

Producing and Reproducing a Revolutionary Tradition, or How the Memory of Anyuan Has Been Shanghaied in Contemporary China

Marc A. Matten, *Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg*

In a thoroughly examined and extraordinarily well-written study on the Jiangxi Province mining town Anyuan — a town that has secured its place as revolutionary icon in post-1949 Chinese historiography — Elizabeth Perry offers a fascinating and compelling picture of how revolution is perceived by those who participated, and by those who remember it. The two major achievements of this book are first that Perry does not take the 1949 divide (nor the one of 1978) as self-evident but rather prefers to show continuities that better explain the long century of rebellion and revolution in Anyuan as well as the rest of China. These started with the secret societies in 19th century and persisted throughout the 20th century; only recently has the right to rebel officially been revoked, if one recalls the idea of harmonious society. Second, the author succeeds at showing convincingly how a large range of symbolic resources (drama, religion, ritual, art, iconography etc.) was used to make Anyuan a symbolic center of CCP policies. She thereby brings the cultural turn to the field of modern Chinese history that has long been an object of exclusively political and/or ideological analysis. For her, the fact that there is a revolutionary tradition is at first sight surprising as revolutions in general attack traditions, yet thinking of Eric Hobsbawm one can easily recall that traditions are not born in the past and inherited by following generations, but can also easily be invented at any point of time, even by revolutionary movements.

The book starts with the origins of the remote town of Anyuan and shows how a rebellious mood took hold when a small rural village was catapulted into a world characterized by a cultural, ideological and economic global network. Pingxiang, once an agricultural county that had only primitive coal mines, had been opened up by the Self-Strengthening movement and become a target of both bureaucratic capitalists and colonial powers in the 1890s. The introduction of new mining technologies by German engineers turned it into an industrial place that became an object of interest to Mao Zedong. Mao - himself raised in a rural environment and familiar with rebellious groups in his own home county (i.e. secret societies) - saw here a great potential for revolution by transforming spotlights of local resistance into a veritable force of political modernity (see here also the outstanding publication by Sun Jiang 孫江 on secret societies in modern China, *近代中国の革命と秘密結社: 中国革命の社会史的研究, 1895-1955*, publ. 2007). According to Perry, it was at this juncture that the traditional concept of rebellion was transformed into the modern notion of revolution. Indeed, this notion of revolution suddenly entailed a strong sense of teleology, making revolution a historical necessity in the pursuit of modernity, yet a modernity that originated in native

forms of political dissent (a point strongly emphasized by Sun Jiang). Perry shows in her work how a personal network based on provincial identity turned out favorable for Mao when he was introduced to miners in Anyuan during his first visit by a man from his home county of Xiangtan. The CCP was able to tap into this network and gain a primary power position when Liu Shaoqi and Li Lisan (both from Hunan) turned the rebellion into a veritable worker movement that developed into a "Little Moscow," extinguished only with the era of the white terror in the 1920s.

However, as Perry argues, Anyuan's historical significance did not end with that era. Mao Zedong, Li Lisan and Liu Shaoqi - all three leading CCP figures who had a great knowledge of China's intellectual tradition - managed to turn their education into a powerful weapon that instigated and kept the rebellion alive. The author points out in this context that they repositioned their cultural knowledge in the late 1910s and during the first half of the 1920s to such an extent that revolution was not only made intelligible to the non-educated workers, but Anyuan was also made into a powerful symbolic icon in modern Chinese historiography. It was also a place where the three leaders contested each other, with Mao finally emerging as the victor, his oil-painted likeness in *Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan* (1968, painted by Liu Chunhua) reproduced as a poster with as many as nine hundred million copies.

The great strength of this book is the way in which Perry takes a local history perspective that places Marxist ideology alongside religious elements, rhetoric, local dramas, dress and rituals used in the construction of a revolutionary culture. Of course, these juxtapositions were not always predetermined or envisioned by political actors at the time, because local cultural tropes changed over the course of time and were - more often than not - used in a trial-and-error fashion. Perry understands culture here as repetitious practices that were able to survive in a continually changing political environment, and by doing so, she provides a strong and convincing picture of Anyuan as it developed into a cornerstone of communist historiography. Less visible, perhaps, in her narrative is an answer to the question of whether workers were actually convinced of the meaning behind revolutionary iconography and wholly endorsed the political views attached to it. Yet this is inevitably the challenge faced by every historian: that in most cases it is possible to show the production of political meaning, yet more difficult to examine that meaning's reception (unless one turns to oral history).

What is however true is that if one had to draw a map of the revolutionary places of memory in contemporary China, one would have to rank Anyuan probably as high as

Tian'anmen Square, or the Nanjing Massacre Memorial. When turned into a site for patriotic education in 2005, Anyuan became a "red" educational and a "green" recreational tourist site. The Red Tourism campaign developed the place for the consumer market by means of cultural patronage, yet at the same time caused Anyuan to lose the historical significance it once had. Today, its representation as a patriotic place relies more on local cultural practices, movies, an MTV program, and finally a distorted representation of the contributions by Li Lisan and Liu Shaoqi in the 1920s worker movement. While the potpourri of symbolic icons works fine for the CCP, it at the same time favors Anyuan's cultural representation over its true historical role, thereby inscribing this revolutionary space into a fluid and flexible cultural memory. While this is the case for many places of memory in contemporary China that are contested by various social, political and cultural forces (if one remembers the failed attempt in 2011 to put a statue of Confucius in front of the newly opened National Museum of China), the fluidity does not necessarily reduce their political significance. The current red revival in Chinese society has certainly led to the renaissance of some nostalgic memories of the past, yet if one has a closer look at the number of visitors at memorial sites such as the Yuhuatai Memorial Park of Revolutionary Martyrs (雨花台烈士陵园) in Nanjing or the Balujun Office Former Site in Xi'an (八路军西安办事处) one has to ask in how far and to what extent these places have an impact on the historical consciousness of politically rather disinterested citizens, especially when compared to the Tiananmen Square or the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong (毛主席纪念堂). In other words, the places listed on the long list of Sites for Patriotic Education or the not much shorter list of Sites of Red Tourism cannot be simply turned into Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*.

In the case of Anyuan, the workers have lost their voice and are subjected to a tradition that they once helped to create but now no longer seem to own. References to the revolutionary tradition are no longer easy to sustain in times of cultural and political patronage. The problem with this development is the fact that the depolitization at the surface seems to make Anyuan appear as a place where political persecution and revolutionary violence did not play a major role. The popular (cultural) representation neglects these historical facts and replaces them with a variety of narratives. Since Hayden White, historians have faced this issue and either chosen to reject the very existence of historical facts, or tried to save these by any means (as does Richard Evans). Elizabeth Perry offers in her work a similar interpretation when describing how any remembrance of Liu Shaoqi was removed from the site during the Cultural Revolution, and later added again, albeit in a less prominent position than the Chairman (see in particular chapters 6 and 7). In this case it is not historical truth that plays the primary role, but rather anecdotes, such as the rumor related to Mao Zedong's statue, created on the occasion of his one hundredth birthday and transported through Pingxiang (p. 257). Such rumors certainly have the potential to offer resistance to official historiography, yet the question of whether anecdotes become part of historical consciousness is determined by their ring of authenticity. The problem is here that authenticity is not an

ontological category (even if we assume that), but nothing more than an ascription. This is especially the case with material relics: the Red Guard armband worn by Mao Zedong possesses a greater authenticity than an anonymous one. It thus comes as no surprise that the Anyuan Railway and Mine Workers' Labor Movement Memorial Hall presents a large number of artifacts, but it is obvious that re-created objects are less authentic, especially when produced for the mass market or when glorified in a digital form (www.aymuseum.com). The authenticity of Anyuan is explicitly defined by those who wield power over cultural patronage (yet not always successfully, especially considering the recent revival of the slogan "once beasts of burden, now we will be men!" as reaction to CCP efforts to construct a harmonious society).

Perry shows that the construction of Anyuan as a revolutionary tradition was then contested as its political-historical significance is today, and maybe the only way miners of then and today are able to establish a narrative of their own is by creative resistance when popularizing anecdotes that - while convincing by their fascinating and narrative character - question the claim for a single historical truth. In addition, if one concedes that anecdotes and nostalgic memories of the past are closer to culture than to ideology and organization, then this might explain why the CCP still has not lost its claim to represent authentically the revolutionary past, even if the singing of red songs appears as a mere irony of history.