

ARTICLE

THE POLITICS OF VOICE: LECTURE HALLS AND GRASSROOTS SOCIAL IDEOLOGICAL CONTROL IN THE LATE QING DYNASTY

1. *Introduction*

At present, nothing has a greater impact on enlightening the people and transforming social customs than public lecturing. Lecturing serves to elucidate principles to the masses; what the listeners hear enters their ears and engraves itself upon their minds, never to be forgotten. As time passes, it can transform people's thoughts and views.

———*Ta Kung Pao*, 16 August 1905, p.5.

Since antiquity, Chinese culture has emphasised the notion of “sounds penetrating the ear and resonating with the heart” (*Shengru Xintong*), underscoring the transformative power of sound upon the mind. As an important means of grassroots ideological control, *Xuanjiao* (the practice of public lecturing and moral instruction) played an indispensable role in political socialisation, knowledge reproduction, and value integration, particularly in ideological indoctrination and the maintenance of social stability. Studies have shown that the long-term stability of the Qing rule was closely linked to the lecturing on the *Sacred Edict* (*Shengyu*).¹ Owing to the rigidification of its content and increasingly heavy-handed moral exhortation, however, this practice had largely lost its efficacy by the late Qing and degenerated into formalism.² After the

¹ DAVID JOHNSON, ANDREW J. NATHAN, EVELYN S. RAWSKI (eds.). *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, p. 357; WANG ERMIN. “Qingting shengyu guangxun zhi banxing ji minjian xuanjiang shiyi,” [The issuance and folk lecturing on the Sacred Edict in the Qing Dynasty] *Journal of Modern History Research Institute*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Taipei), 1993, pp. 255–276.

² In the *Veritable Records of Emperor Dezong* (*Dezong Shilu*), volumes 25, 46, 396 and 458, memorials submitted by officials all reveal that the lecturing on the *Sacred Edict* had

mid-nineteenth century, the profound social transformation triggered by the impact of Western civilisation posed a severe challenge to the official ideology of the Qing court, creating an urgent need for a new form of ideological advocacy suited to the changing times. In response, the court established a grassroots system of ideological control centered on *Xuanjiangsuo* (Lecture Halls). These officially initiated institutions sought to enlighten the public, disseminate current affairs, impart knowledge, and inculcate official ideology; they also constituted a vital instrument through which the Qing state attempted to mobilise popular forces for grassroots governance.

Existing scholarship on grassroots ideological control in the Qing has focused overwhelmingly on the lecturing on the *Sacred Edict*.³ Only a small number of scholars have addressed the late Qing Lecture Halls.⁴ Although

become a dead letter (ZHOU ZHENHE. *Shengyu guangxun: jijie yu yanjiu*. [The Sacred Edict Expounded: Annotations and Studies] Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, 2006, pp. 529–530). In 1832, Western missionaries also pointed out that “At present the public reading of the sacred edict is kept up in the provincial cities, but is neglected in the country towns, or Heen districts. The people rarely attend this political preaching of the mandarins.” (*The Chinese Repository*, 1 December 1832, pp. 297–300). W. A. P. MARTIN similarly noted that “Originally semi-monthly, the observance is now moribund, so that lectures are seldom given, and they have ceased to attract attention.” (W. A. P. MARTIN. *A Cycle of Cathay: Or, China, South and North, with Personal Reminiscences*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1896, p. 290). KUNG CHUAN HSIAO and VICTOR H. MAIR have argued that the system had largely begun to collapse by around 1850 (Kung Chuan Hsiao. *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960, pp. 244–254; DAVID JOHNSON, ANDREW J. NATHAN, EVELYN S. RAWSKI (eds.). *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 353–354, 357).

³ KUNG CHUAN HSIAO. *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960, pp. 184–254; DAI BAOCUN. “Shengyu jiaotiao yu Qingdai shehui,” [The Sacred Edict and Qing Society] *Historical Journal of National Taiwan Normal University*, no. 13 (Taipei), 1985, pp. 303–324; Victor H. MAIR. “Language and Ideology in the Written Popularization of the Sacred Edict,” in David JOHNSON, ANDREW J. NATHAN, EVELYN S. RAWSKI (eds.). *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 325–359; WANG ERMIN. “Qingting shengyu guangxun zhi banxing ji minjian xuanjiang shiyi,” *Journal of Modern History Research Institute*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Taipei), 1993, pp. 255–276; ZHOU ZHENHE. *Shengyu guangxun: jijie yu yanjiu*. Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, 2006.

⁴ LI XIAOTI. *Qingmo de xiaceng qimeng yundong (1901–1911)*, [The Lower Enlightenment Movement in the Late Qing Dynasty (1901–1911)] Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia

these halls inherited certain elements from the earlier *Sacred Edict* lectures, they differed fundamentally in content, methods, and personnel. As such, Lecture Halls displayed the distinctive blending of old and new characteristic of the “transitional era”, offering a valuable window into the transformation of popular culture during China’s modern transition. The work of David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski on popular culture in late imperial China,⁵ together with research on early modern European popular culture by Peter Burke,⁶ Alberto Manguel,⁷ Roger Chartier,⁸ have likewise been an important point of reference. Their discussions of public reading aloud among ordinary people are particularly suggestive for the present study. Drawing on a rich body of historical materials, including newspapers and local chronicles, this article offers a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the operational forms of the Lecture Halls and of the social agendas they embodied within the political and social context of the late Qing. This study clarifies the fundamental features of grassroots ideological control during the late Qing transformation and provides a fresh perspective on grassroots governance in modern China.

Sinica, 1998, pp. 70–84; CHENG LIHONG. *Qingmo xuanjiang yu yanshuo yanjiu*, [Research on Preaching and Public Speaking of Qing Dynasty] Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China), 2021, pp. 61–110.

⁵See their detailed examination of folk documents, local drama, Chinese sectarian traditions, the popularisation of the *Sacred Edict*, vernacular literature, and mass culture in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, especially the discussion of how oral communication shaped popular culture. DAVID JOHNSON, ANDREW J. NATHAN, and EVELYN S. RAWSKI (eds.). *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

⁶In Chapter Four of Part Two, Peter Burke explores the transmission of popular culture, noting that storytellers frequently narrated tales for women while they worked or spun yarn. PETER BURKE. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, rev. ed., Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994, pp. 133–162.

⁷Manguel examines the locations, methods, and audiences of public reading of books and newspapers in early modern Europe, with a particular attention to public reading for illiterate factory workers. ALBERTO MANGUEL. *A History of Reading*. London: Penguin Books, 1997, pp. 109–123.

⁸From the Renaissance, the practice of reading books aloud to ordinary people emerged across much of Europe. ROGER CHARTIER. *A History of Private Life, Vol. 3: Passions of the Renaissance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 147–157.

2. *The Establishment of Lecture Halls and the Formation of the Grassroots Lecturing Network in the Late Qing*

In 1904, with the support of Yuan Shikai,⁹ Yan Xiu (1860–1929), an official in the Education Department of Zhili¹⁰ (*Zhili Xuewuchu*), launched a series of educational reforms. In 1905, Yan Xiu ordered the establishment of *Quanxuesuo* (Education Promotion Bureau)¹¹ in all Zhili counties and issued the *Regulations of the Education Promotion Bureau under the Zhili Education Department* (*Zhili Xuewuchu Quanxuesuo Zhangcheng*). Article 7, “Promoting Educational Undertakings,” stipulated the “establishment of Lecture Halls.”¹² In December 1905, the Qing court founded the Ministry of Education (*Xuebu*), and Yan Xiu took office there. On 15 May 1906 the Ministry promulgated the *Imperially Approved Regulations of the Education Promotion Bureau* (*Zouding Quanxuesuo Zhangcheng*); Item 6, “Promoting Educational Undertakings,” again required the “establishing Lecture Halls,” and Item 7 specified that “Lecture Halls shall be set up in all localities without exception.”¹³ In August of the same year, the Ministry issued the *Imperially Approved Regulations of Education Associations* (*Zouding Jiaoyuhui Zhangcheng*), and Article 11 of which likewise stipulated that “Lecture Halls shall be established at appropriate locations.”¹⁴ On the basis of these three sets of regulations, Lecture Halls were extensively promoted across the country under the impetus of state authority.

2.1 *Lecture Halls Embedded in Grassroots Society*

Lecture Halls were institutionally embedded in grassroots society through local educational institutions and bodies of local self-governing. Late Qing

⁹ YUAN SHIKAI (1859–1916), Viceroy of Zhili from 1901 to 1907, was one of the most important figures advancing China’s modernisation reforms in the late Qing.

¹⁰ Zhili was a provincial administrative unit during the Qing, since renamed Hebei.

¹¹ To carry out educational reforms in the late Qing, the Qing court established Education Promotion Bureaus in all localities as administrative organs for local education; these later evolved into County Bureau of Education.

¹² “Zhili xuewuchu niding geshu quanxuesuo zhangcheng,” [Regulations of the Education Promotion Bureau under the Zhili Education Department] *Jin Newspaper*, 26 November 1905, p. 4.

¹³ “Xuebu zouding quanxuesuo zhangcheng,” [Imperially Approved Regulations of Education Promotion Bureau] *Shibao* (*Eastern Times*), 3 June 1906, p. 2.

¹⁴ “Xuebu zouding jiaoyuhui zhangcheng,” [Imperially Approved Regulations of Education Associations] *Jin Newspaper*, 17 August 1906, p. 3.

contemporaries regarded the halls as the foundation for the popularisation of education: "Lecturing was the key to reforming social mores and the foundation of social education."¹⁵ An educational official in *Hubei* argued that lecturing laid the groundwork for universal education.¹⁶ *Lu Erkui* (1862–1935) of the Central Education Association maintained that the popularisation of education depended on the prior implementation of lecturing, and that Lecture Halls served both as the foundation for mass education and as a means of removing obstacles to formal schooling.¹⁷

Among local educational institutions, Education Promotion Bureau and Education Associations were the principal agents in expanding the Lecture Halls. The *Imperially Approved Regulations of the Education Promotion Bureau* stipulated that "Lecture Halls shall be established in all localities without exception. In rural areas, officials shall be dispatched to deliver lectures on market days." The *Regulations of the Jingshi Education Promotion Bureau* (*Jingshi Quanxuesuo Zhangcheng*), promulgated by the *Jingshi*¹⁸ Education Promotion Bureau in 1906, also specified that "each prefecture and county shall select a spacious site to establish Lecture Halls."¹⁹ Backed by the administrative authority of the Ministry of Education and the example of *Zhili* and *Jingshi*, Education Promotion Bureau across China established Lecture Halls,²⁰ thus extending the institution into grassroots society. Education Associations also designated the establishment of Lecture Halls as a mandatory administrative task, with county-level associations taking the lead. The Education Associations of *Changzhou*, *Yuanhe* and *Wuxian*, for instance, set up five Lecture Halls to popularise education,²¹ and the Education Associations

¹⁵ "Shenming xuanjiang zhi zongzhi," [Stating the Purpose of Lecturing] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, 1911, no. 2833, pp. 8–9.

¹⁶ "Xuexian chikai diliu xuanjiangsuo," [The Provincial Education Commissioner Orders the Establishment of the Sixth Lecture Hall] *Hankow Chinese and Western Gazette*, 23 February 1910, p. 3.

¹⁷ LU ERKUI, "Lun jiaoyu puji yixian zhuzhong xuanjiang," [On Prioritizing Lecturing for the Popularization of Education] *Education Magazine*, 1909, no. 1, pp. 1–4.

¹⁸ *Jingshi* was the name of Beijing during the Qing.

¹⁹ "Jingshi quanxuesuo shiban zhangcheng," [Regulations of Jingshi Education Promotion Bureaus] *Ministry of Education Gazette*, 1906, no. 7, p. 38.

²⁰ A total of 1588 Quanxue Suo had been established nationwide by 1909. Ministry of Education (comp.). *Diyici Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian (jiabian)*, [The First Yearbook of Chinese Education (Part A)] Kaiming Bookstore, 1934, p. 32.

²¹ "Jiaoyuhui jiangshe xuanjiangsuo," [Education Associations to Establish Lecture Halls] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, 1907, no. 1443, p. 11.

of *Baoshan*²² and *Taizhou*²³ each established Lecture Halls in compliance with the relevant regulations. The *Hanyang* Education Association also listed establishment of Lecture Halls as a compulsory task.²⁴

In 1908, *Zhang Zhidong* (1837–1909), Grand Secretary of the Grand Council (*Junji Dachen*), drafted a plan for the popularisation of education that required all localities to “establish one elementary school and one Lecture Hall for every hundred households in each village.”²⁵ The Ministry of Education subsequently issued this plan to all provinces for implementation. In 1911, the Ministry submitted a memorial that prioritised the popularisation of education and listed the establishment of Lecture Halls among its primary objectives.²⁶

Bodies of Local self-government also drove the proliferation of Lecture Halls, in some cases more vigorously than educational institutions. Late Qing scholars and officials regarded Lecture Halls as the foundation of local self-government. “Lecture Halls can remedy the inadequacies of school education and serve as the foundation of local self-government,”²⁷ and “Preparations for constitutionalism must begin with local self-government, of which Lecture Halls are indispensable element.”²⁸ *Meng Zhaochang* (1871–1918), a member of the Constitutional Preparation Association, argued that constitutionalism required the participation of citizens aged twenty-five and above, yet most such persons lacked formal education and could not fulfill civic duties. Lecture Halls, he

²² “Sheli xuanjiangsuo,” [Establishment of Lecture Halls] *Sin Wan Pao*, 30 October 1907, pp. 10–11.

²³ “Xuanjiangsuo chengli,” [Inauguration of Lecture Halls] *Shenzhou Daily News*, 30 April 1908, p. 4.

²⁴ “Hanyangxian jiaoyufenhui zhangcheng,” [Articles of Association of the Hanyang County Education Branch Association] *Hankow Chinese and Western News*, 12 January 1910, p. 4.

²⁵ “Zhangxiangguo mianzou puji jiaoyu zhi jihua,” [Zhang Zhidong’s Memorial on the Plan for the Popularisation of Education] *Ta Kung Pao*, 13 May 1908, p. 2.

²⁶ “Xuebu zouchen puji jiaoyu zuiyao ciyao banfa zhe bingdan,” [The Ministry of Education’s Memorial on the Primary and Secondary Measures for the Popularisation of Education] *Mukden Times*, 7 January 1911, p. 3.

²⁷ “Dufu xianzha tixuesi wen,” [Official Dispatch from Provincial Governors and Vice-roys to the Provincial Education Department] *Jilin Official Gazette*, 1907, No. 13, pp. 2–3.

²⁸ “Lidaling xiangban xuanjiangsuo,” [Magistrate Li’s Administration of Lecture Halls] *Hankow Chinese and Western News*, 8 September 1908, p. 3.

held, functioned as citizen schools for adults and played an irreplaceable role in raising civic literacy.²⁹

In August 1906, the *Tianjin* Self-Government Bureau was established and issued the *Articles of Association for the Lecture Halls of the Tianjin Self-Government Bureau* as a dedicated regulatory document. In November of the same year, the *Guangdong* Local Self-Government Bureau was founded and appointed lecture officers specifically charged with Lecture Hall affairs.³⁰ County-level Self-Government Promotion Associations (*Zizhi Qichenghui*) were successively established in *Wujin*, *Yanghu*, *Qingpu* and other counties, each with an affiliated Lecture Hall to popularise ideology of self-government.³¹ The *Weixian* Self-Government Promotion Association formulated an even more ambitious plan, requiring one Lecture Hall for every two hundred or more households in towns and villages.³²

In 1908, the Qing court made local self-government as a core administrative task, ordering the creation of self-government bodies in provincial capitals, prefectures, counties, towns and villages, each with an affiliated Lecture Hall.³³ In 1909, the government promulgated the *Regulations for Local Self-Government in Towns and Villages* (*Chengzhenxiang Difang Zizhi Zhangcheng*), formally integrating Lecture Halls into urban and rural self-government affairs.³⁴ All provinces successively established Self-Government Preparation Offices (*Zizhi Choubanchu*) to advance these initiatives. *Yunnan*, for example, required at

²⁹ "Yubeilixiangonghui zhi gechu jiaoyuhui lun gedifang jiyi bianshe xuanjiangsuo shu," [Letter from the Association for the Preparation of Constitutionalism to Local Education Associations on the Widespread Establishment of Lecture Halls] *Shun Pao*, 27 October 1907, pp. 2–3.

³⁰ "Cendu zhaxing huiyi difang zizhiju zhangcheng," [Governor Cen Issues the Regulations of the Local Self-Government Bureau] *Shibao* (*Eastern Times*), 23 November 1906, p. 3.

³¹ "Wuyang zizhi qichenghui jianzhang binggao," [Articles of Association of the Wuyang Self-Government Promotion Association] *Shenzhou Daily News*, 25 September 1907, p. 4; "Difang zizhi huizhi," [Collected Works on Local Self-Government] *Eastern Miscellany*, 1908, no. 2, Internal Affairs Section, p. 142; "Qingpu sheli zizhi qichenghui," [Establishment of the Self-Government Promotion Association in Qingpu] *Sin Wan Pao*, 19 February 1908, p. 10.

³² "Weixian zizhi qichenghui zanding zhangcheng," [Articles of Association of the Weixian Self-Government Promotion Association] *Ta Kung Pao*, 1 May 1908, p. 6.

³³ "Zhengfu huiyi guohui wenti," [The Government Deliberates on the Parliament Question] *Shun Pao*, 23 July 1908, p. 5.

³⁴ "Xinding chengzhenxiang difang zizhi zhangcheng," [Regulations for Local Self-Government in Towns and Villages] *Ta Kung Pao*, 29 January 1909, p. 6.

least six Lecture Halls per locality;³⁵ *Henan* ordered the province-wide establishment of vernacular Lecture Halls within three months;³⁶ *Jilin* stipulated two Lecture Halls per town and one per village with more than one thousand inhabitants.³⁷ Some officials incorporated the establishment of Lecture Halls into the assessment of grassroots officials. In 1910 the *Yunnan* Self-Government Preparation Office criticised sixteen prefectures and counties for failing to set up Lecture Halls and issued demerits to their magistrates.³⁸ The Prefect of *Hanyang* held that Lecture Halls formed the foundation of preparatory constitutionalism, ordered prefectures and counties without such halls to establish them within four months or face demerits.³⁹

In sum, Lecture Halls were institutionalised through Education Promotion Bureaus, Education Associations and bodies of local self-governing, taking root in grassroots society. They in turn promoted local education and self-government, and even served as a prerequisite and foundation for their grassroots implementation, acting as a vanguard for both. As contemporaries observed, given the general lack of public enlightenment, the implementation of local education and self-government often met with strong resistance; “any undertaking must therefore be preceded by lecturing.”⁴⁰ The Ministry of Civil Affairs likewise demanded that, before rolling out the New Policies (which covered local education and local self-governance) local officials assign lecturers to deliver detailed expositions.⁴¹

2.2 *The Geographical Network of Lecture Halls*

In 1905, Lecture Halls were mainly concentrated in *Zhili*, *Fengtian*⁴² and surrounding regions. In 1906 they spread to *Jingshi*, *Shandong*, *Henan*, *Hubei*

³⁵ “Diandu zoubao chouban ziyiju qingxing,” [Yunnan Viceroy Submits a Memorial on the Administration of the Consultative Bureau] *Shun Pao*, 3 May 1909, p. 10.

³⁶ “Difang zizhi jinxing zhi zhenxiang,” [The Reality of Local Self-Government] *Shun Pao*, 5 March 1910, p. 11.

³⁷ “Zizhi choubanchu cheng suoni xuanjiangsuo tongxing guize wen bingpi,” [Document from the Self-Government Preparation Office on Formulating Rules for the Establishment of Lecture Halls] *Jilin Official Gazette*, 1910, no. 4, pp. 48–50.

³⁸ *Yunnan Political Gazette*, 1910, no. 33, pp.3–6.

³⁹ “Shufu jishi,” [Government Office Chronicle] *Hankow Chinese and Western News*, May 12, 1910, p. 7.

⁴⁰ “Bingqing tuiguang yanshuo,” [On Promoting Public Lectures] *Ta Kung Pao*, April 21, 1907, p. 3.

⁴¹ “Yufang xinzheng raomin zhi banfa,” [Measures to Prevent the New Policies from Disturbing the People] *Shun Pao*, October 2, 1909, pp. 4–5.

⁴² Fengtian was a prefectural administrative unit during the Qing, since renamed Shenyang.

and other provinces, and after 1907 they became nationwide in scope. The conditions of Lecture Halls across the country between 1907 and 1909 are presented in the Table 1.

Table 1 Lecture Halls across the Country, 1907–1909⁴³

	1907		1908				1909			
	Num- ber	Lec- turer	Num- ber	Lecturer			Num- ber	Lecturer		
				Full- time	Part- time	Subto- tal		Full- time	Part- time	Subtotal
Jingshi	9	21	11	1	22	23	19	22	43	65
Zhili	135	/	121	37	/	37	142	83	62	145
Fengtian	37	90	44	/	/	208	37	74	/	74
Jilin	4	23	35	/	/	64	35	38	31	69
Heilongjiang	4	15	5	6	7	13	6	12	3	15
Shandong	311	366	326	217	166	383	303	210	176	386
Shanxi	234	244	290	71	211	282	265	88	127	215
Shaanxi	229	240	276	/	/	281	327	98	455	553
Henan	114	76	84	94	52	146	58	/	/	149
Jiangning	47	58	35	11	50	61	37	108	/	108
Jiangsu	61	72	108	24	59	83	170	80	/	80
Anhui	/	/	1	1	1	2	60	60	/	60
Zhejiang	78	98	79	26	127	153	117	39	132	171
Jiangxi	18	/	43	/	/	/	99	141	/	141
Hubei	/	/	29	39	27	66	54	/	/	73
Hunan	56	91	99	118	46	164	99	118	46	164
Sichuan	/	/	234	52	229	281	392	101	226	327
Guangxi	30	37	41	36	25	61	63	51	/	51
Yunnan	123	211	124	49	162	211	277	372	/	372
Guizhou	167	235	1169	133	973	1106	1167	150	906	1056
Fujian	20	79	15	50	132	182	15	169	/	169
Gansu	/	/	48	/	/	82	74	/	/	106
Xinjiang	/	/	23	7	11	18	71	26	51	77
Total	1694	1956	3240	972	2300	3907	3887	2040	2258	4626

⁴³ Sources: Ministry of Education (comp.). *Diyici jiaoyu tongji tubiao* (1907), [The First Educational Statistical Charts (1907)] in WANG YANLAI (ed.). *Minguo jiaoyu tongji ziliao huibian*, [Compilation of Republican Period Educational Statistical Materials] vols. 1–2, Beijing: National

Several patterns are evident from the table. First, the Lecture Halls expanded rapidly: their numbers rose from 1694 in 1907 to 3240 in 1908 and 3887 in 1909. Second, geographically they covered all provinces, including border regions such as *Xinjiang*, *Guizhou*, *Yunnan* and *Guangxi*, forming the initial outlines of a national network. *Guangdong* is omitted from the table because the local authorities failed to submit the relevant reports; in 1906, *Cen Chunxuan* (1861–1933), the Viceroy of *Liangguang* (i.e. *Guangdong* and *Guangxi*), had dispatched many Japanese-educated graduates to prefectures and counties to establish Political Science and Law Lecture Halls.⁴⁴ Third, the regional distribution was markedly uneven, with northern China holding a clear preponderance. This pattern was closely linked to state-driven promotion in a context of national crisis: as the core areas of the Boxer Movement (1900) and the principal site affected by the invasion of the Eight-Nation Alliance, the north prompted official enlighteners to attribute popular xenophobia to mass illiteracy, generating the political rationale that greater ignorance demanded more intensive enlightenment.

The northwestern frontier remained a weak link, in response to which the Qing government adopted a series of measures. In 1908, *Zhang Zhidong* sent a circular telegram to Mongolia princes and nobles, declaring that the revitalisation of Mongolian education must rely first and foremost on the widespread establishment of Lecture Halls.⁴⁵ Lecture Halls were accordingly set up in the Karaqin Banner, the Oroqen Banner, and other Mongolian areas.⁴⁶ In 1909 a ministerial conference held that “*Xinjiang* is geographically remote, where *Hui* and *Han* peoples live together and popular education is extremely backward,”

Library of China Publishing House, 2010, FACSIMILE ed.; Ministry of Education (comp.). *Dierci jiaoyu tongji tubiao* (1908), [The Second Educational Statistical Charts (1908)] in WANG YANLAI and GU SHAOJUN (eds.). *Minguo jiaoyu tongji ziliao xubian*, [Supplementary Compilation of Republican Period Educational Statistical Materials] vols. 1–2, Beijing: National Library of China Publishing House, 2012, facsimile ed.; Ministry of Education (comp.). *Disanci jiaoyu tongji tubiao* (1909), [The Third Educational Statistical Charts (1909)] in WANG YANLAI and GU SHAOJUN (eds.). *Minguo jiaoyu tongji ziliao xubian*, vols. 3–4, Beijing: National Library of China Publishing House, 2012, FACSIMILE ed.

⁴⁴ “Pai liuri biye yuanshen wang gefu xuanjiang fazheng,” [Dispatching Japanese-Educated Graduates to Various Prefectures to Preach Political Science and Law] *Shibao* (*Eastern Times*), 5 August 1906, p. 5.

⁴⁵ “Dianshang mengdi shexue banfa,” [Circular Telegram on Discussing Measures for the Development of Education in Mongolia] *Shun Pao*, 14 May 1908, p. 6.

⁴⁶ “Gesheng jiaoyu hui zhi,” [Compilation of Educational Records of All Provinces] *Eastern Miscellany*, vol. 4, no. 11, 1907, Education Section, p. 298; “Benguan zhuandian,” [Special Telegram from This Newspaper Office] *Sin Wan Pao*, 17 December 1908, p. 2.

and identifying Lecture Halls as a primary tool for mass enlightenment.⁴⁷ *Xinjiang* had 23 Lecture Halls in 1908, rising to 71 in 1909; halls were successively founded in *Sailimu* Township, *Cha'erqi* Township, Kuytun Subprefecture, Tarbagatai and *Shule* Prefecture, among other locations.⁴⁸

After 1910 Lecture Halls spread further into remote ethnic areas, including the *Dai* and *Yi* regions of *Yunnan*, the *Hui* areas of *Gansu*, the Uyghur regions of *Xinjiang*, and the Tibetan areas along the Sichuan–Tibet border.⁴⁹

In sum, Lecture Halls first emerged sporadically in *Zhili*, *Jingshi* and nearby areas, and then expanded nationwide to encompass border ethnic regions. They also followed a hierarchical pattern that descended from large cities to county seats and then to rural villages. This horizontal and vertical integration produced a national grassroots lecturing network. The numerous and widely distributed halls acted as media nodes, linking a previously isolated and conservative grassroots society, including border ethnic minority areas, to developments in the capital and across the nation. The grassroots, in this way, began to pulse in tandem with the rhythms of national life.

3. Lecture Texts as a Medium for Social Enlightenment

Lecture texts constituted the core material medium of lecturing and the most direct expression of its grassroots ideological content. To meet the

⁴⁷ “Jingshi jinshi,” [Recent Events in Jingshi] *Shun Pao*, 24 April 1909, p. 5.

⁴⁸ Baicheng County Chronicles Compilation Committee. *Baicheng xianzhi*, [Chronicles of Baicheng County] Urumqi: Xinjiang People’s Publishing House, 2004, p. 517; Wusu County Party History and Local Chronicles Compilation Committee. *Wusu xianzhi*, [Chronicles of Wusu County] Urumqi: Xinjiang People’s Publishing House, 1999, p. 655; Tacheng Prefectural Education Chronicles Compilation Committee. *Tacheng diqu jiaoyuzhi*, [Education Chronicles of Tacheng Prefecture] Internal Material, 2010, p. 201; Shule County Local Chronicles Compilation Committee (comp.). *Shule xianzhi*, [Chronicles of Shule County] Urumqi: Xinjiang People’s Publishing House, 2001, p. 796.

⁴⁹ Compilation Committee of the Chronicles of Jinggu Dai and Yi Autonomous County. *Jinggu Daizu Yizu zizhi xianzhi*, [Chronicles of Jinggu Dai and Yi Autonomous County] Chengdu: Sichuan Lexicographical Publishing House, 1993, p. 585; Education Chronicles Compilation Committee of Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture. *Linxia Huizu zizhizhou jiaoyuzhi*, [Education Chronicles of Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture] Lanzhou: Gansu Culture Press, 1997, p. 112; China Center for Borderland History and Geography Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. *Xinjiang xiangtu zhigao*, [Manuscripts of Xinjiang Local Chronicles] Beijing: National Library of China Microform Publishing Center, 1990, p. 550; Tibet Autonomous Region Academy of Social Sciences, & Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences (co-comp.). *Jindai KangZang zhongda shijian shiliao xuanbian*, [Selected Historical Materials on Major Events in Modern Kham and Tibet] Part II (Vol. 2), Lhasa: Tibet Tibetan Ancient Books Publishing House, 2004, p. 565.

challenges posed by civil society in the late Qing, the official authorities moved beyond the limitations of the traditional *Sacred Edict* texts and adopted an extremely diverse range of lecture materials.

3.1 *The Selection of Lecture Texts*

With the proliferation of Lecture Halls, the provision of ideologically consistent texts became an urgent priority for the official authorities. The Ministry of Education considered many of the locally selected materials inappropriate, and in 1906 it promulgated the *Bibliography Prescribed by the Ministry of Education for Adoption by Lecture Halls* in order to standardise lecture texts.

As shown in Table 2, the texts fall into six categories.

Table 2 Lecture Texts Promulgated by the Ministry of Education, 1906⁵⁰

Text	Text
<i>Sacred Edict Expounded</i>	<i>Robinson Crusoe</i>
<i>Maxims for Cultivating Integrity</i>	<i>The Life of Clive</i>
<i>Maxims for Moralising the Folks</i>	<i>Adventures in Australia</i>
<i>Classified Records of Moral Exemplars</i>	<i>The Long Journey to Find One's Family</i>
<i>Imperial Edict on the Aim of Education</i>	<i>Reader on the World</i>
<i>Imperial Edict on the Preparations for Constitutionalism</i>	<i>Illustrated Compendium of Sericulture and Mulberry Cultivation</i>
<i>Memorial Petitioning for the Proclamation of Educational Aims</i>	<i>Elementary Lessons on Sericulture</i>
<i>Imperially Approved Regulations of Education Promotion Bureau</i>	<i>Elementary Q&A on Physics and Chemistry</i>
<i>Imperially Approved School Regulations</i>	<i>Elementary Q&A on National Prosperity</i>
<i>Imperially Approved Regulations of Police Official System</i>	<i>Elementary Q&A on General Commerce</i>
<i>A Guide to Children's Education</i>	<i>Discourses on Agriculture</i>
<i>Emotional Cultivation in Children's Moral Education</i>	<i>Elementary Exposition of General Agriculture</i>
<i>Admonitions for Private Tutors of Young Learners</i>	<i>Anecdotes of Artisans</i>
<i>Required Readings for Nationals</i>	<i>Biographies of Farmers</i>
<i>Elementary Hygiene Made Easy for Primary Education</i>	<i>A Treasure Trove of Prosperity</i>
<i>Enlightenment Pictorial</i>	<i>Harmony Between Confucianism and Christianity</i>
<i>On Encouraging Learning</i>	<i>Colloquial Police Handbook</i>
<i>Views on European and American Education</i>	<i>Essentials of Police Practice</i>
<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>	<i>Elementary Tract Against Foot-Binding</i>
<i>The Life of Nelson</i>	<i>Reader of General New Knowledge</i>

⁵⁰ Source: "Tongxing gesheng xuanjiangsuo yingyong shumu," [List of Required Readings for Lecture Halls in All Provinces] *Official Gazette of the Ministry of Education*, no. 4, 1906, pp. 5–7.

Traditional moral indoctrination texts. These most clearly reflected the Qing government's intention of ideological inculcation and included *the Sacred Edict Expounded* (Shengyu Guangxun), *Maxims for Cultivating Integrity* (Yangzheng Yigui), *Maxims for Moralising the Folks* (Xunsu Yigui) and *Classified Records of Moral Exemplars* (Renlei Puji). As the foundational texts of official Qing lecturing, they emphasised loyalty, filial piety, righteousness, feudal ethical norms, moral self-cultivation and the moral edification of the populace, continuing the tradition of the *Sacred Edict* lecturing inherited from the early Qing. Their core function was to strengthen popular identification with feudal ethics, uphold the ideological foundation of the Qing court's rule, serve as the primary criterion for the official definition of ideological conformity, and constitute mandatory content for Lecture Halls across the country. The *Imperially Approved Regulations of Education Promotion Bureau*, for instance, stipulated that "lecturing shall attach primary importance to the *Sacred Edict Expounded*." These texts reflected the late Qing "Chinese learning as the foundation" (Zhongxue Weiti).

Official decree and New Policy texts. Centred on the late Qing New Policies, these texts directly conveyed central directives to the grassroots. They included the *Imperial Edict on the Aims of Education* (Jiaoyu Zongzhi Shangyu), the *Imperial Edict on Preparatory Constitutionalism* (Yubei Lixian Shangyu), the *Memorial Petitioning for the Proclamation of Educational Aims* (Zouqing Xuanshi Jiaoyu Zongzhi Zhe), the *Imperially Approved Regulations of the Education Promotion Bureau*, the *Imperially Approved School Regulations* (Zouding Xuetang Zhangcheng), and the *Imperially Approved Regulations of the Police Official System* (Zouding Xunjing Guanzhi Zhangcheng). Such materials extended lecturing beyond purely moral content and turned Lecture Halls into grassroots propaganda outposts for the New Policies. They enabled the populace, including the illiterate, to learn of central decrees through lectures, deepening their understanding of and support for the reforms and laying a social foundation for implementation.

Modern elementary and civic education texts. This category included *A Guide to Children's Education* (Ertong Jiaoyujian), *Emotional Cultivation in Children's Moral Education* (Ertong Xiushen Zhi Ganqing), *Admonitions for Private Tutors of Young Learners* (Mengshi Zhenyan), *Required Readings for Nationals* (Guomin Bidu), *Elementary Hygiene Made Easy for Primary Education* (Mengxue Weisheng Shizaiyi), the *Enlightenment Pictorial* (Qimeng Huabao), *On Encouraging Learning* (Quanxuepian), and *Views on European and American Education* (Oumei Jiaoyuguan). As the most modern-oriented texts in the bibliography, they focused on early childhood education, civic literacy, modern moral cultivation, and public health, and introduced Western educational concepts for the first time. Unlike traditional primers such as the *Three-Character Classic* (Sanzijing) or the *Four Books and Five Classics* (Sishu Wujing), these works centred on the

formation of modern citizens, emphasising civic awareness, basic literacy, and holistic child development, and aligning with the late Qing reformist trend toward “promoting modern education.”

Foreign novels and biographical texts. These included *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Life of Nelson*, *The Life of Clive*, *Adventures in Australia*, *The Long Journey to Find One’s Family* (Wanli Xunqin Ji), and the *Reader on the World* (Shijie Duben). The category consisted mainly of Western translations, foreign biographies, and travel narratives, and embodied the late Qing principle of “Western learning for application” (Xixue Weiyong) in grassroots lecturing. The official choice of such Western texts aimed to convey through foreign stories the spirit of self-improvement, perseverance, and exploration, in line with the late Qing aspiration of “saving the nation through struggle” (Jiuwang Tucun).

Industrial, agricultural, and commercial practical texts. This category covered the *Illustrated Compendium of Sericulture and Mulberry Cultivation* (Cansang Jinnanming Tushuo), *Elementary Lessons on Sericulture* (Cansang Qianyaoyao), *Elementary Q&A on Physics and Chemistry* (Putong Lihua Wenda), *Elementary Q&A on National Prosperity* (Fuguoxue Wenda), *Elementary Q&A on General Commerce* (Putong Shangye Wenda), *Discourses on Agriculture* (Nonghua), *Elementary Exposition of General Agriculture* (Putong Nongxue Qianshuo), *Anecdotes of Artisans* (Yegong Yishi), *Biographies of Farmers* (Sezhe Zhuan), and *A Treasure Trove of Prosperity* (Zhifu Jinnang). Such texts disseminated productive skills, basic commercial knowledge, and ideas about wealth creation, encouraging both improvements in grassroots production methods and a popular awareness of “pursuing personal and national prosperity” that reflected the period’s “industry to save the nation” (Shiye Jiuguo) ideology.

Texts on social governance and new morality. This category included *Harmony Between Confucianism and Christianity* (Minjiao Xiang'an), the *Colloquial Police Handbook* (Jingcha Baihua), the *Essentials of Police Practice* (Jingcha Shouyan), the *Elementary Tract Against Foot-Binding* (Quan Buchanzu Qianshuo), and the *Reader of General New Knowledge* (Putong Xinzhiishi Duben). These texts addressed the core issues of late Qing grassroots social governance and advocated a new social morality, directly embodying official intervention in grassroots society and the promotion of social change through lectures. Most were written in vernacular or illustrated form, well suited to oral delivery and popular auditory habits. The Jingshi Education Promotion Bureau, for example, required Lecture Halls to lecture on police regulations for thirty minutes daily.⁵¹

⁵¹ “Yanshuo weijinglv,” [Lectures on the Police Law] *Ta Kung Pao*, 12 July 1908, p. 5.

For various practical reasons, however, local Lecture Halls did not rely exclusively on the official texts. Beyond the state-mandated bibliography, three additional types were widely employed.

Modern newspapers and periodicals. As powerful tools for “enlightening the public,” modern newspapers contained abundant current news and naturally became essential lecture texts. The *Tianqimiao* Lecture Hall in *Tianjin*, for instance, used *Ta Kung Pao*, the *Peking Vernacular News (Jinghua Ribao)*, and the *Tianjin Daily News (Tianjin Riri Xinwen)* in 1905. *Hunan* Lecture Halls adopted newspapers conducive to ideological enlightenment,⁵² and the *Qingyun* Lecture Hall focused on newspaper content supporting moral education.⁵³ Vernacular newspapers were particularly favoured. In 1905, *Yuan Shikai* ordered the *Beiyang* Official Gazette Bureau (*Beiyang Guanbao Ju*) to compile a special vernacular newspaper for Lecture Halls.⁵⁴ In 1906 the bureau published the *Beiyang Official Vernacular Gazette (Beiyang Guanhuabao)*, distributed free of charge to prefectures and counties in *Zhili* and *Shuntian* for use in lecturing;⁵⁵ it was later renamed the *Beiyang Legal and Political Official Vernacular Gazette (Beiyang Fazheng Guanhuabao)* and continued to be distributed without charge.⁵⁶ In 1906 the *Henan* Official Gazette Bureau (*Henan Guanbaoju*) likewise published the *Henan Vernacular Lecture News (Henan Baihua Yanshuobao)* for province-wide use in Lecture Halls.⁵⁷

New knowledge and social reform texts. This category most clearly reflects the transformation of grassroots reading culture in the late Qing; such texts made up the largest share of the 1906 official bibliography. In 1908 the *Wuyang* Lecture Hall used the *Sacred Edict Expounded, Uncle Tom's Cabin, An Essay on*

⁵² “Xuanjiang gailiang,” [Reform of Lectures] *Sin Wan Pao*, 22 November 1906, p. 2.

⁵³ “Qingyunxian DingdalingLun enqing guanbaoju zengbian baihuabao,” [Ding Lun, Magistrate of Qingyun County, Requests the Official Gazette Bureau to Compile Additional Vernacular Newspapers] *Ta Kung Pao*, 7 September 1905, p. 2.

⁵⁴ “Zhili xuewuchu mingling xuanjiang guanbaoju suoian baihua,” [Zhili Education Department Orders the Use of Vernacular Texts Compiled by the Official Gazette Bureau for Lectures] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 877, 1905, pp. 4–5.

⁵⁵ “Beiyang guanhuabao bingwunian diyice chuban,” [First Volume of the Beiyang Official Vernacular Gazette for the Bingwu Year Published] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 983, 1906, front cover.

⁵⁶ “Fazheng guanhuabao diyiqi chuban,” [First Issue of the Legal and Political Official Vernacular Gazette Published] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 1168, 1906, front cover.

⁵⁷ “Baihuabao yanshuo zhi shixing,” [Practical Implementation of Lectures with Vernacular Newspapers] *Shibao (Eastern Times)*, 20 December 1906, p. 3.

Eradicating Superstition (*Pochu Mixin shuo*), *Required Readings for Nationals*, and *A Guide to Children's Education*.⁵⁸ The Changshou Lecture Hall adopted *The Long Journey to Find One's Family*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Life of Clive*, *Modern Society*, and themes such as patriotism, the promotion of education, girls' schools, opium prohibition, and local self-government.⁵⁹ The Guangchang Lecture Hall used *Required Readings for Citizens*, *Harmony Between Confucianism and Christianity*, *Collected Lectures on Local Self-Government* (*Difang Zizhi Jiangyanji*), *Outline of Local Self-Government* (*Difang Zizhi Gangyao*), and the *Local Administrative System* (*Difang Xingzheng Zhidu*).⁶⁰ The Hubei Local Self-Government Lecture Hall designated *A Concise Introduction to Urban and Rural Local Self-Government* (*Chengzhenxiang Difang Zizhi Qianshuo*), *A Concise Introduction to Prefectural and County Local Self-Government* (*Tingzhouxian Difang Zizhi Qianshuo*), and *Models of Japanese Self-Government* (*Riben Zizhi Zhi Mofan*) as core materials.⁶¹

The Tianqimiao Lecture Hall held regular industrial and commercial lectures for nearly eight consecutive years (1905–1912), on the third and eighteenth days of each lunar month, with few interruptions. The activity drew a substantial response, with hundreds of attendees at each session. Topics ranged across commercial science, finance, economics, insurance, industry, trade, banking, business ethics, and commercial law, as well as modern technologies and academic disciplines such as the telephone, wireless telegraph, phonograph, cinema, steam engine, generator, chemistry, physiology, physics, and mineralogy.⁶² Such lectures broadened popular horizons, disseminated new knowledge, and stimulated commercial and industrial development. The *Nanyang Industrial Exposition* noted that the underdevelopment of industry and commerce

⁵⁸ "Kai diyici xuanjiang hui," [Holding the First Lecture Meeting] *Shun Pao*, 4 July 1908, p. 10; "Zhi Wuyang xuanjiangsuo shi," [Records of the Wuyang Lecture Hall] *Sin Wan Pao*, 7 July 1908, p. 11.

⁵⁹ Compilation Committee of Heilongjiang Local Chronicles. *Heilongjiang shengzhi jiaoyuzhi*, [Heilongjiang Provincial Annals: Education Annals] Harbin: Heilongjiang People's Publishing House, 1996, p. 702.

⁶⁰ "Guangchang xianling Gaoshao shangshu kaiban zizhi xueshe ji xuanjiang yuedubao suo," [Magistrate Gao Shao of Guangchang County Submits a Memorial on Establishing a Self-Government Study Society and a Lecture & Reading Hall] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, 1909, no. 1995, pp. 7–8.

⁶¹ "Hubei difang zizhi xuanjiang zhangcheng," [Regulations of the Hubei Local Self-Government Lecture Hall] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, 1910, no. 2475, pp. 34–35.

⁶² Compiled from *Ta Kung Pao*, 1905–1912.

in the southern provinces, by comparison with *Tianjin*, was largely attributable to the persistent lecturing and advocacy carried on by the Lecture Halls.⁶³

Slide projectors. Introduced into China during the nineteenth century as a tool of Western missionary “scientific evangelisation,” slide projectors became important vehicles for disseminating knowledge and enlightening the public. To attract more listeners and to improve the effectiveness of lectures, late Qing Lecture Halls actively used slides to enhance the immediacy and appeal of their sessions. In 1905 the *Tianqimiao* Lecture Hall showed slides every Saturday evening, accompanied by band performances; audiences sometimes reached a thousand.⁶⁴ The *Imperially Approved Regulations of Education Associations* explicitly permitted the use of slides to stimulate audience interest and reinforce impact. In 1908 the First *Jingshi* Lecture Hall used slides depicting “civilised” and “backward” scenes, drawing large and deeply moved audiences.⁶⁵ The *Jingshi* Education Supervision Bureau also showed slides on astronomy, geography, the rotation of the Earth, and solar and lunar eclipses, winning wide popular praise; *Ta Kung Pao* described it as “the first pioneering undertaking among speech meetings in Beijing.”⁶⁶ Some Lecture Halls produced their own slides depicting the fall of countries such as India and Korea in order to inspire self-reliance and self-strengthening.⁶⁷ The *Wuyang* Lecture Hall used slides regularly for more than two years: when the hall was established in 1908 it showed three slides; thereafter it screened slides on themes such as the Sino-Japanese War and “Education and Social Reform” to support its lectures, continuing to do so until 1910.⁶⁸

⁶³ “Nanyang quanyehui yanjiuhui yijian shu,” [Opinions of the Research Institute of the Nanyang Industrial Exposition] *Ta Kung Pao*, 4 November 1910, p. 6.

⁶⁴ “Ji xuanjiangsuo,” [Records of Lecture Halls] *Ta Kung Pao*, 26 July 1905, p. 5.

⁶⁵ “Kaiban yandenghui,” [Launching a Slide Show] *Ta Kung Pao*, 19 January 1908, p. 3.

⁶⁶ “Xuanjiang kaiban,” [Launching Lectures] *Ta Kung Pao*, 27 October 1906, p. 3.

⁶⁷ “Jiangbao kuxin,” [Carefully Explain the Newspapers] *Ta Kung Pao*, 4 May 1906, p. 2.

⁶⁸ “Xuanjiangsuo chengli,” [Establishment of the Lecture Hall] *Sin Wan Pao*, 3 July 1908, p. 11; “Kai diyici xuanjianghui,” [Holding the First Lecture Meeting] *Shun Pao*, 4 July 1908, p. 10; “Kaishe xuanjiangsuo,” [Establishing the Lecture Hall] *Shenzhou Daily*, 6 July 1908, p. 3; “Zhi Wuyang xuanjiangsuo shi,” [Records of the Wuyang Lecture Hall] *Sin Wan Pao*, 7 July 1908, p. 11; “Fada xuanjiangsuo zhi zuoyong,” [The Role of the Lecture Hall] *Shun Pao*, 29 July 1910, p. 11; “Xinshe changqi xuanjiangsuo zhi zhuangkuang,” [The Current Situation of the Lecture Hall] *Shun Pao*, 26 November 1910, p. 11; “Changqi xuanjiangsuo kaijiang,” [Lecture Hall Opening] *Sin Wan Pao*, 7 December 1910, p. 14.

In sum, the lecture texts displayed a blend of tradition and modernity that mirrored the “transitional era” of Chinese society and reflected the Qing court’s effort to balance “national salvation” with the preservation of its rule. Their core aim went beyond the enlightenment of the populace; through standardised text-based lectures, they pursued three interrelated objectives (ideological control, propaganda for the New Policies, and social governance), aligning grassroots society with the official tempo of reform and the demands of governance. They were, in essence, an instrumental measure for the strengthening of grassroots rule. At the same time, modern texts such as new-knowledge books, foreign novels, and modern newspapers reflected the changing popular culture of the era and conveyed both new knowledge (science, hygiene) and new ideas (freedom, equality, the rule of law). Shifts in the lecture texts, especially the growing share of new knowledge and ideas, also signalled broader social change in modern China. The introduction and promotion of new media such as modern newspapers and slide projectors by the Lecture Halls can be attributed to two factors. First, the modern knowledge and current news these media carried lent themselves readily to oral transmission. Second, such new media generated novel modes of communication that gave material form to abstract concepts.

3.2. *The Oral Adaptation of Lecture Texts*

Unlike written texts, lecture materials were communicated orally: “they must appeal to both the eye and the ear, and their structure and presentation are designed to meet the specific demands of oral recitation as far as possible.”⁶⁹ For this reason, Lecture Halls primarily adapted classical Chinese (*Wenyanwen*) into vernacular Chinese (*Baihuawen*), or used colloquial materials directly.

Converting classical Chinese into vernacular versions was common practice. The *Qingyun* Lecture Hall, for instance, rephrased classical newspapers in vernacular for use in lectures. *Zunhua* officials required lecturers to adapt enlightenment-oriented books and newspapers into vernacular texts and to assign specialists to deliver them.⁷⁰ The Ministry of Civil Affairs likewise held that

⁶⁹ ROGER CHARTIER, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Wu Hongmiao and Zhang Lu, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2013, p. 92.

⁷⁰ “Zunhuazhou YemuSigao bing kaiban xuanjiangsuo yuebaochu wen qingxing,” [Account of Zunhua Officials Establishing Lecture Halls and Newspaper Reading Rooms] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 2463, 1910, pp. 7–8.

local self-government matters should be classified and compiled into vernacular texts for delivery in the Lecture Halls.⁷¹

Vernacular books and newspapers became direct templates for lectures because of their suitability for oral delivery: “vernacular Chinese is like the script or libretto for storytellers and singers, serving as the draft for oral narration and performance.”⁷² In the official bibliography of 1906, sixteen titles, 40 per cent of the total, were in novel or vernacular style, since these forms greatly facilitated public speaking. *Harmony Between Confucianism and Christianity*, compiled and printed by the Zhili Education Administration, was written in plain vernacular and intended to be intelligible to rural women and the illiterate, which secured its place in the official bibliography; the Governor of Jiangxi had 2500 copies reprinted for province-wide distribution.⁷³ *Lectures on Local Self-Government in Cities, Towns and Villages* (*Chengzhenxiang Difang Zizhi Xuanjiangshu*) was fully vernacular, reading like spoken discourse, and was approved by the Ministry of Civil Affairs for national distribution.⁷⁴ The widely used *Required Readings for Nationals* was written entirely in colloquial style, in the tone of a spoken address, with extensive use of modal particles and spacing as punctuation. Its format also imitated the vernacular version of the *Sacred Edict Expounded*.

Vernacular newspapers were extremely popular among the Lecture Halls. As many as 273 vernacular newspapers were founded in the late Qing, and “their most prominent linguistic feature was popularisation and colloquialism.” Specialised “lecture newspapers” emerged at this time, including the *Henan Vernacular Lecture Newspaper*, the *Hunan Popular Lecture Newspaper* (*Hunan Yanshuo Tongsubao*), the *Shanxi Vernacular Lecture Newspaper* (*Shanxi Baihua Yanshuobao*), the *Haicheng Vernacular Lecture Newspaper* (*Haicheng Baihua*

⁷¹ “Lun bian xuanjiang keben,” [On Compiling Lecture Textbooks] *Jilin Official Gazette*, no. 57, 1907, p. 6.

⁷² Li Xiaoti. *Qingmo de xiaceng qimeng yundong (1901–1911)*, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1998, p. 85.

⁷³ “Jiangxi yangwuju feng ganfuWu zhafa minjiaoxiang shu zhuanfa geshu xuanjiang zhawen,” [The Jiangxi Foreign Affairs Bureau Distributing *Harmony Between Confucian and Christian Communities* to Lecture Halls Across the Province] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 1160, 1906, pp. 5–6.

⁷⁴ “Benhui chuban guanggao,” [Publisher’s Announcement of the Society] *Official Journal of the Preparatory Constitutionalism Association*, no. 3, 1909, advertisement page; “Yubeilixiangonghui xuanjiangshu lian,” [Approval for the Registration of the Self-Government Lecture Texts] *Sin Wan Pao*, 25 May 1910, p. 18.

Yanshuobao), and the *Illustrated Lecture Newspaper* (*Tuhua Yanshuobao*). Some vernacular newspapers established a “public lectures” column, which became “a hallmark of vernacular newspapers in Beijing and Tianjin for a time, with not a single vernacular newspaper failing to feature such a column.” According to one count, the *Peking Vernacular News* published as many as 731 lecture texts; the *Peking New Daily* (*Peking Xinbao*) approximately 1400; *True Patriotic News* (*Zhengzong Aiguo Bao*) around 2300; and *Patriotic Vernacular News* (*Aiguo Baihua Bao*) around 3000.⁷⁵

Although vernacular books and newspapers in the late Qing did not adopt modern punctuation, the use of spaces to separate sentences was a common practice; such pauses were clearly intended to correspond more closely with oral delivery.⁷⁶ To convey the intonation and rich emotion of speech, modal particles and interjections came to be widely employed, and some texts even used uppercase and lowercase fonts to mark stress, endowing the materials with the qualities of oral performance. Considering their textual formation, vernacular books and newspapers, especially “lecture pamphlets” and “lecture newspapers,” were probably composed with recitation aloud in mind from the outset. In their early stages, such publications were vernacularised in pursuit of popularisation and a wider readership in order to facilitate public lectures, and the practices of lecturing and public speaking in turn drove innovation in vernacular publications. The interactive alliance among lecturing, public speaking, and print media made these forms a cradle of the modern vernacular Chinese movement.

4. *Lecturers as the Mouthpiece of Grassroots Society*

Lecturers stood at the operational core of the Lecture Halls. They acted as scriptwriters, required to reproduce, rework, and even compose lecture texts, and as performers, charged with conveying content through vocal delivery, facial expression, and bodily gesture. As a critical intermediary between texts and audiences, they served as the mouthpiece of grassroots society.

⁷⁵ HU QUANZHANG. *Qingmo minchu baihua baokan yanjiu*, [A Study of Vernacular Newspapers and Periodicals in the Late Qing and Early Republican Periods] Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2011, pp. 168, 233, 29.

⁷⁶ ROGER CHARTIER. *The Author's Hand and the Printer's Mind: Transformations of the Written Word in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Polity, 2014, p. 89.

4.1 *The Training of Lecturers*

The *Imperially Approved Regulations of the Education Promotion Bureau* set out explicit requirements for lecturer qualifications: “Qualified lecturers shall be graduates of normal schools or individuals of equivalent academic qualifications and good conduct. If no suitable candidates are available for the time being, local primary school teachers shall assume the responsibility of lecturing.” Two implications follow. First, normal school graduates and primary school teachers were preferred for their advantages in oral communication. Second, the halls were regarded as integral to popular moral edification and enlightenment, forming, together with school education, a grassroots lecturing network.

As the modern educational system was still in its infancy in the late Qing, however, teaching resources were scarce, and a shortage of qualified lecturers became a pressing problem. According to the figures in Table 1, the average ratio of Lecture Halls to lecturers nationwide between 1907 and 1909 was a mere 1:1.2; the proportion of full-time lecturers was even lower, at 1:0.3 in 1908 and 1:0.5 in 1909. The Ministry of Civil Affairs noted explicitly: “To administer local self-government affairs, the establishment of a large number of Lecture Halls shall be adopted as a solution, yet the recruitment of suitable lecturers is the most difficult task.”⁷⁷

To alleviate the shortage of lecturers, many Lecture Halls recruited local officials and gentry as part-time lecturers. The *Tianqimiao* Lecture Hall, for example, employed local gentry, while the *Wangdu* Lecture Hall developed a rotating system in which local officials and gentry took turns acting as lecturers. While such measures relieved the immediate pressure, they also led to a decline in the quality of lectures, making lecturer training an urgent priority.

In 1905, *Zhao Erxun* (1844–1927), Military Governor of Mukden, founded a Lecture Training Institute (*Xuanjiang Lianxichu*) in *Fengtian* to train professional lecturers.⁷⁸ In 1906, *Song Shu* (1862–1910), an official of the *Shandong* Education Administration, proposed establishing Lecture Training Institutes by first adding lecture-related courses to existing Normal Training

⁷⁷ “Lun bian xuanjiang keben,” *Jilin Official Gazette*, no. 57, 1907, p. 6.

⁷⁸ XU SHICHANG. *Dongsansheng zhenglue juanjiu xuewu Fengtiansheng* (32), [Political Strategies of the Three Northeast Provinces vol. 9: Education, Fengtian Province (32)] p. 12.

⁷⁹ HU ZHUSHENG. *Songshu ji (shangce)*, [Collected Works of Song Shu (vol. 1)] Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1993, pp. 415–416.

Institutes, and subsequently setting up a Lecture Training Institute in the provincial capital that would recruit *gongsheng* (government-sponsored scholars) and *tongsheng* (aspirants for the *xiucai* degree) from across the province for a three-month training programme.⁷⁹ In 1909, *Anhui* educational officials founded a Lecture Research and Training Institute that enrolled seventy-five primary school teachers, normal school graduates, and political science and law graduates for lecturer training; on graduation, they were assigned to Lecture Halls in various prefectures and counties.⁸⁰

To train a larger pool of lecturers, the *Jingshi* Education Supervision Bureau (*Jingshi Duxueju*) formulated a systematic plan. In May 1907 a Lecture Training Institute was established under the General Education Promotion Bureau, with each school district ordered to set up one of its own.⁸¹ In 1908 the First Outer City School District organised lecture practice for normal school graduates;⁸² the Third Inner City School District founded a Lecture Training Institute that arranged practice for normal school students;⁸³ and the First Inner City School District also established such an institute, providing practice for private school teachers.⁸⁴ In 1909, the Second Inner City School District set up a Lecture Training Institute and abolished academic qualifications for participants, opening enrolment to anyone willing to practise lecturing.⁸⁵ In July 1909, the General Education Promotion Bureau mandated that all school districts in both the Inner and Outer cities establish their own Lecture Training Institutes.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ FENG XU and CHEN SHILI. *Wanzheng jiyao juanshiqi fengjiaoyi*, [Compendium of Anhui Provincial Administration, vol. 17: Moral Education I] Hefei: Huangshan Press, 2005, p. 145.

⁸¹ “Lianxi xuanjiang,” [Practising Lecturing] *Ta Kung Pao*, 15 May 1907, p. 4; “Chishe xuanjiang lianxisuo,” [Ordering the Establishment of Lecture Training Institutes] *Zhili Education Journal*, no. 20, 1908, p. 116.

⁸² “Biyesheng lianxi xuanjiang,” [Graduates Practising Lecturing] *Ta Kung Pao*, 24 January 1908, p. 2.

⁸³ “Zuzhi xuanjiang lianxisuo,” [Organising Lecture Training Institutes] *Ta Kung Pao*, 6 March 1908, p. 4.

⁸⁴ “Zuzhi xuanjiang lianxisuo,” [Organising Lecture Training Institutes] *Ta Kung Pao*, 6 April 1908, p. 5.

⁸⁵ “Sheli xuanjiang lianxisuo,” [Establishing Lecture Training Institutes] *Ta Kung Pao*, 5 July 1909, p. 5.

⁸⁶ “Chishe xuanjiang lianxisuo,” [Ordering the Establishment of Lecture Training Institutes] *Ta Kung Pao*, 14 July 1909, p. 5.

Specialised lecture manuals were also published. One example is the *Art of Eloquent Speech* (*Yanshuo Meicifa*), translated by the *Beiyang* Official Gazette Bureau from a Japanese original and serialised in the *Beiyang* Official Gazette. It covered vocal delivery, bodily posture, facial expression, and other speaking techniques. The work was reprinted by *Cheng Yu* (1870–1940), an official of *Shanxi* Province, to guide provincial lecturing, and was subsequently republished in the *Shanghai* journal *Glimpses of Science* (*Kexue Yiban*). Another work, *Lectures on Public Speaking for the Lecture Training Institute* (*Xuanjiang Chuanxisuo Yanshuoxue Jiangyi*), was compiled by Chinese scholars themselves. Used as the lecture notes of instructors at the Lecture Training Institute of *Fengtian*, it presented the training content in a relatively comprehensive manner, with chapters including “The History of the Science of Public Speaking,” “The Principles of the Science of Public Speaking,” and “The Benefits of the Science of Public Speaking.”⁸⁷ It is likely the earliest work on the art of public speaking written by Chinese scholars in China.

4.2 *The Artistry of Lecturers*

Lecturing was a craft whose effectiveness depended heavily on the rhetorical ability of the speaker. The decline of *Sacred Edict* lecturing in the late Qing was directly linked to the poor artistry of its practitioners; many lecturers merely recited the text mechanically, without artistic skill of any kind.⁸⁸ Drawing on this lesson, the Lecture Halls strove for engaging, theatrical presentation. The *Tianqimiao* Lecture Hall boasted renowned lecturers, and audiences listened with the utmost attentiveness, without a single outburst of noise during sessions; its lecturers performed much like stage actors.⁸⁹ *Tieling* lecturers explained current events and news with exceptional thoroughness, and their delivery, as compelling as that of professional orators, drew packed audiences at every session.⁹⁰ Such examples indicate that lecturers were expected to possess the same artistic skills as actors and public speakers.

⁸⁷ TONG YILIN and GAO SHIZUO. *Xuanjiang chuanxisuo yanshuoxue jiangyi*, [Lectures on Public Speaking for the Lecture Training Institute] Mukden: Kwantung Press, 1907.

⁸⁸ “Qingdai zhouxian gushi,” [Stories of Prefectures and Counties in the Qing Dynasty] *Zhonghe Journal*, no. 10, 1941, p. 91.

⁸⁹ “Shuo yanshuo,” [On Public Speaking] *Ta Kung Pao*, 27 February 1909, p. 5.

⁹⁰ “Tingjiangzhe ri yi jiaduo,” [Growing Audiences for Lectures] *Mukden Shimun*, 2 April 1909, p. 5.

Voice was the physical medium of lecturing, both the precondition and the mode of its delivery. From the audience's perspective, voice embodied the textual content of the lectures, and listeners "engaged with" the lecturer's voice through the act of hearing. *Lectures on Public Speaking for the Lecture Training Institute* categorised vocal expression into a seven-part emotional system (joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hatred, and desire) and established corresponding standards for vocal modulation:

Generally speaking, one should speak calmly and composedly, avoiding rude or harsh words. Yet the voice should not be too faint, lest the audience fail to hear clearly. An excessively loud tone verges on arrogance, while an overly soft one conveys listlessness. To speak in a monotone from start to finish, without variation in pace or pitch, is bound to weary the audience. Pitch and volume must therefore be well modulated, the primary aim being to enable everyone to grasp the meaning. When delivering key points, shifting paragraphs, or adding supplementary ideas, delivery should be vivid and spirited, so as to arouse interest. In refutation, the tone should be agile and assured, free of embarrassment or hesitation. In a defensive or conservative stance, the voice should be ample and unhurried, preserving a calm and gentle manner. In offering explanations, the tone should be steady and clear, avoiding the fault of being tedious and fragmented.⁹¹

The *Baoding* Lecture Hall, for example, stipulated that lecturers must speak in a loud and clear voice in order to elicit a cheerful response from the audience. At the *Benxi* Lecture Hall, the lecturers' clear and resonant delivery was so moving that every session attracted a large number of attendees, some standing outside the windows to listen.⁹²

Dialect proficiency was another critical skill. As a medium of regional culture, dialects allowed lecturers to overcome linguistic barriers, communicate information more effectively, and enhance the impact of their lectures, while also helping to bridge the psychological gap between speaker and audience and to foster genuine emotional connection. The *Tianjin* Self-Government Bureau Lecture Halls required proficiency in the local dialect as a qualification, and the Viceroy of *Shanxi* ordered local Lecture Halls to recruit lecturers fluent in the regional dialect. The *Jiangsu* Preparatory Autonomy Association held that dialects must

⁹¹ TONG YILIN and GAO SHIZUO. *Xuanjiang chuanxisuo yanshuoxue jiangyi*, Mukden: Kwantung Press, 1907, p. 10.

⁹² "Xuanjiang deren," [Lecturers with Competence] *Mukden Shimbun*, 21 August 1910, p. 3.

be used during lectures, and the *Anhui* Education Department, in promoting the establishment of Lecture Halls, required all lecturers to be local residents of the village or town in which they served, since their familiarity with local customs and their command of dialect were most likely to resonate with and move the audience.

As an embodied communicative practice, public lecturing also demanded skilful use of body language. *Lectures on Public Speaking for the Lecture Training Institute* argued that lecturers should integrate “head, eyes, hands, feet, and torso” into a unified whole: head movements reinforced the conveyance of ideas, variations in eye contact communicated emotional shifts, and gestures strengthened the force of arguments.⁹³ Lin Boqu (1886–1960), an education official in *Jilin*, maintained that lecturers must be lively in demeanour and loud in voice in order to attract audiences and hold their attention. It was, he argued, inappropriate to deliver lectures while seated or to read mechanically from books and newspapers with bowed head; chairs for lecturers should be removed in advance, and lecturers were required to prepare their materials beforehand and forbidden to read directly from documents on the spot.⁹⁴ Through embodied communication, lecturers made the transmission of content more direct and effective, fostering emotional resonance and maximising the impact of the lecture.

As grassroots nodes within the national system of publicity and education, lecturers served simultaneously as “state spokespersons” and “knowledge reproducers.” First, as an embodied practice, lecturing was directly linked to the vocal cords of the speaker and the eardrums of the audience; it required the physical co-presence of both parties and an interactive exchange of sound, exposing the lecturer to on-site pressure and demanding continual adjustment in delivery to maximise local effect. Second, unlike a “text-reading” model in which printed texts hold the core authority, the “lecture-listening” model emphasised the lecturer’s authority before the live audience. Lecturers were both disseminators of current events and knowledge and authoritative interpreters of state policy, accomplishing through their lectures the localisation of information and the reproduction of knowledge. Familiar lecturers, familiar dialects, and colloquial speech rendered the information “attractive and digestible,”⁹⁵

⁹³ TONG YILIN and GAO SHIZUO. *Xuanjiang chuanxisuo yanshuoxue jiangyi*, Mukden: Kwantung Press, 1907, pp. 13–15.

⁹⁴ JILIN ARCHIVES. “Qingmo LinBoqu Jilin shixue shiliao,” [Historical Materials on Lin Boqu’s Educational Inspection in Jilin in the Late Qing Dynasty] *Historical Archives*, no. 4, 2001, pp. 64–79.

⁹⁵ RÉGIS DEBRAY. *Manifesto for Media Studies*, trans. Huang Chunliu, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2016, p. 16.

producing the “localised echo” of national discourse and enabling the national voice to penetrate into grassroots society in a perceptible form.

5. *Lecture Halls as the Tipping Point of Official Political Communication*

In the realm of official political communication, the Qing government took two key steps to adapt to late Qing changes. First, it built a nationwide official newspaper network to counter the explosive growth of folk modern newspapers and to remedy the ineffectiveness of the traditional Imperial Gazette (*Dibao*) system. Second, it constructed a national network of Lecture Halls to offset the weakening of ideological control in grassroots society caused by the decline of *Sacred Edict* lecturing. Together, the official newspaper network and the Lecture Hall system formed two pillars of official political communication, written and oral.

As a critical link in official communication, Lecture Halls fulfilled the dual functions of policy interpretation and the guidance of public opinion. Through systematic lectures they ensured the effective transmission of central decrees and dispelled public doubts about reform policies, bridging the gap between top-level New Policy design and grassroots practice. In 1908 the Qing government required each prefecture and county to appoint one lecturer to deliver regular talks on the New Policies.⁹⁶ In 1909 it further stipulated that Lecture Halls must explain the rationale of reforms before any local implementation.⁹⁷ These measures reflect a deep-seated dilemma of governance: at the grassroots level, reform implementation was often met with confusion and considerable resistance.⁹⁸

In such circumstances, the Lecture Halls were regarded as a key tool for overcoming reform resistance, and local officials generally considered them the best means of mass enlightenment.⁹⁹ *Shuntian* officials argued that progress

⁹⁶ “Tongchi tianshe xuanjiangyuan,” [Ordering the Addition of Lecturers] *Ta Kung Pao*, 28 May 1908, p. 2.

⁹⁷ “Yufang xinzheng raomin zhi banfa,” *Shun Pao*, 2 October 1909, pp. 4–5.

⁹⁸ “Cangzhou xiang Licunzhen kaiban zizhi yanjiusuo ji yuebaoshe niding jianzhang chengqing chahe wen bingpi,” [The Establishment of a Self-Government Research Institute and a Reading Newspaper Office in Licun Town, Cangzhou] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 2665, 1911, pp. 6–7.

⁹⁹ “Dachengxian Qiuling Hongguang bing kaiban xuanjiangsuo yuebaoshe ji shiban zhangcheng qingshi zunwen bingpi,” [Magistrate Qiu Hongguang of Dacheng County Establishes a Lecture Hall and a Reading Newspaper Office] *Zhili Education Journal*, no. 18, 1908, pp. 6–8.

in the New Policies would be difficult so long as the public's intellectual level remained underdeveloped, and required each prefecture and county to establish at least four Lecture Halls for daily lectures.¹⁰⁰ When the Qing Board of Colonial Affairs (*Lifan Bu*) reorganised Mongolian affairs, investigations revealed that the Mongolian populace was poorly informed and that the New Policies therefore met with considerable resistance; the board accordingly compiled vernacular notices and set up Lecture Halls for their oral exposition.¹⁰¹

Local self-government likewise required the cooperation of the Lecture Halls. The *Jiangsu* Local Self-Government Association considered that the broad masses had little understanding of the New Policies and that future implementation of constitutional government would inevitably encounter substantial resistance; it therefore established Constitutional Lecture Halls on a large scale.¹⁰² During the 1910 Parliamentary Petition Movement, constitutionalists drafted petition measures that called for the "extensive establishment of Lecture Halls in all prefectures, subprefectures, counties, towns, villages, and rural areas of every province," in the hope of dispelling popular conservatism, which they regarded as the principal obstacle to the implementation of constitutional government.¹⁰³

Lecture Halls also served as official instruments for crisis management in public opinion. Faced with resistance to the household registration survey of 1909,¹⁰⁴ for example, the Ministry of Civil Affairs ordered all provincial governors to compile vernacular notices explaining the genuine reasons for the survey, to post them widely, and to instruct Lecture Halls to deliver detailed lectures on the matter so as to forestall further resistance.¹⁰⁵ *Jiangxi*, *Hunan*, and *Hubei*, among other provinces, defused this crisis through expanded

¹⁰⁰ "Tongchi sheli xuanjiangsuo," [Ordering the Establishment of Lecture Halls] *Ta Kung Pao*, 17 January 1909, p. 5; "Chishu duoshe xuanjiangsuo," [Establishing More Lecture Halls] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 2014, 1909, p. 10.

¹⁰¹ "Ding kaihua Mengren banfa," [Measures to Enlighten the Mongolian People] *Ta Kung Pao*, 27 July 1908, p. 5.

¹⁰² "Chuangban xianzheng xuanjiangsuo," [Establishing Constitutional Lecture Halls] *Sin Wan Pao*, 7 November 1908, p. 11.

¹⁰³ "Lun guohui jixu qingyuan zhi fendao jinxing banfa," [On the Methods for Continuing the Parliamentary Petition] *Shun Pao*, 19 March 1910, p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ YIN JUNLING. "Xuanton g yuannian fankang hukou diaocha fengchao," [The Resistance Movement against the Household Registration Survey in the First Year of Xuanton] *Historical Archives (China)*, no. 3, 1999.

¹⁰⁵ "Chi jieshi diaocha hukou zongzhi," [Ordering the Public Display of the Purpose of the Household Registration Survey] *Mukden Shimbun*, 17 September 1909, p. 2.

Lecture Halls. The measure was regarded as especially pivotal in places of more intense resistance, such as *Dantu*, *Jintan*, and *Yixing* in *Jiangsu*. The *Dantu* Self-Government Office maintained that local self-government required a prior household registration survey, and that such a survey required, in turn, the prior establishment of Lecture Halls. After the unrest, the magistrate of *Jintan* concluded that the resistance had stemmed from the absence of a sufficiently widespread Lecture Hall network, and the magistrate of *Yixing* argued similarly that, had the reasons for the survey been clearly explained through lectures, doubts would have been dispelled, rumours would not have spread, and resistance would not have ensued.¹⁰⁶

In 1908, the Guangxu Emperor (1871–1908) and the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) died in quick succession. In view of the resulting rumours and unrest, the *Jingshi* Education Supervision Bureau distributed a *Sacred Edict* to all Lecture Halls for delivery, with a view to stabilising public sentiment.¹⁰⁷ Education officials in *Hubei* ordered Lecture Halls to praise the benevolence and kindness of the late emperor and empress dowager, in order to inspire loyalty to the monarch and patriotism for the nation.¹⁰⁸ After the *Wuchang* Uprising of 1911, the *Jingshi* Education Supervision Bureau, recognising the populace's vulnerability to rumour, dispatched officials to assist with lecturing at all Lecture Halls.¹⁰⁹ The Ministry of Civil Affairs founded the newspaper *Current Affairs Record* and required Lecture Halls to deliver detailed daily lectures on its contents in order to dispel rumours about the uprising.¹¹⁰

The Lecture Halls also served to counter popular oratory. In the late Qing, public speaking had risen to prominence and gradually become an important medium for the dissemination of new ideas and even of revolutionary thought.

¹⁰⁶ "Jintan diaocha hukou naoshi xiangzhi," [A Detailed Account of the Disturbances over the Household Registration Survey in Jintan] *Shun Pao*, 29 April 1910, p. 11; "Wen Yixing xiangmin zhaoshi ganyan," [Reflections on the Peasant Unrest in Yixing] *Shun Pao*, 17 March 1910, p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ "Quanxuesuo huiyi shixiang," [Matters Discussed at the Education Promotion Institute Meeting] *Ta Kung Pao*, 1 December 1908, p. 5; "Duxueju yanjin yaoyan," [The Education Supervision Bureau Strictly Prohibits Rumours] *Ta Kung Pao*, 12 December 1908, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ "Bianji sanchao zhengyao jiangben," [Compiling Lecture Notes on the Political Essentials of the Three Reigns] *Ta Kung Pao*, 17 December 1908, p. 5.

¹⁰⁹ "Duxueju shenzhong xuanjiang," [The Education Supervision Bureau Stresses the Prudence of Lecturing] *Ta Kung Pao*, 29 October 1911, p. 5.

¹¹⁰ "Zizhao xuanjiang shishi jishi," [Circular Informing the Lecturing of Current Affairs Record] *Ta Kung Pao*, 2 December 1911, p. 5.

The Qing government restricted such oratory through two principal measures. First, it imposed strict bans: in 1906 it ordered provincial officials to prohibit radical language at all public assemblies and required officials to attend such events in person to monitor their content.¹¹¹ In 1907, *Yuan Shikai* and other officials drew up regulations stipulating that any oration before more than fifteen people must be reported to the police station, which would dispatch officers to supervise the event; violations would result in immediate suspension of the oration.¹¹² In December 1907, the Qing court issued a formal decree banning public gatherings for oratory.¹¹³ Second, the government promoted the establishment of Lecture Halls through financial support and institutional safeguards while imposing rigorous censorship on their content. Unlike textual reading, lecturing afforded considerable scope for improvisation beyond any written script, and was therefore subject to even stricter official oversight. The *Imperially Approved Regulations of the Education Promotion Bureau* explicitly forbade political content and radical remarks. The regulations of the *Jingxi* Lecture Hall listed revolutionary speech, anti-government acts, harm to public interests, superstition, and absurd fallacies among prohibited content,¹¹⁴ while those of the *Jingzhou* Lecture Hall stipulated that “all books and remarks concerning revolution, anti-Manchu sentiments, freedom, equal rights, novel fallacies, treason, cynical lamentation over the times, and social criticism are strictly prohibited.”¹¹⁵ To ensure that lectures remained within the bounds of official orthodoxy, the *Jingshi* Education Supervision Bureau formulated a uniform set of lecture regulations, requiring lecturers to adhere strictly to the prescribed bibliographies and to refrain from arbitrary improvisation that might

¹¹¹ “Diaocha jihui yanshuo,” [Investigating Public Assemblies and Orations] *Ta Kung Pao*, 31 January 1906, p. 3.

¹¹² “Zhoudu zanding zhanshi yanshuo xinzhang,” [Governor Zhou’s Provisional Regulations for Supervising Orations] *Shun Pao*, 27 February 1907, p. 9.

¹¹³ “Niding yanshuo zhangcheng,” [Formulating Regulations on Orations] *Ta Kung Pao*, 31 December 1907, p. 3.

¹¹⁴ “Weiyunwen deng guanyu chengli gongli diyi xuanjiangyuebaosuo de cheng ji Jingshi duxueju de gaoshi deng,” [Documents by WEI YUNWEN et al. on the Establishment of the First Public Lecture and Newspaper Reading Hall and a Notice from Jingshi Education Supervision Bureau] Collection of the Beijing Municipal Archives, archive no. J004-001-00001-A.

¹¹⁵ “Jingzhou yuebaochu xuanjiangsuo guize,” [Rules of the Newspaper Reading Room and Lecture Hall of Jingzhou] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 1517, 1907, pp. 13–14.

cause unnecessary complications.¹¹⁶ It also implemented a “pre-review and inspection” system: lecturers had to submit content for advance approval, and police officers were charged with verifying that the actual lectures conformed to the approved text.¹¹⁷

Lecture Halls were also extensively involved in late Qing grassroots social governance. They engaged, for instance, in local educational affairs, running social educational institutions such as half-day schools and simple literacy classes. The *Ximalu* Lecture Hall in *Tianjin* established a half-day school open exclusively to children from poor families, teaching practical skills such as literacy and abacus arithmetic and adopting a model of “half-day study, half-day work.”¹¹⁸ The *Jingshi* Education Supervision Bureau ordered all local Lecture Halls to set up half-day schools providing free education and basic livelihood skills to poor children.¹¹⁹ Lecture Halls in *Kaiyuan*, *Tieling*, *Fengcheng*, *Jinzhou*, and elsewhere opened simple literacy classes,¹²⁰ and some launched midnight schools and evening English courses to broaden the scope of social education.¹²¹ Lecture Halls also participated in local self-government, becoming important public spaces for self-government meetings, voting, elections, and the Parliamentary Petition Movement; the 1907 and 1909 *Tianjin* local self-government polls and elections were both held in Lecture Halls. They were also involved in social reforms, including local opium suppression, public health and epidemic prevention, the abolition of foot-binding, and household registration surveys,

¹¹⁶ “Duxueju dingding xuanjiang tiaogui,” [The Education Supervision Bureau Formulates Rules for Lecturing] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 1397, 1907, p. 10; “Huayi xuanjiang zhangcheng,” [Unified Regulations for Lecturing] *Ta Kung Pao*, 9 September 1907, p. 2.

¹¹⁷ “Tongchi zhengdun xuanjiang shiyi,” [Circular Order for Rectifying Lecture Hall Affairs] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 1648, 1908, p. 10.

¹¹⁸ “Banri yingye xuetang zhaokao,” [Recruitment for Half-Day Vocational Schools] *Ta Kung Pao*, 8 January 1906, p. 3.

¹¹⁹ “Quanxuesuo sheli xuetang,” [Establishment of Schools by Education Promotion Bureau] *Ta Kung Pao*, 18 August 1907, p. 2; “Duxueju gaoshi,” [Announcement of the Education Supervision Bureau] *Ta Kung Pao*, 1 September 1907, p. 3.

¹²⁰ Liaoning Provincial Chorography Compilation Committee Office. *Liaoning shengzhi wenhuazhi*, [Liaoning Provincial Chorography: Culture Volume] Shenyang: Liaoning Science and Technology Press, 1999, pp. 358–359.

¹²¹ “Gesheng jiaoyu huizhi,” [Educational Records of Various Provinces] *Eastern Miscellany*, 1907, no. 11, “Education,” p. 292; “Yingwen yeke kaijiang,” [Opening of English Evening Classes] *Mukden Times*, 19 August 1911, p. 5.

thereby becoming an instrument of grassroots social governance. The participation of Lecture Halls and lecturers in such governance reflected profound changes during the transformation of modern Chinese society: the traditional Four-Stratum Society (*Simin Shehui*)¹²² was gradually loosening, new public institutions and emerging social classes were taking the historical stage, and the pattern of grassroots social governance was being restructured.

6. *The Effectiveness of Lectures*

The effectiveness of the lectures is a central question in the study of Lecture Halls and directly determined their success or failure. Examining effectiveness from the audience's point of view is the most direct approach; the lectures, however, were aimed primarily at the illiterate and poorly educated, who rarely left written records, diaries, or other materials documenting changes in their perceptions, ideas, or thinking. For this reason, accurately measuring the actual influence of the lectures is difficult. To circumvent this limitation in the sources, the present study draws on attendance figures and contemporary newspaper accounts to offer a partial reconstruction.

How many people were influenced by the late Qing Lecture Halls is a question of considerable significance, but contemporary documents tend to record audience numbers in vague and general terms, making precise quantitative reconstruction difficult. In 1907, the *Daciage* Lecture Hall in *Baoding* delivered lectures on agricultural knowledge that drew such a large and crowded audience that tables and stools were broken and the session had to be halted.¹²³ The *Yingkou* Lecture Hall was always packed at its daily sessions, with many people standing outside the gate to listen.¹²⁴ In the remote town of *Xingjing*, lectures hosted by the local hall always drew large crowds and left the venue extremely congested.¹²⁵ As noted earlier, the *Tianqimiao* Lecture Hall maintained an average attendance of between 500 and 700 per session over eight years of lecturing, with grand occasions

¹²² This refers to the traditional Chinese social stratification of scholars (*shi*), farmers (*nong*), artisans (*gong*), and merchants (*shang*).

¹²³ "Xuanjiangsuo shiyan dianying," [Showing Movies at Lecture Halls] *Ta Kung Pao*, 27 June 1907, p. 3.

¹²⁴ "Tingjiangren rijian yongyue," [Attendance at Lectures Increasing Day by Day] *Mukden Shimun*, 31 July 1908, p. 5.

¹²⁵ "Zhengdun Xingjing zhi xinzheng," [New Policies for Reforming Xingjing] *Shenzhou Daily*, 27 September 1907, p. 5.

exceeding a thousand. The *Wuyang* Lecture Hall, during three years of operation, drew 200 to 600 people per session.¹²⁶ The *Wuchang* Second Lecture Hall once suspended a session because of a heavy snowstorm; despite the bitter cold of the following day, more than four hundred people still came to listen.¹²⁷ The *Shunde* Lecture Hall recorded an approximate audience of seventy or eighty per lecture,¹²⁸ and even in the remote *Changshou* County, the local hall drew fifty to ninety daily attendees and held twenty-five sessions per month.¹²⁹ On the basis of these figures and the data in Table 1, a rough estimate is possible: assuming three thousand Lecture Halls nationwide, an average of fifty attendees per lecture, and 150 lectures delivered annually, the total national audience for Lecture Halls would have amounted to approximately 22.5 million people per year.

In comparison with print media, oral lecturing was inherently an embodied practice. Through the operation of sound and the collective physical co-presence of speaker and audience, it created a shared space for emotional transmission, evoking deeper engagement from all participants. A *Heilongjiang* Lecture Hall, for instance, delivered special lectures on local history and the Boxer Uprising that moved all attendees to tears.¹³⁰ On the evening of 14 June 1907, a lecturer at the Lecture Hall of the Fifth School District in the Inner City of *Jingshi* spoke with earnest urgency on the history of Korea's fall; his words were so stirring and forceful that the audience was filled with solemn awe, awakening among them a spirit of self-reliance and self-strengthening.¹³¹ In June 1908, a *Wuchang* Lecture Hall spoke on the Sino-Japanese War, leaving the audience in continuous tears.¹³² Since *Zhao Erxun* had begun promoting

¹²⁶ "Zhi Wuyang xuanjiangsuo shi," *Sin Wan Pao*, 7 July 1908, p. 11; "Fada xuanjiangsuo zhi zuoyong," *Shun Pao*, 29 July 1910, p. 11.

¹²⁷ "Wuchang xuanjiangsuo zhi fada," [The Development of Lecture Halls in Wuchang] *Shenzhou Daily*, 29 January 1910, p. 5.

¹²⁸ "Shundefu Yanshou Ling bing choushe xuanjiangyuebaosuo bing juangou jianyi shizi keben wen fu guize bingpi," [Document by Yan Ling, an Official of Shunde Prefecture, Reporting on the Establishment of Lecture and Newspaper Reading Halls and the Purchase of Simple Literacy Textbooks] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 2449, 1910.

¹²⁹ Heilongjiang Provincial Local Chronicles Compilation Committee (comp.). *Heilongjiangshengzhi jiaoyuzhi*, Harbin: Heilongjiang People's Publishing House, 1996, p. 702.

¹³⁰ "Heisheng yuebaochu xuanjiang shi," [Lecturing on Current Affairs at the Heilongjiang Newspaper Reading Office] *Shuntian Times*, 13 March 1907, p. 4.

¹³¹ "Yanshuo dongren," [A Moving Oration] *Zhili Education Magazine*, no. 10, 1907.

¹³² "Yinglingshi ganyu xuanjiang zhi yuanyin," [Reasons for British Consuls Intervening in Lectures] *Shun Pao*, 20 June 1908, p. 11.

the Lecture Halls in *Shenyang*, attendance had grown steadily, and many among the audience were deeply transformed: on one occasion, after a lecture, three beggars were so moved that they donated all the copper coins they had earned through begging, drawing unanimous praise from those present.¹³³ At the *Andong* Lecture Hall, a small county town in a remote area, an enormous crowd of attendees, including children and the elderly, had gathered for lectures from the moment of its founding; one day, when the topic of “the people of the nation” was delivered, a beggar in attendance immediately donated some money, declaring that he too was a member of the nation’s people.¹³⁴ According to *Ta Kung Pao*, a farmer named *Wang Yucun* of *Zhili* lived in modest circumstances and could barely make ends meet; deeply inspired by the teachings he had heard at the Lecture Hall, he consulted his family, sold 1.6 *mu* of farmland, and donated all the proceeds to the hall.¹³⁵ A man nicknamed “*Yemanzi*” captured the unique communicative value of oral lecturing: everything seen and heard at the Lecture Hall, he remarked, was aimed at enlightening the people and improving social customs; after prolonged immersion and unconscious influence, popular thinking would naturally be transformed. Once audiences understood the principles being taught, they would relay them to neighbours and villagers, producing a spreading effect “from one to ten, and from ten to a hundred,” and thus exerting a wider social influence.¹³⁶ Such individual cases cannot, of course, fully represent the character of the era, nor do they prove that lectures had an equally edifying effect on all people. Nonetheless, they offer clear testimony that the most direct reason peasants, beggars, and other ordinary folk at the bottom of society were so deeply moved, and even moved to make voluntary donations, was the edifying influence of the lectures themselves. The Lecture Halls forged a link between “small people” and the tumultuous changes of their time, bringing individual destinies into resonance with broader currents of social thought. Public lecturing transcended the limits of printed text and physical media, overcoming barriers in the dissemination of new knowledge and new vocabulary; the vocal delivery of the lecture also embodied subtler,

¹³³ “Qigai aiguo,” [Beggars’ Patriotism] *Jin Bao*, 28 June 1906, p. 12.

¹³⁴ “Qigai shangyou aiguoixin,” [Beggars Also Have a Patriot Heart] *Mukden Shimibun*, 21 January 1908, p. 5.

¹³⁵ “Xuanjiang xiaoguo,” [The Effectiveness of Public Lectures] *Ta Kung Pao*, 24 March 1906, p. 5.

¹³⁶ “Shuo kanbao de haochu,” [On the Benefits of Reading Newspapers] *Ta Kung Pao*, 7 July 1905, p. 3.

more approachable, and richer emotions, capable of softening, to a degree, the “hardness” of ideological indoctrination.

The influence of the Lecture Halls must nevertheless be assessed with prudence. Most of the newspapers and periodicals depicting their effects were official in origin, and their accounts often contained exaggeration or excessive optimism. Contemporaries had already identified an inherent limitation: “The establishment of Lecture Halls has for the most part been confined to cities and never extends to remote villages and towns.”¹³⁷ Many halls in fact attracted few visitors and achieved limited results. The *Manzhouli* Lecture Hall in *Heilongjiang* was regarded by local residents as little more than a place of rest; few people listened attentively, and at times it was almost deserted.¹³⁸ Although the magistrate of *Daxing* County actively promoted the New Policies and established four Lecture Halls, attendance remained low and audience response lukewarm.¹³⁹ Even in the imperial capital, some Lecture Halls were located in out-of-the-way places and likewise attracted few visitors.¹⁴⁰ A popular *bamboo branch poem* (*Zhuzhi Ci*) vividly captured the contrast: “Lecture Halls were established and newspapers founded, yet it remained unclear how much popular superstition had actually been eradicated. On the third day of every lunar month, the *Tudi* Temple hosted lecture sessions, where throngs of men and women flocked in droves, all coming to offer incense and floral tributes.” The accompanying note explained: “Lecture Halls and newspapers strove to the utmost to enlighten the people and eradicate superstitions. Nevertheless, the incense offerings at the *Tudi* Temple grew even more abundant than before, which was truly inexplicable.”¹⁴¹ An article in *Ta Kung Pao* entitled “A Glimpse of National Civic Literacy” (*Guomin Chengdu Zhi Yiban*) described the situation in similar terms:

Yet if we look at the Lecture Halls and Newspaper Reading Rooms everywhere, most stand sparsely attended, desolate as empty halls. Even

¹³⁷ “Lun huadao renxin wei jinri difang shenzhi zhize,” [On Cultivating and Guiding Public Minds as the Duty of Local Gentry Today] *Shun Pao*, 17 April 1910, p. 3.

¹³⁸ “Xuanjiangsuo kaijiang qingxing,” [Establishing Situation of Lecture Halls] *Ta Kung Pao*, 31 October 1908, p. 5.

¹³⁹ “Tangling chishe xuanjiangsuo,” [Magistrate Tang Orders the Establishment of Lecture Halls] *Ta Kung Pao*, 31 January 1909, p. 5.

¹⁴⁰ “Sheli xuanjiangsuo,” [Establishing Lecture Halls] *Ta Kung Pao*, 23 February 1907, p. 2.

¹⁴¹ YANG MIREN. *Qingdai Beijing zhuzhici*, [Bamboo Branch Ballads of Beijing in the Qing Dynasty] Beijing: Beijing Publishing House, 2018, p. 136.

when a small number of people come to observe, the speakers expound earnestly and tirelessly, while the listeners remain indifferent and heedless; at times, some cover their ears and turn away, leaving the halls utterly empty. By contrast, the opera houses and vaudeville halls are thronged with crowds, where the audience feels as much at ease as if at home. Whenever a renowned performer takes the stage, the cheers and applause resound incessantly throughout the venue; some even chime in with the arias, ponder every line of the libretto, and grow so absorbed that they fall into a state of complete concentration, much like a Buddhist monk in deep meditation.¹⁴²

The rule forbidding women from attending lectures further restricted the reach and effectiveness of the Lecture Halls. The *Imperially Approved Regulations of the Education Promotion Bureau* stipulated that during lectures all manner of people might enter and listen, and even those in ragged clothes were not to be turned away; only women were temporarily excluded, in order to “guard against potential abuses.” The First Lecture Hall of the southern *Jingshi* explicitly ruled that all people except women were permitted to attend.¹⁴³ The *Guangchang* Lecture Hall enacted the same prohibition,¹⁴⁴ as did the four Lecture Halls established by the magistrate of *Hanyang* County.¹⁴⁵ It is worth reflecting that the enlightenment of the populace, the promotion of female education, the abolition of foot-binding, and the advocacy of women’s rights were themselves core lecture topics intimately connected to women’s vital interests. The contradiction between the vigorous championing of women’s schools and rights and the strict prohibition on women’s attendance at lectures was, in itself, irreconcilable. This evidence cautions us against overestimating the influence of the Lecture Halls; an assessment grounded in a diversity of historical sources should weigh both their achievements and the limitations of their time.

Perhaps most unexpectedly for the Qing court, the Lecture Halls established to rescue its own crisis of rule and to stabilise grassroots order, although formally similar to the early Qing lecturing on the *Sacred Edict*, underwent profound transformations in content, methods, and personnel. They eventually

¹⁴² “Guomin chengdu zhi yiban,” [A Glimpse of National Civic Literacy] *Ta Kung Pao*, 20 June 1909, p. 5.

¹⁴³ “Sheli xuanjiangsuo,” [Establishing Lecture Halls] *Ta Kung Pao*, 20 October 1906.

¹⁴⁴ “Guangchang xuanjiangyuebaosuo zhangcheng,” [General Regulations of the Lecture and Newspaper Reading Hall in Guangchang County] *Jin Newspaper*, 9 March 1909, p. 2.

¹⁴⁵ “Xuanjiangsuo buzhun nvzi tingjiang,” [Women Forbidden from Attending Lecture Halls] *Shun Pao*, 18 October 1908, p. 11.

evolved into a distinctive public space that shook the very foundations of Qing rule. No original sources have yet been discovered showing that the Lecture Halls openly advocated anti-Qing sentiments or directly propagated revolutionary ideas. Even so, their substantial transformation in comparison with traditional lecturing can be examined along several dimensions; the cumulative effect of these subtle yet concrete changes gradually fostered the social forces that ultimately disintegrated the Qing order.

The most striking change occurred in the content of the lectures. As the preceding analysis has shown, the knowledge system and value orientation of the late Qing Lecture Halls underwent a fundamental reorientation. They incorporated a wide range of modern ideas including freedom, equality, democracy, the rule of law, science, public health, constitutionalism, and local self-government, in essential contrast to the loyalty to the monarch, filial piety, Confucian ethical norms, and feudal superstition upheld by traditional lecturing. Works widely adopted by local Lecture Halls included *Required Readings for Nationals* and *Required Readings for Citizens*. In 1905, Yuan Shikai ordered all Lecture Halls in Zhili to adopt *Required Readings for Nationals* uniformly. In 1906 the Ministry of Education listed the work as a “designated text for Lecture Halls” in recognition of its value for civic enlightenment. The book once circulated in as many as 100,000 copies,¹⁴⁶ testifying to its wide dissemination and considerable influence. Statistics show that *Required Readings for Citizens* (First Series) was reprinted as many as twenty-seven times, and *Required Readings for Citizens* (Second Series) sixteen times; the Governor of Guangxi alone purchased 100,000 copies of the First and Second Series in a single batch.¹⁴⁷ Whereas traditional lectures had aimed to produce obedient subjects, these works sought to cultivate modern citizens endowed with democratic and scientific awareness. As contemporary observers noted, once the Lecture Halls had been widely established, ordinary people grew increasingly aware of the connection between their identity as nationals and the destiny of the nation.¹⁴⁸

The Lecture Halls also became an integral part of official political communication. The major late Qing initiatives, including the New Policies reform,

¹⁴⁶ CHEN BAOQUAN, “Yan Fansun xiansheng shilue,” [A Brief Biography of Yan Fansun] *Hebei Monthly*, no. 11, 1936, p. 3.

¹⁴⁷ “Benhui chuban guanggao,” [Advertisement for the Society’s Publications] *Journal of the Preparatory Constitutional Association*, 1909, no. 19.

¹⁴⁸ “Tianjin xuejie shang zhidu yubeilixian bing,” [Petition by Tianjin Academic Circles to the Governor of Zhili Regarding Constitutional Preparation] *Shun Pao*, 25 September 1906, p. 2.

educational transformation, constitutional preparation, and local self-government, relied heavily on the coordination of lectures. By opening government affairs to public view, the Qing court sought to explain the rationale for each policy to the populace and to win their understanding and support. This stood in sharp contrast to the traditional governing model, in which ordinary people were entirely excluded from political affairs and denied any right to political information. At a deeper level, the shift implied that commoners were no longer merely ruled subjects to be controlled, but political allies whom the authorities needed to win over and mobilise. The transformation heralded the formation of a new ideological narrative in which state authority was held to derive from the citizenry as a whole.

The mode of public lecturing likewise displayed a distinct trend toward popularisation and democratisation. Traditional lectures had served as a key instrument of grassroots ideological control, with a highly ritualised communication process; as a political symbol, they embodied the sanctity and supremacy of imperial power and the hierarchical social order.¹⁴⁹ The Lecture Halls dispensed with this ritualised agenda, adopting a simpler and more flexible mode of operation that displayed a markedly popular character. *Zhao Erxun* explicitly regulated the conduct of lecturers: for short journeys they were to go on foot or take a modest sedan chair, without escorting servants and without acquiring the habits of officialdom. They were required to dress plainly in everyday casual

¹⁴⁹ VICTOR H. MAIR offers a brief introduction to the lecture rituals: "Early on the first and fifteenth of every moon, the civil and military officers, dressed in their uniforms, meet in a clean, spacious, public hall. The superintendent or Master of Ceremonies (*li-sheng*) calls aloud, 'Stand forth in files.' They do so, according to their rank: he then says, 'Kneel thrice, and bow the head nine times.' They kneel, and bow to the ground, with their faces towards a platform, on which is placed a board with the Emperor's name. He next calls aloud, 'Rise and retire.' They rise, and all go to a hall, or kind of chapel, where the law is usually read; and where the military and people are assembled, standing round in silence. The Master of Ceremonies then says, 'Respectfully commence.' The orator (*ssu-chiang-sheng*), advancing towards an incense-altar, kneels; reverently takes up the board on which the maxim appointed for the day is written, and ascends a stage with it. An old man receives the board, and puts it down on the stage, fronting the people. Then, commanding silence with a wooden rattle which he carries in his hand, he kneels, and reads it. When he has finished, the Master of Ceremonies calls out, 'Explain such a section, or maxim, of the Sacred Edict.' The orator stands up, and gives the sense." DAVID JOHNSON, ANDREW J. NATHAN, and EVELYN S. Rawski (eds.). *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, p. 352. For a more detailed treatment, see ZHOU ZHENHE. *Shengyu guangxun: jijie yu yanjiu*, Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, 2006, pp. 532–548.

clothes, set aside official arrogance, and stay close to the common people; when elderly villagers, women, or children raised questions, lecturers were to answer them patiently and carefully.¹⁵⁰ The *Fengrun* Lecture Hall installed fixed tables and benches, allowing audiences to sit comfortably and ask questions whenever something remained unclear.¹⁵¹ The *Shuntian* Prefecture Lecture Hall encouraged attendees to express their views freely, in order to pool wisdom and collective insight.¹⁵² The *Xuanhua* Lecture Hall prescribed especially exhaustive standards of conduct: lecturers were ordered to wear plain clothes, discard official robes and bureaucratic pretension when interacting with locals, and abandon official airs entirely. Such an arrangement enabled ordinary people to remain at ease rather than intimidated, allowing lecturers to move them with sincerity and genuine feeling. Only by maintaining an amicable, almost familial relationship with the populace, the regulations argued, could lecturers express their true temperament. In response to pointed or even impetuous inquiries from the audience, lecturers were expected to remain calm and courteous, with a gentle demeanour. Lecturing was to emphasise the transformation of hearts and minds rather than condescending dogmatic preaching; by adhering to this principle, one would naturally find an educational path that stayed close to the people's hearts and led them toward virtue.¹⁵³ The decline of traditional lecture rituals implicitly dismantled the absolute authority of imperial power and officialdom, while the new pattern of equal interaction between lecturers and audiences reflected the emergence and gradual growth of modern egalitarian ideas at the grassroots.

A significant shift also occurred in discursive narration during the lectures themselves. Traditional lecturers typically positioned themselves as condescending preceptors, frequently using forms of address such as “*ni* (you),”

¹⁵⁰ “Hunan xunfu zhao tongchi xuanjiang gongwen,” [Official Circular on Lecture Regulations Issued by the Governor of Hunan] *Political and Art Journal*, no. 16, 1903, pp. 7–9.

¹⁵¹ “Fengrunxian Maling Weiyuan xiangfu zhongmian qingxing ji song mianhua jiangdan wen bingpi,” [Magistrate Ma Weiyuan of Fengrun County’s Detailed Report on Cotton Planting together with Award Lists and Official Comments] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 1766, 1908, pp. 5–6.

¹⁵² “Kai yanshuohui,” [Holding Public Lecturing Meetings] *Ta Kung Pao*, 27 February 1907, p. 2.

¹⁵³ “Xuanhuaxian chengsong yuebaoyanjiusuo ji fushe banri xuetao zhangcheng qingzhe,” [Regulations Submitted by Xuanhua County for the Newspaper Reading Institute and Its Attached Half-Day School] *Beiyang Official Gazette*, no. 479, 1904, pp. 2–3.

“*nimen* (you people),” and “*nimen xiaomin* (you lowly commoners)” to mark hierarchy and status, imbuing their speech with a strong tone of command and instruction. The vernacular books and newspapers used in the Lecture Halls show, by contrast, a marked change in narrative person. *Required Readings for Nationals*, for example, adopted “*wo* (I)” and “*women* (we).” Among the 731 public lecture texts printed in the *Peking Vernacular News*, “*wo*” appeared 691 times, “*women*” 353 times, and “*wo Zhongguo* (our China)” 354 times. This linguistic shift narrowed the psychological and emotional distance between speaker and audience and fostered the emergence of a modern sense of national community and equality.

The composition of the lecturers themselves also underwent a significant generational shift. Traditional lecturers had consisted primarily of officials at all levels and local gentry. The corps of lecturers in the late Qing Lecture Halls was, by contrast, far more diverse and open. Beyond officials and gentry, it drew extensively on returning students from overseas, graduates in law and political science, normal school graduates, primary school teachers, students from new-style modern schools, and graduates of self-government research institutes, among others. As stipulated in the *Imperially Approved Regulations of the Education Promotion Bureau*, normal school graduates and primary school teachers were designated as official lecturers. *Cen Chunxuan*, Viceroy of *Liang-guang*, dispatched returnees from Japan to deliver lectures in prefectures and counties; *Yuan Shikai*, Viceroy of *Zhili*, appointed graduates of law and political science as lecturers in various localities; and educational officials in *Anhui* assigned primary school teachers, normal school graduates, and law and political science graduates as lecturers in prefectures and counties throughout the province. These new-style lecturers had typically received a modern education and possessed a systematic, contemporary knowledge structure; they brought democratic ideas and a scientific spirit, providing solid human-resource support for the modern transformation of lecture content.

In short, the Qing court’s original purpose in establishing the Lecture Halls was to maintain the ruling order, resolve the crises of the era, and strengthen ideological control. In actual practice, however, the halls underwent structural transformation in three key dimensions: content, method, and personnel. In content, they absorbed modern ideas such as freedom, equality, constitutionalism, and local self-government, breaking free from the ideological constraints of traditional loyalty to the sovereign and filial piety. In method, they were de-ritualised and de-hierarchised, emphasising two-way interaction and personal equality and so dissolving the sacred authority of traditional imperial power. In personnel, the old-style officials and gentry gave way to a new intelligentsia (returning students, graduates of law, political science, and normal

schools, and new-style teachers) who carried with them the modern scientific spirit and democratic ideals. These overlapping changes operated over an extended period, gradually causing the Lecture Halls to deviate from their officially intended path. From an instrument designed to preserve dynastic rule, they evolved into grassroots public spaces that disseminated modern ideas, cultivated national consciousness, and corroded traditional ethics and the political order. Imperceptibly, they accumulated the intellectual ground for social change and became an important factor in the collapse of Qing rule.

7. Conclusion

Grassroots moral education through vocal instruction (*Shengjiao*) has a long history in China. As recorded in the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu*), an ancient Chinese classic, “moral education through vocal instruction extended to all corners of the world” (*Shengjiao Qiyu Sihai*). The Han established the *Three Elders* (*Sanlao*) system, and the *township covenant* (*Xiangyue*) system emerged after the Song. The Hongwu Emperor (1328–1398) of the Ming issued the *Six Maxims of the Sacred Edict* (*Shengyu Liuyan*) and founded the *wooden bell lecture* (*Muduo*) system in rural areas. The Qing inherited this Ming institution: the Shunzhi Emperor (1638–1661) promulgated the Ming *Six Maxims of the Sacred Edict* throughout the country, and the Kangxi Emperor (1654–1722) and Yongzheng Emperor (1678–1735) formally established the lecturing on the *Sacred Edict*, a practice that endured for more than two centuries. As successors to that tradition, the Lecture Halls marked the beginning of modern grassroots lecturing in China.

The Lecture Halls did not disappear with the Qing’s collapse. Renamed Popular Lecture Halls (*Tongsu Jiangyansuo*) in the early Republic, they evolved into People’s Education Centres (*Minzhong Jiaoyuguan*) under the Nanjing National Government and into Cultural Centres (*Wenhuaguan*) after the founding of the People’s Republic. Traces of the original Lecture Halls can still be discerned in today’s New Era Civilisation Practice Centres (*Xinshidai Wenming Shijian Zhongxin*). Although their content has differed sharply across periods, these institutions share an essential continuity: “their fundamental spirit lies in transforming the ideas and beliefs of the upper strata into ‘common sense’ in people’s daily lives, and in forging a shared consensus between the higher and lower levels of society.”¹⁵⁴ Their deeper significance lies, perhaps, in the

¹⁵⁴ LI XIAOTI. *Qingmo de xiaceng qimeng yundong (1901–1911)*, Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1998, p. 11.

fact that these lecturing voices not only formed a unique acoustic landscape in China's grassroots society and became a familiar auditory "event" in everyday life, but also filled, to a degree, the gaps where printed texts and administrative power could scarcely reach. In conjunction with official newspapers, school education, and other media, they constructed an integrated system of knowledge popularisation and ideological diffusion from the upper to the lower strata of society.

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Abstract

Lo Xuanjiao (pratica della predicazione pubblica e dell'istruzione morale) è stato a lungo un elemento centrale del sistema cinese di controllo ideologico a livello di base. Questo articolo prende in esame le Xuanjiang Suo (Sale di Conferenza), un'istituzione-chiave per la predicazione di base emersa durante la trasformazione della società cinese moderna. In un contesto di crescenti turbolenze e accelerato mutamento sociale del tardo periodo Qing, la corte imperiale istituì una rete nazionale di predicazione locale incentrata sulle Sale di Conferenza, allo scopo di rispondere ai tempi che cambiavano e di mantenere l'ordine di governo a livello locale. Concentrandosi sulla distribuzione geografica delle Sale di Conferenza, sulla selezione e l'adattamento orale dei testi per le conferenze, nonché sulla formazione e sulle competenze dei conferenzieri, l'articolo analizza sistematicamente le loro forme operative e la logica interna di queste nell'ambito del governo sociale di base. In quanto nodo terminale della comunicazione politica ufficiale, le Sale di Conferenza compensavano in parte la declinante efficacia del controllo ideologico sulla società locale e divennero un importante strumento attraverso cui il governo attuò le Nuove Politiche, affrontò le crisi dell'opinione pubblica e contrastò l'oratoria popolare. Contrariamente alle intenzioni della corte, tuttavia, mutamenti fondamentali nei contenuti, nei metodi e nel personale delle conferenze trasformarono le Sale di Conferenza in spazi che contribuirono al crollo finale del dominio Qing.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Tarda epoca Qing
Sale di Conferenza
Controllo ideologico
Comunicazione politica
Cultura popolare

Abstract

Xuanjiao (the practice of public lecturing and moral instruction) has long been central in China's grassroots system of ideological control. This article examines the Xuanjiangsuo (Lecture Halls), a key grassroots lecturing institution that emerged during the transformation of modern Chinese society. Amid growing turmoil and accelerating social change of the late Qing, the imperial court established a nationwide grassroots lecturing network centered on Lecture Halls in order to respond to the changing times and to maintain ruling order at the local level. Focusing on the geographical distribution of Lecture Halls, the selection and oral adaptation of lecture texts, and the training and skills of lecturers, this article systematically analyzes their operational forms and internal logic of these within grassroots social governance. As the terminal node of official political communication, Lecture Halls partially offset the declining effectiveness of ideological control over local society and became an important instrument through which the government implemented the New Policies, addressed crises in public opinion, and countered popular oratory. Contrary to the court's intentions, however, fundamental shifts in lecture content, methods and personnel turned the Lecture Halls into spaces that contributed to the eventual collapse of Qing rule.

KEYWORDS

Late Qing
Lecture Halls
Ideological control
Political communication
Popular culture