

BOOK REVIEW
Martin T. Fromm,
*Borderland Memories:
Searching for Historical Identity in Post-Mao China*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)

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Most historians of twentieth-century China know of the collections of historical materials termed *wenshi ziliao* (文史资料) and many have cited them in their scholarship. These curated volumes of oral testimonies recounted by individuals in the 1980s provide a wealth of primary data on local history. But what do we know about the origins of these valuable historical sources? For most historians, I surmise, the answer is probably “not much.” In *Borderland Memories: Searching for Historical Identity in Post-Mao China*, Martin Fromm charts the complicated history of *wenshi ziliao* in northeastern China in the post-Mao period. His monograph’s seven principle chapters tackle the context, politics, methodology and tensions shaping the production of *wenshi ziliao* in a region with its own cultural and historical identity. Fromm convincingly argues that “the *wenshi ziliao* constituted a highly nuanced and localized process where concepts and practices of seeking historical truths converged with post-Mao transitional political and cultural strategies and identities” (3-4). *Borderland Memories* is historical writing at its best: analytically lucid, well-sourced, and ready to remind the reader of the many gaps in our historical narrative.

Beginning the book, the reader need not wait long for juicy analysis. Chapter one contextualizes the curation of *wenshi ziliao* against the needs and desires of the post-Mao state. Seeking renewed stability and legitimacy after the tribulations of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Party used the materials as a device of “healing, reconciliation, and political reconsolidation” (33). As part of a search for transitional justice, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (PPCC) – a nationwide political organization created to lend the one-party state a democratic luster – took charge of compiling *wenshi ziliao*. This symbolized a more inclusive, socially representative accounting of the recent past. As a result, after the divisive class politics of the Cultural Revolution, marginalized individuals had their chance to come in from the Maoist cold. Fromm thus shows how *wenshi ziliao* production dovetailed with the precarious, fragmented national situation in the wake of the Mao-era’s excesses.

Chapter two shows how local circumstances in the northeast embellished and modified the PPCC’s remit to produce *wenshi ziliao*. With reference to Heilongjiang province, Fromm discusses how the distinctive history of the region guided the

approach of *wenshi ziliao* editors. In the early twentieth century, a “heavy Russian colonial influence” (45) existed in the province, and editors manipulated materials to portray Heilongjiang as a site of both foreign incursion into Chinese territory and entrepreneurial migrant enterprise. On the one hand, accounts emphasized Russian interference in the region so as to bolster the cherished idea that the Party had put an end to China’s victimization at the hands of foreign powers. On the other, narratives by migrant entrepreneurs stressed bustling Chinese economic activity in the region, framing it as virtuous anti-Russian resistance and the forerunner to the economic policy agenda of the post-Mao ‘reform era.’ Fromm thus shows how editors tried to integrate competing ideological narratives to reconcile Heilongjiang’s place in the broader Chinese nation with the region’s more fluid history. Furthermore, Fromm also shows how some individuals used their contributions to *wenshi ziliao* to package their own life stories – a line of analysis which follows the trend in PRC history scholarship toward finding the agency of everyday actors in larger state-run projects. Fromm’s interpretations of these contributions demonstrates how scholars can “read between the lines” of texts for their inferences and engrained presumptions.

Following his exploration of colonialism and commerce, Fromm turns to how *wenshi ziliao* editors resurrected the concept of ‘northern Manchuria’ to strengthen the ideology of the post-Mao era. Russian-influenced, ethnically heterogeneous, and with a history of Chinese incursion into the region, northern Manchuria threatened to derail the fragile notion of the unified, Chinese nation. As a demonstration of their narrative dexterity, however, contributors to the *wenshi ziliao* turned these characteristics of northern Manchuria into a nation-building virtue. In accounts, the Russian and Japanese colonial threat became the unifying flag around which all others in the region could rally around, creating a “broadly inclusive united front history” (78). Yet, editors also pointedly curated narratives to laud the regional distinctiveness of northern Manchuria within a unifying nationalist framework, celebrating Heilongjiang as the crucible of Chinese nationalist resistance rather than a peripheral part of the emerging nation. Likewise, ethnic minorities located in the region became objects of regional pride – while portraying them as an indisputable part of a wider Chinese diaspora, the *wenshi ziliao* also invoked them as evidence of the region’s cultural vibrancy and heritage.

Here, Fromm offers the starkest examples of how the act of compiling *wenshi ziliao* was laced with political meaning.

In the second half of the book, Fromm transitions away from the regional context toward the ‘business end’ of *wenshi ziliao* production in the northeast. In chapter four, we read how, in contrast to the binary formulations of historical writing under Mao, editors “emphasized instead multifaceted complexity and characterized diverse avenues and expressions of historical truth as equally valid” (113). Neither absolute truth or hack propaganda, the *wenshi ziliao* anthologies provided a space for individuals to tell their own stories and posit alternative visions of the past. Different actors used authorial and editorial opportunities for their own ends, and *wenshi ziliao* thus must be seen as a negotiated product of many competing agendas. Previous chapters show that members of the PPCC remained bound to a certain set of ideological imperatives, but within these boundaries there existed space for individual agency and contestation. For Fromm, this contrast with historical writing during the 1960s and early 1970s represents a deliberate, and inevitably risky, ploy by the Party to strengthen its legitimacy and the nation at a time of renewal. Likewise, in chapter five, *wenshi ziliao* form part of China’s search for transitional justice in the early 1980s. As a secondary political institution, the PPCC provided a forum shorn of major political implications for expressing grievances and overcoming trauma. Non-Party members in the northeast found a new purpose as writers and editors after years of social exclusion, while interviewers gathering oral testimonies from ordinary people took a patient, friendly approach to restore grassroots trust in officialdom. Thus, *wenshi ziliao* teams tried to build community as much through the process of producing *wenshi ziliao* as through the final product itself.

Fromm recognizes that historical sources do not exist in a vacuum: knowing their intended audience illuminates their purpose. Therefore, in its penultimate chapter, *Borderland Memories* engages with the important questions of how *wenshi ziliao* projects acted as “instruments of social and political mobilization” (200). In chapter six, we hear how national and regional leaders of the PPCC envisioned *wenshi ziliao* collection as a means to build a united front across a broad spectrum of society. Their picturing of collection as a way of recording memories before they became irretrievable contrasted with the wanton deaths of people and their memories during the Cultural Revolution. Widening access to information likewise increased the affective power of *wenshi ziliao* volumes: over the course of the 1980s, *wenshi ziliao* information found its way into secondary publications and officials also became increasingly prepared to make volumes available to the public and not just to privileged insiders. Rather than provide a simplified summary, Fromm is happy to revel in the fact that widening access to information also reduced the state’s ability to control the interpretation of it – a constant caveat to any conclusion about the effectiveness of the projects.

Finally, Fromm closes his account by observing the place of *wenshi ziliao* production in the post-Mao rebuilding of regional and national bureaucratic structures. We read how amassing material for the volumes necessitated and (sometimes)

encouraged local administrative cooperation, and Fromm shows how provincial cadres sought to impose bureaucratic control over their subordinates in the localities. Regional *wenshi ziliao* projects also contributed information to provincial and national anthologies of materials, bringing local, provincial and national officials into close contact. At the same time, not surprisingly, different bureaucratic levels proved adept at finding room for their own agendas within broader frameworks handed down from on high. In the northeast, *wenshi ziliao* cadres lobbied for more resources and promoted their region’s identity and interests. Fromm recounts a myriad of relationships and tensions to suggest that the search for historical identity in Post-Mao China was a fraught one.

For those interested in China’s transition away from Mao and the broader history of the 1980s, *Borderland Memories* will not disappoint. As with Alexander Cook’s *The Cultural Revolution on Trial: Mao and the Gang of Four*, Fromm’s monograph explores how the Chinese Communist Party sought to move on from the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution period.¹ While Cook looks at how the legal trial of the “Gang of Four” and works of popular literature developed competing visions for China’s future, Fromm focuses our attention on the regionally-specific dimension to the post-Mao transition. *Wenshi ziliao* writing in the northeast could not proceed in the same way as elsewhere because editors could not apply straightforward narratives of Chinese victimization or Party-led emancipation onto distinctive local conditions. The question of the culpability of the “Gang of Four” for the excesses of the Cultural Revolution applied nationally because the trial represented the Cultural Revolution as an amorphous national disaster, but the curation of local history by local figures for a local audience included a whole different set of pitfalls. At a time when the concept of the “reform era” is coming under increased scholarly scrutiny, Fromm makes an excellent case for disassembling it geographically as well as ideologically.

Borderland Memories also fits within a broader bank of scholarship on the production of history in modern China and prompts questions about state power. The re-writing of the past to suit the present is an almost constant current running through the twentieth century. What makes the *wenshi ziliao* different, say, to the endless rewriting of the history of the Chinese Communist Party is that the state relaxed its grip on the formation of narratives, devolving a large amount of agency to lower-level actors. Fromm lucidly describes how individuals and circumstances in the northeast exerted a localized spin on *wenshi ziliao* narratives. Paradoxically, however, the overall intention of history-writing in the *wenshi ziliao* project seems to have been the same as previous projects: to strengthen state authority and legitimacy. What this suggests, therefore, is that the history of historical knowledge production in modern China is closely connected to changing conceptions of what legitimizes a state. For the *wenshi ziliao* project, it played out against a backdrop of the Party’s need to completely rebuild and reconstruct society after the Cultural Revolution and ultimately bolster its position in a period of political “crisis” (255). As a result, the diversity of narratives in the northeast never appear to have come close to threatening the hold of the state in the region. Fromm wonders in his conclusion whether moves

toward “increasing authoritarianism and suspicion of historical narratives” (256) will destabilize the balance between Party interests and localized historical production. Is there room to argue, however, that *wenshi ziliao* production in the 1980s was authoritarianism with a smile on its face?

I would also be very grateful for further discussion by the author on the relationship between the production of *wenshi ziliao* and history-writing during the Cultural Revolution. *Borderland Memories* differentiates these two processes, but while reading I was frequently struck by the parallels between the rhetoric of *wenshi ziliao* cadres and officials overseeing history projects during the Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius (批林批孔) campaign in the late Cultural Revolution. For example, guidelines for those writing about Confucianism and Legalism stressed the importance of a factual approach and a toleration for differing viewpoints within an overall anti-Confucian framework. Furthermore, during the campaign, authorial teams incorporated broad narratives with local histories and circumstances, histories tried to legitimize the prevailing contemporary ideology, and formerly marginalized intellectual elites found themselves and their skills in demand again. This is not to say that Fromm’s distinction between the Cultural Revolution and the post-Cultural Revolution period is incorrect; rather, I invite him to recapitulate his main thoughts on this distinction.

I began this review by remarking on the frequent citation of *wenshi ziliao* in scholarship, and *Borderland Memories* provides a detailed roadmap for problematizing our archives. Through in-depth discussion of the interviewing, writing and editing processes, Fromm reveals how the recollections contained in *wenshi ziliao* sources tell their own story. This is a

poignant reminder to scholars that gazetteers, the *Dangdai Zhongguo* (当代中国) series and many other compilations all have their own backstory. Following Fromm’s lead, more detailed research on the curation of these sources will prove extremely useful to scholars assessing the reliability and usefulness of such published collections, especially if archival sources in China are hard to access. Fromm’s study also strengthens the case for closer attention to the history of all the archives we use, whether they be state archives, personally-amassed collections, or institutional holdings. Of course, the average overworked academic marching to the beat of the tenure clock lacks the time to trace the in-depth provenance of all their sources, and so I hope that in his response to this review Fromm might offer some practical tips to researchers on how to approach collections such as the *wenshi ziliao* in light of his research.

Finally, perhaps the author will engage with two further ideas. Firstly, how does he connect the *wenshi ziliao* project to the relationship between the reform-era state and ethnic minorities? Does his point that narratives of the pre-1949 period elided Chinese colonialism in the northeast also apply to the 1980s? Did the *wenshi ziliao* project reinforce, as we might expect, the absolute correctness of the Han-centric multiethnic people’s republic model in the post-Mao era? Secondly, how did the high-level political machinations of the 1980s affect *wenshi ziliao* production in the northeast? Did factional conflict percolate into the local PPCC apparatus and affect the goals of the *wenshi ziliao* project? Likewise, were any volumes subject to recall or revision during the ideological ebbs and flows of the period?

¹ Alexander C. Cook, *The Cultural Revolution on Trial: Mao and the Gang of Four* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Response

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I would like to thank Yidi Wu for editing this book review series, and Matt Wills for this sensitive, in-depth treatment of my book in his review. It is an honor to have one's scholarship read and discussed with such detailed and extensive insight. I am delighted, therefore, for the opportunity to respond to his thought-provoking queries.

I will begin by addressing Wills' intriguing question of whether "*wenshi ziliao* production in the 1980s was authoritarianism with a smile on its face," given, as he writes, that "the overall intention of history-writing in the *wenshi ziliao* project seems to have been the same as previous projects: to strengthen state authority and legitimacy" and that "the diversity of narratives in the northeast never appear to have come close to threatening the hold of the state in the region." He is absolutely correct that the *wenshi ziliao* were very much intended to strengthen and reconsolidate party-state authority and shore up its legitimacy, and that the inclusion and accommodation of diverse narratives in the northeast was an integral part of this plan.

Rather than argue that this was somehow a momentary lapse of or shift away from authoritarianism, I am instead proposing an expanded understanding of post-Mao authoritarianism and what kinds of dynamics and tensions constituted and animated it during the post-Cultural Revolution transition. My research suggests that the logic of authoritarian governance during this period involved and demanded a flexible, multi-layered process of historical production and identity formation that accommodated the airing of wide variations in historical truths, as well as ideological ambivalence that created space for the creative assertion of personal agency in officially sponsored autobiographical writing. The production of borderland-centered narratives not only redefined but at times decentered the position of the Party in stories of liberation and heroism. In addition, organizers and editors of historical production took seriously the truth and reconciliation criteria of critical reflection on the past, symbolic and material recognition (of PPCC members and other alienated local elites), and limited political participation (through PPCC consultation processes).¹ In this light, we ought to perhaps reconsider our definitions and assessments of authoritarian governance, at least in the context of post-Mao China.

This leads me next to Wills' perceptive observations about continuities across the 1978 divide. Indeed, one of the conceptual findings that I convey in the book is that, while marking a seminal moment of political transition after Mao's death, the *wenshi ziliao* in fact utilized and relied on strategies of political mobilization, ambivalent attitudes toward intellectuals and local elites, and principles of empirical fact-based truth seeking and investigative research that hearkened back to the Mao era. In terms of political mobilization, *wenshi ziliao* organizers' re-incorporation of intellectuals and other

non-Party elites into a broad-based United Front (*tongyi zhanxian*) was an important aspect of this continuity. Less obvious rhetorically was the continued use of mass line (*qunzhong luxian*) tactics. As Aminda Smith elucidates, this "from the people to the people" process involved collecting heterogeneous perspectives on truth and history from the people, then sending back to the people a version of truth that was processed and reframed in accordance with Party-approved ideology.² While *wenshi ziliao* participants never explicitly invoked this concept, their approach to producing historical materials that circumscribed diverse localized knowledge production within the national Party framework was strikingly reminiscent, in adapted form, of the mass line. The *wenshi ziliao* integration of scientific empiricism and the collection of social facts with political ideology and social mobilization, privileging locally based first-hand experience and evidence-based research, also drew on Maoist principles of investigative research (*diaocha yanjiu*) that involved putting intellectuals and non-Party elites to work in local fact-finding missions. The purpose of these missions, like that of the *wenshi ziliao*, was doubly to re-educate and transform the elites themselves through their participation in this work while utilizing the facts collected as a referential basis for justifying the Party's ideology and policies.³

Wills makes the important point that these approaches to producing historical truths were also revived in the Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius campaign during the late Cultural Revolution. However, unlike that campaign and the Maoist mass line and investigative research campaigns that preceded it in the 1950s and early 1960s, the production of *wenshi ziliao* in the early and mid-1980s took place in the context of pronounced political transition, healing and reconciliation in which the very categories and definitions of historical truth were put into question. Instead of aiming to "criticize Confucius," *wenshi ziliao* compilers wavered between and wove together historical narratives that bore strikingly different attitudes toward cultural tradition, colonial modernity, socialist revolution, and economic modernization. Post-Cultural Revolution social and political healing, together with reconciliation of fundamental tensions and contradictions at the core of post-Mao reform ideology, demanded a more flexible, messy, and open-ended space for constructing historical truths for which *wenshi ziliao* activities in the northeast borderland were well suited.

I do hope, as Wills attests, that this book can provide a detailed and useful roadmap to scholars for critically examining *wenshi ziliao* in light of these "back story" processes that informed their production. Like the reviewer, I look forward to future studies that extend this field of analysis to other important published collections and series. In the meantime, as I note in the Introduction to Chapter Four, the *wenshi ziliao* should

neither be viewed dismissively as state propaganda nor taken literally as authentic historical truth, but instead should be treated as a project where scientific historical concepts and methods intersected with locally, regionally, and nationally mediated politics to produce new post-Mao historical identities. For the overworked scholar that Wills describes, an acknowledgment of these complex realities informing knowledge production can seem daunting. Yet, as the reviewer notes, not just *wenshi ziliao* and other published collections, but all “archives we use, whether they be state archives, personally-amassed collections, or institutional holdings,” have their histories and back stories. The production of knowledge, be it personally produced, state constructed, or somewhere in-between, is usually situated at a nexus of interlayered local, regional, national, and global contexts. An awareness of the ways in which knowledge producers engaged with these contexts, informing the content, style, and tone of the accounts they produced, ought to be an integral part of the scholar’s research and analysis.

To address the first of the reviewer’s final two questions, as I discuss in Chapter Three, *wenshi ziliao* organizers carried out a dual project of demonstrating the Chineseness of ethnic minorities in the northeast borderland through narratives of anti-Japanese resistance while at the same time presenting them as ethnically distinct from the Chinese. These dual modes of classification and representation were related to broader *wenshi ziliao* concerns of tying the region’s marginality and difference to national integration. This approach to recovering and highlighting historical difference while re-enclosing that difference within a Chinese nationalist framework did, as the reviewer suggests, fit into the broader post-Mao state’s program of promoting a Han-centered multi-ethnic people’s republic. Reacting against the Maoist scheme of communalization and sedentarization that had subsumed ethnic difference within a homogenized social order, post-Mao policy toward ethnic minorities such as the Hezhe and Elunchun opened up space for the celebration of ethnic minority customs and rituals contained within state-orchestrated parameters, amalgamated with

cultural expressions of other ethnic minorities, and often performed by professional Han performers.⁴

Finally, upper-level political and ideological disagreements did indeed inform tensions in *wenshi ziliao* production at the local level. Differences between “conservatives” who held on to leftist socialist principles and “liberals” who embraced post-Mao liberalization reforms were evident in interviewers’ attitudes toward their informants and editors’ frameworks for interpreting historical events. This was particularly salient in the case of controversial subject matter concerning which the Party had not yet reached an official consensus. One such case was the so-called CER Incident, a border conflict between the Soviet Union and Zhang Xueliang’s Shenyang-based warlord government over rights to the Chinese Eastern Railroad that crossed through northern Manchuria. Local editors used their intervention in the production of *wenshi ziliao* accounts regarding this incident as a sparring ground for asserting their stance on whether or how far they would allow liberal reform revisionism to inform historical writing. Provincial-level organizers arrogated for themselves the responsibility of imposing ideological norms systematically on local committees, viewing local *wenshi ziliao* activities as muddled and in disarray, to which local organizers responded by re-appropriating these normative frameworks for their varied local agendas. As was true in other aspects of Chinese politics and society during this period, attempts to roll back reform ideology through political campaigns such as the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign were mentioned in internal reports but did not appear to have any lasting impact on the multifaceted processes involved in the *wenshi ziliao*. I did not find any evidence of upper-level ideological disputes resulting in particular volumes being “subject to recall or revision.” This is perhaps testament to the flexible yet contained, half-open and half-closed features of *wenshi ziliao* production that provided a built-in capacity to “handle contradictions.”

¹ I am referring here to the criteria that Ernesto Verdeja identifies as defining characteristics of truth and reconciliation. See Ernesto Verdeja, “Political Reconciliation in Postcolonial Settler Societies,” *International Political Science Review* 38.2 (March 2017): 231-237.

² Aminda M. Smith, *Thought Reform and China's Dangerous Classes: Reeducation, Resistance, and the People* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), see especially Chapter Three.

³ On investigative research, see, for example, Ping-Chun Hsiung, “Pursuing Qualitative Research from the Global South: ‘Investigative Research’ during China’s ‘Great Leap Forward’ (1958–62),” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 16.3 (2015).

⁴ See Lenore A. Grenoble, Lindsay J. Whaley, “Language policy and the loss of Tungusic languages” in *Language and communication*, v. 19, issue 4 (oct 1999): 373-86.