James Evans: How did China's Communist revolution transform the nation's political culture? Here to help answer that question, among others, is my guest today, Denise Y. Ho, assistant professor of history at Yale University and Harvard alumna. She's an historian of modern China with a particular focus on the social and cultural history of the Mao period from 1949 to 1976. Her latest book is Curating Revolution: Politics on Display of Mao's China, Cambridge University Press, which has been described by critics as a compelling bridge between institutional studies of mass campaigns and oral histories to reveal how the use of objects and exhibitions narrated the past. And as Elizabeth Perry said, it's chockfull of new information gleaned from impressive archival, documentary, and interview sources.

James Evans: So Denise Ho, welcome to the Harvard on China Podcast.

Denise Y. Ho: Thank you so much for having me, James.

James Evans: The genesis and focus of the book are the objects of revolution themselves, the wenwu displayed or curated during the Cultural Revolution. How did you first discover these objects and what drew you to them?

Denise Y. Ho: That's a great question. I think there are different kinds of objects in the book. When you say the word wenwu, so cultural relics or cultural things in Chinese, and cultural relics is the official translation, I think when people first hear of that, they think of what we might call antiquities or things that you would find in an art museum, but the category of wenwu in Chinese actually expands much beyond those art objects to include documents of buildings. Particularly important for my book, you also have the category of revolutionary wenwu, so objects associated with the revolution, and that's one category I talk about in one chapter in particular. And then another category is what we might call artifacts or remnants of the past, and these are much more everyday ordinary vernacular objects that were used to teach people a lesson about China in the past. In this case, a very political lesson.

James Evans: Most people listening to this will be very familiar with going to a museum, and in the book you use the example of going to the Shanghai Museum, of seeing things on display, they're curated in a specific way, there is descriptions to help people understand what these objects mean. What is the difference between a museum like the Shanghai Museum or MoMA in New York and an exhibition in the Cultural Revolution sense of the word?

Denise Y. Ho: Great question. One of the ways I try to frame the different kinds of exhibitions in the book is to think about exhibitions of the state in power and exhibitions of the state in revolution. And so the former exhibits or the former kinds of museums include places like the first party Congress site where the Communist Party was founded as a revolutionary history museum, and then something like the Shanghai Museum or let's say the Palace Museum in Beijing, a primarily focused on art history museum that tells the story of the nation. That would be
the context you describe. Going to an exhibit, seeing objects on display perhaps in glass cases, looking at text on the walls, looking at paintings on the walls. Museums are the exhibitions of the state in power. They tell a narrative of political legitimacy.

Denise Y. Ho: The other kind of exhibition that I describe in the book are political exhibitions, exhibitions of the state in revolution, and these are much more ad hoc. They go along with a political campaign like one of the ones you mentioned, the Cultural Revolution, 1966 to 1976, and those kinds of exhibits are much more along the lines of a propaganda exhibit and they teach people not just what's happening in the political moment, but how to participate in that political campaign.

James Evans: So you're teaching someone how to be revolutionary.

Denise Y. Ho: Exactly. So one analogy might be to think of the exhibit as a classroom, a revolutionary classroom where you learn a text and you learn its vocabulary, you learn its definitions, you learn what political slogans to shout, and in particularly in the case of China here, we're talking about exhibits that identify for the Cultural Revolution class enemies. So how do you pick out a class enemy? There's certainly a dark side of these kinds of political exhibitions.

James Evans: And specifically with the class enemy exhibitions, you've mentioned in the book that there are objects on display in these exhibitions that people would have found in class enemies' houses or people who are accused of being class enemies. Their houses would be raided and those objects would be put on display, and you have this great example of an object which is a kettle with a false bottom that is purported to have gold bars hidden inside it as the sort of exemplary of what a class enemy would do.

Denise Y. Ho: That's a classic example that I talk about often when I give a book talk. Let me step back for a minute and think about the wider context for this. In a textbook, a history of modern China or let's say in an introductory lecture for students who don't know anything about China, we might talk about the meaning of class in the Mao period where everybody would have a class designation based on their family background. Let's say you were from a worker's family, from a peasant's family. These would be good categories, or from a landlord's family or a capitalist family, these would be bad categories. And so we have these class designations, and traditionally we think of them as defined in terms of how much property the family owned, if they owned a shop or if they owned a certain amount of land.

Denise Y. Ho: What's interesting about these exhibits is that they define class in terms of possessions. Some of the things that get put on display in these exhibitions are things like luxury items, luxury food stuffs, clothing, firearms, weapons, guns, bullets, knives, things that were interpreted as spy equipment or let's say enemy documents, so identification cards linked to the previous regime. So all of these
get labeled as things that would be ways in which you could tell that this person was a landlord, for example, or this person had capitalist desires.

Denise Y. Ho: And so the example you’re talking about where Red Guards allegedly found this tea kettle, that object gets put on display in a Red Guard exhibition. And one of the really interesting things about that particular object is that it’s displaying a number of things. In the bottom of the tea kettle are these gold bars, so the gold bars then become a symbol of a rich person or somebody who got gold through the exploitation of others, but then they’re hidden because it’s a tea kettle with a false bottom. So then what’s on display is that this person is secretly was hiding this gold because he had some ulterior motive. And then finally the revealing of the teapot is on display allows them to say that it was the Red Guards who found this, so this movement is correct. So there are a lot of different things happening with the display of just one object.

James Evans: In the book you have this great expression that I think sort of summarizes this in some ways, which is that you say that exhibitions both reflected and made revolution. What do you mean by that?

Denise Y. Ho: When we think about exhibitions, we often think of them as illustrating something that is in the past that has already happened. You think back on those exhibitions at the state in power with a narrative that gives political legitimacy. That’s the story that is being told, and so one way to think about it is that those kinds of exhibits are like textbooks.

Denise Y. Ho: But the kinds of exhibitions I’m describing are like handbooks. They teach you how to go and do something. One of the big questions that historians try to get their heads around is how did the Communist Party succeed in creating this mass class-based grassroots revolution? And one question you can answer through this material is to think about how that argument was made at the grassroots, and that’s what I hope to show in my book.

James Evans: And I think that’s a really important point and a sort of direction that a lot of people in modern Chinese history are taking is this move away from the big picture or the sort of big players in Chinese modern history and looking more at, as Jeremy Brown says, Maoism at the grassroots, or Gail Hershatter, for example, looks at oral histories of rural women during the Cultural Revolution. Is that a direction that you think the field of modern Chinese history is going in?

Denise Y. Ho: I do think that it is a direction that the field is moving in, and part of that is based on sources. Part of that is based on accessibility. I do think that trying to understand how and why people participated in revolution is a much longer question. If you look at an earlier generation of sociologists, for example, and their analysis of class and class background and why people participated, let’s say, in factions, that motivation, that question has already been there, but access to new sources may help us answer the question in different ways.
James Evans: So I guess there's sort of big question that's really driving a lot of your research is how do we use these exhibitions to better understand social life in the Mao era?

Denise Y. Ho: I think these exhibitions should be taken as part of a much wider propaganda universe, so it's hard to draw the line from one form of propaganda, let's say a film or a piece of artwork and action. So I don't want to overemphasize the power of one particular kind of propaganda, but I think it's a piece that has not been so closely examined before.

Denise Y. Ho: When you talk about the grassroots history, I think one important thing to understand is just how national this was. So I tell a story about Shanghai because that's where my sources are, but these kinds of exhibitions were happening everywhere in schools, in factories, in work units all over China. In the different chapters of the book, I tried to describe how this is a representative of a much larger trend.

Denise Y. Ho: Going back to your question about what this can tell us about a bigger picture, I think it can tell us about a bigger national picture and I think it can tell us about a wider form of everyday experience. If you want to think about how far the state permeates at the local level, if your own personal possessions can be put on display, if your diaries or family letters can be put on display, and one of the things that I mention in one chapter is the ways in which people's letters from home during the famine after the Great Leap were put on display in the military. If the state could have that level of permeation into people's interior personal relationships, then that says a lot about the propaganda state.

James Evans: And I think in some ways that also speaks to the question of what makes the Mao era distinct from other areas of Chinese history or indeed what makes China different from other revolutionary states.

Denise Y. Ho: Absolutely, and I think we're still seeing legacies of that today amplified in some ways because of a digital means of surveillance. So we were talking about the legacies for today, and I hadn't really quite made the connection until you posed the question in that way, but thinking about how letters and diaries could be used as evidence or used as display objects, I think today when we think about the level of state surveillance with everything happening on a mobile phone with state access to all of the data behind it, the texts and the recent campaign against the Uyghurs, there is the potential for a lot more evidence. Perhaps it's not material. It's not a paper letter, but it's actually a text. It gives us some insight into the reach of the state and all of the power that goes behind that.

James Evans: Yeah, I think it speaks to a broader question that plagues political science, is that the question of what is contemporary versus what is relevant, and I think that's an excellent point in proving that studying the Mao era actually has a lot of relevance to what is happening in today's China.
Denise Y. Ho: I like to think so. Of course as a historian you want your material to be about that time and that place, but I think because we have the same regime in China and because we have many in the top leadership who grew up during that era and because this is still part of people's memories, real or suppressed, it's absolutely important to understand this world and this everyday experience.

James Evans: People who are familiar with the Fairbank Center will know that last fall in 2017 the Fairbank Center hosted the first exhibition in the United States of original big character posters or dazibao from the Cultural Revolution era for which you presented on our panel discussion. Perhaps you could start by telling our listeners what they actually are, but also how there's another dimension of this exhibitionary culture or the sort of blending of the private and the public.

Denise Y. Ho: So reflecting on the exhibition that happened last year, dazibao or big character posters are a form of political repertoire that has a much longer history. Some people trace it back to the early 20th century, and it is a way in which individuals or groups express a political opinion in a public space on large sheets of paper in handwriting. So it becomes a big virtual bulletin board that is supposed to be grassroots. And when we usually think about dazibao, we think of them as coming from the bottom up, but of course more research shows that they are cultivated from the top down. People write them in groups. People get instructions on how to write big character posters.

Denise Y. Ho: And one important link that I make in my research is this link between the exhibition and the big character poster, and that is that these exhibitions, we haven't talked that much about the way they're structured, but oftentimes they're denunciations of individuals where you would have a table with some artifacts laid out on the table and then behind it a large sheet of board that would describe an individual and what his or her crimes were. And what's really interesting about the visiting of these exhibitions is that people came to what I'm calling new exhibitions, these class education exhibitions, and were often required to go back and teach it to their working at their factory or their school, and so they would copy them down. And in the archival materials it describes how that practice of writing down exhibition texts then turned into a template for writing big character posters, so inspiring the Cultural Revolution that came afterwards. I think that's one example of how in Mao era political culture, different forms of propaganda echo each other.

James Evans: Not only echo, but sort of inspire emotion. And I think one of the really interesting points of your book is that you talk about this motive response that people were supposed to have at these exhibitions. You were supposed to shout at certain times, and it's a sort of interesting counterpoint to histories of the Republican Era where it was we're suppressing emotion and we're promoting rationality as a form of modernization, and this sort of seems to be an opposite of that. Emotion is at the forefront of curating and creating a modern China in revolutionary eyes.
Denise Y. Ho: Yes. I think that that is absolutely true that mobilizing the masses involves emotion. Elizabeth Perry has an article about mass work, but I think the important thing to remember is that this is not limited to the Mao period. Certainly the way in which people were inspired to think about revolution in the nationalist period often included very emotional displays, let's say, of revolutionary martyrs because the nationalists were revolutionaries, too.

James Evans: Rebecca Nedostup, for example, talks about replacing of superstitions or religion with the sort of pro state version of superstition, almost. You sort of switch your allegiance.

Denise Y. Ho: And you see that in the Mao period as well. One chapter we haven't had a chance to talk about describes the exhibitions for children, teaching them what is a superstition and what is science, and so students or children in this case were encouraged to replace so-called superstitious, we might call them religious beliefs. There's a fine line between superstition and religion, but replacing one set of ideas for another set of ideas, and here science takes on an extremely political cast.

James Evans: In the conclusion to your book, you use the example of a Song vase as exemplifying how the same objects can mean very different things at very stages of its life cycle, so everything from an example of imperial China to an example of work of the masses being appropriated by the leadership until eventually now it’s seen in a museum and sort of praised for its aesthetic values. When it comes to curating exhibitions about the Cultural Revolution now, how do these cultural revolutionary objects change in meaning from when they were originally displayed?

Denise Y. Ho: That's a fantastic question. We haven't had that much time to talk about the curating of antiquities, which I devote a chapter to when I describe the history of the Shanghai Museum. Certainly those art objects are on prominent display now, and in fact in the early years of the reform period, they served a kind of cultural diplomacy where China was organizing, and then of course they still do this art exhibits to go abroad. So there is a whole separate story of these antiquities.

Denise Y. Ho: To answer your question more directly, I think you're asking more about these everyday political campaign exhibitions, and in fact most of those are not known about. I piece that story together mostly through ephemera, archival documents. So you asked how the Cultural Revolution is portrayed today. It doesn't have a very strong presence in official Chinese state museums. It's often alighted. We see exhibition of the Cultural Revolution primarily in private museums, at the Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Center, for example, or at the Jianchuan Museum in Sichuan. It remains a controversial enough topic that can be dealt with in a much more oblique fashion or, as some would say, this is the collecting stage and the exhibition stage may happen later.
James Evans: Or indeed it's transformed into a sort of kitsch. And I know Professor Jie Li, for example, here at Harvard talks about red tourism and this idea of the Cultural Revolution as almost this strange combination of nostalgia but also as sort of fun for tourists or fun for people to sort of relive a weird commodified version of the Cultural Revolution.

Denise Y. Ho: The big question is what would a true or non-kitsch Cultural Revolution museum look like? I remember being in Anren township at the Jianchuan Museum cluster and talking to some students who were visiting. They were in a department of tourism and they had just seen the [foreign language 00:20:29] museum cluster, and they talked about their expectations for the museum. In particular, one young woman talked about her grandmother's experience and she felt that this was not enough to tell her grandmother's story. So the question is, what would that be?

James Evans: There's a lot of talk nowadays about difficulties or increasing difficulties in accessing archives or certain archival sources in China, especially for topics that are deemed more sensitive, and there's obviously a sort of shifting boundary and what counts as sensitive. Do you think you would be able to do the same archival research that you did for this book today?

Denise Y. Ho: Parts of it would still be doable. I've in the past gone back to check and see which files are still available and which are not, and most of them are still there, but not all of them are there, and I think that there are new rules around how much you can see and how much you can photocopy that make things more difficult unless you are on the ground for some time or you have strong local connections, so archival research is getting more difficult.

James Evans: And if you were talking to someone joining the field today, we have a lot of listeners, for example, who are early stage PhD students or who are thinking about going into academia. But you were talking earlier about how the field in general of modern Chinese history is moving maybe more towards the grassroots or more towards an understanding of how people experienced these times. What is a research project that you think would be an excellent step for a young budding scholar in the field?

Denise Y. Ho: I think I can answer this in a general and specific way. So the specific way is to describe a neighborhood that I visited in Shenzhen, Xiajing, which is north of the Bao'an Airport, and it's an old oyster village. When you walk around to that village, it really feels like a village with all of these different layers, including ancestral temples from the Qing all the way up until the 1970s, 1980s architecture. When I see all of those layers in a place, I really want to figure out its experience, so the specific answer to your question is I think someone should go and study that place.

Denise Y. Ho: The general answer to your question is for someone starting out in their PhD research, if you can find a place or a problem or a question that you just can't
figure out and you want to understand, in this case walking around the neighborhood and thinking what's the story of this place? And you think you can work on that for a few years, then I think you have a good formula.

James Evans: One thing that we like to do here at Fairbank Center is to do what we call the Fairbank Five, which is a quick fire round with general questions about China that try and give us more of an insight about why somebody started to study the country or got interested in the country. So our first question is what is your favorite Chinese food and why?

Denise Y. Ho: A lot of answers to this question. I grew up eating Cantonese food, but Cantonese inflected with some Shanghainese food. Then I lived in Hunan province, ate a lot of food in Hunan province, but I think more recently I have really enjoyed Sichuan cuisine, and so if I could find a village that sparked that imagination in Sichuan, I would be happy to write a book about that place. The final answer to your question is Sichuan food.

James Evans: Sure. No, I knew a lot of people who have twisted their research so as to spend more time in a place that they actually like hanging out in. Second question is your favorite place in China?

Denise Y. Ho: The Fairbank Five is a very hard series.

James Evans: It's the world's least quick quick-fire round.

Denise Y. Ho: I think that different places in China represent for me different times in my life. So Beijing for me is the place where I was a student. This is where I first started learning Chinese. Changsha is the place where I really began to learn about Chinese society and what it would feel like to be a member of Chinese society. And Shanghai for me is the place where I have an academic identity. So that's a similarly long-winded answer to your question. I can tell you a very specific favorite place, which was the Naval Academy in Changsha, and I used to love to take the bus, I believe it was the number two bus, all the way across the Shang river and end up at this academy and sit by a lake and read. That was one of my favorite places and I haven't been for many years.

James Evans: It sounds beautiful. Your favorite saying or phrase in Chinese?

Denise Y. Ho: I could answer this with many possibilities, but once my advisor in grad school said that I was a man with many "ban fa".

James Evans: That was brilliant. Was that Philip Kuhn? Rest in peace.

Denise Y. Ho: Okay. Maybe I should start that one over again. Fantastic. A man with many banfa.
Denise Y. Ho: Yes. So Philip Huhn said I was a man with many banfa, and apart from being a
man, I thought it was a good way to think about being creative, being a scholar,
and kind of being in the world to think of all the different ways he could do
something.

James Evans: A man with many methods.

Denise Y. Ho: Exactly.

James Evans: A recent book on China that you've read that you would recommend.

Denise Y. Ho: One book that I often assign but I haven't assigned recently is Chen Ruoxi's book
of short stories about the Cultural Revolution. It used to be called Chairman
Mao is a Rotten Egg and now it's been retitled The Execution of Mayor Yin and
Other Short Stories from the Chinese Cultural Revolution. And most recently I
read this book or I signed this book in June when I did a public program for New
Haven school teachers, and every time I read this book, I feel that I learned
something new. And the main takeaway, and I won't spoil it for people who are
listening, is that it really demonstrates the level of human complexity in Chinese
society, particularly in this experience in a way that as a book of short stories,
only literature can do and historians can only aspire to.

James Evans: A class that you took or taught on China that somehow changed your thinking
about the country.

Denise Y. Ho: I had the privilege of being in Hong Kong and teaching on contemporary China.
There was no anthropologist that semester or that year, and I was asked to step
in and teach a class about China today. It was a great deal of fun for me because
it allowed me to go out and read sociology and political science and
anthropology and made me think a lot more deeply about the contemporary
relevance of my work, so that's sort of an accident of my career that made me
think differently as a historian.

James Evans: Great. Well, Denise Ho, thank you so much for being with us today.

Denise Y. Ho: Thank you so much for having me.

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