

# Reconsidering the Chinese Revolution

Klaus Mühlhahn, *Freie Universität Berlin*

Elizabeth J. Perry's *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition* (University of California Press, 2012) is an important, impressive and stimulating study. The book aims at connecting the historical study of the Chinese revolution with an analysis of contemporary politics. Today, few scholars of contemporary China are interested or able to engage in such a wide-ranging inquiry that crosses temporal and disciplinary boundaries. By delving into China's revolutionary past, Perry seeks to answer two complex questions: what made the Chinese Communist revolution take a path so different from that of its Russian prototype, and why has China's political development been – and why does it continue to be – so different from that of other post-communist societies? Overall, she locates the origins of differences between China, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe in the Chinese revolution's unique history. Moreover, and against a backdrop of increasing criticism and skepticism in Western academia concerning China's political model, Perry pursues a second goal. While more and more scholars condemn the revolution as a grave error, insofar as its legacies may threaten to derail China's long-term modernization project, Perry wants to rehabilitate the revolution by offering a more balanced account that highlights the national achievements and socioeconomic progress made possible by CCP rule. This study therefore has far-reaching implications for both the history of the Chinese revolution and the study of contemporary politics.

The book suggests that a key distinction between the Russian and Chinese revolutions lay in the Chinese Communists' creative development and deployment of cultural resources during and after their rise to power. Skillful "cultural positioning" and "cultural patronage" allowed the party to build a polity in which a once alien communist system came to be accepted as familiarly "Chinese." By "cultural positioning," Perry refers to the strategic deployment of a range of symbolic resources (such as religion, ritual, rhetoric, art, and so on) for purposes of political persuasion. "Cultural patronage" describes the cultural policies taken by government agencies after 1949 to rewrite, define, and solidify the revolutionary past on behalf of powerful political interest. In other words, for Perry it is the revolution's grounding and entrenchment in Chinese culture that made, and continue to make, "socialism with Chinese characteristics" so durable and resilient. The book traces these two cultural processes through a case study of the Anyuan coal mine on the Jiangxi-Hunan provincial border, where Mao and other leaders of the Chinese Communist Party – most notably Li Lisan and Liu Shaoqi – succeeded in mobilizing a labor

movement at the very beginning of the Chinese revolution. The book describes the actual history of the labor movement as well as how, after 1949, the communist government rewrote and framed the labor movement in public history and political discourse.

There is no doubt that Perry points to important tenets and features of Chinese communism. Her convincingly made arguments advance our understanding of how a communist revolution was made to work and became accepted in Chinese society. This wonderfully written and meticulously researched book makes a strong case for the relevance and significance of China's revolutionary past for understanding the country's current political situation, particularly with respect to continued popular support of the CCP. In further discussing this important book, I want to focus on three aspects: the comparison between Chinese, Soviet, and other revolutionary experiences; the relationship between culture and violence in China's modern history; and the definition of a Chinese "revolutionary tradition." The main intention is not to criticize the arguments in the book, but to engage with its findings and initiate discussion of a number of important topics that have not been adequately addressed by the field as a whole.

Revolutions in the modern world are mostly the product of changes and transformations that were global in scope.<sup>1</sup> For this reason it seems obvious that we should consider revolutions, their causes, and their central actors, programs, and impacts from a global and comparative perspective. Great social upheavals have changed the world's political and social landscape time and again: the American Revolution (1763-1776), French Revolution (1789-1799) and Haitian Slave Revolution (1791) at the end of the 18th century; revolutions in Mexico (1910), Germany (1918) Russia (1917), China (1911 and 1949) and Cuba (1959); intensified global calls for social reform beginning in the 1960s; and finally end of the Cold War in 1989. These revolutions clearly had important internal national and regional causes, but they were also triggered by global discourses and events and must therefore be understood in the context of global "moments" and a history of interactions occurring within worldwide systems. Therefore, revolutions should be regarded and studied as truly global events – in particular, through simultaneous consideration of their local and national contexts, and their transnational origins and impacts – more than has usually been the case in past research.

When written from a global comparative perspective, historical scholarship has generally shown that revolutions need popular acceptance in order to be sustained and successful. Popular acceptance was often, if not always,

generated by adopting, deploying, and rearticulating indigenous symbolic resources and fusing them with globally circulating ideas and rhetoric. Beginning with the French Revolution, transnational circuits of agitation and emancipation powered revolutions worldwide; these circuits did not exclude, but rather fostered, processes of localization. Elements of a global revolutionary political repertoire were crossed with indigenous cultural forms, and this powerful mixture played an essential role in forming the ideas, expectations, and efforts of those who participated in revolutions subsequently taking place in Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe, and China. People from distant areas of the world, China included, began to conceive of themselves as part of a worldwide movement in a conscious way, and with an intensity that was unprecedented in premodern history. Revolutionary movements in the modern period were frequently conceived by participants themselves as simultaneously global and local events, and modern revolutionary leaders from Mao Zedong to Che Guevara saw no contradiction between simultaneously adopting a transnational rhetoric of liberation and articulating fierce national passions. Therefore, when viewed from this global vantage point, there is perhaps nothing uniquely Chinese about “cultural positioning.” To translate globally circulating ideas into local idioms is not the exception, but rather the norm for revolutionary movements.

Problems arise, therefore, if cultural positioning is made into something that sets the Chinese experience apart in the absence of a more systematic and sustained comparison. Many scholars who work comparatively are strongly skeptical of the view that the difference between outcomes of communism in Russia, Eastern Europe and China can be explained by what the Chinese tried that the Russians or others didn't.<sup>2</sup> Mass mobilization, educational policies, and the use of indigenous cultural forms have all played significant roles in the socialist states of Eastern Europe. The fact is that at different times the Soviet Union and other socialist states employed almost every policy observed to have been implemented in the PRC. The difference is that some of these policies succeeded in China, whereas in Russia and elsewhere they did not succeed. The crucial question is then: why not? Most studies point to concrete historical conditions and additional factors such as territorial size, preexisting traditions, and political will and capacity (to mention just a few) rather than one single Chinese master plan such as a cultural strategy. My point here is that it is urgently necessary to put the Chinese revolution in a global and comparative perspective and to avoid repeating claims for a Chinese exceptionalism such as have dominated our understanding of China for decades.

The second part of Perry's book offers an insightful portrayal of how the historical Anyuan movement was revisited, reinterpreted and utilized by the Communist Party after 1949. The argument is, essentially, that cultural patronage managed to generate popular acceptance and thus gave the regime a degree of legitimacy. In the practical political context, cultural patronage was certainly important. But culture was hardly the only pillar of the party's rule, especially given that Mao had stressed early on that a revolution is not simply “a dinner party, or writing an

essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery” and therefore “it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous.”<sup>3</sup> Hence, in Mao's own words, revolutionary rule quite openly rested on the systematic use of violence that frequently occurred before and after 1949, rather than on cultural positioning (“writing an essay, or painting a picture”). Perry admits that the Chinese revolution was often violent, but believes that this does not undermine the case for cultural positioning and legitimacy as being of primary importance to the revolution's entrenchment within Chinese society. With the opening of the archives, however, more and more evidence of large-scale revolutionary violence has been produced, much of it by scholars in China.<sup>4</sup> This research has made clear that state violence was an essential element in the PRC's state-building process. Moreover, the frequent phenomena of mass campaigns and mass arrests targeting large groups of the population conveyed the unmistakable message that Mao's regime was bent on violence.

The victory of the revolution was, moreover, the climax of more than thirty years of war. The various militarized conflicts that ravaged China from the 1920s onward, extending even into the 1960s, should be seen as manifestations of “total warfare,” whose socially consuming nature makes sense if we understand war – in both material and ideological terms – as a life-or-death struggle. The question of revolutionary violence should be framed by this history of total warfare, as the Communist revolution also included persecution and killing of any and all “enemies of the People” or “Han traitors,” and its methods were likewise informed by a broader international context of political and social cleansing. A more general historiographical question thus concerns the nature of war, which in China was rarely ever confined solely to the battlefield, but instead frequently spilled over into the political sphere.

In this respect, the year 1949 was hardly a new beginning separating the previous period of war and violence from one of reconstruction and peaceful reform. The post-1949 socialist project was increasingly obsessed with defending society against its internal enemies. Discourses and practices of exclusion and exception allowed the state to enlist its own citizens in fighting against these enemies, in policing themselves, and in protecting the socialist order. Questions of what constituted loyalty or betrayal began to override concerns for transparency, accountability, and justice, thus opening the way for violent excesses that were conducted or permitted by the state. The discourse of struggle produced disenfranchisement, persecution, and internment; ultimately, it also justified the liquidation of those deemed uncorrectable or dangerous to socialism. The notion that socialism must be defended at all costs connoted a moral right to annihilate those “outside.”

What is captured by the notion of violence here? What is to be gained from historicizing revolution as total war? My intention is not to portray the CCP or its leaders as evil dictators or mass murderers, but rather to point out the inherently contradictory dynamic of the Chinese revolution and its complicated legacy. For Hannah Arendt, the frequent resort to violence by revolutionary states displayed their

inherent instability and (self-perceived) lack of legitimacy.<sup>5</sup> Based on this observation, it would seem that the use of life-crushing force was itself a reflection of the weakness and fragility of CCP rule, thus throwing into question whether cultural patronage was successful and provided much needed stability. In many ways, cultural patronage was an important policy. But did it work? To me it seems that it fell short of achieving its goals because, given the checkered history of the revolution, cultural patronage remained vulnerable to all sorts of counter-narratives and challenges from both within and outside the party and failed to address, much less solve, the crisis of legitimacy faced by the state.

Finally, Perry sees Anyuan as a symbol for a “distinctively Chinese revolutionary tradition” (p.79). Recent studies have suggested a much higher degree of pluralism within Chinese communism than previously assumed. Since going beyond positing the existence of two political lines – once a mainstay of Cultural Revolution-era polemic – we have learned so much more about the diverse traditions of thought and political threads that formed the fabric of Chinese communism.<sup>6</sup> If anything, communism in China was more heterogeneous than anywhere else, giving rise to decades of inner party debate and wide-ranging discussions. It is this pluralism of ideas and the wide spectrum of socialist thought that made possible unexpected innovations and finally led to “reform and opening.” In other words, there was not one Chinese revolutionary tradition, but rather many traditions and approaches that can all claim relevance to the past and present of single-party rule. In other words, there were many new beginnings, new policies, and policy alternatives within the revolution before and after 1949. (And, perhaps more importantly, not all of these revolutionary traditions focused so exclusively on social justice and subsistence.) To be sure, in a country like China social and economic issues were always important topics and rightfully so, but from the May Fourth Movement of 1919 to Tiananmen of 1989, there was also a revolutionary tradition concerned with issues of freedom and democracy. For Nicolas de Condorcet, a French philosopher and enthusiastic supporter of the French revolution, freedom was the ultimate aim of all revolutions; in fact, Condorcet advocated applying the term revolution only to those uprisings that aimed at achieving freedom. The 18th century revolutions that formed our modern notion of what constitutes a revolution were all aiming for no less than freedom itself which, along with social justice, could truly exist only with the simultaneous creation of a public sphere. As Hannah Arendt wrote: “It was a tangible, worldly reality, something created by men to be enjoyed by men rather than a gift or a capacity. It was the [...] public space or marketplace which antiquity had known as the area where freedom appears and becomes visible to all.”<sup>7</sup> Reducing the Chinese revolution to a single revolutionary tradition, one concerned with social and economic issues at the expense of freedom, raises normative challenges for all scholars. Potentially, it disregards the many possibilities and more humane alternatives within China’s own history of revolution.

---

<sup>1</sup> See for instance: Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: Mark Harrison and Debin Ma, “Soaring Dragon, Stumbling Bear: China’s Rise in a Comparative Context,” briefing paper, Chatham House, March 2015, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/190179>; *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, ed. Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), and Steve Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China: A Comparative History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Mao Zedong, “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan” March 1927, in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. I (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1964), p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Gao Hua, *Hong taiyang shi zenyang shengqi de* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2000); Yang Jisheng, *Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai da jihuang jishi* (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1951), pp. xv, 477.

<sup>6</sup> On Mao’s thought generally, see the updated overview in Timothy Cheek, *A Critical Introduction to Mao* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and works by Arif Dirlik and Wang Hui i.a.

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, “On Revolution” (1963), [https://archive.org/stream/OnRevolution/ArendtOn-revolution\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/OnRevolution/ArendtOn-revolution_djvu.txt)