

Anyuan, Political Science and Social History

Henrietta Harrison, *University of Oxford*

This book is a detailed study of the mining town of Anyuan's contribution to the Chinese revolution over the course of the twentieth century and a reflection on its meaning for China today. Anyuan was a cradle of the revolution, where Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi and Li Lisan were all active in their youth as labour leaders. The first half of the book traces these events in their local context. After the 1949 revolution Anyuan became a mythical symbol of revolutionary history. The latter half of the book examines the production of the myth and the violent struggles over the shifting depiction of China's top leaders and their past. But this does not mean that Perry shifts away from the local context, instead she holds the national construction of Anyuan's history in constant tension with ongoing local events. The richness of the material and of Perry's reflections mean that readers are likely to draw a variety of different stories from the book.

There have been a number of previous studies of the communist revolution in a particular location, most famously William Hinton's *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (1968). Perry's work builds on this tradition but is different in that, unlike the earlier generation of scholars who were trying to explain what they saw as a peasant revolution, her focus is on workers and China's industrial heritage. Compared to earlier scholarship her work is also impressive in the depth of its detailed historical research, which harks back to her own earlier *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945* (1980). The book begins with the history of coal mining in the area prior to modern industrialisation and the local culture that was built around this. Perry points out the longstanding tradition of violent protest fostered by Anyuan's local ecology, but she also emphasizes the religious rituals that would later be picked up and used by the Communists and the tradition of powerful gangs and secret societies in the area. The narrative of events begins in the run-up to the 1911 revolution with the creation of the new modern Anyuan coal mine and the Ping-Liu-Li uprising, which grew out of the same pressures but failed to engage successfully with the area's coal miners. These events are crucial because they show that although later Communist Party organisers were building on histories of protest, the role of the communist student organisers themselves was crucial in controlling this.

Three chapters then describe the history of the early communist movement in Anyuan. They tell of the early communist-run labour organising through schools for workers leading into the successful strike of 1922, which brought wage increases and the fulfilment of many of the workers' demands. Perry emphasizes the importance of education in the story as something characteristically Chinese, in contrast to the Russian revolution. In China, she argues, schools for workers

had strong popular appeal and were thus an effective way for young elite party organisers to mobilise the working class, whereas in Russia attempts to transform the workers' culture through education were often rejected. Overall she tells a positive story of the achievements of Communist Party organising in this period, focussing on their contribution to workers' demands for dignity embodied in the effective slogan "Once beasts of burden, now we will be men!" (*Congqian shi niuma, xianzai yao zuoren*) (p 65). However, in the climate of economic decline that followed the end of World War I the workers' demands for higher wages, bonuses and job security exacerbated the business's many other financial problems and led ultimately to a violent crackdown by the factory owners in 1925.

In the aftermath of the 1925 crackdown many of the most active workers left Anyuan and put their talents for labour organisation to use for the Communist Party in other parts of the country. In particular many played an important role in the famous Hunan peasant movement. Many of the unemployed workers also left Anyuan to join the Communist Party's army. Perry sees a transition here from mobilisation to militarisation and she makes two arguments about it. The first is that the fighting that came with the Northern Expedition (1926-8), through which the Nationalist Party came to power, was a key turning point in the militarisation of society. It made it impossible for the communists to sustain their earlier education-based model, created rounds of violence fuelled by demands for revenge and ended in the militarisation of the revolution. This is a more sophisticated version of earlier arguments about the role of Chiang Kai-shek's White Terror, and clearly makes sense of the events she is studying but I wonder how far it is true for other parts of the country. The second argument is based on the Chinese concept of a balance between *wen* (literary attainment) and *wu* (martial prowess) in claims to legitimate power. Perry depicts these as in shifting tension, so that the early period of labour organisation is one of *wen*, followed by a militarised period and so on. This is related to her argument that popular protest without some form of institutional control, such as was provided by the Communist Party, will inevitably end in rampant violence. Thus the Communist organisers were essential to the success of the labour movement.

The second half of the book then examines how and why Anyuan was chosen for sanctification in the official history of the Chinese Communist Party and how provincial and local governments have attempted to make use of this process for their own advantage. This was partly simply because men who ended up being important happened to have worked there: Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi could both link themselves to the workers' movement. Moreover, because of Liu

Shaoqi's restrained management of the great 1922 strike, Anyuan provided a model of a bureaucratic or legalistic type of communist party leadership, which was very convenient for the state in the 1950s. The emphasis on a struggle for human dignity at Anyuan was abandoned in favour of a struggle for elite legitimisation. Looking at events on a local level Perry also argues that the existence of a patronage state was an important reason for the use of hero worship as provinces strove to build up their relations with key central leaders. This part of the book is a real model for historians of reading primary and other sources with careful attention to the politics of their production.

Central to this story are some of the great names of Chinese Communist Party history. In fact one of the reasons that the book is such a pleasure to read is that the reader keeps coming across people and events familiar from the popular culture of the Maoist period and the historical drama series of contemporary Chinese television, and in each case the reader suddenly sees what was actually going at the time. Anyuan was important partly because several of the figures who would go on to lead the Chinese Communist Party were from the local area and were important in its labour movement. We meet Li Lisan, a young man introduced to the factory management with a letter from his teacher father, flamboyant, popular with the workers, and an innovative labour organiser, who strides across the scene and launches Anyuan's labour movement in large part by organising schools for the workers and their children. Through later chapters we will follow him to a tragic end: his father was shot during a radical period of rural Communist rule after the breakup of the Anyuan movement sent Anyuan's workers out into the countryside and Li's own contribution to the revolution was covered up, so that he ended up living in obscurity until he was persecuted to death during the Cultural Revolution. Then there is Liu Shaoqi, Moscow-trained, disciplined, and a little dull, who is able to transform Li Lisan's organising into a successful outcome for the strike, which allows the mine to continue as an ongoing business while achieving many of the workers' demands and winning a management subsidy for Communist-run schools and other institutions. He too, of course, came to a tragic end, but Perry's focus is not so much on that as on the personality cult he developed about his work in Anyuan during the early years of the People's Republic. Throughout the story Mao Zedong is an absent presence: always important but never quite in full view. In the early years he is mostly in Changsha. He visits Anyuan, and as a local man he can share some of the workers' culture. He also sends advice and instruction to the party organisers, but he is never active in Anyuan for long. After the revolution his early visits are memorialised with massive buildings, pictures and other memorials, and much of what happens is driven by what Mao is thought to want, but he himself remains offstage. At a straightforward level this is the result of Perry's argument for the importance of Li Lisan and Liu Shaoqi in Anyuan's history, but it also makes one wonder whether perhaps this phenomenon of absent presence was somehow characteristic of the way Mao Zedong wielded power.

The book ends with reflections on the implications of this story for Anyuan today. In many ways this is a tragic tale of the revolution, which ends with the death of the key

protagonist, Li Lisan, and the betrayal of the goals of the original movement, as coal miners return to the chaotic and dangerous conditions of the 1900s. It is also striking that dignity is what appeals to older workers who today look back positively on the Maoist period. Overall this book is part of the broader rethinking of modern Chinese history and the politics of the Mao era prompted by the changes that have taken place in China in the last twenty or thirty years. It is also part of Perry's quest for the sources of Chinese Communist Party resilience. She has written extensively about this in political-science frameworks. This book returns effectively to the narrative framework of her earliest work to make an argument about how deeply embedded the Chinese revolution was in Chinese culture.
