



Sacred Heart University  
DigitalCommons@SHU

---

History Faculty Publications

History Department

---

2013

## A Study of Modern Mass Education Bureaus (Book Review)

Thomas D. Curran

*Sacred Heart University*, [currant@sacredheart.edu](mailto:currant@sacredheart.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/his\\_fac](http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/his_fac)

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International and Comparative Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Curran, Thomas D. "A Study of Modern Mass Education Bureaus" (Book Review). *Frontiers of Education in China* 8.3 (2013): 478–489.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact [ferribyp@sacredheart.edu](mailto:ferribyp@sacredheart.edu).

DOI 10.3868/s110-002-013-0029-5

近代民众教育馆. [*A study of modern mass education bureaus*]. Zhou, Huimei. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2012. 354pp., (paperback), 48¥, ISBN 978-7-303-13707-7.

Prof. Zhou's book is a general history of the Mass Education Movement that the Guomindang government conducted in the 1920s and 1930s. Topics covered include the movement's ideological objectives, its organizational characteristics, its activities, and its reception by and impact on local communities. The work is carefully balanced between exposition and analysis, and it is supported generously by evidence drawn from a wide range of primary sources. Those sources include government publications, local gazetteers, books, newspapers and general audience magazines, and the specialized publications of a variety of educational and mass education organizations.

Zhou sees her work as a challenge to modernization theories that assume that it is possible to draw clear lines of demarcation between traditional values, institutions and social structures and their modern replacements. Throughout the book, Zhou accepts for analytical purposes that such distinctions are valid, but she makes clear that the weight of her findings support the claim that elements of traditional Chinese society and culture that modernization theory suggests should have been replaced survived, and even thrived, in the new society as China's modern history unfolded. Rather, the book amply demonstrates that even if elements of Chinese tradition were not precisely compatible with the modern institutions and patterns of thinking that the reformers sought to create, they remained essential components of any modernization strategy that had a chance to succeed. No program of cultural transformation could work unless it accommodated itself to pre-existing institutions and customs, many of which continued to be quite serviceable to Chinese citizens for decades.

One of the government's goals in promoting mass education was to foster the dissemination of ideas that were consistent with elite values such as democracy, science and health, modern technology and nationalism, and Zhou demonstrates that at virtually every administrative level in a province the movement's leaders organized mass education bureaus that utilized multiple new channels to reach the people (e.g., radio broadcasts, public readings, movies, and publications). In many cases these institutions were effective, but there also existed an array of customary and traditional vehicles for transmitting ideas—temples, village and clan schools, charitable associations, tea houses, etc.—that the movement's leaders found indispensable. Often the mass education bureaus thrived, but to a substantial degree their fate was conditioned by their ability make good use of

these existing structures as well as the new media.

One of the realities with which the reformers had to deal was that local elites had the power to make or break the movement. The reformers found that success depended upon finding ways to induce elements of the rural population who might otherwise be inclined to oppose the initiative to accept it and cooperate with its programs, and in order to accomplish that the government had to work with local elites. Indeed, it was precisely by harnessing the energies of local leaders that the mass education bureaus found the resources and community support they needed to function.

In focusing on this aspect of the movement Prof. Zhou makes an important point: While the government's purpose was partly ideological, it also used mass education to penetrate rural China in order to assert its control over local power structures. Mass education was conceived by the state to be both a platform for the advancement elite values and an agency for state management. It was a lever by which the central government attempted to use its administrative power to pry its way into village society. Thus, from its inception the Mass Education Movement bore important political implications.

In this regard, Prof. Zhou raises an issue that has been an important topic of discussion among scholars for several decades: the relationship between the Chinese state and civil society. It has often been assumed that as the state grew in power its interaction with the elites who dominated local communities was necessarily antagonistic; the intrusion of the state into pre-existing constellations of power and interest was bound to generate tension. Zhou does not deny that this was often the case—resistance to modern schools, for example, was sometimes sparked by the increases in taxes that accompanied them. She also shows, however, that when the state was willing to compromise with local leaders those leaders were quite capable of finding in the expansion of state power opportunities for their own self-aggrandizement; local elites were able to gain control of the mass education bureaus and use them to serve their own purposes.

One phenomenon that Zhou might have explored more thoroughly was the extraordinarily complex way by which the expansion of these bureaus and other agencies of state power into local political systems could factor into internecine elite competition; reforms could lead to struggles for influence between contenders for local power. The institution-building that came with initiatives such as the Mass Education Movement and educational reform in general often meant in practice the appropriation of local resources such as private schools and temples in such a way as to disturb the balance of power within a community. One incident that was recorded by a professor at Zhongshan University in 1934 is illustrative. In this case, a clan school located in Huiyang County, Guangdong,

became a target for expropriation by a county magistrate whose purpose it was to convert the school into a modern district school. Not only did this mean that the clan that controlled the school would lose a valuable asset, but it also meant granting access to the school to children of a rival clan. In this case, both clans filed suit with the magistrate, and the situation eventually deteriorated to the point at which the magistrate and his militia were called in to investigate only to be repelled by rifle and artillery fire and to see two people killed and the school burned to the ground (Gu Mei, 1934, 2:27). As this example shows, change invoked by external forces could mean tampering with local institutions in such a way as to destabilize the balance between competitors for local influence. The results could be either to advance the cause of reform or to retard it; much would depend upon the decisions that community leaders would make, and those decisions were likely to be affected powerfully by considerations of self-interest. Perhaps it would be unfair to ask Professor Zhou to deal with such a complex topic in addition to carrying the burden she has already born, but it is not inappropriate to suggest that such may be a fruitful avenue for further research. In the meantime, suffice it to say that this work's contribution to the scholarship is already both significant and sufficient to advance materially our understanding of the intersection of state and local power systems in early 20th-century China. It is a solid piece of scholarship that both adds to the evidentiary foundation available for the study of educational reform and places its findings at the heart of a major sub-field within the domain of Nanking-era scholarship.

Thomas D. Curran  
Sacred Heart University  
E-mail: [currant@sacredheart.edu](mailto:currant@sacredheart.edu)

DOI 10.3868/s110-002-013-0030-9

*Education and Global Cultural Dialogue: A Tribute to Ruth Hayhoe.* Mundy, Karen, and Qiang Zha (Eds.). New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012. 301pp., ISBN 978-0-230-34010-7

As an interconnected work, the book holds together most cohesively by its subtitle, "A Tribute to Ruth Hayhoe." One does not need to know Dr. Ruth Hayhoe to appreciate the prevailing themes that thread this volume together. But, knowing Dr. Hayhoe's life's work does help because much as her life is about living values more than about a particular ideology.

While each of the individual chapters has internal consistency, a story to tell, a piece of reflection or logic that is worth reading, it is the overall sense of the