

# The Making and Unmaking of the Chinese Working Class: Mining *Anyuan* for Revolutionary History

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“What’s next?” In what is still probably my favorite TV series, *The West Wing*, the fictional President Bartlett was fond of using this phrase to cut short inconclusive debates and to push the discussion forward, on to more pressing issues. I would like to borrow that sentence—if not exactly that attitude—in this piece. Not, however, with the intention of ending the conversation that Elizabeth Perry initiates in *Anyuan* but rather with the opposite goal of exploring how we can push forward some of the approaches to the history of the Chinese Revolution that Perry proposes in her richly textured volume. So, what’s next after *Anyuan*? How can we further investigate some of the issues concerning the Chinese communist revolution that Perry brings to the fore?

In following the case of *Anyuan* from its emergence as a revolutionary site in the 1920s to its very uncertain present, Perry makes a compelling case for paying attention to the cultural side of the communist endeavor—without forgetting the social and political aspects. She focuses her attention specifically on the ability of earlier Communist Party organizers to use pre-existing networks, rituals and symbols—what she calls “cultural positioning”—and on the deployment of cultural initiatives by PRC leaders to bolster their legitimacy and their status within the Party-State—“cultural patronage.” Through a painstakingly careful examination of the *Anyuan* archives, but showing also a keen eye for the analysis of visual sources and a certain flair for depicting historical characters, Perry describes in detail the pedagogical and organizational initiatives of the 1920s, the turn to armed struggle post-1925, the building of a revolutionary tradition between two cults of personality in the 1950s and 1960s, and finally the reversal of verdicts and red tourism of the reform era.

Though constructed with rigorous attention to both theorization and detail, Perry’s cultural-historical approach is not wholly new or unprecedented, as we have seen cultural histories of the PRC and of the Communist revolution;<sup>1</sup> similarly, the ability of early CCP activists to use the existing cultural networks is not particularly surprising if one looks back at the history of New Culture, May Fourth, or even earlier “reformists,” who were often very apt at utilizing their knowledge of local structures of power for goals that exceeded those structures.<sup>2</sup> Yet *Anyuan* is especially noteworthy because Perry, by focusing on one location over a long span of time, is able to follow the evolution of specific symbols, categories, and attitudes, and she can track the interplay of memory and state discourse, revolutionary practices and revolutionary narratives. In looking at the long revolutionary

*durée*, Perry traces the symbolic shift from a set of images and depicted activities that had at their center the dignity of the miners and workers of Anyuan to another discourse that was instead functional, extolling the personality of CCP leaders. This shift in many ways paralleled a similar transformation in the rhetoric and the actual practices of workers’ political activism from nonviolent, legalistic, “accommodating” methods to a militarized, ruthless and class-based militancy, something that Perry describes as a movement from *wen* to *wu*.

So, what’s next?

First, we should take seriously Perry’s implicit invitation to pay attention to social and cultural aspects, symbols and practices in our accounting of the revolutionary process. Reading *Anyuan*, there were times when the little Marxist historian in me clamored for more social history, for more data on the actual situation of railway workers and miners, for precise descriptions of changes in work conditions, salary, and workplace hierarchy in the long timeline of this revolutionary site. To go back again to a perhaps archaic but still useful Marxist vocabulary, we need histories of the revolution that combine an accurate analysis of the shifting material structure of production *for* workers (and peasants) with a sensibility to the cultural and social conditions of their reproduction *as* workers (and peasants).

In order to achieve that, I believe it might be necessary—or at least useful—to put at the center of our analysis the very categories which frame both the revolutionary discourse over time and our understanding of it—as well as define the actual people as revolutionary subjects. Perry reminds us of the “once and still downtrodden proletariat,” whose consciousness and dignity was the focus of the earlier activities in Anyuan and which is practically (if not symbolically) set aside after 1949 and especially in the reform era. I would like to pursue this trend of analysis further and to be more specific as to what is the crux of the long transformation that Perry portrays: the very figure of the worker. Perry repeatedly cites the slogan, invented by Li Lisan in the early 1920s, “Once beasts of burden, now we will be men!” and it was difficult, at least for me, not to hear an echo of another revolutionary couplet, this one dating back to the exact moment when the capacity of modern workers to organize and be the subjects of their own political destiny was first recorded: “nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout” (“we have been naught, we shall be all,” in the American version).<sup>3</sup> That echo, I would argue, points to the fact that the Chinese revolutionary process coincided with the very establishment—always contradictory, problematic, contested—of the figure and the category of the worker in

China. What *Anyuan* might lead us towards is producing histories of the Chinese revolution that trace, in complex and multifaceted fashion, the making and unmaking of the Chinese working class.

The figure of the worker (together with, in a different way, that of the peasant) is central to both the material and the symbolic history<sup>4</sup> of the Chinese revolution and the communist state. It frames the scope of economic and social progress, the fulcrum of communist political culture, and, crucially, the very relationship between the social-political body and the party-state. The status and the material conditions of the workers (synecdoche for the popular masses) were—at least rhetorically—at the center of the revolutionary project of Chinese communism: the well-being of the workers justified massive programs of social improvement and constituted one of the crucial measures of the success of the revolution; the basic living unity of the new communist cities (the *danwei*) was constituted precisely for workers and around the factory; and the Communist Party repeatedly split over issues of workers' equality and productivity, workplace democracy and hierarchy. Perhaps more importantly, the figure of the worker was the hinge that attached—not just rhetorically but also politically—the masses and the Party. It was as representative of the working class that the CCP had a mandate to govern; it was only within that connection, workers-Party-state, that the PRC had legitimacy to exist; and it was this connection and this existence that the revolutionary tradition, of which *Anyuan* was a central piece, justified.

Obviously, as the case of *Anyuan* shows very clearly, the process of radically transforming the conditions of workers' existence was never without contradictions and was never completed. In terms of hierarchy and inequalities the communist factory was probably not that different from the capitalist one, and as Perry illustrates, even in one of the birthplaces of the Chinese revolution, workers had to fight to get a minimal concession (hourly pay instead of piece rates) from the Communist state. Yet, the centrality of the figure of the worker—even when it was temporarily sidelined—remained. In a sense, it haunted the existence of the Party-State, both because of the permanence of inequalities among workers and because of the Party's failure to act on its own ideological mandate as the embodiment of the working class.

If we look at revolutionary and PRC history through the figure of the worker—meant as a fulcrum of a long material, political, cultural and ideological process—we might be able to pursue some of the insights and to explore in more depth some of the points of tension that Perry highlights in *Anyuan*. For example, from this perspective, the emergence of cults of personality in the PRC can be characterized not simply as a transfer of focus from workers to leaders/elites, but rather as either an attempt to reframe the meanings of the workers' revolution (as in the case of Liu Shaoqi's cult) or as a sign of a radical break in the connection between the Party and the workers (as during the Cultural Revolution). In the latter case, when, in the eyes of Mao, the CCP seemed incapable of fulfilling the promises of the revolution, the revolutionary tradition was deployed against the Party in the name of a direct relationship between the working masses and the leader himself.

Similarly, I would argue that the passage from *wen* to *wu*, from the nonviolent activities of the 1920s to the militancy of the 1930s and 1960s might appear less stark if we follow the figure of the worker throughout the long revolutionary process. The shifts in methods and practices were not always limited to this binary choice, and workers of *Anyuan* after 1925 joined a peasant movement that was not, I would argue, exclusively *wu*. Rather, the figure of the Chinese revolutionary proletariat, especially in the Jinggangshan or Yan'an, postulated the possibility of a militancy that combined military, educational, cultural and political methods and organization.<sup>5</sup> Even in Mao's 1927 Report, besides the recognition of the necessity of violence, there is also an appreciation of the need for profound cultural changes through symbolism, rituals, and knowledge of local culture. Parading a landlord in the streets of the village is, ultimately, an act that combines *wu* and *wen*.

Today, as Perry rightly highlights, we are faced with another conundrum, workers whose living conditions have improved during the reform era but who still wax nostalgic about the Cultural Revolution and the Mao Years. Perry hints at the fact that this has to do with something more than the insecurity of the marketplace. And indeed I would argue that *Anyuan* shows us the long and tortuous process by which the working class was created (through *wen* and *wu*), became conscious, and placed at the center of the Party-State project, and then was dismantled—in its identity, its material conditions of existence, and its own self-consciousness. The voices of the workers and the speeches of leaders such as Hu Jintao, which Perry reports in the last pages of her book, point to the disappearance of the figure of the worker, which remains however—must remain—paradoxically central in the discourse of the State and the Party. In this sense, the workers' musing over the Maoist past are less a manifestation of nostalgia and more a sign of the empty void at the center of the ideological project of the post-Mao state. Elizabeth Perry's *Anyuan*, with its careful reconstruction of the Chinese revolutionary tradition, gives us a sense of how problematic that void can be.

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<sup>1</sup> One notable example is Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution. A History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Richard Belsky, *Localities at the Center. Native Place, Space, and Power in Late Imperial Beijing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), which traces the role of native-place lodges during the reform movement of 1890s. Mao Zedong himself relied on a pre-existent local association (the Chuanshan Study Society) to establish the Hunan Self-Study University in 1921. See "An Outline of the Organization of the Hunan Self-Study University" in Stuart R. Schram, ed. *Mao's Road to Power. Revolutionary Writings 1912-1949. Vol. II: National Revolution and Social Revolution, December 1920-June 1927* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> The Chinese version of the *Internationale* was written by Qu Qiubai in 1923, just a few months after Li Lisan coined his motto. The translation of that particular verse is "Bu yao shuo women yiwusuoyou, Women yao zuo tianxia de zhuren." 不要说我们一无所有，我们要做天下的主人

<sup>4</sup> I don't want to imply here that symbols are not "material." As Perry shows, symbols inform practices and frame social relationships.

<sup>5</sup> Also, I find it a bit difficult to fault *Anyuan* workers and leaders in their decision to move to more violent methods after their nonviolent strike was

bloodily repressed by armed soldiers. The idea that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun” must have seemed fairly self-evident.