

Document 10.3: Excerpts describing the founding of schools 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.

James Yen was born in China forty-seven years ago, in the province of Sichuan, the son of an old scholar family, which, like all old scholar families in China, had always lived its own cultivated life. It was a life very remote from the people. Some countries have had their aristocracies of birth and some have had aristocracies of wealth, but China has for centuries had an aristocracy of scholars.... Tradition, too, taught them to think that work with the hands was beneath them and that the common man who toiled for his food and shelter was of a class different from the scholar who cultivated his mind and manners.

Into such a family was James Yen born and he was not different from his ancestors except in the age in which he was born. It was an age when China had come into contact with the West, and it had become the fashion to educate the sons not only in the ancient Chinese learning but also in the western learning. Thus this young man, who might have lived out his life as a scholar in the tradition of his family, absorbed in books, in ancient poetry and history, was brought into the life of the new world, too. He was sent abroad to study in America.

But something more than this went into the making of James Yen. He happened to be born at a time that brought him into the First World War. Since he spoke good English

and was intelligent and able, he went to France to help in welfare work for the great numbers of Chinese laborers who were there. . . . [T]hey had families whom they loved and they wanted to write to their families. They went to this young Chinese intellectual who was in charge of them and asked him to write for them.

Before long James Yen learned to respect these men of bitter strength. He had never known them in his own country. They had belonged to a different class there. They were workmen and he was a scholar. . . . He found them ignorant and helpless when it came to expressing themselves on paper, but he knew by watching them that actually they were strong and resourceful and able with their hands. That they could not read and write was no fault of their own. They had never had a chance to learn, for there had been none to teach them. . . . They had lively humor and warm hearts. They were industrious and courageous. There in France this young Chinese intellectual began to be proud of these countrymen of his, whom he had never known before. He began to teach them and he found them both intelligent and eager. They wanted to learn. The more he taught them the more convinced he became that it was a deep injustice that they were illiterate and that to teach the common people of China was what he wanted to do above all else.

But how could this be done? The Chinese written language is complex and difficult. Scholars spend a lifetime perfecting their use of it. To recognize five thousand separate characters is a minimum even for ordinary reading. These five thousand characters, he decided, must be reduced to a much smaller number.

There in France he worked out a simplification of the Chinese language that was to be the basis for the whole scheme of mass education that followed. It was in effect a sort of basic Chinese. He put down to the best of his ability the one thousand characters for the words most used by the men, then he taught these characters to them. But when he taught them, what had they to read? He found that he must supply their reading material. This he did by starting a little newspaper, so that immediately after they had learned their thousand characters, they had something on which they could use them. The whole venture was a great success.

Yet the important thing actually was not that a few thousand Chinese laborers were taught to read. The important thing was what happened to the young scholar. He was deeply shaken by the joy of these men. He saw that they had been suffering under a sense of their own ignorance. They had felt themselves blind because they could not read and write. When he saw them able to read even a little, when he saw what this meant to them, his own conversion was complete.

From that day on James Yen never faltered in what he wanted to do. He made up his mind to go back to China and devote all that he was and all that he had to the plain people of his own country.....

“It was several years before we got to Dingxian. The city or county seat was the obvious place to start,” he said. “We knew the great value of an ‘educational atmosphere.’ Any people who are illiterate and isolated are antagonistic towards anything. You talk about a railroad, they object to it. Public health? They don’t understand it. But if you talk about *dushu* (reading books), they understand that. I suppose this is due to our centuries of traditions, which have cultivated even in the illiterate a kind of reverence for learning. They appreciate *dushu* but they never dreamed that they could do it too. For centuries it has been beyond the farmer. But if you can go to the people and actually show them that they can *dushu*, then half the battle is won....

Also the ‘education atmosphere’ is necessary to get the conservative element in the community, which is the most influential, to allow the young people to study. The young people may be ever so eager, but if the heads of their families do not approve, that would be the end of it—especially for the girls.

“It required weeks of ‘social calls’ and group meetings to set the atmosphere. Then the campaign went on almost of itself. A big meeting of the townspeople elected a council to take charge of it. Schools were drawn in, and students volunteered to serve on recruiting teams. Events led up to a mass meeting and parade all around the town to the gaping

astonishment of the villagers who had come in to town for market day. There was hardly anyone left unaware of the literacy campaign, what it meant, what it stood for. The recruiting teams went from house to house, and there was no peace for a family until every illiterate between twelve and twenty-five had signed.

“Wuhan [general name for the three cities Wuchang, Hankou, and Hanyang] was one of the most successful of our campaigns, and because of its central location and its historic setting it stirred the whole nation.”

I remembered that it was at Wuhan the Chinese Revolution [of 1911] met with its final success and the Republic of China was established.

“At Wuhan, the enrollment of illiterate men and women, girls and boys, went far beyond our expectations. Over 20,000 enrolled, and this created a threatening problem of shortage of teachers. Urgent invitations were sent to the professors and students of the colleges, to principals and teachers of the middle schools and primary schools, for a big mass meeting held at the Central China University at Wuchang. We sent out altogether a thousand invitations. We thought that we would be fortunate if we could get five hundred of these teachers and students to come.

“When the time came, the auditorium of the university was crowded to overflowing. More than 1200 teachers and college students came. It was a great inspiration to me to see the whole sea of keen expectant faces. I spoke for two hours on the importance of the educated members assuming the responsibility of educating the uneducated. In conclusion I made this appeal to the audience, ‘Those of you who are willing to volunteer to teach one hour a day without pay, please stand up.’ Those 1200 men and women rose like one man and offered their services.

But after a campaign like that you have to set up an organization, or it will fizzle out. So at Wuhan we formed a Mass Education Association, and in a quieter way the campaign spread to the villages. Demonstration schools were established in several centers with

‘student teachers,’ young men selected from the district and given brief training. In addition to teaching at least two classes in his own school, each teacher had to get at least ten self-supporting People’s Schools started in the neighboring villages.”

And how was the work done in the villages?

He smiled. “I’ll tell you how we do it now, after all that we learned in those days. The first thing we do is call on the Village Elder. He is like the head of the family. Usually he is known for his fine character, or his philanthropy, or his scholarship. If he doesn’t know anything or doesn’t have much, he is simply a good honest man with gray hair and a long beard, whom everybody respects and loves. You call on him and ask him how many people in the village read. He says I don’t know. What about finding out? He doesn’t care. If we are going to have this village rich and strong it would be a good thing to have it educated. He says that’s impossible. So we begin to tell him about what we have actually accomplished in a big city. (In the city we told the people what we had done in France!) I say, how about trying it in your own village, and have the honor of being the first village to have education? We know the technique. We know how to teach. But you must come out and tell the people what to do. If we tell them they won’t believe it. Then he says, I have a few associates on the Village Council and we must go and call on them. We say fine, but you must do the talking. You must tell them we have already taught the people. You tell them what we have done.... So we’d call on the members of the Council, his associates. We would sip and sip tea and talk. Pretty soon we would find someone who was related to someone in our group, or a friend of a friend. Immediately, you are friends and equals—or even relatives! Then they want you to stay for dinner and they serve you rice wine. Maybe not much but there is friendliness, joviality. So they are very happy. Then we say, how about calling a meeting tomorrow? They say fine. We say, get all the families to come out. Fine! But where? In the temple. Every village, no matter how big or small, how rich or how poor, has a temple with an open-air theatre. These temples also serve as social community centers for these country people. They say, it will be done. They will call a meeting tomorrow and will get all the heads out.

“The people couldn’t read or write so they couldn’t put up a notice about a meeting. A man would go around to each section of the village, a sort of town crier, beating a gong. Everybody would come out and he would announce: Tomorrow at the temple theatre there will be a very important meeting. Everybody must be there. Scholars from the city have come to this village. Everybody is excited. Who would come to our village? It’s too dusty. So they all come to the meeting to find out. They all go on talking until the gong sounds again and everybody grows quiet. The Village Elders are there. The little old ladies, their children and grandchildren, even the dogs! Everybody comes to see us, just as though we were a circus.

“Then the Village Elder starts to speak. ‘I called you together for a very important meeting. It concerns the prestige of this village. These gentlemen are self-sacrificing scholars. They have come to our miserable, despicable village to educate us, to make scholars of us.’ I would get up and talk but I wasn’t too good. Then the Elder would call on one of the men who could speak their jargon—not really a dialect but more like a drawl, like American speech of the deep South. It was important to get one of the local people to talk. He says, ‘Do you have eyes? Everybody here who has eyes, raise his hand.’ They all raise their hands. ‘Can you see me?’ they all answer yes. ‘Here’s a book. How many of you can see this?’ everybody raises his hand again. ‘How many of you can read this?’ Nobody answers. ‘You have eyes, that’s true, but you can’t read. You are just as bad as blind. We have doctors here who can cure this disease. They have studied in Chinese schools and in western schools. They have come to cure your disease. They are very patient. They will keep on treating you until you are cured. If you were really blind, how long would it take to cure you? But these scholars know how to cure your disease in four months! You don’t need to pay any money. You only spend one hour a day. In four months your blindness will be cured.’

“By this time they are all laughing and smiling. They enjoy the talk but don’t believe it. Then he says, “Those who are willing to come to school, hands up! One would very timidly put up his hand and then pull it down again. Then the Village Elder gets impatient. He says, ‘Now look here, Lao Wang, you don’t know how to read. You put

your hand up. Come on, hands up.’ And Lao Wang sheepishly puts up his hand again. Then, perhaps a little twelve-year-old boy raises his hand. In a little while everybody has put up his hand—three or four hundred, depending on the size of the village, and on the Village Elder. If he is good he can get the whole village to sign up. We do not want too many pupils to begin with. So the enrolling is finished that way and perhaps we have thirty or forty for our first class. The Village Elder or one of the rich members perhaps will give us one or two rooms, or sometimes we use the temple. The teacher is one of our trained men. He knows the technique of teaching these people and knows how to draw them out. He starts out with the people who have enrolled in the class but they go back home and talk to their families about it. So when the class goes on you have people peeking in through the windows.

“While we have one of our trained men start the class, we find out who are the literate members, if any, in the village and train them to be teachers. Then, the second week, perhaps, the village teacher will take over the school. That is the typical beginning of a People’s School.

“The first school was really experimental. After we learned the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ we would start three or four demonstration schools in centrally located villages. To these the teachers of the old-fashioned schools and other literate members of the community were invited. Once they saw how practical the teaching material was and how simple the teaching methods, they would start classes of their own and teach the illiterates in their respective communities without pay. These schools, taught and supported by the people themselves, are the ‘People’s Schools.’ The responsibility of staffing and financing the ‘People’s Schools’ falls upon the people. In Dingxian, we conducted only two experimental schools and six demonstration schools for the whole district. But the people of Dingxian ran 471 ‘People’s Schools,’ that is, one for every village, all supported by themselves.

“We soon began to see that when the minds of the people were liberated, they wanted more and they needed more. We realized that literacy alone was not enough. Literacy

isn't education—it is only a tool for education., a means to the whole end. The people had to get an education, which involved the whole of their life. And life in China for them is very unsatisfactory. So their education, if it is of the right kind, should be not so much to fit them *for* life as to *re-make* life. Later you will see how we tackled public health, agriculture, economics and local government.”...

Source: Buck, Pearl S. *Tell the People: Talks with James Yen About the Mass Education Movement*. New York: John Day Company, 1945. 5–8, 17–22.