age of 24, was one such woman. At Liberation she was 32 and had been taught a full range of farming skills by her brother, going to the fields to plow at night so that the neighbors would not see her making crooked furrows. Her poverty and family circumstances, which marked her as a dangerously exposed and vulnerable person in the old society, made her available as a skilled leader of women when the new state turned its attention to bringing women into the fields. At the same time, her reputation as a

faithful widow meant that she had the local prestige to be effective as a model. As a former “squatting” cadre explains:

Cao Zhuxiang was widowed very young, and was restrained by the remnants of feudalism. She could not remarry, because she had a son. She had to remain as a widow in that family. From the time she was in her twenties, she devoted her youth to that family. Cao Zhuxiang ... could carry loads on a shoulder pole, push a cart, plow, urge a draft animal on with shouts, and had all the skills of plowing, sowing, raking, milling, and winnowing. Cao Zhuxiang was extremely capable, and so she had prestige in the village. Not prestige in our current sense, but rather prestige given to her by feudal remnants. They said, this woman is capable, honest, can eat bitterness, and on this basis we [the provincial Women’s Federation] can spread a new prestige, not only by having her join in production, but by having her join in political movements. She will not only lead her own small family, but will also lead the bigger [collective] family.¹⁸

Women were chosen as models for their role in production, not for virtue of the faithful wife/chaste widow variety. Nevertheless, if a woman was to be an effective model, she had to have the respect of her neighbors; shrewish wives and lascivious widows would not have served that purpose. Particularly when the objective was to pull women out of the domestic sphere and into collective agricultural production, a move that unsettled village notions of respectability, the labor model doing the persuading had also to be a model of probity. In that respect, Cao’s faithful widowhood—and her refusal to consider proposals that she remarry even after 1949—kept her domestic life uncontroversial, unencumbered by wifely duties, and available for collective projects.¹⁹

Living and working side by side with labor models, sometimes eating in their homes, Women’s Federation cadres were well aware that not all labor models had conflict-free domestic

lives. And yet, one did not see in print—although one might hear it forty years later from a Women's Federation cadre—stories such as the one about a labor model whose husband opposed her work and who got so exasperated that she chased him around the household millstone, beating him with a broomstick, until the cadre pleaded with her to stop.²⁰ Instead, reports on women labor models, in contrast to those on men, tended to list their domestic achievements side by side with evidence of high production and advanced political consciousness. A 1952 Women's Federation report on Shan Xiuzhen, for instance, included in her Plan for Patriotic Activities her intention to complete the following tasks: promote women's literacy, organize labor for fieldwork, console soldiers' families, donate grain to the state, produce cloth for her whole family, attend to her children's studies, and not quarrel with her husband.²¹

Speaking. By the mid-1950s, increasing cotton production was a national priority, and at Party instigation, various government units cooperated to involve women in growing it. This required an adjustment in the gendered division of labor, as men gradually moved—not always willingly—out of cotton farming and into sideline production. Cotton growing was suddenly discovered to be suitable work for women, because it required meticulous attention to detail and dextrous fingers.²² Yet few women were involved in all stages of cotton production.

One exception was Zhang Qiuxiang of Shuangwang Village in Weinan County, whose skill at cotton cultivation had already come to light at the first provincial cotton meeting, held in Weinan in April 1954. Women's Federation cadres thought she would be a promising model, and set out to get her cooperation: "From this point, we led Zhang Qiuxiang by telling her that "if only one person is red, there is only one dot of red; if all the people are red, there will be a wide swath of red."²³ Zhang was an experienced farmer from an extremely poor family; her revolutionary loyalties were profound. For her to be an effective model, however, more was required: she had to

learn to speak in public, explain policies, hold people's attention, and fire their enthusiasm.²⁴ In spite of her cotton-growing skill, Zhang Qiuxiang was inarticulate. Undaunted, Women's Federation cadres set to work:

*Zhang Qiuxiang could not read or make a speech, could not sum up her own experience. When we asked about her cotton growing experience, she just said "you plant, hoe regularly, top the cotton plants well." It was our comrades from the Women's Federation who picked up important content from her words and drew out the important points. After this, she experienced a lot and got to know the world, and found her wings. This shows that our Women's Federation put out considerable labor and hard work to cultivate these models, and carefully helped them, hand in hand.*²⁵

As Zhang's fame grew, "squatting" cadres acted as her secretarial staff. They remained in her village, joining in the cotton-growing work, and also helping the illiterate cotton-growing champion reply to the dozens of letters that arrived daily from all over China, asking for cotton seeds, advice, and encouragement.²⁶

Writing. From the early years of the PRC, local cadres were instructed to write accounts of labor model achievements. A 1951 Shaanxi provincial government directive provided a numbingly detailed template for such accounts: "The basic types can be divided into pest-control model, flood-fighting model, manure accumulation model, intensive cultivation model, disaster relief and famine fighting model, production model, ... ordinary model, and other kinds of model mutual-aid groups, model villages, and so on." The writer was admonished to include concrete experiences: how much manure had the model applied to the soil? How deep was the plowing? How often were crops rotated, irrigated, fumigated? What was the average output, and by how much did it surpass the local average? What was the makeup of the village, its method of

organizing labor and keeping accounts, its output, its penchant for production competitions?

What were the patriotic activities and improvements in political consciousness fostered by the labor models? Finally, the writers were exhorted, “Try your best to be comprehensive, material, and detailed.”²⁷ Material about women labor models, necessarily gendered because women were being mobilized for tasks that they had not routinely performed before, was a subset of this larger bureaucratically defined genre.

Models were typically lauded for their hardscrabble origins and suffering in early life, allegiance to the Party after 1949, technical skill, political awareness, and contribution to current campaigns. A handwritten piece on Cao Zhuxiang probably written in 1954, for instance, identified her as a 35-year-old widow who had learned fieldwork skills of necessity in the old society but had been despised because she had to perform field labor. Her first accomplishment in 1951 did not transgress the conventional gendered division of labor: she organized women into a spinning and weaving coop. But within several years she had moved on to fieldwork tasks, leading the villagers in repairing wells. The document goes on to describe how she organized a village “patriotic pact” to complete the summer wheat harvest, and then learned and applied advanced techniques of seed selection, planting, hoeing, and pest prevention. It concludes with an account of her concern about “current affairs, political study, and productive knowledge,” which led her to organize group newspaper readings and encourage her group members to attend winter literacy classes. Matter-of-fact in tone, full of technical detail, and selective in its deployment of reconstructed dialogue or cinematic description, this six-page document contains in compressed form all the important elements of a labor model narrative.²⁸ It was used to enhance her reputation and that of her home community, while modeling behavior in concrete, embodied form for less exemplary village women.

By 1956, when advanced producers from across Shaanxi province gathered for a meeting, the documentation of labor model exploits had grown more elaborated and refined. Archival records of the meeting contain a file on each attendee.²⁹ The stories told in these 1956 files have a visual specificity and an element of human conflict missing in earlier reports, although the virtues of the labor models are similar. Shan Xiuzhen, then the 43-year-old head of an advanced producer's cooperative (APC), had three heroic moments. In the first, an upper middle peasant who wanted to withdraw from the collective in 1955 tried to embarrass her by kneeling to her in public and demanding money the collective owed him. Drawing on her Party education and her communist commitments, Shan defused the situation with gentle words and patient explanations. The second incident dated from 1954, when the collective decided to send 15 laborers into hilly territory to cut green fertilizer for the cotton crop. The men doing the cutting needed to have steamed bread and noodles delivered to them each day, but women were reluctant to take on the task for fear of being gossiped about. (Sexual misconduct in the hills was the implied content of the gossip they feared.) Keeping her eye on production targets and her hands on the cooking pot, Chair Shan personally prepared and delivered the food, leading to record output in crop production. In the third anecdote she noticed that one of the draft animals was sick, got speedy attention for the animal from the veterinarian, meticulously boiled water and hand-fed medicine to the animal, and thus saved the life of a collective resource valued at 300 *yuan*.³⁰ Together, these three incidents showcased the virtues of a woman labor model: gentle and patient, but firm in her communist commitments to the collective; unafraid of hard work and immune to sexual gossip, in part because her conduct was irreproachable; meticulous and tender in caring for collective livestock, on which she lavished maternal levels of attention.

When material on labor models was published for a wider audience, it tended to be organized not according to the narrative of a life *tout court*, but rather by the completion of specified tasks or the performance of desired virtues. Sometimes the tasks were technical. In a 1956 publication of reports by labor models to a province-wide meeting on cotton field management, Zhang Qiuxiang (assisted by a Women's Federation cadre who served as her scribe and editor) presented tasks in cotton cultivation as a series of handy maxims about carefully preparing the soil, spreading fertilizer, selecting and preparing the seeds, planting early, thinning, weeding, irrigating at the right moments, topping the plants, battling pests, and using improved techniques to harvest the bolls.³¹ Government agrotechnicians were the originators of some of these techniques, but they did not publicize their innovations directly. Rather, they used the stories of labor heroines to communicate specialized information. Centered as they were on hard work, group cooperation, and sacrifice, these stories had a solidity that, as Gao Xiaoxian puts it, "could be seen, touched, and studied," and thus made accessible to farmers across the cotton belt.³²

By early 1958, the name "Zhang Qiuxiang" had become a shorthand way of talking about raising cotton production in Shaanxi.³³ In April, just prior to the formal launch of the Great Leap Forward,³⁴ the Women's Federation publicized the slogan "Study Qiuxiang, catch up with Qiuxiang," and innovations such as "Qiuxiang fields"³⁵ (experimental cotton plots), learn-from-Qiuxiang labor contests, and in 1959, "Go all out, catch up with Qiuxiang again" events, soon followed. Zhang Qiuxiang herself was lauded in a national Women's Federation publication as "the first woman researcher of peasant origin" (第一个农民出身的研究员张秋香).³⁶ Pamphlets introduced by Women's Federation cadres and published by the Shaanxi Provincial Press, bearing titles like "*Silly Girls*" *Launch a "Cotton Satellite"* and *We caught up with Zhang Qiuxiang*, encouraged the spread of Qiuxiang fields across the cotton belt.³⁷

Shortly after Zhang Qiuxiang was named a scientific researcher of peasant origin, the *Shaanxi ribao* reported, Vice-Chair of the National Women's Federation Kang Keqing paid her a courtesy call, sloshing through a rainstorm to visit the storied experimental cotton plot.³⁸ She was followed four months later, the same newspaper reported, by a Soviet expert stationed in Xian, also braving a drizzle, who was reported to have told Zhang Qiuxiang that the Chinese Great Leap Forward was unprecedented anywhere, past or present, and that the Soviet people were extremely happy at the achievements attained by the Chinese people. When he asked her how her high level of output had been attained, she modestly smiled and replied, "It is mainly the result of the Party's leadership and everyone's Communist mode of daring to think, daring to speak, and daring to act, along with our learning from the Soviet elder brother." The emissary, astonished, is said to have replied, "Your experience is very rich, and the Soviet people should learn from you and from all Chinese agricultural experts. When I return to the Soviet Union, I will tell the Soviet people in detail about the miracles you have created. The Soviet people are very concerned with the construction of China." And with that conversation concluded, Zhang Qiuxiang presented him with a gigantic turnip and a cotton stalk with more than 50 bolls as a memento of his trip.³⁹

This sort of political fantasia centered on the figure of the labor model became more stylized as the Great Leap wore on and began to founder. By early 1959, Zhang Qiuxiang was quoted speaking in verse about the connection between politics and cotton:

The General Line is a beacon	总路线是灯塔
It illuminates the peoples' hearts and they flower	照得人心开了花
In recent years since the General Line	今年有了总路线
The cotton has bloomed bigger than the clouds.	要棉花开放比云大. ⁴⁰

The moralistic tone of labor model discourse lingered well into the difficult years that followed.

In the aftermath of the Leap, the Shaanxi Women's Federation continually referred to the prestige and achievements of Zhang Qiuxiang, citing cotton production as one area that had continued to grow and, it seems, using talk of this success as a means of salvaging the wreckage left by the Leap.

Written accounts about labor models were not biographies in the sense of a narrative about people's lives. Rather, these accounts did one of two things. Some presented material that otherwise might have been published in a technical manual in relatively colorful, sprightly form by using labor models and their cotton-growing apprentices as an organizing device. Others, in a manner similar to accounts of exemplary figures in the Yuan dynasty, "focused...on a particular type of extreme moral behavior," and like the exemplar texts studied by Beverly Bossler,⁴¹ they often signaled "the critical virtue" of the labor model in the title. As the content of these stories became more explicitly entwined with dedication to communism, the specificity of the women became less important than their status as vessels for revolutionary virtues.

Remembering. As the 1950s crescendoed in the Great Leap Forward, written accounts of labor model lives became simultaneously more colorful and more flat—full of heroic exploits and retrospectively imagined politicized dialogue, increasingly devoid of surprise or depth. The historian in search of biographical insight is tempted to look elsewhere, in the liveliness of in-person interviews, but the results for us have been mixed. Cao Zhuxiang, for instance, gave us a toneless account of one meeting after another, a story that caused us to wonder why, for instance, she appeared not to regret missing her daughter's wedding because she was attending a meeting, but also did not demonstrate any enthusiasm for the public activities that took her away from home. Zhang Qiuxiang, too, was opaque about her labor model career, whether from age (she was in her

late 80s at the time we interviewed her), fatigue, or irritation at our persistent questioning about difficulties in organizing other villagers.⁴² Ironically, however, it was precisely when the labor models grew most animated—in their stories of seeing Chairman Mao—that the puzzle of how to understand their relationship to modelhood and the state seemed most unsolvable. Far from a source of transgressive, disgruntled, or even reflective stories, memory seems to be the place where labor model discourse, discarded by a reform-era world with scant regard for these women, survives most intact. Consider two such memories.

For Lu Guilan, the chance to be a delegate to a meeting in Beijing offered community and, away from home, a giddy sociality with other women from similar backgrounds. Lu Guilan mocks her own country bumpkin naïveté amidst Beijing grandeur:

Oh, my goodness. The food, the lodging! It was the Beijing Hotel. Look, when you walk in, the door turns. People go in the empty space and it turns automatically. I didn't understand it. There was even a joke. A representative from Tongguan was Shan Xiuzhen. She went to the Beijing Hotel. Here's a mirror, there's a mirror in the room. She entered and said, "Oops! How come here's me and there's me too?" We were very close when we went to meetings at the province. Zhang Qiuxiang, Shan Xiuzhen, Cao Zhuxiang, ... At night we sang opera [and accompanied ourselves] with dishes, bowls and ... chopsticks. We sewed shoe soles. ... We chatted all day long. ... They called me the director of the chat office. ... It was so much fun. I still miss those big sisters now.⁴³

The pinnacle of attendance at any national meeting, however, was proximity to the Party-state's top leadership, an experience that produced intense emotions in the retelling. Here the informal hilarity of a woman-only opera party in a Beijing hotel room was replaced by the solemn

joy of drawing close to the Party's acknowledged heart. As a delegate to the second meeting of the First National Women's Congress, Shan Xiuzhen saw Chairman Mao in 1953:

We took baths and washed our clothes and everything was clean and tidy. ... In Huaiaren Hall, everything was in order. ... The Shaanxi representatives were in the middle and I was in the front. After the representatives were seated, Chairman Mao, the Premier [Zhou Enlai], Chairman Liu [Shaoqi], the Chief Commander and other leaders of the central government came in, over fifty people. ... When Chairman Mao came, the correct thing for you to do was welcome him. We weren't to move, because if we moved there would be chaos. People would say that women had no consciousness and didn't comply with rules. We didn't dare to pull on Chairman Mao to shake hands. We were supposed to love and protect Chairman Mao. "All you people, if Chairman Mao shook hands with all of you, wouldn't you be worried about Chairman Mao?" They talked to us in advance. I was sitting there properly. Chairman Mao came. There were many people and we sat in a circle. Chairman Mao was smiling and took off his cap. The only thing I did was clap. (Chairman Mao) walked around twice. If he didn't walk around twice, the women on this side would have been able to see him, but those on that side would not. People were so happy that they were crying.

This was the first time, in Beijing, I had my picture taken with Chairman Mao. It was a pity that among the Shaanxi representatives, only director Yan and I were from the countryside. The picture was seven feet long and five feet wide, and it cost seventeen yuan and was unaffordable. I didn't have money and didn't have a copy printed. When the meeting was over, I came back.

... What I regret is this. At the third women's representative meeting in 1957, Chairman Mao received us and took pictures with us. [Zhang] Qiuxiang and [Cao] Zhuxiang were in the

*picture. Each of us got a copy. But the pity is that it was taken away and lost in the Cultural Revolution in 1966. This is the thing I regret the most.*⁴⁴

Meetings—occasions for workaday reporting and listening, for occasional out-of-town camaraderie and hilarity—were also the place at which labor models were most thoroughly interpellated as political subjects. At a distance of almost half a century, even given the personal and political effects of unhappy intervening events, the moment of sighting Chairman Mao seems untarnished. It is in their personal stories, even more than in the writings meant to publicize their achievements and laud their political consciousness, that these women emerge most completely as full participants in the political moment that produced them. In their narrated memories they place themselves at the center of an important political drama.

As revealing as oral narratives can be about struggles and compromises invisible in the written sources, women recalling their past as labor models do so in language provided by the historical process they are recalling. Their stories sometimes call that past to account, sometimes use it to call the present and its insufficiencies to account, sometimes narrate their virtue and value to a world that currently neglects them. What they never do is stand apart from that past and reject the subject positions that collectivization offered them, even though those positions have long since ceased to exist. Put in contemporary parlance, many of these women came to inhabit the subject position of labor model to such a degree that their subjectivity cannot be apprehended independent of it. Indeed, these stories call into question the idea—already under fire in many disciplines, but generally sacrosanct in historical research—that if we could just dig far enough, the authentic person with an interior persona distinct from the public model would be waiting to reveal herself. This suggests that pure interiority, tales of non-normative personal change, life apart from or in resistance to state discourse, the truth of the self or selves, cannot be recovered

through research on the 1950s. Indeed, the 1950s materials, and memories of the 1950s as recounted more recently, suggest that the whole project of a search for the real selves of a real past is chimerical. What the 1950s offers us is the possibility of constructing an account of how new women were brought into being, not by state fiat, but by the labor of cadres, the women themselves, their village communities, and regional (sometimes national) reading and listening publics. These life stories direct our attention, not to hidden inner truths or the sort of life writing engaged in by contemporary biographers and historians, but to shared worldmaking projects. They suggest that the interior self is itself a historically situated and peculiar idea, and that our attachment to it as historians deserves a gaze as skeptical as any we turn on our source materials. They don't tell us what we want to know, but perhaps they offer us lessons we need to hear.

Hinterland Transnationalism

Except for a small and important cadre of scholars working on the migrations of Chinese from south and east China, China historians do not often concern themselves with transnationalism. Conversely, those who focus on the transnational tend to ignore China, precisely because China studies has been so insular and state-centered. Most who use the term confine their inquiries to the very recent past, to the realm of flexible accumulation, post-Fordism and, on the left, anti-globalization formations. Transnationalism foregrounds motion of all sorts: lateral, oblique, circuitous, purposeful, accidental. To become visible through the filter of transnationalism, you have to move, or at least you have to be left behind by someone who moves. Most often you have to stop what you were doing before, transcend your previous activities as you transit across national boundaries. Transnationalism, even as it disaggregates globalization, divides the world into global flows and backwaters.

Then what about people who stay put: for example, northwestern China farming women in

the 1950s who seldom left their own villages? As we have seen, their lives and struggles often show tenuous connection to the nation itself, to say nothing of what lies beyond. Their life trajectories are instances of what Anna Tsing calls "marginality in an out-of-the-way-place."⁴⁵ Yet they are not marginal to a historical and cultural account of the transnational, one that allows critical distance from the trajectories and effects of dominant global capital flows. Thinking the transnational with and through rural Chinese women also suggests ways in which history and contemporary globalization theories might benefit from more cross-talk, particularly about issues that arise when a national state effect and a transnational imaginary are produced at the same time, by the same processes, among people who do not leave home.

During the early 1950s, even as village space was being remapped and campaign time was being deployed, women and men were also asked to imagine themselves as part of a transnational collectivity: that of the peoples of the world resisting American imperialism. Villagers during the Korean War were mobilized to "resist America and aid Korea." Cao Zhuxiang, the labor model discussed earlier, reportedly inspired reluctant villagers to dig wells on a bitterly cold day by invoking China's international role:

But during the well fixing, some people said that the weather was too cold and they could not keep warm. At that time, Cao Zhuxiang said bravely, "The volunteer army beat the American devils in a world of ice and snow without any fear of death. They protected our good lives. Now Chairman Mao called us to dig wells and prevent drought in order to increase the output. How can we be afraid of cold weather? We must overcome the difficulties and struggle against the weather in order to complete wells." After her encouragement, people expressed the opinion that, "We won't lower our head because of difficulties. We should increase our production in order to support the volunteer army."

Cao's well-digging group was not a women-only project, and it is unclear whether women participated at all. As a village leader, she had the unusual task of directing men as well as women in daily labor. Most women did something less dramatic to aid Korea, something they had been doing already—needlework. They made shoes, shoe soles, socks, and small care packages (*weiwēn bao*) for Chinese soldiers fighting in Korea. The packages contained patches, sewing kits, daily use items, and small handmade gifts. Women who were being developed as local leaders and becoming regional labor models were praised in government reports, not only for organizing spinning coops and agricultural mutual aid teams, but for organizing these groups to make care packages, to do the plowing for Army dependents whose menfolk were in Korea, to use their newfound literacy to write letters for the troops. Reports on labor model achievements counted the number of care packages, wallets, gloves, and so forth produced by groups of women just as they counted the tons of cotton sold to the state. One particularly outstanding labor model was invited to join a delegation to visit the soldiers in Korea (although, interestingly, she begged off because she was a widow who had no one to care for her children if she went).

One required characteristic of a labor model, the records suggest, was to make consistent connections between the local production process, the national political situation, and transnational political solidarity, whether that meant preparing care packages for the soldiers in Korea or taking the lead in selling cotton to the state. (Whether model women actually spent substantial amounts of time on such activity is not the point; what is visible here is the modeling of model activity.)

The move to resist America and aid Korea took other forms in the cities, where well-off women were mobilized to donate jewelry to the state to finance purchase of a plane for the war effort. In another officially sponsored transnational gesture, half a million women and children marched against the rearmament of Japan. But in the villages, transnationalism took a very

familiar form: the vernacular practice of needlework. It was clustered with the campaign for land reform and suppression of counterrevolutionaries. But solidarity with Korea, unlike the local land redistribution, did not take rural women out of the house or alter the type of labor they did. As Joshua Goldstein (1998: 159) comments, “Liberation did not have to mean a drastic change in responsibilities, certainly not immediately. Rather, under the supervision of collective Party-led organizations that applauded loyalty, frugality, and sacrifice for the national war effort, women’s ‘feudal’ roles were recast as revolutionary.” Here the national not only was bundled with the transnational, but the transnational was less disruptive or transgressive than the national. It mainly required sewing. Transnationalism, as currently theorized, does not easily take account of this sort of activity. I am arguing that it should.

I do not want to make overblown claims for these care packages. It is doubtful that rural women woke up in the morning meditating about their link in the chain of transnational solidarity. I make no claims for transformation of subjectivity here, because ten years of interviewing rural women has reminded me, constantly, that change in the Chinese countryside was neither as thoroughgoing as Party histories claim nor as insignificant as post-Mao accounts of rural collective stasis suggest. And memories of rural socialism are always fragmented: wrapped around lies, secrets, and silence (in Luise White’s memorable phrase⁴⁶), and articulated by aging narrators at a moment of decreasing economic security, increasing incomprehension across generations, and elder neglect or even abuse.

Still, women remember the campaign to resist America and aid Korea, and in a situation where many have forgotten several decades of collectivized agriculture, that’s something. In the 1950s, “America” and “Korea” became part of their daily vocabulary. This was not just a “support our Chinese troops” campaign. Rural women became conscious Chinese citizens

partially by opposing America and aiding Korea: they were encouraged to imagine themselves as part of a transnational collectivity. (An alternative vocabulary, perhaps one in more general circulation at the time, was that of international socialist solidarity. Its emphasis on Party-to-Party relations, however, kept it at some remove from women's sewing projects.) Instigated by outside cadres, but developed and given local shape by villagers, awareness of the national and the transnational were introduced simultaneously. It required a great deal of daily work to hold both the national and the international in place. In the latter case, it was the work of sewing that counted—work by which women stitched themselves into the transnational.

This fragmentary memory of sewing for a particular faraway purpose suggests several things. First, transnationalism may be produced simultaneously with the national, or as a dependent part of the national. For China scholars dug into the vertical silo of state-centered study, this is an important reminder. Second, the relationship between the two must be investigated locally and historically—it should not be generalized. Theorizing here must include attention to the past. And third, scholars enchanted by transnationalism should not forget the local, vernacular specificities of the labor by which the transnational is sustained—in this case, gendered rural labor, performed by people who never left home but who understood themselves to be in a relationship with faraway places they would never see

Necessary and Insufficient Gender

Scholarship on women in China's twentieth-century revolution has begun to move beyond its initial focus on whether Chinese Communist Party policies were good or bad for women.⁴⁷ Freed from that important but insufficient question, we can begin to look at all of the ways in which the revolution was gendered, within and beyond articulated policy—in its reconfiguration of

space, its relationship to nonrevolutionary temporalities, its production of an embodied state effect, even its transnational claims.

Such a reconsideration may force us to reconsider a few of our common-sense assumptions about the Chinese revolution. We might conclude, for instance, that the Party/state's claim to have 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. When labor in the "inner" realm became inarticulate in the state-provided language of liberation—residual, uninteresting, slated to wither away at some undefined future moment—large parts of women's daily existence went missing, unavailable to be addressed, even by themselves, except in the language of late-night virtue at one's needlework. Nevertheless, the contents of domestic time shifted dramatically across the collective period, affected by the disappearance of sidelines, the appearance and survival of children, the slow disaggregation of extended families. The entanglements of domestic time with campaign time in the lives of women suggest that the official story of political change, as it was lived by half the rural population, is radically incomplete.

The degree to which labor heroine tales were deeply embraced, by the heroines themselves and by their communities, raises other questions. Were women, as some men and women suggested to us, easier to mobilize than men, less complicated or less devious or less enmeshed in village relationships? Or did men, too, become deeply invested in new political subjectivities made available by the revolution? Crucial to our best stories about post-1949 village life are the figures of the venal local male Party secretary, or alternatively the local cadre tormented by his conflicting duties to the higher levels of the Party/state and the local community. Is it possible that these fiercely loyal and impressionable women were just as canny as the men, or that the men were less canny, less resistant, more invested in the state than our scholarship usually admits? (Dare I ask:

how was the moral economy gendered? Were women's hidden transcripts different from those of men? And if, as I expect, they were, what do we do with those differences?)

And yet, having spent many pages establishing that the revolution is illegible without gender, I want to conclude with the observation that gender, deployed alone as an analytic frame, may obscure as much as the older analytic frames I have criticized here. There are many reasons for this, the most obvious being that no single person, let alone a collectivity, is completely explicable by reference to gender. Nor can we understand the experience of a peasant woman in, say, central Shaanxi by employing an additive logic of peasant+woman+location. No single attribute or list of attributes suffices, and when one moves beyond individual attributes into ensembles of relations, and then stirs in temporality, the insufficiency of gender isolated from other relationships becomes clear. Even our apparently most stable category, "China," is friable if poked at too energetically. Our persistent habit of talking about "China" obscures the extent to which the working out of state policies was contingent upon geography, prior social arrangements, local personalities, and a host of other endlessly variable factors. Across all these rural areas, however, any given state pronouncement, such as "Sell grain to the state!" or "Don't treat marriage as a commercial transaction!" or "Women can be champion cotton growers!" or "Give up sideline activities (such as weaving) and work for the collective!" landed in myriad social environments and produced multiple effects. The terms that come so easily to historians—"the rural," "the revolution," the names of individual government campaigns—are order-making devices imposed on an intractably varied landscape. And even a powerful and determined Party/state cannot impose a uniform national imaginary. Being brought into "the national" (and the transnational) was a contingent, precarious, nonlinear, multi-sided and multi-sited project. Gender was a consequential, at certain conjunctures even determinative, part of that project. We

impoverish our own analysis if we ignore it, but it needs to be understood as one in an array of powerful relationships.

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² This is a shameless approximation. See Judith Banister, *China's Changing Population* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1987), 329, for urban population totals and urban population as a percentage of the total population, which rose from 10.6% in 1949 to 18.4% in 1959. Banister (25) gives the overall sex ratio provided by the 1953 census as 107.6; the rural sex ratio was likely more skewed in favor of males.

³ Our research has been fully collaborative, and I have benefited enormously from discussions of this material with Gao Xiaoxian, but we plan divergent writing projects for different audiences as a result of this research. I take full responsibility for the ideas expressed in this paper.

⁴ Kelly 1984.

⁵ *Hong se niang zi jun* [videorecording] 1999. For a discussion of *Red Detachment* and similar themes in *The White-Haired Girl*, see Xiaomei Chen 2002, 76-88.

⁶ LF, former Women's Federation cadre, interview with Gail Hershatter, August 14, 1996.

⁷ WL, interview with Gail Hershatter, August 13, 1996.

⁸ WL, interview with Gail Hershatter, August 13, 1996.

⁹ As one recalls: *At that time, as a woman at the age of nineteen in 1950, joining the land reform was part of my learning process. I was asked to call women to attend the meeting and make speeches to propagandize the policies. I was talking to the women on the stage. I talked and talked and suddenly forgot what to say in the middle of my speech. I was so angry (with myself) and burst into tears. How stupid my brain was! I memorized carefully but just forgot it when I made the speech. ... We were so naïve at that time.* WL, interview with Gail Hershatter, August 13, 1996.

¹⁰ A *kang* is a heated platform bed common in North China peasant homes.

¹¹ I discuss some of the transformations of campaign time in Hershatter 2002.

¹² Wang Guohong 1993.

¹³ Space precludes a comprehensive discussion of all the issues involved. The Marriage Law, for instance, which targeted women in particular ways, was seldom cited by our interviewees, although there were exceptions in each village. Nowhere did it transform marriage practices quickly, and divorce remained exceedingly rare, but the law did enable some child brides to leave difficult situations, gave some young women the support to break off unsatisfactory engagements and/or play an active role in new ones, and provided a diffuse and sometimes resentful consciousness among some young married women that their natal or marital families had landed them in “feudal” situations. Additionally, state practices aimed at reproduction proceeded on a very different timeline from those aimed at production. The arrival of reliable birth control in villages in the 1970s, an event that does not loom large in state narrations of birth planning policy (see Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005), is remembered with great specificity by many village women.

¹⁴ On this point, see Friedman et al 1991 and Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden 2005.

¹⁵ On these points, see Shue 1988; Diamant 2000a and 2000b; Diamant, Lubman, and O’Brien 2005; Perry 1994; Dutton 2005.

¹⁶ Mitchell’s analysis is aimed at the postwar capitalist state, with interlocking connections between state and “private” institutions on the one hand, and a naturalized separation between “state and society” or “state and economy” on the other. Although I have wrenched it from its original context, I find his work useful for thinking about the socialist Party/state and the production of a sectionally differentiated entity known as “the masses,” among whom women (or “woman-as-state-subject,” in Tani Barlow’s formulation) were an important constitutive part. Mitchell 1991, 1999; Barlow 1994; for further elaboration of these points, see Hershatter 2002.

¹⁷ Raphals 1998, *passim*.

¹⁸ ZJN, former Weinan Women’s Federation cadre, interview with Gao Xiaoxian and Gail Hershatter, August 9, 1996.

¹⁹ For more detail on this point, see Hershatter 2000.

²⁰ WL, interview with Gail Hershatter, August 13, 1996.

²¹ Fulian Archives 178-27-023, 1952.

²² For a discussion of this transition, see Gao Xiaoxian 2005.

²³ ZJN, August 9, 1996.

²⁴ WL, August 13, 1996.

²⁵ ZJN, August 9, 1996. This account, rendered 40 years after the fact, is also a retrospective attempt by a Women’s Federation cadre to validate the work of her own youth.

²⁶ LXC, former Weinan Women’s Federation cadre, interviewed by Gao Xiaoxian and Gail Hershatter, August 9, 1996.

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- ²⁷ Shaanxi Provincial Archives 194-8 (Nongye ting, Oct. 30, 1951), pp. 26-27.
- ²⁸ Cao Zhuxiang danxing cailiao, SPA 178, no number, no date.
- ²⁹ Shaanxi Provincial Archives 194-534 (Nongye ting, 3-4, 1956), pp. 81-85.
- ³⁰ Shaanxi Provincial Archives 194-534 (Nongye ting, 3-4, 1956), pp. 81-85.
- ³¹ Shaanxi sheng minzhu funü lianhehui 1956.
- ³² Gao Xiaoxian 2005. One example of such a publication is Shaanxi sheng nonglin ting 1958. For another example, with a few more rhetorical flourishes, see Shaanxi sheng nongye zhanlanhui 1958.
- ³³ In Shaanxi, the most famous and longest-running labor competition was the “Silver Flowers Contest,” run by the Shaanxi Provincial Women’s Federation in the cotton-producing districts of Guanzhong from 1956 until the early 1980s. Zhang Qiuxiang was one of the “Silver Flowers.” For details on this contest, see Gao Xiaoxian 2005.
- ³⁴ Roderick MacFarquhar 1983, p. 51 and passim.
- ³⁵ On Shan Xiuzhen’s work in creating Qiuxiang fields in her commune, see *Shan Xiuzhen* 1962.
- ³⁶ Jiang Xinghan and Cheng Wanli 1958; see also *Shaanxi ribao*, June 27, 1958.
- ³⁷ Zhonggong Weinan xianwei bianzhu xiaozu 1959a and 1959b.
- ³⁸ *Shaanxi ribao*, July 5, 1958.
- ³⁹ *Shaanxi ribao*, November 7, 1958.
- ⁴⁰ *Shaanxi ribao*, January 1, 1959.
- ⁴¹ Beverly Bossler 2002, p. 510.
- ⁴² Gail Hershatter forthcoming.
- ⁴³ Lu Guilan, personal interview with Gail Hershatter, August 15, 1996.
- ⁴⁴ Shan Xiuzhen, personal interview with Gao Xiaoxian and Gail Hershatter, June 28-29, 1997.
- ⁴⁵ Tsing 1993.
- ⁴⁶ White 2000.
- ⁴⁷ Details on some of the forms this broadening has taken can be found in Hershatter 2004, 2007.

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