

2012

Book Review: *The Gender of Memory*

Nicole Elizabeth Barnes

University of California, Irvine, nicole.barnes@duke.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>

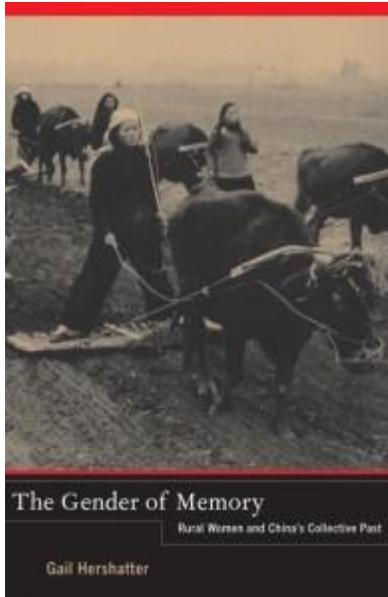
 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

Barnes, Nicole Elizabeth, "Book Review: *The Gender of Memory*" (2012). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 21.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/21>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

[Book Review: *The Gender of Memory*](#)

February 14, 2012 in [Books](#) by [Twentieth-Century China](#)



Hershatter, Gail. [*The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*](#). Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, xii, 455 pp. \$49.95 (cloth).

By Nicole Elizabeth Barnes

Gail Hershatter and her Shaanxi-native research collaborator Gao Xiaoxian (of the Shaanxi Provincial Women's Federation) spent ten years interviewing 72 women and a few men in rural Shaanxi province in northwest China. *The Gender of Memory*, Hershatter's sole-authored product of this joint effort, fills a crucial gap in historiography of the 1950s, providing the first personal stories of land reform, the 1950 Marriage Law, collectivization, and the Great Leap Forward. Moreover, through incisive gender analysis, Hershatter illustrates how gender determined not only how Chinese women and men lived their lives, but also how they remember them. Whereas male interviewees used political events as the primary signposts of their lives, women tabulated their life narratives with personal events such as marriage, childbirth, and family deaths, sometimes re-ordering or re-naming political campaigns.

Women's narratives of the past alternately troubled and reinforced state discourse. Interviews uncovered a tension between the reality, in pre-Liberation days, of poor farming women left unprotected as they worked and traveled outside the home, and their characterization of this era as one of "feudal" seclusion within the home, in a manner coinciding with Communist propaganda of women's liberation. Faced with this tension between the women's self-characterization with a post-'49 vocabulary and their actual pre-'49 experiences, Hershatter and Gao concluded that women may have preferred imagining themselves as having been constrained under "feudalism" rather than left alone to fend for themselves and their children without the help of menfolk, too poor to afford the luxury of seclusion at home (p. 37). Yet other

interviewees emphasized the absence of men, in both the pre-Communist and Communist eras, and hence the extreme hardships they faced as single mothers solely responsible for both farm work and housework. Regardless of whether their memories confirmed or contradicted the Communist narrative of women's liberation, the interviews showed that rural women generally ordered their lives around family and local relationships, with political campaigns in the interstices.

Here Hershatter contributes to the long-lived state-and-society debate in Chinese historiography. Drawing on Timothy Mitchell's theory of the "state effect" to trouble the Communist state's self-narrative of reforming a society from which it stood separate and apart, Hershatter explores how rural women were incorporated into the state as both agents and targets of state reforms. For many rural women, relations with female labor models or *dundian* cadres (non-local officials residing with local families) constituted their interactions with "the state." For the labor models and cadres themselves, taking on a state-defined role as an agent of reform both set them apart from local society and enmeshed them much more deeply in local relationships and national politics. As local embodiments of the state, these women transformed state projects into local projects, bringing national politics into village life and domestic spaces (p. 68, 210).

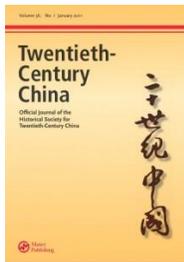
Allowing her interviewees to speak for themselves in frequent and often long quotations, Hershatter illustrates that women were incorporated into the state in moments, spaces, and modes that differed from those of men. Women earned fewer work points than did men for the same labor; agricultural collectivization effaced and discounted women's reproductive, domestic, and handicraft labors; reforms in midwifery left farming women thoroughly exhausted with more children surviving gestation and infancy; political reforms hewed generational cleavages between mothers and daughters as younger women were more likely than their elders to fight gender discrimination in work point allotments or to resist arranged marriages; female labor models who attended mixed-sex meetings came under intense scrutiny even while exercising extreme caution to protect their chastity. As narrated by the women themselves, political campaigns touched women's lives in very personal ways that tell of continued gender discrimination within the very legislation that has nearly eradicated the greatest threats to women's wellbeing: chronic poverty, banditry, illiteracy, and disease.

Hershatter's analysis of these narratives, with gender at the center, uncovers an entirely new picture of 1950s China. Moving beyond her first question, "Did women have a Chinese revolution?" (p. 7), she troubles the narrative of progress and reveals the gender-contingent contours of China's socialist reforms. Her gender analysis of land reform and collectivization illustrates that rural women's agricultural and domestic labors enabled the success of the Communist revolution, the very revolution that in many ways left this generation of rural women behind. Hershatter shows convincingly that we cannot understand twentieth-century China without appreciating the particular contributions and social position of these women (pp. 264-65, 287).

This book is powerful in yet another way: it is startlingly frank about the historian's positionality in the production of (oral) history. Hershatter challenges the myth of uncovering a raw and unmediated history via interviews with "the subaltern who speaks" (p. 204), and occasionally shares interview segments with the reader that strained her and Gao Xiaoxian's interpretive

powers. She thereby identifies herself as simultaneous consumer and co-creator of the documents (in this case, oral history interviews) from which she crafts her own historical narrative. Such honesty carries the historian's craft far beyond the linguistic turn and brings Hershatter into dialogue with theorists and scholars who are shaping the future of the field.

Because so many men died in China's twentieth-century wars (between warlords in the 1920s and 30s, with Japan from 1937 to 1945, and between the Communists and Nationalists from 1947 to 1949), Hershatter and Gao were only able to interview a small number of elderly men. Therefore the book's comparison between male and female narrations of the past relies on a sex-skewed interview sample that may beg revision if future scholarship applies it to a different source base. Nonetheless, Hershatter's gender analysis of memory, her introduction of personal narratives of rural life in the early Communist era, her theorization of the gendered inflection of state-society relations, and her refreshingly candid model of oral history make *The Gender of Memory* a path-breaking work in Chinese studies.



Nicole Elizabeth Barnes is PhD candidate in modern Chinese history at the University of California, Irvine.

© 2012 by [Twentieth-Century China](#) Editorial Board. All rights reserved.