

Robert Culp, *Articulating Citizenship: Civic Education
and Student Politics in Southeastern China, 1912-1940.*

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Only a minority of Chinese children attended modern public schools during the republican period, and those who managed to graduate from middle schools and normal schools automatically formed a social and cultural elite. Many, though not all, came from elite families, at least elite enough to support a child through long years of economically non-productive schooling. Yet given the social changes underway by the early twentieth century, and given the new content and institutional setting of education, the school graduates did not so much represent the reproduction of an elite as the creation of a new group not only marked by a certain social cohesion based on shared experience but also marked by possession of cultural capital based on hitherto inaccessible modern knowledge. In this important monograph, Culp considers these social and intellectual issues in some detail but is even more interested in how politics was conceived, shaped, and practiced by educators and students.

Focusing on secondary schools in the lower Yangzi region such as those in Nanjing, Shanghai, and Yangzhou, and using a wide variety of sources—from textbooks and school regulations to memoirs and interviews—Culp argues that

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“lessons about national identity, political participation, and the social order...reinforced one another and promoted a coherent conception of republican citizenship, characterized by direct participation and practical action for the nation’s welfare” (p. 9). Culp examines what students were supposed to be learning and also school-based daily practices and body training such as student self-government organizations, reading clubs, outreach efforts like street dramas and literacy schools, and civic rituals like saluting the flag and bowing to the portrait of Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙. Culp concludes, “many lower Yangzi region students sought to associate themselves with the ideal of the active citizen, which was produced through the articulation of discourses of political participation, social order, and national membership, as a way to claim social privilege and political agency” (p. 11). Educators sometimes promoted student civic action or, especially under the Nationalists in the 1930s, urged students to stay in the classroom; regardless, students could draw strategically on an array of theoretically sanctioned activities for their own purposes. Female students in particular received double messages about their inside and outside roles, but, in Culp’s view, were given means to prepare themselves for “independent personhood” through civic action for sake of nation.

Ultimately, Culp is making an argument about modern Chinese views of political identity and the public sphere. In this view, Chinese citizenship was less about liberal rights-based democracy familiar to the contemporary West and more about civic republicanism: participation, not representation. I find this argument largely convincing. A vision of active republican citizenship clearly informed the views of such creators of the new Republic’s educational system as Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培. Culp further suggests that we see a version of this vision right through the Maoist years. “When viewed in longer historical context, Mao-era civic action in the PRC can be seen as the culmination of early twentieth-century Chinese elites’ efforts to

construct citizens who would be publicly engaged” (p. 288). Culp specifically argues that in the 1920s, then, Communists and Nationalists competed for student support through political programs designed to encourage and harness political action as intrinsically proper, not merely a tactical response to specific conditions. However, as Culp also shows, the 1928-1930 period saw a major change as the Nationalists brought education (and political activities generally) under much stricter controls. To me, this suggests that Culp’s emphasis on civic republicanism has to be qualified: as “participation” becomes ritualized and routinized, the significance of political activity is demeaned and increasingly divorced from anything that can truly be called republican. True, the activist republican *ideal* continued to inform Nationalist ideology (as well as anti-Nationalist resistance), but the scope of participation was in fact increasingly restricted under first the Nationalists and then the Communists. The “masses” in Maoism are not the ideal of the active citizen of republican ideology. As well, I would argue that “liberal democracy” and “civic republicanism” share the concept of rights-duties, for all their differences. Culp does note the possibility of diminishing returns to ritualization (including ritualization of protests), but seems to blur symbolic citizenship and meaningful political participation (pp. 219-220). Nonetheless, Culp’s emphasis on the concept of participation in the educational sphere and Chinese political culture more broadly has the distinct advantages of reminding Western observers both that not all political behavior can be reduced to nationalism (even if nationalism shapes it) and that the Chinese were and are forging new political forms with their own claims to justice and legitimacy, not merely imitating Western forms.

Culp shows that students were taught that China was a unified, sovereign territory that was under attack and needing the support of all its citizens; citizens were the interdependent cells of a functionally integrated organic society. History,

geography, and civics textbooks thus treated citizens as “horizontally connected,” more or less culturally homogenous, and certainly members of a cohesive territorial unit. Indeed, in Culp’s view, even more than race, territory provided “rhetorically the most powerful and conceptually the most stable of national visions for twentieth-century China” (p. 92). Civics textbooks changed more: from a Confucian-based view of the state as the family—marked by distinct role hierarchies and duties—writ large, to the more liberal egalitarianism of the 1920s, and on to the statism, participation, and Confucian revivalism of the Nationalists.

Still as Culp shows, students enthusiastically organized themselves with and without official approbation. Student self-government emphasized self-control, sacrifice, group discipline, and participation. Whether they were citizens-in-training or citizens, students claimed a voice in running their lives and their schools, and in local and national affairs as well. Culp cites the support for students on the part of liberal educators; he also notes the roots of participatory citizenship “in evolving patterns of local-elite management that themselves grew out of a long statecraft tradition of Confucian discourse” (p. 278). One might also ask if student self-government owed anything to late imperial associational practices such as *huiguan* (會館).

Citizenship was not (merely) an ideology but a matter of performance and training the body. The scouting movement makes an interesting case study of how class and gender were simultaneously transgressed and reinforced. Boys were taught sewing and girls military drill; yet, in the end, boys were to be soldiers and girls nurses. Lessons on etiquette and hygiene contributed to class distinctions even while citizenship was supposed to transcend such distinctions. Public ceremonies made students highly visible participants in the national political culture, whether in more or less spontaneous protests or in government-sponsored civic rituals such as National

Day celebrations. Culp shows how particular strands of civic republicanism fed into the state-building and mass mobilization efforts of Chinese political elites after the 1920s: especially the ideal of selfless contribution to the common good. Students claimed to be the “core elements” (中間分子) of Chinese society, and Culp also brings out the tensions between the condescension and egalitarianism of the students. At the same time, I wish he had explored a little further whether civic republicanism necessarily entailed this tension, which, if so, might help explain its degeneration under the Nationalist and Communist periods.

Students were but one of many groups claiming citizenship, as Culp points out, along with professionals, small business owners, workers, and others; this valuable monograph enriches our understanding of the political culture of the Republic by demonstrating the central role played by students in daily political life, not only in periods of protest, which were in fact just the tips of the iceberg of student politicization. Unfortunately, the monograph lacks a glossary and characters are not provided for the bibliography, but it does benefit from nice illustrations from original texts and a useful bibliographical essay that shows the way for further research on this important topic.