

Document 10.1 Excerpts from *Tell the People: Talks with James Yen about the Mass Education Movement*, by Pearl S. Buck, 1945

Y.C. James Yen (1893–1990) was born in Sichuan Province. He graduated from Yale University in 1918 and also studied at Princeton. His work with Chinese workers serving the war effort in France during World War I brought him in close contact with working class people, and when he returned to China, he organized the Mass Education and Rural Reconstruction Movement. In 1960, he began the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction. “We work with people not out of pity,” he said, “but out of respect for their potential for growth and development, both as individuals and as communities.” Pearl S. Buck, the daughter of Chinese missionaries, interviewed Yen in the United States.

“You know there are about 1,900 *xian* or counties in China and since the country is predominately rural, the life pattern in one *xian* is very similar to that of another. So we said, ‘Why do we not just choose one *xian* as our social or human laboratory? The chemist has a chemical laboratory, the physicist a physics laboratory, those of us who want to study human problems and solve them ought to have a human laboratory.’ We had been going around to look for this laboratory.”...

“You remember those symbols, five of them, which are enshrined in practically every Chinese home? They are, you remember, these five characters: heaven, earth, emperor, parent, teacher. Teacher, as you see, is ranked side by side with heaven and earth. The teacher shares the homage and worship of the people with heaven and earth as well as parent and king. That tradition, as you know, accounts for the great reverence that the Chinese people, a farmer or laborer, have for the scholar, the teacher. So with an educational atmosphere prevailing in the community, everybody wants to learn, and also to teach. No literate who can teach wants to be left out. Indeed it is a privilege to be a student and an honor to be a teacher.”...

“The dilemma we had as we went along was this: to learn the conditions and the attitudes of the people was wholesome, but where to draw the line? If you have people who are poor, are you going to be poor with them? If you have people who are dirty and unsanitary, do you have to live like them? How to strike a balance? How much to preserve or to construct? How much to destroy? We respect the traditions of the people, and one of the things we always bear in mind is that while we aim to create a new society, we must not forget we are doing it with an old society.”

Source: Buck, Pearl S. *Tell the People: Talks with James Yen About the Mass Education Movement*. New York: John Day Company, 1945. 34, 44–45, 38.