Irrespective of ideology, all modern Chinese governments, Robert Culp tells us, sought to transform people long accustomed to thinking of themselves as imperial subjects into modern, active citizens. As he states, China’s continuous twentieth-century revolution “pivoted on creating modern citizens as publicly active people (gongmin) who were committed to serving that nation” (p. 279). In putting forward his insightful argument, Culp brings creativity, theoretical sophistication, and mastery of a wide-ranging secondary literature to the complex and rich subject of citizenship formation in modern China.

Culp treats citizenship as a complex, multifaceted discourse focused on motivating people to act for broad community interests rather than out of a narrow concern for the well-being of family or lineage. The origins of that discourse lay in the political and intellectual crises of the nineteenth century and the realization that the populations of nations threatening China related to their governments and societies in ways very different from those of the Chinese. To save China, social elites and political leaders recognized the need to mobilize ordinary people into service to the greater political and social whole, and thereafter the perceived imperative to cultivate a nation of active citizens never slackened. Thus, in China the creation of citizens was a decidedly top-down project. At the same time, Culp argues, the various regimes were never able to maintain perfect control over the process. Citizen participation in public life required the empowerment of ordinary people, even if it did not require the state to embrace formal democratization. For the majority of regimes behind the project, then, the central problem was how to empower ordinary people so as to generate new energy for the construction of the nation while at the same time harnessing that energy, and steering it, such that the power holders’ vision reigned supreme and their position at the top was not challenged.

Culp makes a valuable contribution in observing that the (imperfect) resolution of that problem was found in the widespread embrace (sometimes consciously, sometimes not) of civic republicanism: “a vision of participatory government” that “stressed active and direct involvement by all citizens in community affairs,” while at the same time asserting the critical need for “moral regulation and active self-discipline, rather than individual freedom and the expression of self-interest” (p. 104). Here, Culp goes against the mainstream of Western Sinological literature, which, he correctly points out, has “centered on the extent to which Chinese intellectuals and social elites theorized and practiced forms of democratic politics associated with Anglo-American liberalism” (p. 104). By identifying the Rousseauian democratic tradition, rather than the Lockean, as the foundational idea undergirding China’s effort to create a nation of modern citizens, Culp helps explain how a succession of Chinese governments spoke the language of democracy while consistently limiting civil liberties.
Culp’s primary research focuses on Republican-era civic education, which he considers to have been the key site where civic republican ideas of citizenship were articulated, inculcated, and performed. As he shows, a diverse range of social elites presented normative ideas about citizenship through school curricula and other organizational schemes, such as school ceremonies and Boy Scouting, and students were energetic social and political actors who self-consciously experimented with different forms of citizenship. Culp contends that all of this was most developed in Zhejiang and Jiangsu, and he draws the bulk of his material from “roughly two-dozen Chinese-run middle schools (zhong xuexiao) in the lower Yangzi region” (p. 20). Basing large claims about the discourse of modern Chinese citizenship on this limited material may raise some eyebrows, but Culp has good company in arguing that developments in the greater Shanghai region had a profound shaping effect on Chinese public life as a whole, and that the Republican era—to whose different phases Culp is highly attentive—produced an enduring intellectual legacy that affected Maoist discourse and policy and has obviously remained relevant in the post-Mao era as well.

Aside from the broad and important contributions discussed here, the most fascinating material in Articulating Citizenship is Culp’s analysis of Republican-era textbooks. His treatment of citizenship enactment through practice is interesting, especially insofar as he is able to demonstrate that students could not be easily disciplined into adhering to singular interpretations of correct citizen behavior, but Culp truly shines as an intellectual historian. His subtle reading of textbooks and his discovery therein of a rich discourse on the historically and geographically imagined “geo-body,” which “served as the basis of rallying cries for action by citizens to realize the nation” (p. 95), is persuasive and thought provoking.

For this reader, the most compelling question raised by this engaging book resides in Culp’s claim that the early twentieth-century discourse “promoted a coherent conception of republican citizenship” (p. 9), on the one hand, and the plentiful evidence that he produces of contestation over the meaning of citizenship then and ever since, on the other. Culp identifies a very real tension here; paying due attention to it should enrich the way we think about citizenship and the closely related (and timely) subject of Chinese nationalism as we go forward.

TIMOTHY WESTON

University of Colorado at Boulder


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This collection of essays by nonlawyers sets a great benchmark for Chinese law studies. Contemporary Chinese law studies, especially those conducted by