

BOOK REVIEWS

A School in Every Village: Educational reform in a Northeast China county, 1904–31, by Elizabeth R. VanderVen, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2012, 222 pp., £74.50 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-7748-2176-6

Elizabeth R. VanderVen brings an established academic reputation in the field of Chinese historical studies to this study. She is fluent in Mandarin Chinese and holds a PhD in Chinese history from UCLA. She has more than twenty years' experience in Chinese and East Asia issues, teaching a wide variety of related courses in several US universities (Reed College, University of Chicago, and Rutgers University). She is currently working in International Trade and Commerce at UCLA Extension. This book is featured in the *Contemporary Chinese Studies* series, published by University of British Columbia Press. It covers a range of perspectives on contemporary and historical China.

VanderVen examines the development of the modern school system in Haicheng County in north-east China between 1904 and 1931, a period which starts when the new school system was launched in the late-Qing period and ends when Japanese troops occupied the north-east region in 1931 in the Republic era. VanderVen argues that developments in the north-east during that period provide a successful example of educational reform, since they provided education to many more students (including girls and young women) than before. In *A School in Every Village*, VanderVen discusses three overlapping areas:

... the structure and organization of Haicheng's (mostly) primary schools, the relationship of the schools to local society, and the complex interaction between local educational reform and national-level debates as well as between provincial and centrally generated regulations. (3)

Drawing on previously untapped local official archival sources on education and social issues in Haicheng County, VanderVen puts forward several innovative and interesting arguments pertaining to the establishment of the modern school system in China between 1904 and 1931.

VanderVen discusses the abolition and reform of the old-style Chinese private schools (私塾, Sishu) in Haicheng County which began in 1907. Along with the creation of the new-style schools, the Sishu had been 'either systematically abolished or reformed to provide viable educational opportunities for students who did not have easy access to the new schools, particularly female students' (56). VanderVen argues that a 'two-tiered primary education system' (58) had been in place until the 1920s: one tier consisted of the new-style schools, the other tier consisted of the reformed Sishu. She argues that these reformed Sishu innovatively synthesized elements of 'traditional and modern, old and new, and Western and Chinese' (56).

VanderVen analyses the important role that the semi-official Educational Promotion Bureaus played in implementing educational reform at a local level. These bureaus were 'third-realm offices in which both state officials and gentry leaders participated' (77). Although the bureaus were not officially part of the county government (衙门, Yamen), they exhibited many characteristics of bureaucratized offices. In fact, the bureau officers were playing the role of 'effective liaisons between the county government and local society' (78).

Based on the analysis of the financial resources of the modern schools, VanderVen points out that 'it is clear that there were village communities, at least in Northeast China, that were

proactive about educational reform' (100), and that the rural communities actually played a crucial role in China's early-twentieth-century modernization. The majority of the modern schools' funding came from the local communities rather than the county. An interesting insight is how there were multiple resources at local community level: community property, offsetting tuition fees with community subsidies, individual donations of land and money, and rent.

VanderVen focuses upon the way that during this period there was a 'significant development in girls' education' (122), arguing that this development was not only owing to the establishment of girls' schools, but also the transformation of the objectives of education, which began to diverge from the aim of 'merely maintaining domestic harmony' so as to 'provide women with enough knowledge to assist husbands and children and thereby strengthen China in order to elevate the nation' (123).

VanderVen discusses the 'old ways' and 'new ways' in curriculum, teaching, environment, and administration in the modern schools of Haicheng County. The new-style schools and the reformed Sishu merged the old and new, traditional and modern, and Western and Chinese elements. Such issues have a strong contemporary resonance. She says that although it is hard to say that Haicheng County possessed a fully integrated schools system at that time, 'it is a fair assessment that it was on its way' (159).

VanderVen not only discusses the history of the late-Qing and early-Republic educational reforms, but also considers the long-term impacts of this reform on rural schools into the Communist *Minban* (民办, people-managed) period; a similarity between the new-style schools of the 1904–31 period and the *Minban* schools in the Communist-era was that the schools had a local base for their funding, rather than direct funding from the government. VanderVen's research offers us a historical perspective to understand the origin and development of the *Minban* schools in contemporary China.

As the result of the 1904 reform, a new schools system that contains modern elements in curriculum, teaching, environment, and administration has been established. At the same time, the state government started to substantially regulate the local schools, which had been 'informal and almost entirely unregulated by the state' (2). In fact, the 'modern educational elements' and the 'strong state regulation on education' originating from the 1904 reform are two key elements of the school system in contemporary China.

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