

Reflecting on Anyuan

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In an age when serious book reviews have been largely displaced by quick electronic clicks of “like” or “dislike,” it is a rare privilege to have one’s work read carefully and reviewed critically by even one, let alone six, highly knowledgeable and thoughtful scholars. Let me offer my appreciation to Matthew Johnson and his H-PRC colleagues for arranging this unusual honor, and let me also express sincere thanks to each of the six roundtable reviewers – Henrietta Harrison, Denise Ho, Brian DeMare, Fabio Lanza, Marc Matten, and Klaus Muhlhahn – for their considered comments and challenging queries.

In reading through their comments, I was pleased to see that the reviewers chose to highlight, from rather different perspectives to be sure, almost all the themes that I had hoped to bring to the fore with this study: the central role of education and cultural mobilization in the Chinese Communist movement, the cry for human dignity that sparked the Anyuan strike of 1922 and would continue to stir workers’ political demands for years to come, the frightful and fateful militarization of the revolution, the rewriting of revolutionary history after 1949 to serve the ambitions of Party leaders, and even today the ironic yet formidable influence of a constructed “revolutionary tradition” on the resilience of the Chinese Communist party-state.

I am gratified that the reviewers touched upon a number of different themes, since my intention in writing *Anyuan* was not to put forward any single alternative or authoritative account of China’s revolutionary tradition and trajectory. Rather, I thought that by tracing the fitful course of the revolution in one small but significant locale, and reflecting upon the contrasting connotations that were assigned to that eventful history by different actors at different moments, we might gain a fuller understanding of the complex and inherently contradictory tensions contained within China’s rich revolutionary tradition. Ultimately, my aspiration was to stimulate further attention – inside and outside of China – to the multiple meanings, contested legacies, and unfulfilled promises of China’s revolutionary past and present. I especially hoped to raise awareness of what I believed was an underappreciated element in explaining the rise of the CCP as well as its continuing hold on power: the capacity to deploy symbolic resources in such a way as to render the Communist Party and its leaders culturally familiar. Mao’s revolution and the regime it spawned, both of which were modeled closely on the precedent of the Soviet Union, had somehow been made to feel authentically Chinese.

At the time that I was researching and writing *Anyuan*, the central leadership then in power in the PRC was usually understood to have turned the page on China’s Maoist chapter. Hu Jintao’s technocratic “Scientific Development Outlook”

and his bland call for a “Harmonious Society” seemed a far cry indeed from Mao Zedong’s stirring slogans “To Rebel is Justified” and “Never Forget Class Struggle!” Yet, as I suggested in a journal article on the study of contemporary Chinese politics, and as Sebastian Heilmann and I elaborated in our co-edited volume, the influence of earlier revolutionary experiences (for better and for worse) remained visible across a wide range of post-Mao policies and governance techniques.¹ That argument, which anticipated my approach in *Anyuan*, was greeted with some skepticism by a political science profession accustomed to looking no further back than the Tiananmen Uprising of 1989 for the origins of current affairs. Today, however, as Xi Jinping and his fellow “princelings” self-consciously resuscitate and reassemble prominent pieces of Maoist practice and propaganda (seen in the Mass Line Education Campaign, the strident attack on the teaching of Western values, and the like), the relevance of revolutionary patterns to contemporary politics is considerably more obvious – and ominous.² These days few observers would dispute the claim that “the princelings share a common commitment (and personal interest) in revitalizing revolutionary culture as a vehicle for perpetuating Communist Party rule” (295), thereby ensuring that “the revolutionary past continues to haunt the political present in many unsettled ways” (296). The question with which the *Anyuan* study concludes, of whether or not future Chinese generations will be able to “mine the revolutionary inheritance in ways that encourage its inspiring vision to triumph over its appalling violence” (296), remains as yet unanswered.

The tension between education (*wen* 文) and violence (*wu* 武) that marked the Communist experience at Anyuan seemed an apt metaphor for thinking more generally about the complicated interplay of culture and coercion that has characterized Chinese Communism from its origins to the present. Unlike Hannah Arendt, the Chinese Communist Party has always understood political legitimacy to derive from “an ambidextrous deployment of both types of power: 文武双全” (p. 9). At the same time, the distinction drawn between “cultural positioning” in the pre-‘49 period and “cultural patronage” after 1949 was meant to highlight a critical shift in the CCP’s focus, from mass mobilization to elite legitimation, as it transitioned from a revolutionary party to a regime party.

I did not for a moment mean to imply that cultural governance is of *primary* importance in explaining the rise and resilience of Chinese Communism. Chinese authoritarianism “is a product of many complex factors” including “the tremendous discursive and coercive power of the Communist party-state, which renders dissent both difficult and dangerous” (292). Although the early years of Communist mobilization at Anyuan were noteworthy for the inventive use

of mass education and folk culture, even “Little Moscow” – as the coal mining town was known at that time – was marred by violent strife. And violence escalated dramatically when the “graduates” of Little Moscow returned to their native villages to establish the radical peasant associations and spearhead the Red Terror that Mao Zedong celebrated in his famous *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*.³ As Mao would later observe, “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”

Anyuan does not try to sugarcoat the bloody record of the CCP’s rise and rule (see especially Chapters 4 and 6). Nor does it claim that the founding of the PRC in 1949 marked the end of violent revolution and a new beginning of peaceful evolution. The brutal deaths of the protagonists of the Anyuan strike, Li Lisan and Liu Shaoqi, not to mention the slaughter of countless ordinary citizens in state-sponsored armed conflicts during the Cultural Revolution (211, 214-215, 232-233), should dispel any such illusion. Despite this terrible and tragic trajectory, interpretations of Mao’s revolution remain highly contested, as the contrasting views expressed by American journalists, Chinese writers and artists, state officials, Party historians, and Anyuan workers themselves demonstrate (Chapter 7).

One issue that did not receive much attention from the reviewers in this roundtable was the analogy between Mao’s revolution (particularly in its Cultural Revolution incarnation) and religious crusades. Militant religious movements are also directed against both heretics and infidels, or internal and external enemies. Seeing the Cultural Revolution as akin to a fundamentalist religious revival that aimed to purify China’s revolutionary tradition and thereby spare it from the perfidy of the Soviet Union helps, I believe, to make sense of the otherwise puzzling reverence that the image of Mao still commands in the popular Chinese imagination, especially among those who came of age during the Cultural Revolution. As a religious crusade, the Cultural Revolution cast Anyuan and its workers (Mao’s “chosen people”) in starring roles in a drama designed to save China’s sacred revolutionary path from the sinful revisionism of Khrushchev’s Soviet Union (as advocated by “China’s Khrushchev,” Liu Shaoqi). The searing socialization experience of the Cultural Revolution goes some distance toward explaining the rediscovery and redeployment of the power of “red culture” on the part of Xi Jinping and his fellow princelings today.

The interest that the publication of *Anyuan* has generated within China, thanks in no small measure to a marvelous Chinese translation by Yan Xiaojun of Hong Kong University,⁴ attests to continuing concern over the meaning of their revolutionary tradition on the part of many thoughtful Chinese.⁵ As with the original English edition, my hope for the Chinese edition was not to propose any new historical or political orthodoxy, but rather to stimulate engaged discussion of Mao’s revolution -- in this case by those most directly affected by its outcome.

In a new preface written for the Chinese edition, I recounted a visit to Cuba a few years back where I was struck by the remarkable pride and consistency with which virtually everyone I encountered characterized the Cuban revolutionary tradition: “universal, free education and medical care.” Impressed by this consensus, when I returned to the United

States I started asking fellow Americans how they understood the American revolutionary tradition. Again, the responses I received were notably upbeat and consistent – although of course quite different from the social rights that Cubans had stressed. For Americans, the revolutionary tradition was the enshrinement of civil rights: freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of expression, freedom of association. On subsequent trips to China, I posed the same question to many Chinese. In stark contrast to Cubans and Americans, however, the responses from Chinese interlocutors were neither uniform nor positive. Usually my question would be met with a pained grimace and a stammering “don’t know” (不知道) or “unclear” (不清楚). Sometimes it would simply elicit an uncomfortable laugh. On the rare occasions when respondents offered a substantive answer, they tended either to name a famous revolutionary site (e.g., Jinggangshan or Yan’an) or else to mention something negatively associated with Mao (e.g., class struggle or cult of personality). The revolutionary nostalgia to be found in such abundance among the workers of Anyuan – and deftly resurrected by ambitious princeling politicians – was obviously far from universal.

Part of the reason for the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding China’s revolutionary tradition rests of course with its unusual complexity and diversity. Compared to the Cuban and American revolutions, the Chinese Communist revolution was nasty, brutish and long. As a consequence neither its ideals nor its lessons can be succinctly summarized. The watchword of the Anyuan strike of 1922, “Once beasts of burden, now we will be men!” (从前是牛马，现在要做人!), appears throughout the book as a recurring motif for the meaning of the revolutionary tradition to the workers of Anyuan. The slogan expresses a yearning for human dignity that would seem to encompass the full range of human rights: social justice, civil liberties, and political participation. Surely what separates men from beasts is the human aspiration for freedom. But in the end, it is of course up to Chinese citizens – not Western theorists or scholars – to determine the content and contours of China’s revolutionary tradition.

As a student of comparative politics focusing on modern and contemporary China, I am particularly interested in situating the rich Chinese experience within a cross-national context. There is no doubt that the core ideology and institutions of the Chinese Communist Party were imported from Moscow. Anyuan’s moniker of “Little Moscow” exemplified the early CCP leaders’ infatuation with the Soviet model, which they attempted to replicate in everything from architecture to agit-prop. But my understanding from secondary scholarship on the Russian Revolution (summarized in Chapter 3 and the Conclusion), is that popular receptivity to parallel overtures was actually quite different in the two countries.

Why would a revolutionary recipe designed for the Russian proletariat prove even more attractive in a rural Chinese setting? In China, the appeal of literacy education (or “possessing culture” 有文化) evidently rendered villagers especially susceptible to the pedagogical overtures of Communist cadres. Although the worker-peasant schools and cultural propaganda performances introduced at Anyuan were inspired by the Bolsheviks, these (adapted) practices seem to

have resonated more strongly among Chinese than among their Russian counterparts (118-123, 322). The fact that early CCP leaders such as Mao Zedong, Li Lisan and Liu Shaoqi – well educated though they were – hailed from rural villages very similar to those of their target constituency facilitated their ability to translate abstract Marxist ideology into folksy terms that were immediately intelligible to their target audience. The creative use of popular religion (from lantern festivals and lion dances to secret-society rituals) was particularly important. In this respect, the CCP was advantaged vis-a-vis Bolsheviks and Guomindang cadres alike (151-152).

Why might cultural governance have more staying power in the PRC than in the Soviet Union? After all, the cults of personality developed first for Liu Shaoqi and then for Mao Zedong were also modeled on Soviet exemplars. Even the idea of a Cultural Revolution originated with the Soviets. Had Liu Shaoqi's Leninist/Stalinist versions of the cult of personality and Cultural Revolution prevailed in China, it seems plausible that the PRC might indeed (as Mao feared) have followed in the footsteps of the USSR. Mao Zedong's alternative road – a tumultuous Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution – was intended to inoculate his party-state against the fatal disease that he believed had already befallen his erstwhile “big brother.” If Mao calculated correctly, then the religious awakening of his final crusade – for all its violence and viciousness – was critical for grooming “revolutionary successors” who would see their own political legitimacy as inextricably intertwined with his revolutionary legacy. It was in that sense that the memory of Anyuan came to symbolize a “distinctively Chinese revolutionary tradition.”

Let me conclude with two of the most important lessons that I personally have taken away from this project. First is a deeper appreciation for the dedication and scholarship of so many outstanding Chinese colleagues. This was not a new discovery, having been engaged in collaborative work with Chinese counterparts for over 35 years, but my admiration for their accomplishments was heightened in the process of working on *Anyuan*. Professor Yu Jianrong of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who first persuaded me to study the Anyuan story, has written a brilliant book of his own focused squarely on the question of the making and unmaking of the Chinese working class.⁶ I would recommend that those interested in pursuing the topic further consult his work, along with some of the many other secondary sources (by official Party historians, librarians and archivists, journalists, novelists, and scholars representing a range of academic disciplines) summarized in Chapter 7 and cited in the endnotes.

A second lesson is renewed appreciation for the work of an earlier generation of Western social scientists studying Mao's China. Although I enjoyed access to a wealth of primary materials unavailable to that pioneering cohort, I found myself returning again and again to their insightful publications. If I were to offer one single piece of advice to the generation of talented young historians now working on the history of the PRC, it would be to familiarize themselves and engage seriously with the work of that first generation of political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, psychologists, and even psychiatrists who – despite daunting

source limitations – succeeded in producing such informed and inspiring scholarship on the early years of the PRC. Some of their works are listed in the bibliography of English-language sources, but many more await rediscovery. In studying the history of the People's Republic of China, we are fortunate to be able to stand on the shoulders of intellectual giants!

¹ Elizabeth J. Perry, “Studying Chinese Politics: Farewell to Revolution?” *China Journal* (January 2007); Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, *Mao's Invisible Hand: Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

² Andrew Jacobs and Chris Buckley, “Move Over Mao: ‘Papa Xi’ Awes China,” *New York Times* (March 7, 2015).

³ Violence in the urban wing of the Chinese Communist revolution is explored in an earlier book, *Patrolling the Revolution: Worker Militias, Citizenship and the Modern Chinese State* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

⁴ 裴宜理著, 阎小骏译, *安源: 发掘中国革命之传统* (香港大学出版社, 2014) .

⁵ See, for example, 唐小兵, “裴宜理谈安源革命的历史记忆” *东方早报* (上海: March 29, 2014)

(<http://www.dfdaily.com/html/1170/2015/3/29/1254307.shtml>); 裴宜理: 中国崛起的意义, *求是理论网* (May 18, 2013)

http://www.qstheory.cn/wh/sxdl/201305/t20130518_231956.htm; 裴宜理: 我问中国人, 你们的革命传统是什么? *chaoglobal* (July 20, 2014)

<https://chaoglobal.wordpress.com/2014/07/20/revolution/>; 裴宜理: 对革命传统的不断动员是中共的独特能力(<http://cnpolitics.org/2012/12/elizabeth-perry/>); 豆瓣读书 <https://book.douban.com/subject/25930094/>; <http://www.aisixiang.com/thinktank/eperry.html>.

⁶ 于建嵘, *中国工人阶级状况: 安源实录* (香港: 明镜出版社, 2006).