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The Discourse and Practice of the Anti-Superstition Movement in Guangzhou (1929-1936) – Based on The Republican Daily News (Guangzhou)

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Abstract

During the “Ten Years of Construction” (1927–1937), the Nanjing National Government prioritized the elimination of superstition as a critical component of cultural modernization. However, the penetration of state power into local society involved complex negotiations rather than simple top-down implementation. Based on a systematic analysis of The Republican Daily News (Guangzhou), this article examines the discursive construction and practical implementation of the anti-superstition movement in Guangzhou from 1929 to 1936. The study reveals that the definition of “superstition” in Guangzhou was not static but fluid, evolving through phases of radical ideological fervor by the Social Customs Reform Committee, pragmatic legalism by the Social Affairs Bureau, and political instrumentalism under the semi-independent rule of Chen Jitang. In practice, the movement exposed the structural limitations of state capacity. While administrative authorities successfully altered physical landscapes, such as the removal of roadside idols and the conversion of the City God Temple into a market for domestic goods, they struggled to transform underlying social behaviors. The prohibition of divination and astrology largely failed due to the state’s inability to provide adequate economic relief for displaced practitioners, while the public responded to the destruction of idols with strategies of symbolic substitution and spatial relocation. The findings demonstrate that the boundaries of “superstition” were continuously contested and redefined by the interplay of central norms, local governance needs, and resilient social customs. Ultimately, this research highlights the institutional and cultural dilemmas faced by the modern China in its attempt to integrate grassroots society, arguing that cultural transformation is a dynamic process of conflict, compromise, and hybridity.

Keywords: Anti-superstition; Discourse Analysis; State Power; Folk Beliefs; Social Resistance