Review
Reviewed Work(s): The Rural Modern: Reconstructing the Self and State in Republican China by Kate Merkel-Hess
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The Rural Modern: Reconstructing the Self and State in Republican China, by Kate Merkel-Hess. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 264 pp. US$40.00 (Cloth). ISBN: 9780226383309.

In her fascinating examination of the Rural Reconstruction Movement in China in the 1920s and 1930s, Merkel-Hess shows us a vision of national modernization in which rural residents, through education, literacy, and self-improvement, would be able to achieve modernity and become citizens on an individual level. In her recounting of this unrealized "alternative, rural vision of a Chinese modernity," Merkel-Hess seeks to show how these reconstruction efforts "established an important precedent" by setting "the terms of the debate": that is, China could be both "modern and rural" (p. 14). In so doing, she makes a significant contribution to the broader literature on modernization and development, showing us that today's exemplars of Chinese modernity — huge dams, high-speed rail, urban industrialization — represent but one of several paths that might have been taken. Merkel-Hess's story is primarily an intellectual history, focusing on the assumptions and perceptions of elite reformers. This is in part a function of the surviving archival material: few sources directly document the thoughts and feelings of rural people themselves.

At their height in in the years between 1933 and 1937, Merkel-Hess's rural reconstructionists were "a loosely organized group" of people, "ranging from county magistrates to central government officials to university professors to foreign missionaries" (p. 6) connected by "a few key government committees, scholarly networks, and independent conferences" (p. 7). While the Communists loom large as the foremost proponents of rural change, Merkel-Hess reminds us that the Communists were "neither the first nor the only group of urban intellectuals to look to the villages as the foundation of a new nation" (p. 2). The prefix "re-" in the term "reconstruction" (as opposed to the Chinese term *jianshe*, or "construction") reveals the awkward match between the local terminology of Chinese rural reform and a global discourse of modernization, a discourse that Chinese reformers were very much a part of. Merkel-Hess persuasively demonstrates the contingency of today's world, in which cities (and not the countryside) are the primary site of a globalized, capitalist modernity.

As interlocutors in a global discourse of development and modernization, many of the reformers, such as Mass Education Movement (MEM) leader James "Jimmy" Yen (晏陽初), were educated abroad. In Chapter 1,

Merkel-Hess tells of the establishment of the MEM as an exemplar of how rural reformers believed that education — literacy, in particular — could transform rural people and teach them modern ways of behaving. Basing her story on rural reform publications, among them pamphlets and textbooks for "new literates" (p. 27), she describes the reformers' emphasis on literacy as the cornerstone of modern selfhood and as a basis of national citizenship. While the MEM began in Beijing (then, Beiping 北平) in the 1920s as a part of an urban literacy drive, the low literacy rates in the countryside were a great cause for concern and thus impelled the shift of the organization to Dingxian (定縣), 120 miles southwest of Beiping. In its didactic and popular publications, the MEM sought to educate its rural audience about "agricultural methods, home sanitation, health, and women's issues" (p. 43) and about the place of rural residents as citizens of a new Chinese nation. To fund these efforts, the MEM (in spite, one imagines, of the Christian injunction otherwise) found itself serving two masters, or at least performing for two audiences. In addition to addressing the needs of his rural subjects, Yen sought funding from such foreign sources as Henry Ford and Christian missionaries.

In Chapter 2, Merkel-Hess discusses two other sites of reform: Xiaozhuang (曉莊, near Nanjing) and Xugongqiao (徐公橋, halfway between Shanghai and Suzhou) to explain how reformers sought to bring about the self-transformation they thought necessary for modernity to take root in rural China. The Xiaozhuang School was founded in 1927 by Tao Xingzhi (陶行知), who had been born into poverty in Anhui and educated in missionary schools in China and at Columbia Teachers College. Until its shutdown in 1930 by the Chinese Nationalist Party (or Kuomintang, KMT) for apparently ideological reasons, the school sought to instill "practical knowledge" (p. 65) into its rural students, by which was meant not technical expertise but rather discipline and self-improvement instilled through a reflexive self-examination. To achieve this goal, Tao sought to have his urban teachers "commonerize" themselves, adopting local customs and dress in order to better understand their reform subjects' needs. In contrast, the project in the small village of Xugongqiao, started in 1926 and run by the Chinese Vocational Education Society, was "soundly oriented towards vocational education" (p. 74), "making education available to rural youth" (p. 75), and disseminating "specific, expert knowledge" (p. 76) — a vision of modernity as specific, learnable skill sets. Though the project at Xugongqiao lasted far longer (into

the 1940s), Xiaozhuang was by far the more famous one at the time, given that, like its counterpart in Dingxian, it had a charismatic leader and claimed to be a model that could be replicated nationwide. Merkel-Hess shows us that, despite their differences, these two projects demonstrated the rural reformers' belief in modernization through self-transformation rather than, as the Communists argued, systemic change. Failures to modernize, they believed, were rooted in individual weaknesses — laziness or ignorance.

In addition to education, reformers sought to influence individual behavior in rural areas through other methods of persuasion to better "organize" village life. Merkel-Hess focuses on two of these reformist interventions in Chapter 3: village opera and agricultural and economic cooperatives, comparing them with one case of a government-directed top-down rural development effort in Suiyuan Province (綏遠省, now part of today's Inner Mongolia). Most notable for Merkel-Hess is the development of the organizational chart — a two-dimensional representation of how reconstruction was to take place in many cities and villages that sited the individual within a hierarchical organizational context. These charts reflected the influence of Taylorism and scientific management, as well as a concern for efficiency, a critical reform necessary to strengthening the nation. In addition, village organization and organizational charts served to make village networks more "legible to the state" (p. 81). The village organization efforts reveal the "underlying autocratic tendencies" (p. 82) in the discourse of rural reform. Reformers also sought to rewrite the local opera tradition, which they saw as often "wasteful" and "cacophonous" (p. 96), by incorporating such themes as "kindness" and "bravery" (p. 90), "unity, cooperation, and progress" (p. 93), in addition to "public health" and "agricultural demonstrations" (p. 92).

The relatively short remainder of the chapter is devoted to cooperatives and the rise of state-led, top-down development. Cooperatives for credit, marketing, purchasing, selling, and adult education arose during the ecological disaster years in North China of the late 1920s and the Depression in the 1930s, allowing rural people more economic opportunities and the extension of "community allegiances beyond the family" (p. 102). Merkel-Hess then compares the envisioning of village organization, the rewriting of village operas, the rise of rural cooperatives, to the Suiyuan New Agricultural Experiment, begun in 1929 by the provincial governor Fu Zuoyi 傅作義, which was more like a frontier military garrison than any of the more liberal rural reconstruction efforts from

which it drew inspiration. Overall, the chapter shows, in its (albeit lopsided) contrasting of persuasive and autocratic developmental initiatives, that "the notion of rural reconstruction" itself "was one that depended on the directed and controlled remaking of rural people" (p. 108).

This authoritarian and paternalistic impulse would ultimately prove to be the undoing of rural reconstruction in China. Merkel-Hess charts the beginning of this decline in Chapter 4 by telling how rural reconstructionists began cautiously in the early 1930s to collaborate with the KMT government in Nanjing. There were three reasons, she tells us, that this occurred. First, the reformers felt an "intellectual closeness" (p.122) to the KMT government and perceived their goals to be shared. Second, the reformers felt themselves unequal to the basic task of maintaining the physical security of their rural subjects, and so turned to collaboration with the KMT to organize local militias — a task that ultimately was undermined by the Japanese invasion: the peasantry's resentment at their mobilization against the Japanese caused them violently to turn on the reformers. Third and finally, reformers thought the KMT's outreach to their efforts was an implicit admission of the government's failure in its prior top-down approach to rural development; this was an erroneous reading of the KMT, which in fact was simply co-opting the rhetoric and ideas of rural reconstruction for its own state-building ends. The collaboration between the KMT and rural reconstructionists ultimately hindered the reformers' efforts by undercutting their claims to independence and by undermining their hope for bottom-up reform through persuasion. Sometimes, the KMT put reformers in charge of county governance, and as a result they gained coercive powers that could be used to force reform. Ultimately, the collaboration ended in disappointment for both reformers and the KMT.

Chapter 5 chronicles the decline and end of rural reconstruction in China amid the global shift to a more universal and generalizable model of development that depended on the creation of development experts — a model that lasted into the 1950s and 1960s. The influence and priorities of the KMT government and foreign funders like the Rockefeller Foundation led to the shift in focus away from self-transformation to the training of a cadre of "rural researchers and bureaucrats" (p. 158). The Japanese invasion of China effectively ended the efforts of most rural reconstructionists in northern China, as the KMT successively shifted its capitals into the interior of the country, although Merkel-Hess shows the

remarkable resiliency of Jimmy Yen's MEM as it shifted its base of operations from Dingxian to Changsha and then to Chengdu and Chongqing. (Later, after the Communist victory in 1949, the MEM would further shift to New York and then Manila.) Amid the crisis of invasion, the KMT government and foreign funders had no patience for the slow process of self-transformation that earlier rural reconstructionists had sought; instead, they pursued a more top-down, expert-led, "generalizable global model" (p. 164) of development.

One wishes, over the course of such a rich and detailed story, that Merkel-Hess had been a bit more specific about what she meant by "rural" China — a place in which "more than 85 percent" (p. 34) of Chinese people lived. One also wishes she had been clearer about the rural problems that reformers thought needed addressing. She alludes obliquely in Chapter 3 to problems like "disorder" in the "floundering" villages (p. 80), as well as "chaotic" (p. 84) and "disintegrating" (p. 86) village society. These echo references in Chapter 2 to problems with debt, gambling, drunkenness, prostitution, and opium use, but the narrative does not make clear to what extent rural life might actually have been afflicted by these social ills. Nonetheless, Merkel-Hess's excellent new book successfully helps shift the scholarly focus of modernization and development away from the state-led versions promoted in postwar American foreign policy and under Chinese Communist rule.

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