Since Deng Xiaoping’s post-Mao reforms in the early 1980s, the famous Tibetan Buddhist monastery town of Labrang in China’s northwest has been vigorously revitalizing in conjunction with the rise of a tourism industry serving Han Chinese urbanites and foreign travellers. That process is contributing to the (re)emergence of the town as an important urbanizing market node on the edge of the high grassland plateaus, the erstwhile Sino-Tibetan frontier zone. The Labrang region is now administered as Xiahe county seat in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu province, China. From its founding in the early eighteenth century to its forcible closure under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1958, the massive Geluk sect Buddhist monastery, figured locally as the mandala palace of the Jamyang Shepa lineage of incarnate lamas, was a multiethnic centre of higher learning and a Tibetan polity governing hundreds of nomad and farmer patron communities in the surrounding mountains.

During my fieldwork there in the mid-1990s, and again in the summer of 2002, I found that the past was a heavy, and very often hidden, burden for locals. This was not readily apparent amidst the bustling public market activities in town and in monastic tourist spaces, but this is a population living with unsanctioned memories of the traumatic ruptures of the Chinese Communist revolution, memories, that is, which conflict with official history. For them, the ‘unsaid’ of history spoke loudly in implication—in implied dialogue with multimedia official histories, in the gaps in written and oral chronologies of events, in the revived performance of the lay and monastic ritual calendars, and in the dodges and silences of my Tibetan interlocutors during our many conversations about their pasts. “I don't know anything! I’m too young, you know!” (Tib. ngas
shes ni ma red, nga lo chung gi mo). Ama Drolma, a village matriarch in her late fifties, repeated this adamantly to me after I and my Tibetan woman assistant asked her for a taped interview about local history (Tib. lo rgyus).\(^1\) She would hear none of our explanations about my interest in people’s personal histories and insisted that I seek out old men, they would know about “early, early, early times” (Tib. sngan na sngan na sngan na).

That awkward encounter occurred in the spring of 1995, during an early attempt at collecting residents’ oral histories based on a brief interview schedule. At the time I thought I had understood Ama Drolma’s (unspoken) message to me: as an uneducated lay village woman, she did not consider herself a legitimate narrator of ‘history’. It was not until much later, when I tried to write about the life-stories I eventually heard from some sixty Tibetan men and women, who had lived through the socialist transformation, that I realized that Ama Drolma’s narrative also revealed that the category of ‘history’, itself, was a crucial aspect of the gendered state violence that she and her peers had experienced under the CCP.

**SOCIALIST TRANSFORMATION AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY**

In this chapter I address the painful process of the incorporation of Labrang into the PRC nation-state by rethinking ‘history’ as fundamentally a gendered ‘practice of time’ (Mueggler 2001: 7; cf. Rofel 1994; Watson (ed.) 1994), one that unfolds as situated persons work to remember within a variety of hierarchically arranged discourse genres under the press of relations of power. From this perspective, we have to consider history-making as a situated politics of memory. That is, memories, in state and academic media as much as in ordinary conversations, are only made into stories through contemporary, context-specific selections, which foreground some things and repress others (White 1981: 10; Scott 1991; Marcus 1992; Watson 1994: 2; Hall 1998: 440; Kansteiner 2002). Indeed, Prasenjit Duara, in his analysis of historiography and early nationalism in China, characterized modern nationalism as a unique form of state-sponsored forgetting, a way of organizing the past that located new national communities in posited oppositions between ‘tradition’ and

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\(^1\) All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Due to the sensitive nature of this material, I do not give much identifying information about my interlocutors.