

tently fashioned against a current of marginalization in the post-Mao era. They were, to quote Audre Lorde, "past memory forward / into desire" (1986:57).

In this chapter, I bring us back to these liberation stories to reflect on them from another angle, considering them as memory, or what I prefer to call "memory-practice." As nostalgic memory, they raise questions about how people come to reinterpret their history. They lead us to consider how representations of the past are discursively produced and deployed. I draw attention to their nostalgic quality in order to discern how that nostalgia is produced out of and positions women of the oldest cohort in relation to post-Mao visions of modernity. The post-Mao imaginary of modernity, as I argued in the previous chapter, decenters workers and makes them the embodiment of a troubled history. As managers and party cadres sought to reinvigorate the silk industry in order to produce exports profitable for the state, they invoked a dominant form of nostalgia that imagined how workers in the period before the Cultural Revolution used to be more obedient, more dedicated, and too naive or too afraid to speak out.

Older women workers implicitly complicate that construction of the past by remembering themselves instead as socialist heroes. Their nostalgia resides not only in the content but in the form of their stories, which is known as "speaking bitterness." By speaking bitterness in the post-Mao era, women workers in their turn unsettle the most recent universalizing vision of modernity that has displaced them. Analysis of this interplay will require a more nuanced interpretation of nostalgia than its usual and somewhat dismissive portrayal as an "always already" insidious structure of sentiment. We must pay attention as well to the dynamic and contested nature of historical identities.

By turning a doubled angle of vision on these stories—seeing how they speak not just to the past out of the present but also to the present out of the past—I necessarily explore the writing of history in anthropology. History provides a critical ground from which scholars challenge the allochronism of culture as that approach was developed in colonial anthropology. By "allochronism" I mean, following Fabian (1983:32), the use of "naturalized-spatialized Time" as a distancing device that

3 Socialist Nostalgia

History is not kind to us
we restitch it with living
past memory forward
into desire

Audre Lorde,
"On My Way Out
I Passed Over You and
the Verrazano Bridge"

Stories of liberation, as I situated them previously, speak about a seemingly distant past. As a history of the 1950s, they trace the specificities of cultural challenges that made transgressions of sexual difference a central practice of imagining a socialist modernity. They illuminate how and why a small group of women became such enthusiastic subjects of a Maoist discourse on liberation. Yet we cannot forget that these women shared their stories with me in the contemporary moment of post-Mao reform. In this context, their tales of gender transgressions appear to be anachronistic, incongruous in today's very different regime of modernity. I heard their commentary, then, as an arc of interpretation that swept from the 1950s to the 1990s and back again. Older women workers proffered these stories to me as if they were reminiscing over photographs from an old national family album. But these were not sepia-hued snapshots of moments frozen in time. Though steeped in nostalgia, they were instead selective genealogies of socialist subjectivity, insis-

supported a systematic tendency to deny the coevalness in time between the subjects of anthropological writings and the anthropologist. Anthropologists have, for some time, contended that non-European peoples "have" not only history (E. Wolf 1982) but the art of historical inquiry (Faubion 1993; Price 1983; Rosaldo 1980). They have explored how history both disrupts and reinforces culture, as well as how culture is an effect of history (Rosaldo 1980; Yanagisako 1985). While certain anthropologists have, in a problematic vein, discerned a "cultural logic" that reproduces itself through historical events, thus purportedly demonstrating cultural autonomy (Sahlins 1985), others have demonstrated how history can be used to tell a story of forced cultural syncretism in colonial worlds of unequal power (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Though many of these critical approaches have unraveled the colonial conception of culture as timeless tradition, they have failed to explore the politics of knowledge in constructing narratives that count as history.

Recent anthropological work along these lines has developed from critiques of Hegelian historiography (Chakrabarty 1992; Duara 1995; Prakash 1990; H. White 1987; Young 1990). These critiques have unveiled how Enlightenment assumptions of linear progress relegated contemporary histories of struggles over power and meaning to the shadowy background of ahistorical cultural difference. Classical Marxist versions of such linear tales were similarly flawed, reducing all forms of subalternity to a story of class oppression. Such Enlightenment histories narrowly incorporated colonized peoples by forcing on them the kinds of progressive histories that kept Europe and the United States at the center of modernity. Indeed, the very concept of modernity derives from hypostatizing History as a story of progress. For this reason Foucault, though he ignored colonialism, intentionally disrupted linear narratives of progress with genealogies that traced the recent invention of concepts and practices that lie at the heart of modernity.

Simply proving that non-western others also have History thus does not undo the link between structures of historical knowledge and forms of domination. Such uncoupling requires open-minded scrutiny of the relations of power in the creation of historical narratives—relations of power that reside, for example, in narrative genres. As Hayden White

(1987) has argued, the content of history is found in the form. These genres include biography and autobiography (Gagnier 1991; Steedman 1986), statistical studies (Joan Scott 1988b), and tales of the rise of class subjectivity (Thompson 1963). Such relations of power also inhabit the politics of history as discourse (Chakrabarty 1992; Spivak 1991), whereby historians construct the very terms of a past they believe they merely describe. And finally, power dwells in the heterogeneous sites where these narratives have a contested existence—in struggles, for example, over cultural citizenship that challenge linear tales of the nation or, in this case, over the politics of gender that challenge progressive stories of modernity.¹

This chapter, then, draws attention to the discursive production of history. I by no means intend its argument to supplant that of chapter 1 for the continued need to understand the historical production of discourse (in this case, discourses of women's liberation). Rather, in juxtaposing the two chapters I explore the creative tension between them—between the way discourses of women's liberation were historically generated and the way history is discursively deployed.

If nations, states, and peoples deploy history as a sign of the modern, then the past becomes a site through which multiple voices can contest specific projects of modernity. The oldest cohort's stories of liberation, when revisited with an ear to their nostalgia, open up a space for women of this cohort to remember themselves as creative political actors in a world that now denies them this ability. To be sure, the nostalgia was not theirs alone. A nostalgia for the utopian dream of socialism, and for the first years after the revolution when people believed in that dream, pervaded national political culture. Older women workers drew on this dominant form of socialist nostalgia, which portrays an innocent state at one with its citizens. They, too, remembered a time when they sacrificed on behalf of the new state. But their memories diverged from the history created by the state. For in remembering that during that time they were heroes in the eyes of the state, they provided an implicit social commentary on the post-Mao regime's current vision of modernity. They unsettled the naturalization of that vision and the effort to rewrite history that such naturalization requires.

THE GOLDEN ERA

A recurrent nostalgia for the initial years of socialism underlies official and popular rejection of Maoism. Indeed, many people told me that "Maoism" began only after the halcyon early years of the 1950s. National political culture, including both official and unofficial revisionist histories, novels, television programs, and informal commentary, encourages a nostalgic view of those years as utopian perfection, utter social harmony, and the innocent belief in the unity of Chinese citizens and their new socialist state. Many—not only older workers but also a significant number of intellectuals—share in this nostalgia. Their sense of loss is tinged with a nationalist longing for a future of rapid and infinite progress. The longing speaks of a desire to have China regain a dignified and powerful position in relation to the West; lost is the hope that China would lead the way out of the social degradations generated in the history of western capitalism. Michael Dutton (1995), borrowing from Walter Benjamin, has called this period China's "dream time."²

Incorruptibility

The reminiscences of Yang Zhuren brought out one prevalent nostalgic image of the 1950s—that of a society that was incorruptible. Yang Zhuren held the modest title of secretary to Zhenfu's party office but was perhaps the most powerful man in the factory. Like others who expressed nostalgia for that time, Yang Zhuren allowed his ruminations to emerge in momentary and unexpected snatches. At times, people reminisced in response to my direct questions about their lives right after the revolution, but just as often, their nostalgia punctuated commentary on other topics.

Yang Zhuren was a consummate storyteller. He had a firm grasp of the politics of speech, a skill that was essential to his political power. He was also a virtuoso at discretion, sometimes turning stories into oblique illuminations of contemporary political dilemmas and at other times just using them to distract my attention. I had gone to Zhenfu numerous times to interview Yang Zhuren and others before I received permission to visit on a daily basis. When the latter project began, I spent the first

full day with Yang Zhuren again. This time I tried to be more assertive in pressing him on the deep problems Zhenfu faced because of economic reform. Echoing popular explanations, Yang Zhuren blamed their problems on the Cultural Revolution. When I asked which specific practices still lingered from that period, Yang Zhuren deftly skirted my question.

"Before the Cultural Revolution," he began, "people helped one another. It was not an economic relationship. We did not have 'going through the back door,' 'the winds of corruption,' 'opportunism and profiteering.'" Yang Zhuren invoked phrases familiar from official denunciations and ordinary conversation alike. The post-Mao government had disengaged the act of accumulating wealth from questions about the mode of its acquisition or the relations of inequality structured by it. Yet a lively and heated moral discourse on wealth nonetheless continued, raising questions about who should be allowed to make money and in which ways. As he and I both knew, the most pointed critiques of corruption were directed toward party cadres and their families for using their political power to gain unfair advantage. Even the central party-state leaders felt compelled to announce periodically, with much rhetorical fanfare, the latest campaign to sweep out corruption in the party. Local citizens merely shook their heads cynically.

He continued, "Before the Cultural Revolution, there existed 'honesty in the performance of official duties.' Government officials did not seek personal [i.e., selfish] gain." Yang Zhuren had tellingly switched his mode of political discourse. His language here reflects a presocialist language of governance, replete with a four-character phrase from classical Confucian prescriptions and a term for "government officials," *guan*, that harks back to the imperium. Then he grabbed a piece of the factory's stationery and held it up to me: "For example, you wouldn't even use this paper to write your own letter. You would buy your own paper. Then it was glorious not to use what belonged to the public."

No Thieves

The public sphere then was built on mutual trust—or so people remembered. One day after her retirement, Yu Shifu and I met for a long walk. I had just returned to China after a four-year hiatus. We caught up on

past news. Had I finished my dissertation, she wanted to know? And did I have a job? Reassured on that account, Yu Shifu waxed eloquent about her newfound leisure time. We lingered over unraveling episodes of the soap opera *Yearnings* that she and many others were devoted to watching. Then I turned the conversation to her past. There were details I wanted to fill in. I began by asking her what her first impressions were of "this liberation stuff."

"Good, very good," she answered. "Because then we had wages. It wasn't like now, with people so particular about nice clothes and good things to eat. Then we just cared about getting enough wages to eat at all. And that was when I finally learned how to read. I was thirteen years old. I hadn't gone to any schooling before that; we were too poor and things were too chaotic."

"And it was so much more calm and stable then. Oh, it was really good. No one dared steal anything, it was very stable. People's relationships with one another were really good."

"How did people get rid of the thieves?" I asked.

"Whenever someone took anything," she replied, "for example, if someone took something on the bus, then they would post his picture and say he had stolen on this bus. Then he wouldn't dare do it again. Or if someone beat someone, then they would post his picture where it happened and say that this person had beaten someone in this spot. So people didn't dare do it anymore. So the 1950s were good. Very safe. And people were very trusting. Friends had a sense of loyalty."

Sacrifice

Citizens willingly made sacrifices for their new state—or such was the sense conveyed to me by various people's nostalgic memories. Yang Wanfen and Si Zhaoding, Zhenfu's trade union leader and head of security, respectively, fondly remembered their self-denial. "Just after Liberation," Si Zhaoding recalled, "workers' zeal was so high. We thought, after Liberation, life couldn't be better. Then, workers were obedient. Now, people just want money. We had a few bad workers then, too, who complained or were afraid of getting tired, afraid of the hardship."

"But we worked so hard then! I remember the Korean War. 'Oppose America, Aid Korea!' 'Protect our homes and defend our country!' We workers made such an effort. We gave extra money to the government for planes and bombs. Workers didn't pay attention to the hours. We went all out. And 1958. 'The high tide of socialist construction!' Workers were excited then, too."

Yang Wanfen added, "For seven days we didn't sleep. We just kept working."

Si Zhaoding went on, "And in 1960, all the problems. No raw materials. We stopped production. Soviet-China relations broke off. We had to give back money to the Soviet Union in goods, like silk. Then workers also worked like crazy. Zhenfu didn't ask the government for wages. We swept the floor, planted mulberry trees, picked tea leaves. We made our wages that way."

Though nostalgic, this paean to themselves also contains a faint trace of ironic self-deprecation. To speak of "zeal," for example, is already to mark a distance between the innocence of then and the cynicism of now. The post-Mao regime periodically pleads with the populace to "raise their zeal" for the accumulation of national wealth in an unselfish manner—that is, for the state. But zeal is a scarce sentiment these days, for people hold a more skeptical view of state power. Moreover, all the political campaigns they mention have been reevaluated: many view the anti-American politics of that era as reflecting a history best forgotten; all believe that the Great Leap Forward ("the high tide of socialist construction") was an unmitigated disaster; the break with the Soviet Union marks a certain socialist rigidity. Ironic questions underlie their nostalgic commentary: Why did we bother to sacrifice? Exactly what was it all for?

Nostalgia is not an innocent sentiment. Indeed, it is not just a sentiment, for it also exists as a strategy of representation. Most social theorists perceive nostalgia critically, as a way of redeeming an idealized past that naturalizes contemporary relations of domination. Susan Stewart, in her reflective essays collected in *On Longing* (1993), deftly traces nostalgia as a representational practice. She points out that it persists as a longing, structured through narrative, for the authenticity of absolute

presence and the origin of lived experience; it reflects a wish to close the gap between experience and its mediation in language. Nostalgia is of necessity inauthentic, Stewart argues, because as narrative it does not partake in the lived experience of the past. It is thus ideological because the past it idealizes exists only in its own narrative, there reproduced as a felt absence. Yet nostalgic narrative also endeavors to bring closure to events, thus forcing a bounded interpretation of their significance. Nostalgia's *raison d'être* lies in that desire for absolute closure, for both the clarity of beginnings and the certitude of endings. Paradoxically, nostalgia functions only in the absence of such fixity and closure. "The nostalgia," Stewart writes, "dreams of a moment before knowledge and self-consciousness that itself lives on only in the self-consciousness of the nostalgic narrative" (p. 23).

Stewart's meditation attends to the relationship between meaning and materiality or, more specifically, between narrative, sentiment, and temporality. She underscores the troubling and pervasive inability to fix a nonarbitrary relationship between representations and their referents, not only in literary works but in all of cultural life. Nostalgia as a utopian gesture searches for certitude in the face of the potential multivocality of meaning.

The pervasive nostalgia in China for the 1950s as a golden era of socialism bears out much of Stewart's argument. This dominant mode endeavors to capture a protected and pure essence of socialism that precludes the history of its degradation. It erases a range of political tensions that had already manifested themselves in the early 1950s, such as the workers' strikes and political campaigns that prefigured the Cultural Revolution. By invoking the socialist dream, these nostalgic memories implicitly cleave to an essential innocence and goodness attributed to the state. They also hark back to the obedience of citizens and their willingness to believe in the state. Such nostalgia acknowledges how much China has "fallen" from that state of grace. At the same time, it encourages a renewed attachment to the state and its post-Mao projects of modernity. If only "the people" would return to that originary unity with the state and not question its power, China could have modernity within its reach.

This hegemonic nostalgia seeks, as Stewart suggests, a purity of lived socialist experience that will provide ideological closure on the meaning of socialism, then and now.³ In this sense, she echoes other critics of nostalgia who reveal a diversity in forms of domination. Renato Rosaldo (1989), for example, writes movingly of imperialist nostalgia, peculiar to colonialists who yearn for the very ways of non-western life they have destroyed. Kathleen Stewart (1988) writes ironically of bourgeois modes of nostalgia in decorations of a town square that recapture the rustic.

Socialist nostalgia in China also longs for the very ways of life that the socialist state destroyed. Yet the dream about the 1950s is not uniform. Women workers who came of age then share in the official culture of nostalgia, but they also diverge from it. They remember not just the innocence of socialism but a past when they viewed themselves as heroic political agents, exemplified in their willingness to transgress the conventional boundaries of gender. Indeed, their memories create a contested terrain of nostalgia by unsettling the post-Mao vision of natural, ahistorical femininity. They open rather than close a gap in the representations of the past and, necessarily, of the present, creating a certain distance between themselves as older women workers and the post-Mao state.

To understand how these memories unsettle dominant modes of nostalgia, we will have to move beyond Stewart, who assumes that culture and language are universal and shared. No particular subjects appear in her argument, no situated relations of power. She locates nostalgia within representations but outside of specific, and contested, histories. How, instead, can we come to appreciate the nostalgia of those who were so recently designated as subalterns but have since lost that privileged status granted them by the socialist state?

SPEAKING BITTERNESS

Along with sharing the nostalgia for a landscape of social harmony in the socialist Golden Age, women workers who came of age in the 1950s also spoke about the "bitterness" of their lives during that time. I'll admit

that even as I provided an empathetic audience, I thought they complained a lot. They spoke about "eating bitterness" with regard to almost everything in their past. Being a woman then, they said, was "bitter"; doing silk work was "eating bitter food"; life itself, Yu Shifu said, was "bitter, then, very bitter." They emphasized the difficulties in overcoming this bitterness, the lengths they went to in struggling against local male dominance, the amount of bitterness they had accepted over the years as conscientious women workers. These remarks were made in formal interviews but also in informal moments, as we walked around the factory grounds or while they worked. I took their complaints to heart, even as I wondered if they weren't a bit overdone. After all, these women also waxed eloquent about how perfect the 1950s were. How was I to grasp the import of their aggrieved tone?

At first, I assumed their rhetoric of complaint was transparent, that the meaning of what they said could be found simply in the surface content of their speech. Only gradually did I come to think of their speech as speech *acts* and to interpret their complaints as a historically and culturally specific narrative practice. After my first stay in China, I began to reread ethnographic accounts of communist organizing just before and after the socialist revolution. I no longer accepted that the only explanation for the Communist Party's success lay in the obviousness of the need to address exploitation. I had begun to ask a different set of questions about the cultural construction of political convictions. At the same time, innovative uses of narrative analysis in ethnographic writing (Caton 1990; S. Harding 1990; Lavie 1990; K. Stewart 1996; Tsing 1993) led me to ponder the genre of this talk by older women. Eventually, I came to realize that their commentary on the bitterness of their everyday lives reflected a narrative practice known as "speaking bitterness" (*suku*).

Speaking bitterness was a political praxis honed and disseminated by the party in the process of revolution. Party cadres used it as a vital method of teaching peasants and later workers how to speak as socialist subjects of the new nation. Speaking bitterness, in other words, provided a means of interpellation; it led people to conceive of themselves as new kinds of subjects, as subaltern subjects. Gradually I could hear, even in

their informal remarks, that older women workers cast their lives in this mode, thereby asserting certain political claims. Given their current marginalization, I began to hear their speaking bitterness as nostalgic. The nostalgia existed in the form of their talk and the way it was spoken.

The secondary literature on China describes speaking bitterness as a political tool of the party during the 1940s and 1950s (Belden 1949; Chan, Madsen, and Unger 1992; Hinton 1966).⁴ William Hinton, for example, who worked on a UN project on agricultural development in China in the late 1940s, provides an extended description of this process. He became interested in communist land reform and, with the permission of local Communist Party leaders, observed its workings in one northern village.⁵ As he describes it from his copious notes, party organizers from outside the village mobilized those individuals whom they had decided were the most oppressed to speak up about their exploitation in a public gathering. First, they met with these peasants separately and educated them about how to interpret their lives in the socialist terms of class exploitation, replacing concepts of fate or kinship noblesse oblige. (Many poor peasants worked for their wealthier kin.) After teaching them to think of the wealthier peasants who hired them as their enemies and the poorer peasants as their friends, the cadres encouraged them to believe they could overcome their exploitation by speaking out about the bitterness they had suffered and then acting to rectify it. Under party guidance, they rehearsed how to perform their tale of bitterness. At the subsequent public gathering, these peasants would "speak pains to recall pains" (Hinton 1966:157) in the form of public accusations against gentry landlords whom party cadres brought before the crowd. This political performance moved others to speak their pains and thus to create a new form of collective identity. It also paved the way for the collective reappropriation of wealth from the accused elite by creating a new public morality about wealth. Though rehearsed, these performances were far from mechanical. Their novelty and their goal of a thorough rupture with previous social ties made them highly emotional and sometimes violent.⁶ Many of the poor peasants who first dared to speak their bitterness assumed leadership of their villages in the new socialist regime. Speaking bitterness later was performed in urban factories as well,

but without either the redistribution of the means of production or the violent confrontations common in the countryside. When I returned to China a second time, I gathered stories about these urban sessions. Yu Shifu described them as rather formal affairs that occurred nearly a year after the revolution, when the new party-state had firm control of the cities. Workers descended from Shanghai to visit each factory in Hangzhou and talk about the oppression they all faced as workers. These sessions taught Yu Shifu how to think of herself as a worker in the socialist way. She learned that she was suffering from something called "exploitation" and that she could overcome this condition by joining the party. Unlike peasants, however, she and other workers did not yell their accusations at capitalist managers, who continued to administer the factories for the new state. Rather, they learned that the way to address their oppressed condition as workers was to support the new state.⁷

The importance of speaking bitterness lies in the conception and construction of China as a modern socialist nation effected through this practice, at once aesthetic and sociopolitical.⁸ Speaking bitterness identified which social group stood as the national heroes of a particular political moment, and the party designated which people could use this genre. Moreover, only certain kinds of knowledge could be made into the truth of speaking bitterness—class exploitation but not, for the most part, marriage or domination by one's husband. Speaking bitterness was a highly effective performance. By framing their experiences within this narrative, many peasants and workers came to see themselves as new kinds of persons and to interpret their lives in new ways. Many embraced socialist political convictions by speaking bitterness.⁹

Speaking bitterness did not simply offer one way to understand experience; it was not a mere ideological overlay. Rather, it made experience meaningful by having people perform and thereby signify its truth (S. Harding 1990). Speaking bitterness thus provided the representational means by which the party "mapped" social vision into subjectivity" (de Lauretis 1984:8), and in so doing created a foundation for the socialist subject. It was a political praxis of signification. Such things said aloud motivated not only the speaking self but also others—who, by acting in dialogic imitation of the speaker, affirmed the speaker's actions.¹⁰

As a narrative form, speaking bitterness defines subject-positions of identification and desire; such definitions in turn encourage people to conceive of their lives according to this narrative. Speaking bitterness incites desire by offering a historical imagination of overcoming. It furnishes a providential plot, organizing the meaning not just of certain aspects of life but of life in its entirety. It subsumes the contingencies of existence into a progressive story of its overcoming through socialist means. The plot of overcoming life's bitterness is resolved through the party. Speaking bitterness thus exists ultimately as a narrative performance of political *resolution* in which people are called on to claim heroic stature in the eyes of the nation-state. It led many of those designated as subalterns, like Yu Shifu, Chen Shifu, and others of their cohort, to fervently embrace the political, social, and military goals of the party-state.

Benedict Anderson (1991) has perceptively argued that narrative form is a critical cultural component of the imagined nation. Following Walter Benjamin, he concludes that conceptions of simultaneity in the homogeneous, empty time of linear history pervade the structure of the nineteenth-century realist novel and that this form provides a narrative of nation-ness. Speaking bitterness operates in a similar manner. It connects people who have disparate experiences, making those experiences tell a story of the coming together of a socialist nation. However, beyond this formal homology, the cultural specificities in the narrative form more pointedly evoke national identity. Speaking bitterness created the conditions of visibility for a new socialist subject, one whose dilemmas in life might lead to state-sanctioned rewards. Such rewards might range from symbolic praise to concrete manifestations in terms of education, job assignments, and household material goods, as well as accession to state power itself.

But this genre also has a history within the socialist era. While "bitterness" constitutes the grounds for heroism and glory, the specificities of bitterness vary with each political movement. After the socialist revolution, the state codified liberation stories; the party brought out workers and peasants to tell the children and foreigners about the bitterness of life before Liberation. Yu Shifu recalled with pride her contribution to educating people by telling her own story in front of elementary

school children. Most scholars thus assume that speaking bitterness refers only to the narrative practices at the moment of revolution.

Yet the legacies of this narrative practice persist in what otherwise seem like disparate styles of speech. One can find its echoes during the Cultural Revolution, though they are not commonly so labeled. Struggle sessions witnessed workers screaming their bitter accusations against managers, and students haranguing their teachers (Liang and Shapiro 1983; Luo 1990). Speaking bitterness reemerges again in the initial years after the Cultural Revolution. As intellectuals poured out their bitterness about the sufferings they had endured, they wrote in a form that came to be known as literature of the wounded, or "scar literature" (Barme and Lee 1979; Honig 1984; Siu and Stern 1983).¹¹ This genre was followed by Cultural Revolution memoirs speaking bitterness in English to an American audience. Such narratives created intellectuals as victims of oppression who deserved state restitution.¹² In its initial years, the post-Mao state encouraged and used scar stories to bind intellectuals to providing political support for economic reform. The state thus participated again in shaping these narratives into tales of redemption and progress; now it is the intellectuals who seek resolution, which is found when they offer to build the nation out of the ashes of Maoism.¹³ As a genre, then, speaking bitterness "speaks" people's lives into a socialist realist form. The stature it confers on those who give it voice moves them from undeserved victimization to public recognition of their heroism in enduring that victimization. Those who speak out about their bitterness implicitly speak to be recognized as socialist subjects of the state. Thus we must attend not just to narrative structure but also to the context of the particular performance.

Women workers in the 1980s and 1990s used an informal mode of speaking bitterness. Unlike intellectuals, they spoke it out of turn, on the sly, since the state no longer designated them as heroes of national development. They spoke their bitterness as a counterpoint to the public discourse about them. Their use of this form out of turn makes it nostalgic.

Let us return to the stories of chapter 1, listening again to their language. They might sound like complaints or patent tales of woe, but if

we listen from a different angle we can hear the echoes of a politically significant genre. Recall Yu Shifu's words: "It was very bitter, then. You couldn't produce much in one day." Or those of Si Zhaoqing, the head of security: "Country people know how to eat bitterness; that work was a real hardship." Or think of how Chen Shifu told her story: "My money is enough for her to study at the university." Those were [my pa's] words when he was dying. . . . But [my ma] was cheated out of the money by others, because she couldn't read." She tellingly described her apprenticeship under the new socialist regime: "I was so young as an apprentice. I didn't even get the usual 'clothing expense.' . . . I really lost out. But I don't want to haggle over it. It's more important to do good work. . . . In 1956, when I entered the factory, I was a little illiterate person. . . . [W]e didn't have as good conditions then. And women were not as important then."

Their language literally references bitterness. It juxtaposes conditions of victimization with their strength in enduring them. These are tough women. Yet their rhetoric emphasizes hardship. Chen Shifu's language, for example, elaborates the misfortunes that, she implies, never really went away: "I really lost out." These are not tales of the good old days. Nor can we hear them as unmediated voices of the oppressed, even while recognizing that their lives were undeservedly hard. These voices have incorporated the language of particular tales of oppression. They hold, in their story line, an implicit demand for recognition of the sacrifices they endured in the face of victimization. The language of speaking bitterness places the speaker in a position of heroism *in relation to* an implied audience: the state. Chen Shifu forgoes just compensation with the knowledge that it is more important to "do good work." Hardship and sacrifice in labor—these make heroes in the eyes of the state. Or they once did.

Just as speaking bitterness has a recognizable language, so it also contains a conventional plot. Consider again Chen Shifu's story of coming to work in the silk industry, which centers on the downfall of her family's silk workshop and her being cheated out of mastering her father's business because she was only a woman. Her father takes ill; relations grow tense when he brings in an older male cousin to take over the workshop.

Her father dies, and her cousin allows the workshop to sink into ruins. Chen Shifu could have saved it, but she was only the daughter, not allowed to take over. She and her mother lose everything and must enter the factory. In the factory, she must struggle to overcome the bitterness that "women were not as important then." She must fight the conservative consciousness of male weavers to learn the craft of weaving. She succeeds in doing so, but only through constant dedication and sacrifice on her part: "So I really lost out. But I don't want to haggle over it. It's more important to do good work."

Chen Shifu's story follows the classic plot line of speaking bitterness. It begins in oppression and moves to an overcoming of that oppression. Her tale of bitterness is founded in the way her gender prevents her from inheriting the family business and protecting her family from ruin. She then progresses to a new experience of bitterness: learning the skill of weaving in a male-dominated world. She overcomes her bitterness by transgressing the boundaries of gender. Her actions are heroic; she changes her gender identity through labor, which is taken up in the name of socialism. Both rhetoric and plot, then, reveal that the genre of speaking bitterness underlies what otherwise sound like informal complaints or transparent descriptions of a hard life.

Yet stories of bitterness told by these women lack the public attention they once garnered. By speaking this bitterness now, inappropriately, they implicitly expressed a longing for continued recognition that would lend a heroic quality to their identities as women workers. They spoke *as if* they still deserved to be seen as heroic, even though the whole interpretive frame of their actions has been brushed aside as part of the wrongheadedness of Maoism. Nostalgia is palpable in the way the stories jar against everything happening in the world around them: changing gender differentiations that make them appear to be women who misperceive what it really means to be a woman rather than heroically overcoming the need to be merely women; the devaluation of workers that makes their labor appear to be just common drudgery rather than Herculean toil for the nation; the feminization of labor in state-run work units that makes them appear to be marginal to the new story, which declares that China's modernity will fly forward on the exploits of the

masculine market. The nostalgia, then, is for the political frame that lent a larger-than-life importance to their laboring activities.

Their speaking bitterness moves imperceptibly between past and present and from nostalgia to resentment. This "migrancy" across time came out strongly in another conversation I had with Chen Shifu. Zhong Lan, a young economics professor from the university, accompanied me on this visit to Zhenfu. The university had assigned her to take care of the logistics of my initial interviews, and she had been scrupulously conscientious in helping me. Zhong Lan prided herself on her long family lineage of elite intellectuals. She and I had argued briefly about workers on the evening before our conversation with Chen Shifu. She had insisted that economic reform made life much better for workers and that, in any case, workers did not really have the capacity to think about the future.

Interested in the question but lacking the opportunity to speak much with workers, Zhong Lan took advantage of this chance to ask Chen Shifu: "Aren't things better for you now with economic reform?" Surprising us both, Chen Shifu launched into a detailed reproach: "No. Things were much better then. We had higher wages then, one hundred yuan a month; now we get eighty-four. Before, we looked after one machine; now we are running after four. The younger ones are no longer willing to become weavers. It's too bitter. They run around chatting, all that *xixihaha* stuff. I don't like to chat; there's no time for that. It influences the quality of production. We older workers, we were conscientious, we did things willingly and took initiative [in our work] in those days. We never stopped working. We were timid and cautious; the younger workers are bold." I asked Chen Shifu why, if older workers were not treated properly, she bothered to work so hard. She replied, "If I am not better than others, I feel embarrassed (*guoyi buqu*)."

The nostalgia in Chen Shifu's speaking bitterness evokes a creative political agent, but one who has been displaced. She is someone who was "conscientious" in her labor, "willingly" did what the state asked of her, and "took initiative" in grappling with the bitterness of silk weaving. The agency is gendered, for the nostalgia is for women who felt inspired to undertake far more than had been expected of them. Chen

Shifu makes a claim, through this nostalgia, that she has a history as a subaltern subject even as the vision of post-Mao modernity attempts to make her *into* history.

As Chen Shifu's depiction implies, older women workers embodied their speaking bitterness in the way they labored on the shop floor. Marked distinctions existed in what I saw of the way workers of different cohorts engaged with their daily work. Recall my encounter with Du Shifu, described in the previous chapter. Her unflagging energy and pride in displaying her knowledge of silk weaving was a performative style that I came to associate with this oldest cohort. Everywhere in the factory, whether in the preparation, weaving, or inspection shop, the oldest workers spent the most time at their looms or rows of spinning machines and cared the most about not having mistakes—broken threads or poorly woven cloth—appear in their work. They were the ones who felt “embarrassed,” as Chen Shifu said, if criticized by their supervisors for a problem. The discipline they embraced at work resulted less from overt directives and more from a sense of mutual obligation existing between the state and its designated subalterns.

Older workers felt, too, the most identified with producing a commodity symbolic of Chinese culture. They would elaborate on the beauty and complexity of the patterns for me. Workers who came of age during the Cultural Revolution or in the post-Mao era, by contrast, did not approach their work as if it held the key to their identity. They did not take particular pride in the kind of work they did, and their only problem with criticism from a supervisor was public embarrassment or docked pay.

Studies of transnational political economy often assume that relations of inequality are the material effect of relations of capital, production, and consumption. Culture is brought in to make sense of material life, but it is assumed to be separable from it. This explanatory framework, however, cannot help us understand the performance of quite disparate identities and styles of work among these women workers. Women become women by performing as women in many different circumstances, including in the world of work. That older workers had such a distinctive mode of engagement with their work indicates a discursive performance

of their gender identities through labor. Their actions speak loudly, albeit nonverbally, about the “bitterness” that older women workers willingly, conscientiously endured so that they might continue to appear as the heroes of China's modernity.

Older women workers wax nostalgic from the margins of the nation-state. They discursively deploy a genre of speaking bitterness to remember their past in a present context that no longer offers the political reverberations of heroism through gender transgression, suffering, and sacrifice. By speaking and performing the bitterness of their labor as if they still deserved the mantle of heroism, these women made a valiant effort to stem the tide of another gendered modernity as it brushed them aside. But already caught up in it, they are half convinced that maybe being a woman worker is nothing heroic after all, just the end of an unfortunate path they took. If their course was not set by fate, then it was determined by circumstances: they had no choice. One might imagine these older women workers as migrants not across space but across time. They have been pulled, while they look back, into a world where they are anachronistic and “Maoist” rather than brave and tough women.

Their discursive deployment of their past both supports and unsettles the post-Mao imaginary of modernity. The narration of their lives in the genre of speaking bitterness continues to uphold an identification with the state, for their nostalgia draws on an imagined unity of mutual recognition between themselves and the state. While that unity has been lost, an undercurrent remains: a sense that Chinese citizens should continue to identify with a socialist state and look to the state to determine national identity. Younger workers, even party members, rarely claimed to speak for or in the name of the state as Yu Shifu or Du Shifu did with me. Most referred instead to *shangmian*, a vague reference to “the above,” where they felt state power resided in relation to them. Older workers expected that since the state had constituted its legitimacy in the name of subalterns, the state should have an obligation to, as Chen Shifu put it, “look after them.”

Moreover, their narratives perpetuate the discursive production of “labor” as the foundation of full human subjectivity. Labor, for them,

still serves as the ultimate measure of human worth and dignity, the grounds for discerning domination and inequality, and the means by which people should search for their freedom. Older women workers learned to interpret labor as the site where women find identities as something other than "mere" women. The younger cohorts, as will become clear, find precisely this vision of modernity through labor to be the domination worth challenging or escaping.

Still, their nostalgia moves like a sword that cuts more than one way. It serves as a stroke of countermemory to the post-Mao transformations of categories of gender and class. The strategic deployment of speaking bitterness inadvertently opens up the mythical quality of the putatively objective knowledge of post-Mao modernity. Their memories trouble the reconstructions of both a postsocialist essential womanhood and a capitalist fetishism of workers. The gap that they open becomes a place from which to craft a genealogy of specific imaginaries of modernity and the intersecting social categories those visions both reify and dissolve. Class, gender, and political generations overlap and disturb one another in these political contests over history. In the process, they unsettle the essentialization of identities in the post-Mao era that both constitute and divide politicized cohorts of women.

I have encouraged the reader to read these stories of liberation and heroism in two directions at once. They tell a story of the past, a cultural history of multiple discourses on liberation. But they also deploy—and therefore creatively reimagine—that history as part of a contemporary discourse on the politics of gender and modernity. Ethnographic histories reside in this tension between a historicity of knowledge and a knowledge of history. Rather than seek a resolution, I find it more useful to approach the writing of history in anthropology through this tension—to allow each method to find the other's limits. I take this approach to be in the spirit of Gayatri Spivak's method (1987) of critical interruption,¹⁴ which rejects the coherence of modern emancipatory narratives while retaining what still makes political sense in those narratives. After recognizing the multiplicity of political interpretations, such as cultural histories of women's liberation and the politics of nostalgia for those

histories, I then use one position to critically interrupt, or find the limits of, the other. To interpret the liberation stories of the oldest cohort of women workers in this manner opens out the stories. We can hear them simultaneously as socialist discourses on gender and histories of feminism, as well as about the cultural construction of class, state power, and socialist nostalgia. Spivak's method of critical interruption encourages us to pay attention to the cultural locations of stories about modernity. The mediations of speaking bitterness, re-collecting history, and disciplining labor gather under the sign of an ever-deferred modernity. Such mediations bind together the practical and the imaginary in overlapping global histories.

In the next section, I turn to the Cultural Revolution cohort of women workers, who vehemently reject the oldest cohort's understandings of what it means to be a woman and a worker. They, too, "critically interrupt" a discourse of liberation and a politics of nostalgia by explicitly challenging authority and passionately yearning for political meaning that fuels those challenges. Their passion tells stories of "other" modernities.