Introduction

In the early 1980s, in the town of Heihe on China's northeast border with the Soviet Union in what was formerly northern Manchuria (*Bei Man*), a teacher, editor, and local Party official named Liu Banghou unearthed documents containing transcribed interviews that had been hidden away for more than a decade during the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. Fifteen years earlier, the Heilongjiang provincial government had sent a group of researchers to the Heihe vicinity to seek out and interview elderly residents who had migrated to the area before 1900 from "China Proper" (mostly from Shandong and Hebei Provinces). Specifically, they targeted individuals whose destinations had included Blagoveshchensk, the city directly across the river from Heihe on the Russian side, and an area just to the east of Blagoveshchensk formerly known as the "Sixty-Four Villages East of the River" (*jiangdong liushisi tun*) that had long been a source of dispute between the two countries. Conducted in the midst of heightening border tensions between China and Russia, the investigation culminated in a published report released later that year that utilized selected excerpts from the testimonies to corroborate Chinese territorial claims to a contested area along the Amur River, and also to stir up anti-Russian nationalist sentiments through highlighting historical memories of previous Russian imperialist aggression.

The subsequent decade of the Cultural Revolution suspended this state-orchestrated oral history project, but in the early 1980s, the provincial branch of a Party-affiliated institution called the People's Political Consultative Conference (*Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi*), hereafter referred to as the PPCC, revived this investigation as part of a larger nationwide project of historical memory production known as the *wenshi ziliao*, translated literally as "cultural and historical materials." Once again, this time on a much broader scale, teams of interviewers consisting of a mix of Party cadres, researchers, and retired non-Party representatives from various sectors of society – including finance, commerce,

education, and culture – combed villages and towns throughout the region collecting memories from eyewitness survivors of various historical events that the Party deemed significant. In this context, Liu, who had participated in the earlier stage of interviews, revisited the testimonies within a radically changed regional and national context of cross-border commerce in which Chinese cities along the border reenvisioned themselves as "dragon wings" expanding northward. The bloodstained memories of borderland migration that resurfaced through Liu's work of compilation and editing bore new and conflicting meanings for a society undergoing market liberalization and political reconsolidation. Did memories of Chinese migration to this region in the early twentieth century tell a story of national humiliation to foreign aggression, of triumphal Chinese economic expansion, or of the formation of a culturally hybridized borderland society?

The competing meanings latent in memories of migration to China's northeast borderland were central to the larger post-Mao historical memory project of which Liu Banghou's work was a part. The production of history and historical memory, a vital legitimizing task of the nation-state, took on particular significance during China's post-Mao transition, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution's destruction of not only the institutional infrastructure but also the historical identity of the Party. For this reason, the post-Mao regime mobilized its subjects to produce historical artifacts in the form of written and orally transcribed memories; compiled, edited, and framed these narratives in a way that could be incorporated into new Party-approved local, regional, and national histories; and systematically published and circulated these *wenshi ziliao* accounts for various educational, ideological, cultural, and political purposes. To accomplish this, county, city, and provincial branches of the PPCC, which consisted of an eclectic amalgamation of organizations and individuals of non-Party as well as Party affiliation, mobilized teams of investigators to seek out, collect, and edit personal testimonies regarding firsthand experiences of events that had taken place before the Cultural Revolution, with particular attention to the pre-1949 period, that were deemed relevant for constructing new post-Mao identities.

The *wenshi ziliao* project did not take place under the auspices of institutions traditionally associated with historical work, such as the local gazetteer office, the Party history institutes, or academic research institutions. Instead, the PPCC oversaw this endeavor. At first sight, this was a strange choice. Founded as a multiparty organization attempting to bring the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Guomindang (GMD) together as a coalition government, the PPCC had evolved after 1949 into an institution that mediated and brokered communications between officials

and representatives from various political parties and social organizations who were inducted as PPCC members. To co-opt members of these organizations into supporting the new regime and to ensure that the Party kept close tabs on what was happening at the local level, county and provincial branches of the PPCC organized ideological study sessions, invited PPCC members to make policy recommendations, and mobilized teams to conduct inspections of economic and social conditions in surrounding villages and towns.[1]

In 1959, as chair of the national PPCC, Zhou Enlai called for the collection of firsthand "cultural and historical materials" pertaining to the pre-1949 period to be added to the list of the organization's tasks. Prompted by the traumatic aftermath of the Anti-Rightist Campaign against intellectuals and the ongoing disaster of the Great Leap Forward, the PPCC's involvement in the collection of historical memories from individuals outside the Party had distinct political objectives. These included bringing about healing and reconciliation through inviting people to tell their stories about travails they had endured in the past, constructing an authentic narrative based in firsthand testimonies that would remind people of the Party's liberatory role in history, and rebuilding a broader-based "united front" of support for the Party by including different perspectives in the official historical narrative.

Cut short by the Cultural Revolution, the *wenshi ziliao* found fertile ground for revival in the crisis of socialist legitimacy that faced the post-Mao transitional leadership in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Torn apart by the ideological battlefields of the preceding decade, PPCCs were gradually reconstituted, and by the early 1980s, all provincial and most county branches had formed offices and committees specially designated for *wenshi ziliao* work. In spite of scarce resources and low budgets, teams of local researchers, interviewers, editors, and writers set out to collect information and to interview surviving witnesses about events and people they deemed historically significant.

For decades, scholars have mined the published *wenshi ziliao* materials for their detailed firsthand accounts of and perspectives on social conditions in China during the first half of the twentieth century. This is the first study to use archival materials to examine systematically the processes, politics, and debates behind the mobilization, production, circulation, and publication of *wenshi ziliao*. Neither fabricated state propaganda nor authentic historical records, the *wenshi ziliao* constituted a highly nuanced and localized process where concepts and practices of

[1] The PPCC's roles and activities are explained in more depth in subsequent chapters, especially in Chapters 1 and 5.

seeking historical truths converged with post-Mao transitional political and cultural strategies and identities.

The northeast borderland, situated at once outside of, on the margin, and at the center of the Chinese nation, was of particular significance in the *wenshi ziliao* production and writing of history during the 1980s. As Manchu homeland separated from China proper; as the site of competing visions of multiethnic Russian colonialism, Japanese pan-Asian empire, and Qing frontier expansion; and as the intersecting zone of intense cross-border movements of different ethnic groups at the interstices of shifting colonial and national boundaries, the region's complicated past identities presented risky but fertile ground for experimenting with and reconciling different ideas about the nation, the Party, and the relationship between Communist revolution, nationalism, and market reform. The region's more recent formative place in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) military, political, and industrial development, and more specifically the PPCC's establishment as a mediating institution, made the project of producing historical narratives about this place especially meaningful for the Party. In the case of *wenshi ziliao* and the northeast borderland, therefore, the margin was indeed the center.

Political Mobilization through *Wenshi Ziliao*: The United Front and Mass Line Revisited

In the context of post-Mao China, scholars have directed attention to the flexible institutions and processes alternately described as "consultative authoritarianism," "guerrilla-style politics," and "decentralized authoritarianism," arguing that these characteristics have contributed to the political resilience of the Party through times of crisis and transition.[2] In both economic and cultural spheres, this flexibility favored local experimentation and initiative within certain prescribed limits, encouraging local actors to appropriate national Party agendas and ideology to champion the celebration and commemoration of local histories. The *wenshi ziliao* was in many respects a model case of this flexibility, experimentation, and resilience at work. The continuous tension between devolution of initiative to the local level and top-down integrative

[2] Baogang He and Stig Thøgersen, "Giving the People a Voice? Experiments with Consultative Authoritarian Institutions in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 19.66 (2010): 675–692; Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, "Embracing Uncertainty: Guerrilla Policy Style and Adaptive Governance in China," in Heilmann and Perry, eds., *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1–29, at 4, 7–8; Chenggang Xu, "The Fundamental Institutions of China's Reforms and Development," *Journal of Economic Literature* 49.4 (Dec. 2011): 1076–1151.

measures lent *wenshi ziliao* participants a structured space in which to reimagine who they were historically. Indeed, the integrative push from above reinforced regional particularity, as PPCC members collaborated across county and provincial lines to revive pre-1949 concepts of northern Manchurian and northeastern regional identity.

In doing so, they drew deeply on pre-Mao and Maoist approaches to mobilization and the construction of social and political "truth." The flexibility in the Party's oversight of cultural projects during the 1980s speaks to what Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth Perry have referred to as an underlying continuity in Maoist "guerrilla-style" politics marked by "a process of ceaseless change, tension management, continual experimentation, and ad-hoc adjustment" and by "decentralized initiative within the framework of centralized political authority."[3] In the 1940s and 1950s, key components of this flexible framework had been the United Front (*tongyi zhanxian*), the mass line (*qunzhong luxian*), and investigative research (*diaocha yanjiu*). Originating in the 1920s with the so-called First United Front brokered by the Soviet Union–backed Comintern between the CCP and the GMD, by the 1940s, the Communist Party had established a more comprehensive and coherent United Front strategy that involved reaching out to and making connections with a broad array of economic, social, and cultural elites such as business managers/entrepreneurs, intellectuals, scientists, and artists. This alliance with non-Party elites was an important instrument in the Communist Party's "war of position" to alienate and isolate the Nationalist regime.[4]

After 1949, the Party continued to use this United Front alliance as a mechanism for mobilizing broad-based support for socialist policies, carrying out what Lyman Van Slyke calls a "bridge function" connecting the Party to other social groups and interests, and providing the Party with administrative, managerial, and scientific expertise.[5] The PPCC, which established branches at the local and regional levels after 1955, was the institution that embodied and mobilized the United Front (and continues to do so to this day). This United Front strategy that the Party adopted was, to use Antonio Gramsci's terminology, a means by which the CCP could subsume narrow particularist interests within a broader

[3] Heilmann and Perry, "Embracing Uncertainty," 4, 7–8.
[4] Gerry Groot, *Managing Transitions: The Chinese Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism, and Hegemony* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004): 5.
[5] Eddy U, "Dangerous Privilege: The United Front and the Rectification Campaign of the Early Mao Years," *China Journal*, no. 68 (July 2012): 35–39; Lyman Van Slyke, *Enemies and Friends: The United Front in Chinese Communist History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967): 215, cited in Eddy U, "Dangerous Privilege," 35–39.

national ideology, "gain the consent of other classes and social forces through creating and maintaining a system of alliances by means of political and ideological struggle," and thereby achieve hegemonic rather than merely coercive control of society.[6] As recent scholarship has shown, the success of the United Front as a political strategy lay in "the rapid rise of a 'culture of accommodation' with CCP rule within elite populations because of their 'profound concerns about personal careers and family trajectories,'" "'hopes for political and material rewards,'" and the psychological comfort and confidence they derived from the Party's warm invitation to participate as a privileged group in the construction of a new socialist society.[7] The United Front was not implemented consistently across the Maoist period, with notable breakdowns being the 1955 "Campaign to Wipe Out Hidden Counterrevolutionaries," the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign, and the Cultural Revolution, and even in the most robust periods of alliance building, United Front elites were subjected to continual criticism, self-criticism, and reeducation.[8] Drawing on Jack Goldstone's ideas, Gerry Groot observes that "it is precisely at times of crisis, as states seek to maintain or regain the political initiative, or even collapse, that the role of ideology is most important in influencing action," which, he suggests, helps to explain the CCP's focus on and revival of United Front work at "critical junctures . . . between 1945 and winning power and after many subsequent crises."[9]

The *wenshi ziliao* emerged for the first time in 1959 as an attempt to revive the United Front alliance and reconciliation through historical memory production at a moment when the Party was facing its gravest political crisis yet in the aftermath of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and as the disastrous consequences of the Great Leap Forward were starting to become apparent. A much lengthier and more dramatic breakdown of the United Front followed shortly thereafter before the project made extensive headway. Following the Cultural Revolution, the resumption of the *wenshi ziliao* marked another critical juncture of ideological and political crisis when the Party once again turned to the United Front and the PPCC as an important mechanism and institution for achieving its aims

[6] Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982): 22, cited in Groot, *Managing Transitions*, 3–4.
[7] Jeremy Brown and Paul Pickowicz, "The Early Years of the People's Republic of China: An Introduction," in Brown and Pickowicz, eds., *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007): 10, cited in Eddy U, "Dangerous Privilege," 35; Eddy U, "Dangerous Privilege," 34–35.
[8] Eddy U, "Dangerous Privilege," 41–46.
[9] Jack A. Goldstone, "Ideology, Cultural Frameworks, and the Process of Revolution," *Theory and Society* 20.4 (1991): 405–454, cited and discussed in Groot, *Managing Transitions*, 5.

of political reconciliation and reconsolidation for the purpose of unified Party-led development. Once again elites were drawn toward the regime with psychological and material benefits and privileges, which inspired at least some to participate in the project, and once again this privilege was mixed with criticism, self-criticism, and thought reform. Though not nearly as extreme as the reversals and breakdowns that had punctuated the previous decades, 1980s United Front practice as embodied in the *wenshi ziliao* continued to manifest inconsistencies, with organizers and editors regarding United Front elites with varying degrees of enthusiasm and suspicion. As with earlier periods, the Party's United Front strategy embedded in the *wenshi ziliao* was aimed at subsuming narrow local and class interests within an integrative national interest. The Party used nationalist discourse to frame its leadership in national terms that would make it hard for groups to legitimately go against the Party's ideology and leadership.

Alongside these important continuities, *wenshi ziliao* in the 1980s reflect a significant change from the Maoist period in the political dynamics of United Front work. Politically and ideologically fractured at the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Party turned to the *wenshi ziliao* with an urgent need to bring about healing and reconciliation through conceptualizing changes and evolutions across historical time. Whereas in the 1940s and 1950s the Party had incorporated United Front elites into its singular revolutionary agenda and teleology that drew a clear line between revolutionary "new society" and pre-revolutionary "old society," *wenshi ziliao* organizers in the 1980s drew up a more complicated mapping of the past that accommodated both change and continuity across the 1949 and Communist divides. This more complicated understanding of the past was conditioned not only by post–Cultural Revolution trauma and rupture but also by the Dengist leadership's effort to reconcile communism with market reforms. The relatively decentralized nature of *wenshi ziliao* implementation, informed by a broader set of post-Mao strategies to encourage local economic and cultural initiative and experimentation, added still more complexity and diversity to *wenshi ziliao* processes of reconstructing the past. In this context, *wenshi ziliao* became not simply an important mechanism for the Party's incorporation, absorption, and transformation of non-Party interests, but also created a more flexible and heterogeneous space for local non-Party elites to articulate their identities and interests more assertively and creatively, to redefine revolution and nationalism in borderland-centered terms, and to celebrate their past lives and achievements in the pre-1949 period.

Along with the United Front, the mass line was another aspect of Maoist social mobilization that became adapted with significant change

and variation in post-Mao *wenshi ziliao* practice. As Aminda Smith discusses, the mass line involved a back-and-forth "from the people to the people" approach to "thought reform" and ideology construction that attempted to reconcile social heterogeneity with political unity, and democratic pluralism with Party control.[10] This central feature of Maoist social mobilization, though never explicitly mentioned in the 1980s, had a clear influence on *wenshi ziliao* organizers and editors who approached the production of historical materials as a process of seeking out raw materials "from the people" (in this case mostly "united front" local elites rather than the "masses"), "processing" them using the Party's ideological framework, and then delivering back "to the people" a final product that was reframed and "polished" according to this framework.

More broadly, the *wenshi ziliao* continued the long and fraught relationship between instrumental rationality and affective sentiment and emotion that had informed China's twentieth-century modernization project. Indeed, as Eugenia Lean has shown, rationality was never divorced from affective politics in the processes of modernization in China.[11] The integration of empirical investigation with political mobilization as central principles of *wenshi ziliao* drew in particular on a rich tradition of Mao-era investigative research methods. During the communist period, Mao's investigative research approach to knowledge production brought the fusion of rationality and affective sentiment to a new level that put locally based, empirical, fact-finding research in the service of mass social and political mobilization.

While these elements of the mass line and investigative research methods were clearly present in the *wenshi ziliao*, the deep post–Cultural Revolution political and ideological crisis of the early 1980s generated some peculiarities in how *wenshi ziliao* participants employed and adapted these Maoist principles. Unlike the victorious Party confident in its ability to transform and liberate society through unleashing class struggle in the 1950s, *wenshi ziliao* cadres in the 1980s were deeply ambivalent about social mobilization. Acutely aware of the traumatic chaos and divisions sown by Cultural Revolution excesses and the need to regain the trust of local economic and cultural elites, organizers and editors focused their energies on blurring class distinctions, fostering reconciliation and unity rather than unleashing class struggle, and cultivating a complex, multifaceted view of historical identities that obscured the moral truth boundaries between preliberation

[10] Aminda M. Smith, *Thought Reform and China's Dangerous Classes: Reeducation, Resistance, and the People* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012); see especially chapter 3.
[11] Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

(pre-1949) and postliberation. In a break from the *suku* (speaking bitterness) and *yiku sitian* (recalling bitterness and reflecting on sweetness) communist traditions of contrasting the bitterness of the "old society" with the "sweetness" of life under communism that Uradyn Bulag and others have documented, *wenshi ziliao* compilers produced a syncretic vision of history that reconciled tradition with revolution.[12]

While variation in unity had always been a central part of the mass line, in 1980s *wenshi ziliao*, the emphasis on reconciliation and the significant room for participants' localized expression and appropriation of different historical narratives and perspectives meant that, in practice, editors accommodated a great deal of ideological variation and heterogeneity. At the same time, the *wenshi ziliao* also constituted a much more constrained approach to the mobilization of sentiment that reveals the post-Mao transitional state's fundamental ambivalence about the relationship between political mobilization, personal and local historical memories, and Party control. Indicative of this ambivalence was the half-open, half-closed approach to producing and circulating historical memories that both drew upon and diverged from the Maoist investigative research method of integrating empirical investigation with social mobilization. *Wenshi ziliao* cadres' adoption of the hybrid *neibu/gongkai* (internal/open) circulation framework and their selective recruitment of local elites provided a controlled environment of political mobilization. Organizers of the project were both dedicated to and wary of the materials they produced, trying to maximize their social impact while limiting the potentially disruptive influence of their unintended and excess meanings.

Recreating the Historical Landscape of the Northeast Borderland

Here the context of the northeast borderland of Heilongjiang and what was formerly known as northern Manchuria played an important role. *Wenshi ziliao* approaches to reconstructing the historical landscape of "northern Manchuria" shed light on the significance of the northeast borderland in relation to the post-Mao party-state's nation-rebuilding project. Borderland scholars have envisioned the borderland as an open-ended process of movement, transgression, and circulation that resists, subverts, and displaces linear nation-state-centered historical narratives and reveals the limits of state control.[13] At the same time, state expansion

[12] Uradyn E. Bulag, "Can the Subalterns Not Speak? On the Regime of Oral History in Socialist China," *Inner Asia* 12.1 (2010): 95–111.
[13] See, for instance, Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands," *Journal of American History* 98.2 (Sept. 2011): 338–361.

did not necessarily diminish but rather shaped the emergence and persistence of these borderland dynamics.[14] The dynamic, fluid, and transgressive features of borderlands expose the limitations of state power, are an unintended consequence of state projects of expansion and consolidation, and highlight tensions in society that contribute to shaping state policies, laws, and governance approaches.[15]

The *wenshi ziliao* reveals a somewhat different relationship between borderland dynamics and nation-state building. In 1980s China, the post-Mao state sought out and actively recreated the messy historical landscape of the northeast borderland to make room for, experiment with, and meld together a new post-Mao identity. It provided a flexible space for asserting local and regional voices and identities while reaffirming party-state national integration. The Chinese state, through its sponsorship of *wenshi ziliao*, contributed to the production and recreation of the borderland as a discursive strategy for constructing a new post-Mao paradigm that would reconcile different ideologies and political and social interests. From this perspective, the borderland was "kept alive" in the historical imagination by the state as a strategy of political reconciliation, providing a flexible tableau that could reconcile nationalist United Front, international market liberalization, and socialist revolution components of the Party's reform agenda and legitimacy claims.

This multilayered Party initiative to revive borderland memories, even and especially those that distinguished it culturally from other parts of China, was in marked contrast with *wenshi ziliao* projects happening at the same time in the Uighur and Tibetan northwest and southwest borderlands of China. Unlike the clear and present dangers of ethnic separatism that complicated historical memory projects in the Uighur and Tibetan borderlands of the southwest and northwest, in the northeast borderland, *wenshi ziliao* organizers viewed the historical reimagining of the borderland in its messy and open-ended complexity as a discursive opportunity to bring about political, social, and cultural healing and reconciliation. Ethnicity in the northwest and southwest borderlands was a sensitive issue that threatened not just Party legitimacy but also Chinese control of the region and required careful obscuring of Chinese colonialist

[14] Charles Patterson Giersch, "Afterword: Why Kham? Why Borderlands? Coordinating New Research Programs for Asia," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* (Honolulu, Hawaii), no. 19 (2016): 202–213; Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865–1915* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, reprint edition, 2009).

[15] Regarding the latter point especially, see Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 4th edition.