

BOOK REVIEW

Wang Ning. *Banished to the Great Northern Wilderness: Political Exile and Re-education in Mao's China.*

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Dayton Lekner, *University of Melbourne*

Prior to the publication of Wang Ning's book, the words *beidahuang* (great northern wilderness) had remained, in Anglophone as well as most Chinese language scholarship, the Chinese equivalent of "Siberia"—a place where political untouchables were sent after labelling in the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957-58. Histories of that campaign often close as trains leave for this foreboding destination, or chose to remain focused on the centers as "rightists" were freighted to the periphery. This is true for earlier studies focused on central politics by MacFarquhar,¹ Goldman,² and Teiwes,³ but has remained the case in more recent work on the "grassroots" by Cao Shuji,⁴ Shen Zhihua,⁵ and others. Thus, the experiences of those who survived, or not, through their years at *beidahuang* remained the domain of works of literature and memoir. Both modes contribute incrementally to our understanding of what it meant to be an exile through the grimmest of the Mao years, but both also are built upon the subjective recall of individual memories. Reading these works in sequence, one has the sense of gradually accumulating a pointillistic image of *beidahuang*. Read enough, the hope goes, and perhaps a full, or fuller, picture might emerge.⁶

Wang Ning's book not only provides exactly this invaluable service, it also pulls such memoirs into PRC historiography with the deployment of the additional sources of interviews of those interned in *beidahuang* as well as Party documents (central and local). Wang offers greater detail as well as breadth than previously available on the process by which "rightists" from Beijing were labelled, their experiences in the camps, and their life after release. Chapter one readdresses the Anti-Rightist campaign, exploring its origins, who the "rightists" were, and why they were labelled. Refuting the understanding that the Anti-Rightist campaign came about because of an ideological or political schism between the Party and liberal intellectuals, Wang exposes the social forces at play in the labeling of many "Rightists," as they found themselves attacked due to factional conflicts, poor relations with Party bosses, personal animosity and even envy. The close of the chapter discusses both the reasoning on the part of Mao and the Party behind the decision to send "rightists" to labor camps, and the process by which the imminent exiles were stripped of any affiliations with the Party, dismissed from any posts, and dispatched in temporary labor teams in Beijing while they waited up to six months before their sentences began.

Chapters 2 and 3 detail life on two kinds of camps in *Beidahuang*. Chapter two focuses on the experiences of Beijing "rightists" on army farms, and chapter three on "political offenders" sent to Xingkaihu labor camp. In chapter two, Wang

unpacks both the Party's attempts at a rational sorting of "rightists" into categories by which their sentence would be decided, as well as its claims of the camps as places of "thought reform." In the first case, Wang points out that despite six grades of "rightist" of whom only the highest three grades were to be removed from jobs and sent to labor re-education camps, in fact army farms became the internment base for all categories of "rightist." The belying of stated Party goals continues with Wang's discussion of the haphazard and irregular manner by which "thought reform" was carried out at the camps. He makes a strong case for seeing the internment of "rightists" as a mobilization of labor rather than an attempt at ideological remolding. Wang also adds contour and variegation to our understanding of the experience of those exiled to the camps. We learn that the relief from political persecution felt in civilization population, as well as moderate treatment by some officials and the dangled carrot of release meant some began their sentence in high spirits. It was a brief honeymoon, however, as manual labor ramped up and food rations tapered off and the grim details of life in the camps became clear. Even here, however, Wang reveals exiles who professed to welcome the work, and feel gratitude to the Party for attempting to improve them.

In chapter 3, Wang moves our attention to Xingkaihu labor farm, an "institutionalized labor reform regime," at which his research continues to trouble the clear categories provided by the Party. Here, Wang gives us a brief description of three types of camps that constituted the CCP's labor reform program. First, camps for "labor reform" (*laogai*) holding those who had been legally sentenced; second, camps for "labor re-education" (*laojiao*), for those without formal sentence but who had been otherwise disciplined by police authorities; and third, camps for "forced job placement" (*jiuye*), for those who had served their term but were not yet free to leave the camps. Xingkaihu was home to all three categories, and Wang divides those present again into three more: Ultra-rightists, historical counter-revolutionaries, and active counter-revolutionaries. Further complicating the picture, criminal prisoners were also housed at Xingkaihu, their relationship with political "rightists" characterized at times by opposition and bullying, and at times by mutual reliance. At Xingkaihu, ideological remolding held a more central place than on the farms detailed in chapter two. More time and effort was expended on mandatory study sessions each day after labor, and active input was required from prisoners. These were coupled with ongoing reminders of the inmates' past crimes, and the lure of rewards or early release for hard work or the reportage of others' crimes. Turning on one another and cynicism were two responses to life at Xingkaihu,

but in the cases of Chen Fengxiao and Tan Tianrong, Wang also illustrates that some prisoners maintained ongoing dissent through their internment, and in fact were transformed from “loyal opponents” who supported the Party but sought to improve it, to “true dissidents.”

Both physically and emotionally, life was bitterly hard in *beidahuang*, and Wang dedicates two chapters to a frank description of this. Chapter 4 deals with death, and its arrival via overwork, undernourishment, physical abuse, and suicide. Workloads amped up and rations decreased as the Great Leap Forward policies met camp cadres’ desire to “perform.” Caught in between were those in the camps, many of whom starved and died in a clear refutation of the calorie mathematics of their superiors. Allocation of food with preference for those of greater physical strength of course resulted in more deaths. Physical abuse, both of, and among, prisoners, again compounded the problem. In this chapter also, Wang details the problem of death for those who survived and were forced to dig mass graves, and hold whatever ceremonies they could to mark the passing of their fellow prisoners.

An inmate’s reaction to the death of a cellmate acts as a telling metric in the gradual break down of previous social norms at *beidahuang*, and it is this breakdown that Wang highlights in Chapter 5. Wang argues that the decay of morality that others, (he cites Anne Thurston) have attributed to the Cultural Revolution in fact began in the campaigns of the 1950s and became widespread in the Anti-Rightist campaign. As colleague turned on colleague and friend on friend, what Wang calls a “chain of prey” phenomenon occurred during the struggles of 1957-58, and continued as culture into the camps in *beidahuang* as those who had been victims turned on each other to win favor, or simply survive. Unsurprisingly, such an atmosphere induced great psychological stress on those interned, and Wang deals briefly with this question at the close of the chapter. Finally, chapter 6 covers the convoluted extrication of prisoners from the camps from 1960 as some “rightists” were returned to their work units with hats removed, “ultra-rightists” on *laojiao* sentences were transferred from camps such as Xingkaihu to farms in northern China, and *laogai* inmates and “rightists” from military organizations were left behind to continue their sentence as before. Here again, Wang’s extensive use of memoir enables him to show the diversity of the lived experience, as some of those freed returned quite rapidly to their careers, others, were restricted to menial labor, and one (Ding Ling) asked permission to remain in *beidahuang*. Their separate paths after release, however, were drawn together again in the Cultural Revolution, during which many suffered renewed attacks that are dealt with succinctly here.

Wang Ning has presented us with an extremely rich study of *beidahuang*, and the transparency of his deployment of sources, as well as his acknowledgement of their limits (see Appendix B for detailed discussion) ensures this book will remain relevant and valuable in the long term. He notes throughout the weaknesses of the memoirs, as well as possible biases present in memories reconstructed many years after the fact. He is even

more critical of Party sources, and is always careful to temper them with interview or memoir. But herein lies the historiographical experiment of this work: What kind of reconstruction of a time and place can we achieve through the triangulation of such texts? Do Party documents written for one purpose plus personal memoir written for another add up to a fuller picture, or are the two genres so at odds as to be incommunicado? The former consist of rhetoric, bureaucratic guidelines, and official histories. As such their focus is always on the collective, their purpose to propel, organize or unite. The latter serve their own purpose. They are written, mostly by those with a literary background, as records of personal experience, mostly of suffering, and mostly late in their author’s life. While the official texts work on the reader’s pride, hope, or bureaucratic bent, always with reference to a community, the memoirs bring you into a private world of suffering, loneliness and regret. The question then, is whether we should see the memoirs undergirding Wang’s book as microhistories, or more akin to the scar literature that has previously served as the main conduit for discussion of the *beidahuang* experience.⁷ A more pragmatic issue here is how to reconcile, or otherwise aggregate, the many contradictory narratives. Wang does an impressive job of creating social history from these texts, but even when summed, they struggle to fit together - for each claim on the lived experience of those at *beidahuang* there almost always follows a counter-example.

Wang, like all of us working on histories of the PRC, has a troublesome medley of literature to engage with. We can draw on a range of studies on China and the Soviet Union, but we often find ourselves arguing against either CCP propaganda of the time or official histories of today. Descriptively, this means the detailing of effects of bad policy haphazardly put into practice, and of facts previously obfuscated. But it also means an expression of emotions previously denied as the deficit of pathos in official history prompts the converse in private recollection. Both tasks are essential, we need to uncover the history either neglected or subjected to forced forgetfulness, and those who survived need a mode by which to express and work through the feelings they have about this past. But given the exciting format of this review series, I cannot resist asking Wang Ning how he views the relationship between these two goals – to record history and to treat trauma.⁸ Progress on how to reconcile, or separate, the two will be fruitful not only for other no-go areas of PRC history, but beyond China. Further, given the details he has from such a range of survivors of *beidahuang*, Wang’s book is highly relevant to broader questions of how political prisoners experienced their sentence and life after release, on transitional justice, and on trauma and memory.⁹ I would be excited to hear Wang’s thoughts on how he sees his work in relation to these questions. However, it is only through Wang Ning’s thorough work that we can begin to make such connections, as *Banished to the Great Northern Wilderness* brings new material together for the first authoritative work on the topic.

¹ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

² Merle Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Communist China*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).

³ Frederick C. Teiwes, *Politics & Purges in China: Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms, 1950-1965*, (New York: ME Sharpe, 1979).

⁴ Cao Shuji, "An Overt Conspiracy: Creating Rightists in Rural Henan, 1957-1958," in *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*, edited by Jeremy Brown and Matthew Johnson, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 77-101.

⁵ Shen Zhihua, *Sikao-Yu-Xuanze: Cong Zhishi Fenzi Huiyi Dao Fanyoupai Yundong, 1956-1957* / 中華人民共和國史, 第3卷: 思考與選擇: 從知識分子會議到反右派運動, 1956-1957, *Zhonghua-Renmin-Gongheguo-Shi*. 3 (Xianggang Zhongwen Daxue Dangdai Zhongguo Wenhua Yanjiu Zhongxin, 2008).

⁶ For an excellent summary of some of these works, focused on the Anti-Rightist Campaign but including discussion of *beidahuang*, see Christine Vidal, "The 1957-1958 Anti-Rightist Campaign in China: History and Memory (1978-2014)," <http://cecmc.ehess.fr/index.php?2861>.

⁷ For a recent discussion of how literature may prompt open discussion of previously off-limits topics, see Sebastian Veg, "Creating a Literary Space to Debate the Mao Era," *China Perspectives* [Online], 2014: <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/6563>.

⁸ For a recent theoretical discussion, see Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). For a discussion of the relationship between history and feeling in twentieth-century China, though with a focus on literature, see Chapter 1 of David Derwei Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists through the 1949 Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁹ On this question in the PRC, one recent interesting approach, among others, is Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "Trauma and Memory: The case of the Great Famine in the People's Republic of China (1959-1961)," *Historiography East and West* 1.1 (2003): 39-67.

Response: Sources, Trauma, and Writing History

Wang Ning, *Brock University*

I am extremely grateful to Dayton Lekner for his review of *Banished to the Great Northern Wilderness*. Reading through his thoughtful and thorough analysis makes me realize how I could have pushed this book in different directions, for example by broadening my research scope chronologically and geographically, and by incorporating the experience of political inmates in other labor camps at *Beidahuang*. Why did I restrict my focus on the period of the late 1950s and early 1960s? And why didn't I carry out further investigation into the inmates' lives after release, their adaptation to society, and how they dealt with their psychological wounds after rehabilitation?

Nevertheless, I still feel very lucky that I did the majority of my research before the climate for academic activities in China deteriorated. At the time I was still able to gather labor farm archives and gazetteers, I could visit camp sites, and I was warmly received by several farm cadres—administrative heirs to labor farm cadres. Though I was sometimes met with suspicious eyes, many of my interviewees not only addressed my enquires, but they also generously helped me to collect various kinds of sources. They introduced me to friends whom they thought were relevant to my project, without fear of being troubled by the police. Nowadays, however, labor farm archives are entirely closed to external researchers, surveillance over dissenting voices has tightened, and many of my interviewees have passed away, taking with them their stories, told and untold.

Lekner's first set of questions is about the treatment of sources—does the combination of Party documents and personal memoirs add up to a fuller picture, or are the two

genres so at odds to be incommunicado? How can one reconcile the many contradictory narratives? During the course of my research I paid more attention to analyzing the validity and the context for the different sources than to reconciling them. Although the sources generated under official auspices differ from the unofficial ones (memoirs, personal interviews, etc.) in terms of purpose and content, neither set of sources constitutes a homogenous whole (for instance, the directives of the CCP Central Committee are drastically different from county gazetteers in terms of origins, authors, and nature, yet they are all categorized as official sources). However, this doesn't mean that they are incompatible or that they don't speak to similar concerns. At the operational level, rather, these two kinds of sources can be complementary, and can be used for addressing different issues, or different aspects of same issue, or different phases of a given event; they enable researchers to see things from different angles. They differ, parallel, as well as concur within a range of issues. In the book, Party directives/state circulars specifying categorization of rightists run parallel to rightists' narratives about their real living conditions at labor farms. Farm histories may contradict rightists' memories about the death toll during the famine years but they concur over the fact that many rightists lived passable lives in the early stage of their banishment. Personal interviews refuted official rhetoric about careful reform efforts made by camp cadres yet they confirmed the existence of stubborn rightists who defied the reform as well as the camp authorities' strategies to pit the inmates against each other. Even on same issue, official sources do not necessarily contradict unofficial ones. For instance, the Xingkaihu Farm History fully acknowledges the contributions and sacrifice of the convict laborers to the founding of the farm, to which Chen Fengxiao's memoir supplements rich details.

Their different purposes and biases don't prevent them from being independently valuable; it mostly depends on how researchers use them.

There is of course an issue of veracity and validity both for official and unofficial sources. Several official reports (including archival documents) contain information that is dubious, as they often distort or misrepresent the "words and deeds" of the targets of the state. For instance, a joke among friends could be twisted and misrepresented as a "rightist kingdom incidence" (see Chapter Five). This is something that unofficial sources—recollections of rightists and/or third-party narratives—help to clarify. Needless to say, unofficial sources are not immune to various kinds of flaws. Individual memory can be selective, highlighting certain things and omitting others, nor is it free from emotional attachment and glitches. Therefore, it is up to the training of the historian to make scrupulous and meticulous evaluations. As for this book, my general approach was to analyze the limitations and merits of each of these sources, compare their contradictions and concurrences, and make use of those I believe were the plausible and convincing ones in the right places.

For Lekner's second question, concerning the relationship between writing history and treating trauma, I originally did not intend to deal with this issue, as it had already been explored by European scholars decades ago. Now Lekner's question pushes me to delve into it in relation to the experience of the Chinese victimized by Mao's campaigns.

I agree with the accepted definition of psychological trauma—a type of mental damage that occurs as a result of a distressing event. It is a highly individual phenomenon, however; people experience events differently, thus the impact trauma has on the psyche of individual victims must also be different. I also believe that victims who go through distressing or catastrophic events usually choose not to communicate their trauma to the public (although some might do so to those who have undergone the similar experience), because such retelling often leads to the bleeding of the psychological scar/wound. This is particularly the case for those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Case in point, a number of survivors of the Anti-Rightist Campaign declined my interview requests as they did not want to revive the afflictions caused by their bitter memories. Furthermore, the meaning of trauma is understood differently by those who experienced it compared with those who did not: an event traumatic to one person is not necessarily felt as such by others. Therefore, one cannot easily comprehend the severity, depth, and texture of others' trauma.

That being said, people who underwent similar traumatic events or belonged to the same group of political targets (e.g. banished rightists, survivors of Mao's labor camps, or those having witnessed their dear ones perish in the Great Famine) may have a more acute understanding of others' traumatic experience, and are thus willing (or even eager) to tell the stories of others. Liu Qidi's suffering in Xingkaihu labor camp (see Chapter Three) repeatedly haunted Chen Fengxiao, pushing him to make Liu's story public. Dai Huang's observation of Yang Taiquan's self-isolationist propensity prompted him to learn more about Yang being fatally betrayed by friends and thus generated deep sympathy for Yang's behavior. Dai then showed in his memoir

how Yang was mentally devastated. These people speak on behalf of the victims, they get closer to the inner world of their protagonists; their narratives are invaluable, yet their portrayal of trauma is still inevitably fragmented and partial.

When historians expand their research to addressing not only the traumatic experiences of others, but also trauma itself, they use the limited recollections of protagonists and the narratives written by witnesses in order to make sense of trauma, to write individual or collective histories, and to develop collective memories of events. In this process, however, historians' interpretations of trauma and traumatic events are likely unable to account for the feelings of those who went through such experiences, not only because they did not have that experience themselves but also because their sources are far from sufficient. In addition, in the course of developing historical analysis related to trauma and in trying to make individual trauma explainable, historians often de-traumatize trauma. As Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik puts it, "Those who participate in defining the collective memory of the catastrophic event de-traumatize the trauma by integrating into the historical narrative that which is not integratable. Their story inevitably must be different from the memory of those who lived through the trauma." ¹ Dominick LaCapra raised a similar point: "Historiography involves an element of objectification, and objectification may perhaps be related to the phenomenon of numbing in trauma itself."²

This is a dilemma that confronts historians: writing history involves writing human feeling, but "feeling remains unfathomable"³ and often defies intrusive explanation on the one hand and anaesthetized objectification (splitting up object from subject) on the other. In their effort to explain the inexplicable and write collective history, historians risk losing the authenticity of trauma. And if we take into account the challenge posed by the lack of sources, things look even less promising. In the cases when traumatized individuals choose not to utter their affliction, or when third-party narratives about others' traumatic experience are fragmentary and insufficient, how could researchers pertinently interpret the underlying turbulence of human feeling? It is unlikely that we could be able to fathom the innermost part of the other's experience. We may approach their inner world but we cannot enter it. For instance, we cannot easily understand the pain, pathos, and loneliness writer Shen Congwen experienced when he participated in the Land Reform.⁴ In retrospect, I must admit that when, in the book, I occasionally flirted with the words "psychological trauma," "mental agony," and "traumatic experience," I was far from able to adequately comprehend or describe the psychological damage my subjects suffered. I would have needed a degree in psychology for that.

My point is that, when we attempt to write about trauma and integrate trauma into history, we need to bear in mind that the picture we provide is approximate at best. A possible remedy for this problem is to write about trauma and traumatic experience with empathy. Empathy should not be conflated with unchecked identification with the experience of others, nor does it imply the appropriation of their experience. However, as LaCapra puts it, empathy can be brought into historiography as a "counterforce to numbing". "Empathy may be understood in terms of attending to ... recapture the possibly split-off,

affective dimension of the experience of others.”⁵ By placing ourselves in the other’s position, we might have a better chance of discerning what the other is feeling, of understanding their emotional states, of developing an accurate recognition of their actions, and thus suppress our urge to make blunt

objectifications or to rashly integrate individual trauma into any definitive analysis. This is perhaps one of the best ways to fight numbness, to prevent amnesia, and to keep precious human remembrance alive.

¹ Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “Trauma and Memory: The Case of the Great Famine in the People’s Republic of China (1959-1961),” *Historiography East and West*, 1.1 (2003): 47.

² Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001): 39-40.

³ David Derwei Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists through the 1949 Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015): 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*: 40.