This is an important book in that it provides fresh empirical grounding to longstanding debates about the nature of early twentieth century state expansion and state-society relations in China. Elizabeth R. VanderVen demonstrates that taking up again research on the daily management of local schools, which was blooming in the 1980s and 1990s, can provide us with new insights. Although centered on educational reforms, this study allows for conclusions that go beyond village schools, or schools, or villages.

VanderVen’s highly condensed book covers the operation (including teaching, funding, and administration) of rural schools in Haiding county in North-East China from the Qing introduction of a state-led system of education in 1904 to the Japanese occupation of the area in 1931. She argues convincingly that village communities did not necessarily either fall prey to or resist state building efforts. Based on one of the rare surviving county-level archives, VanderVen instead demonstrates that the new school system (or the sprouts thereof) worked, and worked pretty much along the lines its very late Qing architects had envisioned. Given the mostly negative judgement rendered by previous scholarship, this in itself is noteworthy.

Organized into six short, focused and well written chapters, „A School in Every Village“ demonstrates that Haiding’s rural schools largely adhered to central and provincial educational laws. Local elites cooperated and negotiated with officialdom on educational matters, and efficient improvisation prevailed in those fields left unregulated by the state. While the first chapter provides the regional setting of remote Fengtian province, chapter two takes us to the traditional private school (sishu) and its modern fate. In many ways, the sishu with its curriculum largely consisting of Confucian classics, no fixed schedule, and flexible times of operation depending on agricultural seasons, embodied (or was made to embody) the opposite of everything the new-style schools (xuetang) stood for. Yet sishu were not simply abolished but reformed in order to bridge the gap between shared state and elite visions of modernity and the realities on the ground: teachers, money, and labor-free time were all in short supply, and instruction in natural sciences or mathematics yielded little practical use. While central, provincial and local governments all made it abundantly clear that the xuetang was the new and superior norm, the reformed sishu with its flexibility and low costs continued to be preferred by many villagers, and the state allowed them to continue. This pragmatic and adaptive approach set the tone not only for the rest of the period studied here, but, as VanderVen notes (p. 168), even carried over into the People’s Republic and its locally funded minban schools.

The third chapter turns to the local institution set up by the Qing government to implement educational reforms, the Educational Promotion Bureaus (quanxuesuo). By describing the work of the Haiding county bureau in vivid detail, VanderVen makes a larger point. Governed by state legislation but staffed with local gentry, the bureaus represented what Philip Huang has described as „centralized minimalism“ served by the „stateification“ of the gentry after decades of increasing local autonomy following the mid-nineteenth century Taiping rebellion. Yet again, VanderVen points to the room for maneuver the members of the bureaus possessed, making it clear that „stateification“ in practice did not amount to total control from above but rather became an exercise in cooperation and negotiation. Neither, however, were the „New Policies“ simply a continuation of growing gentry power.

Following the 1909 introduction of local self-government, official control over the bureaus increased. While VanderVen sees this as „paradoxical“ (p. 64), it can be viewed as a logical step by the central government to draw a clearer line between itself and the novel con-

---

1 Philip Huang, Centralized minimalism. Semiformal governance by quasi officials and dispute resolution in China, in: Modern China 34 (2008), pp. 9–35.

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.
cept of society. „Stateification“ required the government to decide anew which tasks were of paramount importance and should thus be under official control, and which could be left to locals and consequently be managed through self-government. Schools fell into the first category. Here, her material would have allowed VanderVen to take a closer look at the role educational reforms played for the evolution of the state/society dichotomy in modern China, a dichotomy she herself aims to challenge.

Chapter four turns to the largely unregulated school income already mentioned. Schools were financed from multiple local sources and competition was high. Unlike past scholarship, however, VanderVen does not simply denounce this as financial „chaos“ (although this, in fact, was how even some contemporar-ies perceived of the situation) but rather praises the creativity with which mostly poor villagers were able to meet goals set by the state. The local population did so, VanderVen argues, because it by and large shared these goals. Locals also called upon the state to solve disputes over the use of resources for schools and generally asked for advice from officials.

Although never made mandatory, school education for girls, the topic of the fifth chapter, was spreading in Haicheng, particularly after 1911. Always lagging far behind the number of schools for boys, girls’ schools were nevertheless promoted by local elites following the conservative yet modern call for educated women as good mothers of the nation. This, VanderVen argues, was part of an effort to shake off Fengtian province’s image as a cultural backwater.

Chapter six looks at how „Old and New“ merged in daily life at the schools, from the curriculum to attendance, and how tradition versus modernity was not the overarching dichotomy for local contemporaries. Here, as in other parts of the book, inspection reports from the Educational Promotion Bureau enable VanderVen to draw a highly nuanced picture that does away with generalizations either condemning the new schools as too new, or as not new enough. The schools in fact were both old and new, which made them attractive so that by the mid-1920s, Haicheng was on its way towards a „fully integrated school system“ (p. 159). Local enthusiasm for education thus also helped to bring village society under state supervision.

If one compares VanderVen’s conclusions to Stig Thøgersen’s findings from Shandong, it becomes evident that results can be a matter of emphasis and perspective. Where Thøgersen mostly looks „from below“ and thus portrays the new schools – unlike the sishu – as unable to meet the basic needs of early twentieth-century Chinese peasants, VanderVen’s perspective is that of the county government and the Educational Promotion Bureau which leads her to emphasize villagers’ cooperation and the „stateification“ of the gentry. Yet at the same time she does not neglect the lasting importance of the (reformed) sishu.

Among the studies on late Qing and Republican rural education, VanderVen’s book presents one of the most balanced and best documented accounts. „A School in Every Village“ will become a yardstick for future work on the subject.


---


3Stig Thøgersen, A county of culture. Twentieth-century China seen from the village schools of Zouping, Shandong, Ann Arbor 2002.