

Revisiting Anyuan: Identity, Narrative, and the Political Uses of Culture

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Though published just three years ago, Elizabeth Perry's *Anyuan* has already proven highly influential in the field of PRC studies. In late 2014, for example, I attended a conference where organizers singled out *Anyuan* as one of the essential texts for scholars working on PRC history. For me, the pronouncement of its importance came as no surprise. Reviewing *Anyuan* immediately following its publication in 2012, I praised the book as an exemplary local history, noting also how Perry's broad historical scope offered a refreshing alternative to the traditional Mao-heavy narrative that dominates most histories of the Chinese Communist Party. As I wrote then and still maintain, Perry's latest book should be read by students of modern China at all curricular levels.¹ For this special issue of *The PRC History Review*, however, I would like to revisit *Anyuan* by placing the book within a more specific historiographical context. While the systematic approach Perry brings to her study of this richly mythologized mining town offers scholars a wide variety of entry points into her work, I focus here on three topics found in *Anyuan* that I believe are among the most important for cultural historians currently working on China: identity, narrative, and the political uses of culture.

In recent years scholars have increasingly problematized the Maoist social and class identities that once seemed both stable and natural. These include the categories of "peasant" and of "intellectual," two groups of great importance in Anyuan's rich history. With respect to peasants, recent scholarship has indicated that this rendering of the Chinese word *nongmin* is highly problematic, with the testy exchange between Felix Wemheuer and Frank Dikötter in the pages of *The China Quarterly* including a conversation over the relative merits of the monikers "farmer" and "peasant."² Because *Anyuan* is a study of an industrial center in south China, not a North China village, Perry is much more concerned with miners as opposed to the tillers of the good earth. But the warning to carefully consider and deconstruct Maoist class labels should now be a universal concern, and the question of what the history of Anyuan might reveal about the peasant category is highly intriguing.

This is especially true in light of the fact that the intellectuals found in the pages of *Anyuan* are notable for how they refuse to fit into the standard party narrative of China's *zhishifenzi* in the countryside. Eddy U, for example, has demonstrated how the party created and policed the intellectual category; critically, this group was seen in a largely negative manner.³ Thus during land reform, intellectuals sought to cast off their bookish and detached ways in order to become one with the peasant masses.⁴ This

desire to leave behind the ways of the intellectual, seemingly a constant theme during the revolutionary era, was based on the Maoist assumption that the educated elite had to change their ways in order to successfully carry out work in the countryside. Yet Perry's examination of the experiences of Mao Zedong and Li Lisan in Anyuan completely demolishes this long held assumption. Mao and Li in fact used their status as "red literati" to their advantage, impressing all with their mastery of knowledge. As Perry vividly recreates in her book, Mao strode into an Anyuan coal mine clad in a blue mandarin robe, a costuming choice that made a powerful impression on miners. In a similar fashion Li opened a three-room school and visited the homes of students and potential students; when he was not dressed in a Western suit, Li could be found in a long mandarin robe, looking ever the part of an itinerant scholar-teacher. Intellectuals would eventually be derided as "stinking number nines" (*chou lao jiu*) during the Cultural Revolution, but the experiences of Mao Zedong and Li Lisan in Anyuan demonstrate the falseness of some of the key assumptions behind the vilification of China's *zhishifenzi*.

The thought that intellectuals might have been valued for their learning and cultural capital, and not derided as enemies of the masses, is one of the intriguing but unrealized narratives introduced in *Anyuan*. Before long Mao and his comrades would promote a metanarrative of rural revolution that centered on the pivotal moment of violent class struggle. Because narratives are powerful tools to explain historical events, the dominance of Mao's class struggle narrative would have devastating implications, most notably the forceful effort to find and struggle against class enemies in land reform.⁵ But during the heyday of the Anyuan Workers' Club, Mao's "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan" had yet to be written. As Perry makes clear, these were almost certainly the best days of the revolution. Education and revolution worked in tandem in "Little Moscow," where Liu Shaoqi promoted moderate and effective policies to promote cultural mobilization. But the crushing of the Workers' Club signaled the end of any narrative that privileged the cultural (*wen*) over the martial (*wu*). Anyuan activists were soon busy organizing in Hunan, where Mao would pledge devotion to violence in the name of revolution. Mao's narrative of class struggle would continue to define Chinese political culture until Deng Xiaoping rose to power, but the Anyuan example serves as a powerful reminder that there were in fact multiple revolutionary narratives in play at the dawn of Mao's revolutionary enterprise. Perry should be commended for bringing this alternative and appealing narrative to our collective attention.

At the heart of *Anyuan* is Perry's argument that Mao and other Communist leaders' excellence in manipulating the cultural realm helps explain both their rise to power and the cementing of their authority during the PRC years. As Perry explains, the Communists made the alien ideology of Marxism understandable to Anyuan workers through "cultural positioning." Once in power CCP leaders, through "cultural patronage," controlled the memory of Anyuan to better suit their political authority. As a result of deft use of local forms, cultural propaganda became "a critical weapon in the arsenal of the Red Army and its successor, the People's Liberation Army."⁶

The idea that the Communists' use of culture for political purposes was an important element in the party's many successes before and after 1949 is certainly well established. Take, for example, the role of dramatic performances to drum up support for the party. Perry points to the Communists' use of drama, especially the "tea-pickers opera" most popular in Anyuan, as one of the more notable of its cultural successes. From the "proto-propaganda department" located in the education department of the Anyuan's Workers' Club, the Communists honed their unique political culture. This included newspaper reading boards and lectures, but most effective were dramas and other forms of cultural performance. These included civilized plays (*wenming xi*) and costumed lectures (*huazhang jiangyan*), which Perry argues were especially popular due to the preference for local opera.⁷ Critically, the Communists made clear efforts to bring these messages to the countryside. By early 1925 the Workers' Club had seven "costumed lecture teams," each of which could claim more than fifty high school students as members. According to Perry, these teams attracted hundreds of peasants to watch their shows.⁸

As many students of Chinese revolution will recall, Perry's suggestion that drama helped draw new converts to the party's revolutionary enterprise echoes Edgar Snow's own observations after taking in a propaganda show in Bao'an in the 1930s. Noting how the Communists were able to constantly alter the content of shows while also explaining their messages in an easy to digest manner, Snow declared: "There was no more powerful weapon of propaganda in the Communist movement than the Red's dramatic troupes, and none more subtly manipulated."⁹ And by the land reform era the party could draw on thousands of amateur drama troupes to help carry out land reform and other mass campaigns.¹⁰ Perry's focus on cultural patronage also recalls well-studied linkages between the cultural and political realms. David Holm, for example, has explored Hua Guofeng's patronage of drama troupes in the mid-1940s.¹¹ And in a study of poet Ke Zhongping, Holm demonstrated the potential dangers of cultural patronage; in the 1950s Ke discovered the pitfalls of cultural patronage when his pet project, an epic poem celebrating Liu Zhidan, was labeled an "anti-party epic poem."¹² Ke's commitment to the poem, never completed, led him to be thoroughly struggled. The resulting stress led to his early death in 1964.

But while Perry was not the first to point to culture as the key to understanding the success of the Chinese Communist Party, her excellent scholarship has made the argument unassailable. In part I suspect this is due to her academic

background. I have heard more than one scholar mistake Perry for a historian, but her comparative arguments, tight focus on political leaders, and concern for the future of the party reveal the nature of her training. To have a leading political scientist argue that culture holds the key to understanding the party's past successes as well as its ongoing legitimacy is, of course, reaffirming for cultural historians. But the success of *Anyuan* must ultimately be traced back to Perry's systematic approach to the mining town and its long standing role in the narrative of the party's rise to power. In this essay I have focused on drama, but in *Anyuan* Perry considers the vast spectrum of the party's uses of culture for its political needs. Her broad understanding of culture and commitment to following the Anyuan story over the long course of the revolution are, in my view, the two reasons Perry's text is destined to become a classic.

¹ Brian J. DeMare, "Review of Elizabeth J. Perry, *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition*." *Twentieth-Century China*, vol. 39, no. 3 (October, 2013).

² Felix Wemheuer, "The Chinese Revolution and 'Liberation': Whose Tragedy?" *The China Quarterly*, no. 219 (2014).

³ Eddy U, "Reification of the Chinese Intellectual: On the Origins of the CCP Concept of *Zhishifenzi*." *Modern China*, #35 (November 2009).

⁴ Brian James DeMare, "Casting (Off) Their Stinking Airs: Chinese Intellectuals and Land Reform, 1946-52." *The China Journal*, #67 (January 2012).

⁵ Brian DeMare, "The Romance and Tragedy of Rural Revolution: Narratives and Novels of Land Reform in Mao's China." *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History*, vol. 43, no. 4 (Summer 2014).

⁶ Elizabeth J. Perry, *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 151.

⁷ Perry, pp. 94-96.

⁸ Perry, p. 98.

⁹ Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), pp. 123-124.

¹⁰ Brian DeMare, "Local Actors and National Politics—Rural Amateur Drama Troupes and Mass Campaigns in Hubei Province, 1949-1953." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Vol. 24, no 2 (Fall 2012).

¹¹ David Holm, "Hua Guofeng and the Village Drama Movement in the North-West Shanxi Base Area, 1943-45." *The China Quarterly*, no. 84 (December 1, 1980).

¹² David Holm, "The Strange Case of Liu Zhidan." *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 27 (Jan., 1992), p. 84.