

History in Focus
14. Agency and History +
Hong Kong and China Between the Tides

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Matt Hermane

Welcome to *History in Focus*, a podcast by the *American Historical Review*. I'm Matt Hermane. This is episode 14. Today, I speak with Yale historian Denise Ho on her article in the forthcoming June issue of the *American Historical Review* on life and migration along the Hong Kong–China borderlands during the Cold War years. But first, the June issue's History Lab features the forum titled "The Agency Dilemma" on how scholars throughout and beyond the historical discipline approach agency as a central matter of historical scholarship. Duke associate professor of modern Russian history Anna Krylova spearheads the forum with a thought provoking essay on the nature of agency as a category of historical analysis. She calls for a more disciplined, narrower understanding of agency that emphasizes individuals significantly challenging or altering the world around them, whereas scholars have tended to conceptualize agency as a natural faculty of human life. In the history lab, Professor Krylova's essay is followed by responses from scholars of various intellectual backgrounds. For this episode of *History in Focus*, our Conor Howard spoke with Professor Krylova to get a better understanding of how she wants scholars to think about agency going forward.

Conor Howard

There are moments in life which leave us in shock, struggling to make sense of a situation using the cultural tools and understandings that we have gained throughout our lives. Other moments are even more impactful, leaving us nearly paralyzed, having to create new ways of understanding the world around us in order to carry on. The Second World War had many of these moments. For Soviet officer Valentin Markov, one of these moments came in 1943, when he was ordered to take command of a mixed male and female dive bomber regiment on the Eastern Front. Markov did not know what to do, he did not have the cultural toolkit to understand how to lead female pilots in war, something that he and others would have to develop a new over the coming months and years. As historian Anna Krylova explains in her upcoming piece in the AHR, the case of Valentine Markov helps us understand the relationship between culture, agency and history. We'll hear more about Valentine Markov at the end of the segment. But first, here's my conversation with Professor Krylova. I'm Conor Howard, and this is "History in Focus."

Anna Krylova

I'm Anna Krylova. I'm an associate professor at Duke, where I teach modern Russian history. I'm an intellectual historian. But I also work across a number of fields, including gender history, military history. And I'm clearly quite interested in also questions of social theory and historical theory. And at Duke I have been teaching seminars, historical theory and methodology for many years, and this seminars are the reason why the article we're discussing today exists at all.

Conor Howard

Wonderful. So you found that teaching has been a really important part of your own intellectual work.

Anna Krylova

The questions that brought this article into a kind of into lives are actually deep gaps kind of conceived in this intense conversations with graduate students. Since this has been a very long process. I'm also happy to report this, that this these conversations have become not only an article, they have become a book project. And the book project is much broader than the article it actually deals with this question of what has happened to historical theory, after the Cultural Turn, and what his historical theory was before the Cultural Turn, what have we lost, what have we gained over the last 40 years and what are we dealing with now at the present moment.

My research provided me with ways on how to resolve the problem that I formulated first, the question itself actually originates within the field of historical theory, those intense conversations with graduate students, my graduate seminars, historical theory methodology. If there is one thing that actual graduate students learn from my graduate seminars, is that you cannot really talk about agency without talking at the same time about ideology, power disruption, like it's just well, if you drop the second half of the equation, you are making things very simple, while but you are not really giving we do not explain why agents will be so complex.

Conor Howard

So to understand agency, then, we have to understand power relationships within a society. After posing some initial questions for examining this proposition, Professor Karlova walks us through one possible way of understanding this relationship.

Anna Krylova

So I would have to introduce two questions I would introduce like One question. The first question is very simple. It's what do we mean when we say that some someone or something is culturally constructed? Right? It's a basic premise of all analysis and all social sciences. And we have a wealth of theoretical resources to answer this question. I would like to answer this question very briefly as a Marxist, the new kind of academic Marxist on whom I draw in my introduction to the article. So those Marxist would have answered this social construction question by first, starting with the big picture, right, they would stress the mutually constitutive domains of society, which cannot be disintegrated, they will talk about economy, social relations, culture, politics, and also language and linguistic forms will be all encoded. And Marxists perceive those domains as inextricably interconnected around circuits of mediation. So people uh enter those circuits of mediation, they learn that to internalize them, and they do that inadvertently. And I just kind of stress this idea that they that the key term here is "inadvertently." Is that people require what I would call "social competence," in a way in order to become social beings, without necessarily knowing that they're doing that before they get out in the world to make a difference in the world, right. But this social competence uh, actually is not a neutral tool of the social competence that we acquire in order to become social beings. They are ideologically opinionated. And they support and propel a certain organization of power relations that we have been drawn as we become a social being. This is a specific way that we can answer this question by complicating it, but I think it's enough to stop here. How do we handle the question of current agency if we immerse our historical protagonist in this dense, power ridden ideologically encoded maze of social-economic relations, and corresponding and pre-reflective cognitive structures? So this question actually is very difficult to answer. We have just created such an elaborate maze of what it means to become a social being, that it's very difficult to take a human being out of that maze. We can answer this question, what do we mean by social construction? Very well, we have enormous amount of resources to answer this question. But we don't have theoretical tools to explain how do people disengage from the ontological codes of their social construction? Right? Can they replace them? Can they change them? Can they offer alternatives? So this is the question that is at the core of the article.

Conor Howard

This is a powerful and provocative set of questions. How do we understand agency if we don't understand the cultural and political context in which an individual has been programmed to operate? How can we tell if someone is truly acting independently if we don't know what role their society and upbringing have had on the choices they make? Not everyone would define

agency quite so narrowly. In the forum following Professor Krylova's essay, some scholars pushed back presenting agency as a more universal concept.

How would you respond to, or perhaps you could elaborate a little bit on the response to scholars like William Sewell, who have perhaps said that you yourself are going too far in the other direction, overcorrecting? Is, is there anything you'd like to say in response to that?

Anna Krylova

I would like to outline how we have learned to answer this question. Bill Sewell is fundamentally a voice in this kind of trajectory that I'm tracing in the article. So kind of in a very simplistic way, which is very difficult, because there is actually nothing simplistic about it. But nowadays, when people invoke agency, and they do that a lot, right? They don't need any longer kind of worried about the ideological contract of those social codes of their sort of kind of social construction that people actually have to internalize and all that to become social beings. We know that those codes are there, we do not really engage with that problem. What we do, we basically say, well, let's analyze how people use their social competence in order to live their lives, and to navigate in there in different situations or different relations. In other words, we actually analyze how humans use their social competence towards their own ends. This is a very problematic proposition, in my opinion. And I just want to explain like two reasons why it is problematic. We can actually take an example from Bill Sewell, because Bill Sewell, in his comments to the forum, summarized very well, this particular problem that I'm dealing with. He says in his comments that to have agency means "simply to act consciously to modify and or sustain one's mode of life." So this kind of question begs a number of questions. My number-one question will be, can one think of a human being living in a society who is not engaged in this kind of activities on a regular basis. When Bill Sewell talks about modification and sustainment, he can also add to that subversion, playfulness, and even manipulation with what it is that we actually learn from society. This is what I mean in my article is that agency category actually has become equated with life itself. We have given agency to everyone. So to me, that presents a big problem. If you have a category without boundaries, it's not a category. For Marxist, to have agency would mean that you would need to do something that will impact structurally, your kind of conditions of life, to distance yourself from those codes, or social constitution, which are imposed on you without you knowing it. And so you would need to do all of these things will have to be included in the conversation about agency. Now, we're no longer include those questions into our conversation about agency, and it has made it very easy for us to start expanding the category indefinitely. I would argue today, that kind of this analytical emptiness of the category, this is not where the trouble ends, what is happening when we actually now discuss agency as an inherent human faculty, that we can find, and we

can ground to all historical actors. Sewell compare us human ability for agency with human ability for respiration. But he captures, specifically how empty and extended this category actually has become. For him, that is a solution to the problem of agency. To me, that is the biggest problem that we can have generated for ourselves. Nowadays, when historians actually invoke agency, they no longer treat discrepancies in people's means to sustain their life as integral to the conversation about agents basically becomes secondary. The fact that people have agency, regardless of their social standing, basically suggests that social standing is secondary. And this allows us to make historical context secondary, and to make questions of ideology and power secondary. We can now actually hand out agency to people who are oppressed people who are underprivileged, people who are enslaved. And we don't complicate the store of agency with questions or discrepancy in their means and power to navigate and sustain their lives.

Conor Howard

Is agency a universal human faculty, something akin to breathing, something that can be extended to anyone and everyone perhaps even extended beyond human beings? Or is agency, something more radical, most of it represent a fundamental challenge to or replacement of the society's basic structures and ways of understanding?

How do we conceptually define agency on the one hand versus the innate human ability to make choices?

Anna Krylova

I actually don't think that we need to put all our categories under the rubric of agency. Resistance, subversion, autonomy, all these are very important categories, and we can use them. And I think that we actually create a problem when we start [to] align those categories with agency, why cannot we just kind of say that people resisted, and peoples fought back, but they fought back within certain limits, possibilities, but most of the time, actually, the vast majority of struggle actually takes place within certain limits. Let's develop those categories, which we have used for a long time. And let's not necessarily ally them with agency. And if we want to talk about agency, I would argue we need to have a much more disciplined, much more radical category in order for that to be a meaningful. This is the question that I raised in my article, because I'm actually interested in pointing out that the raw historical conditions under which historical actors can disengage from them, and the ideological codes of their own cultural kind of construction, and they can replace them with something alternative.

Conor Howard

I do want to double back to Valentine Markov as a way of illustrating what we've been talking about, I think, having read the piece, it really is helping me understand this conversation, but listeners likely won't have that advantage. So could you I guess, sort of tell us who Valentine Markov was and the situation that you kind of walk through with him that helps illustrate some of these questions of agency and cultural understandings.

Anna Krylova

Valentine Markov introduces us to this very peculiar, but not peculiar across history, situation, where Soviet women and Soviet men at the Eastern Front of World War Two were to actually proven unable to use one of the most fundamental, tenacious, and ideological encrypted ways of organizing human nature and social order. By which I mean binary categorization of male and females and how it impacts the way we think about human nature. They fail them to navigate their everyday reality of shared combat. This is kind of a larger picture that Valentine Markov introduces us to. The article begins, of course, with a very concrete example of how he himself is unable to navigate the situation that he was forced into. In 1943, he was asked to lead a mixed Air Regiment. When he heard this command, he found himself dumbfounded. And he couldn't imagine he wouldn't, couldn't visualize how exactly he was going to do that, under conditions of combat how he was going to actually lead women into combat, flying those complex machines, which even men could not operate well. And then he also went on self explicating, how many things he couldn't imagine. Like he couldn't imagine how he would fly in combat with them. He couldn't imagine them dying, he couldn't imagine how he would be writing to women's relatives about their deaths. He couldn't imagine how he would relate to this women when they're not in combat, but off combat. So all kind of this maze of social relations and social habits of thought that usually come effortlessly to people was all of a sudden gone. And it was also interesting that he actually tried to use the kind of conventional gender norms. And he would be claiming, [he] knew women's nature very well. But those traditional norms that he actually knew very well couldn't help him to navigate the socially and culturally empty space. From his point of view. For me, markup is kind of a microcosm of this logic problem that the Soviet society had to work through during World War Two, on the grand scale.

Conor Howard

Yeah, to me, at least that that case is just it does help to illustrate the complexities so well. As a follow up to that, I'm wondering, is it in moments like that these moments of intense stress that allow for greater agency is, is it this stress that allows more people to sort of break free from cultural scripts?

Anna Krylova

Yes, I'm thinking about those moments where a person is confronted with something that he or she or they are incapable of navigating using cultural tools that they have been using for a long time, as those moments of opportunity for people to become radically creative, and radically with redrawing the ideological links between different terms and different social practices. Like me, what is important is to say, well, before you can become an agent, you actually need to free yourself

I try to start developing and have a conceptual framework for thinking about those moments in history when people actually are not equipped with cultural tools to navigate those situations. And I do that specifically to counteract the predominant historical protagonist in our contemporary scholarship who always knows. And by this, I mean that this protagonist is always well enough equipped with cultural scripts, right, like so this protagonist can do a lot of things with the cultural competence that was given to him or her. But I'm interested in that particular moment in history, where all of a sudden, what people have taken for granted, stopped working for them to such a degree that they feel paralyzed in their most banal, most immediate situations and social relations.

Conor Howard

Thank you very much for taking the time to sit down with me.

Anna Krylova

It's my pleasure. Thank you very much for doing this, like even doing this was actually important for clarifying what it is that I'm going to say in the final version of the book.

Conor Howard

Wonderful.

Professor Krylova's essay can be found at the head of the forum titled "The Agency Dilemma" in the June 2023 issue of the *American Historical Review*. Her evaluation of agency as a historical category leads the robust discussion between a number of scholars from a variety of backgrounds, including William H. Sewell, whose perspective we discussed near the middle of our conversation.

Matt Hermane

That was Conor Howard's conversation with Anna Krylova on her essay in the forum titled "The Agency Dilemma" for the June installment of AHR's History Lab. Now we hear my conversation with Denise Ho on her article titled "Oysterman and Refugee: Hong Kong and China Between the Tides, 1949–1997."

Denise is Associate Professor of modern Chinese history at Yale University. Her article in the June issue of the AHR will contribute to her book titled "Cross-border Relations: A Grassroots History of Hong Kong," in which she traces the history of the Hong Kong–China border through stories of the people who live at the border and the movement of materials and ideas across the border.

One of the things that's apparent in your article is how much of your study depends on oral histories. In the end, you're to provide these big insights on economic arrangements and Cold War trends. But you do so by focusing on the lives and livelihoods of individuals. You open your article by talking about one of these individuals, a widow named Man Tai. Could you start by telling us Man Tai's story.

Denise Ho

So the story you're referring to is something that I found in Hong Kong government archives. This is a story about someone called Widow Man. In 1966, her children were kidnapped from the Hong Kong coast, the northern coast. This area's called Lau Fau Shan, an oyster producing area, and they were taken across the bay, Deep Bay, to an ancestral village, also an oyster producing area on the Chinese coast, called Shajing. This border could be an opportunity for economic production, for exchange for kinship, but it also could be a threat in times of political tension, and 1966 is exactly this moment of political tension—the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in mainland China.

In this story, she decides to take matters into her own hands, cross the border herself and see if she can secure the release of her children. The children are eventually released. They're allowed to go back to Hong Kong in part because they were wartime refugees - they had gone to Hong Kong before 1949 - as opposed to political refugees. So part of my entree into the subject was to uncover the politics of that moment of the border and how geopolitics were experienced by everyday people. But along the way, I discovered all kinds of other stories, narratives, and social changes among these communities who live and work the border.

Matt Hermane

The geographic focus of your article is Deep Bay and the Pearl River Basin. There are waves of refugees that you talk about. So maybe you can talk a little bit about that borderlands and then how it affected people over time.

Denise Ho

So Hong Kong is comprised of three parts. Hong Kong Island, ceded to the British at the end of the Opium War. So this is 1842. Then the area directly across the Kowloon Peninsula is the second part. And then the third part is the largest area, the New Territories. So the border that I'm talking about is created by treaty between the British and between the Qing Dynasty in 1898, demarcated in 1899. This border is between Hong Kong as a colony and what historically was known as Bao'an County, Bao'an Xian, and today, it's Shenzhen, a border town which has become a Chinese mega city. So, in Hong Kong, it's typical to talk about two big waves of refugee movement. One of them was in the years leading up to 1962. This is around the time of China's Great Famine. And then there's a second wave of migration that happens around 1978 to 1980. This border area of Bao'an County is a place where refugees come from and a place where refugees pass through. The people who raise oysters, or people who engage in fishing, are really at this border in a very liminal way. They have special passes that allow them to go to sea. So part of the story in this article is about the people who traverse this border, not only as we often think of it as refugees or visitors who would make a one time crossing but people who actually lived and worked on the border. The story that I'm trying to tell is also the story of people who stayed.

Matt Hermane

These borders, they're drawn to demarcate geographies for people. But what you're dealing with here is this ecological zone, where people have to traverse this border to do their farming, to earn their livelihood. What challenges did those oyster farmers confront by that border?

Denise Ho

What I would do is think about the way oyster production works. We need to start with the process of cultivation. So oyster production is extremely sensitive to ecological conditions. The oyster has a three to five year lifespan, and you want optimal salinity conditions. So if you're raising oysters, you want to diversify. You want to have oyster beds in different places so that you can pick them up and move them depending on conditions. But you want to diversify in order to protect yourself against risk. Because if there's a typhoon or some other, some other kind of disaster, then you're going to lose your multi-year investment. This makes oysters a very special kind of product - not quite like farming, which stays in one place, not quite like

fishing, which is mobile. When you think about things like land disputes, it suddenly becomes very complicated. You also need collective labor. You have to have a boat in order to do this. And then you have to have teams depending on the size of the boat. One of the really interesting things that happens is that when land reform happens in Bao'an County, taking land from landlords and redistributing it to the peasants, land is redistributed, but in order to be effective, the oystermen on the China side have to re-form into small collective units because they need boats, they need capital in terms of oysters seedlings, and you also need something for the oysters to grow on. This could be old oyster shells, it could be pieces of concrete and tile. So you need land, you need collective labor, you need some kind of investment. So the oyster people actually form collective units. We have a story in which the collective form of production suits oyster culture on the China side and allows the units - the communes under which the Chinese oystermen operate - to expand. On the Hong Kong side, you have a traditional form of landlord tenant relationship, the oyster beds are sublet; some people hire themselves out for work, or they're able to have the right to [unclear] oysters in unused beds and do a little bit of sideline for themselves. The Chinese collective can engage in mobilizing labor in a way that the Hong Kong side can't, and they can also invest in research and development. So you have a very different economic situation on both sides. In some ways, this Deep Bay Area is a natural experiment in two forms of agricultural production.

Matt Hermane

You're basically comparing the experience of the oyster farmer that decided to stay in China and the oyster farmer that took refuge in Hong Kong.

Denise Ho

One of the things that I found in my research is that the oystermen are not the typical refugee. When we think about refugees, we often think about the people who migrated. When did they come to Hong Kong? How did they adapt? And so on. But oral history materials and local publications I was able to use from the China side tell a very different story of people who chose to stay and why. When we think about the oystermen, in particular, they don't migrate in great numbers in that wave leading up to 1962. And this is in part because they're part of a privileged state industry that produces oysters and oyster products for export. Their positionality in Bao'an County is much better than that of an average farmer, so there are people who choose to stay. This is their hometown. But then in 1978, 1980, this is the early years of China's era of reform and opening up, you have maybe 40, sometimes up to 50 percent of those oyster-producing villages migrating. So, in some ways, the oystermen story overlaps with the story of the general migrant population.

Matt Hermane

You have this quote, you say, “The relative success of China's oyster industry offers a counterexample to narratives of collectivization as failure and socialist production as de-skilling.” I'm curious about what you would suggest to the historian, the economist, the political scientist, whomever when they're examining or assessing particular political or economic arrangements throughout history, or even in our own time.

Denise Ho

Some examples I can refer to Jacob Eyferth has a book on papermakers, or papermaking, as a trade. Madeleine Dong has a recent book chapter about traditional food production in Beijing and what happens during socialist transformation. In both of their examples, it's a story of how socialism, or the socialist project and its forms of economic production, remove skill or remove traditional skills from local communities. But in the oyster case, I find a different story, where the skills of the oyster people were preserved. You have a multi-year apprenticeship, you have a flourishing of trade, it becomes a nationally recognized industry, it does something very important - it produces goods for exports at a time when China needs to have foreign currency. So it is a privileged industry. But I think the bigger point I want to make is that this is not just a story of two different forms of economic production. It's not just because of socialism that the Shajing oyster communities flourish. There's also a story of geography, the Shajing coast is much larger. And then, in the 1980s, when I trace the development of Shajing oyster industries after the era of reform and opening up, even though they were faced with problems like pollution, they were scouting out other places along the Chinese coast. So it's not just a different kind of economic production; it's also about ecology, it's also about geography. And then, when we think about the livelihoods of the people on the China side, they were really able to take advantage of a historical accident. The people who stayed, because there was so much migration to Hong Kong, could gather up some of those abandoned fields and scale up very quickly, in the early 1980s. They were also able to diversify into trade. And one of the points that I make in the larger article is that the border is really the barometer. It's the first mover of the reform era. We think about the reform era as this time that starts in 1978 with the beginning of reform and opening up and then the establishment of the Schenzhen economic zone. But, in truth, people at the border were experienced in doing cross-border trade, and this dates back to a policy of 1961, when the Bao'an County government allowed people to cross the border and do petty trade. The oyster people are some of the first people who begin to take advantage of the border. These individuals were benefiting from being the first movers of petty trade. So with the decollectivization of agriculture people get a certain amount of oyster fields. They bring this all together, and they form teams again. These new 1980s style cooperatives will do things like have one boat for continuing to harvest oysters and then

another boat for moving materials. So if we zoom out to the bigger picture, when you think about the 1980s as a time when South China is undergoing this economic takeoff, these oyster people, they've been in these waters for decades, and now they're moving not only small consumer goods, they're also moving construction materials. They're able to benefit by location, by policy, by their experience. So the larger argument of the article is that it's not just due to one singular thing. It's not just about two different economies.

Matt Hermane

What you're saying is that we really need to look at these specific localities and how specific circumstances might change the way we think about these broader phenomenon.

I don't have any other questions, but I am just curious, how much about oyster farming did you know before beginning this line of work?

Denise Ho

That's a great question. I did not know anything about oyster farming before I began this. I went to Shenzhen with the idea of starting to do research there. And in addition to going to a local library and going to the University Library, and a local archive, I also spoke to a local anthropologist and historian of Shenzhen called Mary Anne O'Donnell and asked her, "Where should I walk around, what would be an interesting place to explore?" She recommended to go and walk around this place called Shajing, and when I got to Shajing, I was really taken with two things. One was the way, despite the modernization, there were still so many aspects of village life and village history. In particular, oyster shells are used in the walls, both for decoration and for reinforcement. So, as a historian, being able to see that tangible and material evidence of the past really captured my imagination. Another example from that trip is the opportunity to visit a local museum of oyster culture, and one striking part of that exhibition was a display case in which the ocean-going passes and the border passes of local people were put on display. I wanted to find out more about who these people were, what their relationships were, and what their life experience had been.

Matt Hermane

Just reading the article, it was kind of disappointing to hear about how so much of this traditional oyster farming was just ruined by industrialization, but to know that those things are still there that there are signs of that tradition still there. That is encouraging, and it's nice to hear. So thank you for sharing that with me.

Denise Ho

Thank you. Thank you so much for this interview. I'm delighted to talk with you.

Matt Hermane

That was my conversation with Denise Ho on her article "Oysterman and Refugee: Hong Kong and China Between the Tides, 1949 to 1997." Earlier we heard Conor Howard's conversation with Anna Krylova on her essay for the "History Lab" forum, entitled "The Agency Dilemma." Both pieces appear in the June issue of the AHR. *History in Focus* is a production of the *American Historical Review* in partnership with the American Historical Association and the University Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Episode 14 was produced by Daniel Story, Conor Howard, and me, Matt Hermane. You can find out more about this and other episodes at americanhistoricalreview.org. That's it for now. See you next time.