

The Power of Culture

Denise Y. Ho, *Yale University*

On the occasion of the Lantern Festival in 1922, a lion poised in front of the Anyuan workers' club and a gathered crowd of coal miners had something to say. Voiced and danced by a martial artist from the local Red Gang, the lion declared, "Our teacher [Li Lisan]'s home is in Liling [Hunan], but the ancestral founder of our school lives far, far away. To find him one must cross the seven seas. He's now more than a hundred years old and his name is Teacher Ma [Marx], a bearded grandpa" (60). This colorful story from Elizabeth Perry's *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition* highlights one of the central questions of the book: how did Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party convince ordinary Chinese of their revolution? (3) Tracing the history of the coal mining town from its late imperial industrialization to its central role in the articulation of the labor movement, from Anyuan's contested legacy in the Mao period to its persistence as myth today, Perry evaluates how and why the Chinese revolution succeeded. In doing so she also examines why the Communist-led revolution was different from previous movements and how China's experience differed from the Russian model. Throughout the book Perry also considers labor's relationship to the revolution, history and political legitimacy, and the origins of today's nostalgia for the Mao era.

This review focuses on *Anyuan's* answer to the question of success: that the Chinese revolution owes its victory to the adaption of traditional culture and the creation of a revolutionary one. To return to 1922 and let the lion be our guide, the scene encompasses several important elements. A message about Li Lisan, the Communist Party organizer sent by Mao to found a school for workers (48-57), is delivered by a representative of local power who wields the talent of martial arts and who is himself costumed for a traditional performance. He spoke of the school as if it were also a native institution, but the lessons it taught were about workers and capitalists, and the "ancestral founder" was a teacher called Marx. In these earliest moments of the Chinese Communist Party, then, we have an example of the power of culture. As Perry argues, "this process of cultural translation was critical to the victory of the Communist revolution and remains central to the nationalist/revolutionary authority that underpins the political system today" (284). She suggests that scholars have overlooked the relationship of Mao and others both to "old culture" and to the "culture of the revolution" (283). Against Joseph Levenson's claim that Marxism in China took root over discredited Confucian tradition (283), Perry claims that Mao understood the necessity of traditional culture, "that the cultural realm is every bit as critical a terrain of struggle as that of the state and the economy" (288).¹ The power of traditional culture is embodied in what Perry calls "cultural

positioning," or "the strategic deployment of a range of symbolic resources (religion, ritual, rhetoric, dress, drama, art, and so on) for purposes of political persuasion" (4). In the figure of Li Lisan himself, we see cultural positioning in each turning point. Not only was Li—like Mao Zedong before him and Liu Shaoqi to follow—able to rely on local connections, knowledge, and dialect, he could employ literary language and secret-society rituals as the occasion demanded. On his arrival in Anyuan, for example, Li wrote a petition to the local official to seek permission for his school, impressing the Pingxiang county magistrate with his Confucian rhetoric and elegant calligraphy (53). To seek the support of triad leaders on the eve of the great strike of 1922, Li Lisan once again used cultural positioning. Armed with gifts and speaking in code, Li drank rooster blood with the "dragon head" leader of the Red Gang, who beat his chest three times to express his support for the period of the strike (67). While these two examples also show that local elite backing was crucial to Anyuan's success, Perry demonstrates that such support owed itself to cultural positioning by Li Lisan, resplendent in Mandarin gown or Western coat jacket and flashing a metal badge that was said to make him invincible (61).²

The triumvirate of Li, Mao, and Liu, whose remembered roles would later rise and fall with their political fortunes, is termed the "red literati" (8). Crucial here, Perry argues, is both their role first as educators and their reception by Anyuan's workers as such. Arriving at Anyuan the red literati exploited their status as intellectuals, and "the well-educated young Communists parlayed their academic credentials and connections into revolutionary power" (44). Establishing schools and educating workers, Perry reminds us, was grounded in the Chinese Communist Party's founding resolution; workers' schools were meant to raise consciousness so that they themselves would understand the importance of a union.³ Throughout the book the theme of education recurs: Mao remembered in 1954 that the workers were *his* instructors (50), in China's Little Moscow the Anyuan workers' club presented lessons in Marxism-Leninism while serving as a proto-propaganda department (94), and even at the height of the Cultural Revolution the painting *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* depicted Mao as a young teacher (243). By introducing the red literati as such, Perry challenges us to think beyond May Fourth as enlightenment and the Nationalist and Communist party organization as militarization and control; the red literati too wished to bring the Anyuan miners into the light.

But the power of culture is balanced by the power of the sword. Perry affirms that political legitimacy rested on both *wen* (the literary) and *wu* (the martial), and Li Lisan sporting both long gown and bullet-deflecting badge encompassed both

aspects (8-9). This duality and the later ascendancy of militarism notwithstanding, the early history of Anyuan is a history of culture over militarism, *wen* over *wu*. Perry explains how the red literati were “cautious and deliberate” in creating local institutions (43, 120-121), why the Anyuan model of education and institution-building became a model for organization elsewhere (74, 118), and that in Little Moscow the Communists followed Lenin’s idea of “cultural revolution,” transformation through cultural work (120). Of this period she concludes that “the result was a remarkable interlude in which education and entertainment overshadowed intimidation as the primary instrument of rule” (121).

This characterization of *wen* over *wu* at Anyuan has at least two implications beyond explaining the Communist Party’s early success. First, it locates a turning point in the 1925 military crackdown on Anyuan; concurrent with the shift from proletarian to peasant movement is a turn from mobilization to militarization (117-118). Mao’s 1927 *Hunan Peasant Report*, which is so often used in our teaching, should thus be prefaced with the story of Anyuan.⁴ And second, if there is something to be salvaged out of a revolutionary history so often told as dystopia and inhumanity, it may be found in this Edenic time of liberation when beasts of burden became men (3, 118, 121, 296).

The power of culture is also the power of history, and in *Anyuan* Perry traces its cultural and historical legacy through many media, from folksongs to slogans and from painting to films. Revolutionary tradition, as constructed after 1949, was based on contemporary concerns, and its relationship to power is illustrated in Perry’s concept of “cultural patronage,” or the claims made on the legacy of revolution both by central leaders and local historical actors. *Anyuan* shows not only how cultural texts transformed over time—song lyrics changing, films made and remade, exhibitions mounted and revised—it also demonstrates how individuals made such changes. For example, the old workers of Anyuan knew how to respond to contemporary signals; in 1958 they followed Liu Shaoqi’s former bodyguard Yuan Pin’gao in making Liu the central protagonist, and they were equally astute in taking advantage of “politics in command” to gain hourly pay instead of a piece rate (177-178). Similarly, Perry excavates the multiple layers of historical texts, such as the 1923 essays of Liu Shaoqi, showing how Liu deleted and revised to give himself more credit for the 1922 strike mobilization, to discount the role of Li Lisan, and to distance himself from the Soviet example (184-185). Of the cultural and historical texts in *Anyuan*, one could easily choose one genre and trace its evolution over time. To take the exhibitions as an example, there are at least ten iterations from the display of revolutionary artifacts in 1957 to the advent of red tourism (*hongse lüyou*) in 2005. The changes to the display include shifting foci on leaders (despite the workers’ own remembrances), the rise and fall of the Chairman Mao cult, the Cultural Revolution practice of exhibiting movements in realtime, and the reform period rectification of history. How exhibitions changed can be illustrated through Anyuan’s Chairman Mao Memorial Hall and its exhibition of Lin Biao in 1971. The Memorial Hall’s party secretary was suddenly summoned to Beijing where he observed that Lin Biao had been erased from the Great Hall of the People. The party

secretary edited his museum accordingly, and when news of Lin Biao’s death came out, its exhibits (in contrast to Jiangxi’s other revolutionary museums) were already clean (234-236). This anecdote underscores culture’s lockstep with politics, and explains how exhibitions could function as up-to-the-minute political texts.

If the power of culture makes it an historical actor, then culture can and does “shape present and future political trajectories” (1). In the final chapters of *Anyuan*, Perry examines the persistence of the myths of the Anyuan experience and also considers how its culture may explain both the Communist Party’s success and its longevity (285).⁵ Communism became Chinese, she concludes, not because May Fourth iconoclasm created a vacuum but because the red literati built a revolutionary culture out of a traditional, Chinese one.⁶ The CCP’s legitimacy is thus based on cultural nationalism *and* revolutionary authority (284-285); socialism with Chinese characteristics long predates the Deng Xiaoping era (284, 292). In looking towards the future of such legitimacy, culture also offers its own duality of control and liberation. On the one hand, Perry suggests that today’s cultural critiques still take place within boundaries that the Party establishes, and that “such a combination may be surprisingly well suited to sustaining authoritarian rule” (281). But on the other, that of the revolutionary tradition to which belongs the vision of human dignity for Chinese workers, *Anyuan* warns, may still elude the Party’s grasp (281, 296).

¹ On Levenson, Perry’s citation comes from Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 3: pp. 115-117.

² The invulnerability badge as well as the martial artist call to mind Paul Cohen’s discussion of traditional elements in the Boxer Rebellion. Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). On Boxer magic, see Chapter 4, especially pp. 119-128, and on martial performance see pp. 104-109. Cohen describes Boxer spirit possession’s “cultural language” and “cultural patterning.”

³ For this document see “Zhongguo gongchandang diyici quanguo daibiao dahui wenjian” [Documents of the First Chinese Communist Party Congress] in *Zhongguo gongchandang xuanchuan gongzuo wenxian xuanbian: 1914-1937 (Vol.1)* [Collected documents from the Chinese Communist Party’s Propaganda Work: 1914-1937] (Vol.1), edited by Zhonggong zhongyang xuanchuanbu bangongting and Zhongyang dang’an guan bianyanbu (Beijing: xuexi chubanshe, 1996), pp. 323-326.

⁴ There are many such anthologies. See for example Timothy Cheek, *Mao Zedong and China’s Revolutions: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002). *Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan* is the first document (pp. 41-75).

⁵ For another consideration of the Communist Party’s resilience, see Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Mao’s Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011).

⁶ This argument concurs with recent scholarship on Cultural Revolution culture that argues the Cultural Revolution was part of a longer transformation. See Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012).