

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

The Personal Past—Two Readings

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Joseph Esherick, *Ancestral Leaves: A Family Journey through Chinese History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011. 392 pp. \$28 (paper).

Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011. 472 pp. \$55 (cloth).

What do we learn when we reconsider modern Chinese history from the vantage point of those who lived through it? Does our understanding of the grand narrative of key events change fundamentally when we think not in terms of the revolution or the state but in terms of life experience and memory? What happens when an empathic historian literally engages his or her sources in conversation? The authors of the two books under review offer radically different answers to these questions, even as they cover some of the same temporal ground. In *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*, Gail Hershatter uses oral interviews with rural women to call into question the inevitability of “campaign time” as an organizing principle. In *Ancestral Leaves: A Family Journey through Chinese History*, Joseph Esherick revisits the iconic events of modern Chinese history through the life experiences of several generations of elite men from his wife’s family, shedding new light on the familiar timeline while reiterating that chronology’s organizing power. Hershatter offers a breathtaking interrogation of her sources and methods, rendering elegantly transparent the thought processes behind her book’s production. Esherick integrates sources and storytelling, providing a confident and seamless narrative in which politics and personal lives are inextricably intertwined.

In *The Gender of Memory*, Gail Hershatter interrogates the timeline that structures the modern China survey. She refocuses attention on some of the least privileged people in Chinese society and questions the salience of “campaign time” (or “national history”) to their experience. Hershatter argues that in thinking about post-1949 history, we have been too wedded for too long to a litany of political events and state initiatives produced in Beijing. Our histories have been too centralized, too state-oriented, and too concerned with elite men—or they have focused on “women’s liberation” as defined by either the revolutionary state or Western feminism. Hershatter turns these perspectives inside out; she asks us to consider what the twentieth century felt like at the local level, what political events meant for women’s work, what changed for women after 1949, and, most significantly, how rural women’s accounts of their own life experiences change how historians understand fundamental categories like revolution, gender, and the nation.

The book is animated by the question of whether Chinese women had a Chinese revolution. If so, when, and in what ways? (7). In pursuit of answers, Hershatter and her Chinese colleague Gao Xiaoxian interviewed seventy-two elderly women in four villages in Shaanxi Province over the ten-year period from 1996 to 2006. They also interviewed a smaller number of men and younger people. The chapters are enlivened by extensive passages in the informants’ own words; the women thus talk back, “speaking bitterness” to the historian, the reader, and those more locally who have not listened to them (34). Hershatter’s informants seem, at least in memory, remarkably disengaged from “Beijing time.” The women get the chronology “wrong” in ways that Hershatter reads as gendered; they use officially sanctioned terms like “old society,” “feudal,” and “revolution” in unconventional (or asynchronous) ways (25). They describe themselves as having been “shut away at home” prior to 1949, even when “the details of their stories suggest otherwise” (44). They deploy older notions of virtue in service to revolutionary ideals and express consternation at the present-day failure of family members and the state to reward or recognize their contributions in those terms (269). For these women, tradition, revolution, and modernity are not incompatible categories. Nor, Hershatter finds, can their lives be narrated as a straightforward progression from oppression to liberation. The past bitterness of which they speak has moral force and emotional power. It is not, however, the stuff of simple historical evidence, if such a thing can be said to exist. The informants’ relationship to their past remains fraught and subject to revision. Hershatter does not attempt to synthesize her informants’

stories into an authoritative account of “Chinese women” or “modern Chinese history.” Instead, she offers what she terms “a good enough story,” or a collection of good enough stories, deliberately intended not to be representative or complete. Such stories, she reminds us, are meant to surprise readers, to engender thought. They are, by nature, subject to reinterpretation and available for incorporation into other narratives (3). Hershatter highlights the partial, the local, the uneven, the unspoken contradictions, unintended consequences, and disjunctures, observing that events played out differently even within the same province, with effects varying sometimes from one village to the next. In calling attention to the mutability of recollections, the limitations of archives, and the ways in which local variation confounded the Chinese state’s efforts to impose uniformity, she also calls into question the viability of linear narrative and the desirability of such an account as an end product.

Although the initial impetus behind the book was Hershatter’s desire to shed new light on the 1950s, and thus to “fill a blank spot on a syllabus” (3), *The Gender of Memory* covers a longer time frame, ranging backward from the interviews, conducted in the present day, to the women’s childhood experiences in the 1920s and 1930s. Throughout the book, the reader is constantly made aware of the dynamic relationship between pasts and presents. The chapters are roughly chronological in arrangement: chapter 2, “No One is Home,” is mainly about pre-1949 experiences; chapter 10, “Narrator,” situates the past of which Hershatter’s informants spoke in relation to their current context at the time of the interviews. Each chapter centers on an occupation, role, or identity available to Hershatter’s informants: they were activists, farmers, midwives, mothers, and model laborers. And in each chapter she highlights one or several individual case studies; thus, to borrow language from Esherick, she humanizes or personalizes historical experience and events. These women worked tremendously hard for little compensation—inevitably less than what their male counterparts received, although this inequity does not seem to have troubled them as much as readers might expect. Much of their labor was rendered invisible by collective-era state priorities that recognized only what could be tabulated and remunerated in work points. Hershatter’s informants vividly describe almost unspeakable exhaustion from a double shift that included field labor, housework, and making clothing and shoes for growing families. They recall hunger, illness, fear, physical pain, and grief at the loss of loved ones, and they remember the events that we think of as national in deeply local and personal terms. Worn out by childbearing, these women in many cases became proponents of the

one-child policy. Their life experience heralded the feminization of the farm labor force. Their hard work, Hershatter argues (in a rare underexplained generalization), made possible the accumulation of resources by the state that set the reform policy in motion (11-12). Some readers will surely want more information and evidence on this last point.

Hershatter brilliantly conveys the emotional depth of the women's stories and the paradoxes and contradictions that their fragmentary and wandering accounts encapsulate or evoke. At the same time, however, the reader (like this reviewer) may find it difficult to recount particular biographies based on the book; such straightforward narratives seem beside the point.

Hershatter's authorial interventions are mostly illuminating, even as they self-consciously reveal seams that would normally be left unexamined. In the hands of a less assured historian, all of this self-awareness might overshadow the subject matter or descend into narcissism. It is a tribute both to Hershatter and to her informants that their stories resonate so powerfully, even as they are deployed in ways that call into question official and historical conventions. The chronology that emerges out of these doubly marginalized accounts is convoluted and contradictory, and it defies the logic of the standard modern Chinese history syllabus.

In *Ancestral Leaves: A Family Journey through Chinese History*, Joseph Esherick combines omniscient macronarrative with individual life stories, using each to illuminate the other. He draws upon a rich collection of documentary and oral materials in order to reconstruct the history of the Ye family, which he presents in the book as a "typical" Chinese family. Using sources including a twenty-volume poetry collection by a mid-nineteenth-century ancestor, formal lineage genealogies, school records, personnel dossiers, diaries, a manuscript of a memoir penned by his father-in-law, and interviews with his wife's uncles and cousins, he persuasively demonstrates that the lives of these men were closely entangled with China's national story. Readers follow the family's transformation across space—from Anqing to Beijing, by way of several northern provinces and the treaty port of Tianjin—and over time, from the Taiping War of the mid-nineteenth century through the Boxer Uprising, the 1911 Revolution, the Warlord Period, the May Fourth Movement, the War of Resistance against Japan, the 1949 revolution, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and the initial period of Reform and Opening Up (1980s). Indeed, the book is organized according to political time: its three parts are titled "The Imperial Era," "Republican China," and "The People's Republic."

As Esherick retraces this familiar chronology, he also reiterates conventional terminologies and patterns. During the Qing, or Imperial era, the Ye men are motivated by “Confucian” concerns and “conservative” values. They embody, even typify, the governing style of the Tongzhi Restoration and live (and travel) as an extended multigenerational household. During the Republican era, the main protagonists—descendants of the earlier generation—are children of privilege who become left-leaning patriots and advocates of free choice in marriage through their experiences in modern schools. After the 1949 revolution, they experience a brief sunny period of socialist development, and then they suffer miserably as the Communist Party turns on some of its early and enthusiastic proponents during the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution. With the initiation of economic reforms after 1980, the now elderly Ye men are finally able to fulfill their desire to contribute to society in their sunset years; many of their children depart for education abroad, where some now remain. Their story is no less compelling for being familiar.

Esherick first introduces his readers to Ye Kunhou and his son, Ye Boying, both of whom were propelled outward from their hometown and upward to positions of influence in the bureaucracy by the devastation that accompanied the Taiping occupation of central Anhui. They helped organize local militias and engaged in fundraising to support the dynasty, and they were rewarded with imperial honors and opportunities. Even as they, like many of their contemporaries, decried official venality and incompetence, they also accumulated considerable wealth while serving in office. Ye Kunhou, for example, acquired a sizable and valuable collection of books and antiquities during his period of official service. Typical of their generation of officials, neither Kunhou nor Boying achieved office through the regular examination channels. Rather, involvement in militia organization, and ties to Li Hongzhang and Zeng Guofan, “helicoptered” them to positions of influence. They were also typical of their generation of local officials in terms of their governing priorities: they organized rites and shrines to honor the war dead, built academies, and funded philanthropic institutions and activities (82–85).

In these early chapters, Esherick offers a detailed account of the family’s roots, tracing the genealogy back to its founding ancestor who moved to Anqing during the Yuan-Ming transition. Most of the material, however, deals with the family’s mid- to late-nineteenth-century experiences. Through the words and actions of his protagonists, Esherick shows how local elites

sympathetic to the Qing experienced the Taiping War: they suffered as refugees, were dismayed at the destruction of property and the ruination wrought by war, and, ultimately, departed in pursuit of opportunities elsewhere. Through the poetry of Ye Kunhou and the chronological autobiography of Ye Boying, readers witness the violence, starvation, and unspeakable numbers of dead bodies that littered the landscape, both during the war and in its aftermath. The reader is made privy to the observations and self-representations of two late Qing officials, which provide an insider's view of tumultuous events. An external yardstick occasionally, and rather jarringly, intrudes: Esherick is particularly struck by the fact that his nineteenth-century protagonists seem oblivious to the Opium War and the arrival of the Western powers. He attributes this deviation from the standard timeline to the conservatism of men raised in an inland province, rather than to the irrelevance of the event to their experience or the possibility that their views were not governed by the chronology and priorities that we now understand as obvious.

In recounting the Ye family's experience during the nineteenth century, Esherick makes extensive use of the amorphous and here undefined adjective "Confucian," which he invests with broad-ranging explanatory power. The term is used to account for all manner of beliefs, sentiments, and behaviors, ranging from religious agnosticism to parsimony to interest in the preservation of family reputation and the contours of family organization. This gives an unfortunate aura of timelessness to Esherick's account of the nineteenth century. Indeed, he seems to be using "Confucian" as a synonym for "traditional Chinese," and not enough attention is paid to how typical Chinese elites and their family patterns and official behavior may have differed in the late nineteenth century from earlier traditional periods. Late Qing social and cultural particularities are left to stand for an entire imperial era. Almost inevitably, readers are left to anticipate the triumph of a westernizing treaty port-based modernity over an insular Confucian tradition. Esherick's oft-repeated description of Ye men as possessing a typical "Confucian skepticism toward religion" rings false, given recent research that highlights the religiosity of late Qing and Republican elites. Plenty of late Qing elite men were also devoted Buddhists, Daoists, or proponents of various forms of popular religion. The scholarly assumption of an inverse correlation between Confucian values and religious devotion may well be a product of twentieth-century antisuperstition campaigns.¹ The Ye men may have possessed a certain skepticism toward religion, but it was not necessarily due to their Confucian leanings.

In subsequent chapters, Esherick reveals that one key to Ye status maintenance was the family's good fortune in having moved to Tianjin, where the Ye patriarchs became embedded in a web of business, social, and political networks extending outward from that city during the 1910s and 1920s. Esherick beautifully evokes childhood in a multigenerational polygamous household in shades reminiscent of Ba Jin's famous novel *Family*. The fourteen children of Ye Chongzhi and his two concubines (his primary wife remained childless) played and studied against the backdrop of a richly appointed and decadent courtyard dwelling, while their father did business and their mothers played mahjong, drank, smoked opium, and bickered. The family servants, including a sizable number of nannies and wet nurses, provided the children with a limited window into the lives of the lower classes. The nostalgic pull that these childhood memories exerted on his informants is palpable in Esherick's detailed accounts of culinary pleasures, schoolroom mischief, and seasonal entertainments. As the family fortunes diminished, and after the death of the patriarch, the younger Ye brothers made their way in a world defined by the academic, political, and sportsmanly values of Nankai University and its affiliated high school. Ultimately, their educations led them into the world of left-wing politics, in some cases inspired by romantic entanglements. The sisters were almost completely shut out of these educational opportunities; the older ones remained largely uneducated and entered into socially advantageous but personally catastrophic arranged marriages.

The main protagonists of this and the subsequent section on the later twentieth century are Ye Duzhuang (Esherick's father-in-law); his older brother, Ye Duyi; and his younger brothers, Ye Fang, Ye Duzheng, Fang Shi, and Ye Lizhong. All but the last of these, Ye Lizhong, who became a comedian and was subsequently estranged from the family for an extended period, followed similar trajectories out of Tianjin. They sought academic, political, and romantic satisfaction beyond the horizons of the family compound, rejecting arranged marriages and pursuing higher learning in Nanjing, Beijing, Tokyo, and Chicago. Wartime activism also extended their horizons: members of the Ye family trekked across China as part of military and political organizations. Two joined the Chinese Communist Party at an early stage; two others joined left-leaning organizations; and one returned from the United States after the revolution in order to contribute to the scientific development of his country. Ironically, during the Mao years, the brothers suffered for their earlier political awakening and involvement, when these activities became an excuse for persecution and abuse during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural

Revolution. The oldest brother (Ye Duren) and the fourth brother (Ye Duxin), both businessmen in Tianjin who were relatively disengaged from politics prior to 1949, had an easier time after the revolution. While they did not rise as high as their brothers, nor did they suffer as much.

Esherick describes the Ye family as “middling elites,” explaining that by this he means “never rising to the top, but never falling to the level of the general population” (xi). This by no means should be confused with their being middle class, for the Ye family members discussed in this book had close connections to leading political figures and (intermittent) access to extraordinary financial and educational resources. Indeed, the men of this elite family demonstrated a remarkable ability to maintain positions of influence and prestige in very different political settings; their particular torment in the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution correlates with their educational, political, and occupational status, although of course many non-elites suffered as well.²

In *Ancestral Leaves*, Joseph Esherick seeks, as he puts it, to “bring major historical events and transitions down to the level of individual lives” (xiv). Here we find the particularities of personal experience mapped onto the vast canvas of modern Chinese history. That the men at the center of his story literally embody what we know about Chinese history should come as no surprise. Officials, treaty port businessmen, left-leaning student activists, journalists, academics, and cadres are familiar historical actors and subjects. That their timeline defines our survey courses does not diminish Esherick’s achievement in bringing this familiar chronology to life.

Both Esherick and Hershatter have written passionate and engaging histories, although they take fundamentally different approaches and perhaps imagine different audiences. Esherick has revisited the standard account of modern Chinese history from an intimate perspective, taking for granted the ways in which historians use evidence to make narrative. By contrast, Hershatter’s work pushes us to reconsider the underpinnings of the historical craft. She reminds us that chronology is a construct of our making, and that our sources may not have understood time—or their times—in our terms.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Nedostup 2010, Katz 2010, and Goossaert 2006.
2. See, for example, Yang 2011.

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