



Shaanxi women learn farming skills, 1959.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GAO XIAOXIAN

Opening Doors through Collaboration

ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE OF CHINA

The reestablishment of diplomatic ties between the United States and China in 1979 opened the door to scholarly exchanges after nearly three decades of isolation. For American academics this opening held the promise of connecting with scholars in China and conducting field and archival research there. Chinese scholars were eager to learn about Western theories and research methodologies and to gain a broader international platform for their work. To help accelerate these connections, a Luce Foundation program promoted joint research projects aimed at producing new insights and knowledge that would enhance understanding of China and improve Sino-American relations.

The ten-year U.S.-China Cooperative Research Program, which ended in 1998, funded U.S. universities to support more than fifty teams of American and Chinese scholars who collaborated on projects that explored legal, economic, political, social and cultural topics—in urban and rural, historical and contemporary contexts. These cooperative inquiries generated publications in both languages and a range of new resources. In many cases, they also fostered enduring professional relationships.

Gail Hershatter, a China scholar and professor of history at the University of California, Santa Cruz, worked with Gao Xiaoxian on a project that allowed each to benefit from the other's expertise. Professor Hershatter's 2011 book, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*, is based on a decade of oral-history interviews conducted in rural Shaanxi Province with Gao, who at the time was research director of the Shaanxi Provincial Women's Federation. The book breaks new ground by exploring the experiences of farming women during the early years of Chinese socialism—particularly the impact of agricultural collectivization on work and family in the 1950s.

"I could not in any way have done this research without Gao Xiaoxian," says Hershatter. "I learned so much from her, but at the same time I think we did things together that neither one of us could have done separately."

While the two women shared an interest in the subject of their research, each had a different goal. Hershatter was seeking to fill a gap in scholarship by looking beyond that era's political campaigns to examine their impact on individual lives. Gao wanted to identify lessons from the past that could be applied to current development strategies affecting rural women.

"We had diverse but overlapping interests. I work in an academic environment, Gao does not. She's involved in development work, I'm not. My concern in writing about our research was to make China more comprehensible to an audience outside China, which means I had to fill in a lot of background. Gao was more interested in drawing out the policy implications of our findings for a Chinese audience. So we decided we were going to talk to people together about the 1950s, but would do separate things with our research."

The collaboration was mutually enriching. Gao Xiaoxian had a deep understanding of the Chinese countryside, spoke the local dialect, and was able to gain the confidence of interview subjects because of her well-respected work on women's issues in the province. At the same time, she valued her research partner's experience with oral-history techniques and interpretation.

"The most rewarding aspect of the collaboration was the intellectual relationship," says Hershatter. "As an American academic, I was concerned with questions like what is the nature of memory—when someone tells us what happened in the 1950s, what are we really hearing? And Gao was very interested in seeing how an American academic would approach questions like that, and also in the way feminist historical analysis gets done."

The two colleagues remain close friends. Gao Xiaoxian founded a grassroots development organization where she continues her work with rural women. Gao has written policy-oriented essays informed by the collaborative research and is working on a longer history of women's labor in Shaanxi Province. ■