

Document 10.4: Excerpts describing the Fellow Scholar Association 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.

“Besides teaching many to read the Fellow-Scholar Association is also responsible for ‘wall-news,’” he replied. “That’s writing the essential news of the day in chalk on a wall which has been painted black. There were no newspapers for the farmers until the demand for news was so great that we had to run a weekly called ‘The Farmer.’ It was the first paper ever published for the Chinese farmers in the last three thousand years. The reason is simple. The farmers had never read before.

“Then the radio. We installed a broadcasting station at the county seat, powerful enough to reach the entire county—approximately 400 square miles. The members of the Fellow-Scholar Association had a daily broadcast of useful information about better farming, home improvements, child-care, cooperatives, and health pointers. This began in 1934, when the radio was comparatively new in China and had never been heard of in the rural districts. We had 472 villages but not every village could afford to buy a receiver. We made inexpensive sets and thirty of the larger villages bought them. Each radio receiving station was run by members of the Fellow-Scholar Association. Each day at a regular hour people of the whole village gathered together in front of the receiving station, usually in a temple or an open-air theatre.

“How do our unlettered people know so much about the great events and personalities of Chinese history? It is, as you know, chiefly through the theatre. No matter how poor a village may be you never fail to find an open-air theatre. My colleagues who had specialized in drama made a study of the old Chinese plays. Their aim was to put new spirit and content into the old plays and to write new ones for the people. The Fellow-Scholar Association organized dramatic clubs and theatrical troupes, and traveled from the village to village to perform these plays....

“Members of the Fellow-Scholar Association worked for such other things as the anti-opium movement, road-building and civic improvements in their communities. These community leaders do the spade work of reconstruction in community life. That very work provides the content of our schools, the primary schools for children, the people’s schools for adults, all adapted to the different grades but teaching the same basic things.... We found that two-thirds of the families in Dingxian were in debt. The city bankers weren’t interested in the farmers, yet capital was rotting in the cities for lack of investments. But there were 200 local ‘bankers’ making loans to the poor farmers at 40 per cent interest. After two years of the Self-Help Societies all of these local ‘banks’ were closed down. That didn’t make us very popular with them. In fact, one night several hundred so-called ‘citizens,’ tenants and henchmen of the local ‘bankers’ paraded the streets of Dingxian shouting in unison, ‘Down with the Mass Education Movement.’

He looked sheepish for a second. Then he laughed and said, “They all yelled, down with me!”...

“Let me tell you a word about the cotton project,” he said. “First the cotton farmers produced more cotton because of improved seed, but we found what they gained as better producers, they lost as poor business men. Later all the cotton farmers were trained and they organized their marketing cooperative and shipped their cotton collectively to Tianjin, and sold it directly to the mill owners there. In three years’ time their cotton

business grew from \$120,000 to \$1,800,000. No little cotton merchant exploited them. No middleman 'squeezed' them.

“So as a result of fatter pigs, better seeds, smut control, more eggs per hen, cooperatives for credit, marketing and purchasing, the income of the Dingxian farmer was nearly doubled. If this were applied to all of China and if only one-half of the seventy million farm families used these methods we would have a total increased income of over three billion U.S. currency!

“That is very important, but what is more significant is the training. The fact that farmer Wang is able to produce fifteen per cent more cotton than his ancestors did is a great liberating force in his life. That superstitious mind of his, with its constant fear of demons and evil spirits, is changed into a scientific mind. And he is getting his additional income by cooperating with others. This training in cooperativeness is very essential for a people who are clan-conscious and clan-centered.

“There is much talk nowadays about industrialization in China. I think it is very important. But there is a danger that we think too much of industrialization without realizing it depends upon improved farm economy too. For example, one of the reasons why America has such tremendous productive power is the high efficiency of the American farmer. That is a fact many people overlook. Unless the purchasing power of the rural masses is increased, industrialization cannot be supported. Of the millions of people in Asia, over 80 per cent are rural. If the peoples in this rural continent are left in the backwash of primitive farming and illiteracy, they could easily become instruments of dictators aiming at power and conquest. Under such circumstances no industrialization would be practical or beneficial.”

“Well,” I said, “to get back to your demonstration center at Dingxian, you proved it a success there. But—can it be financed locally? That is important, else how can you spread the technique everywhere? Not every village or county or even nation has a James Yen.”...

“[M]oney is needed only for the primary experimental stage of the work. The stage of application and extension can usually be financed locally. The people themselves are willing to pay for what they get. What actually happened in Dingxian was this. We financed the first two experimental schools and six demonstration schools. But the 471 Peoples’ Schools resulting from these first eight schools were all financed and manned by the people themselves. This is typical....

“All this work was private and not governmental,” I said. “Did the government of China pay no heed to what you were doing for national reconstruction?”

James Yen looked quizzical. “I did not want too much government at first, especially during the earlier years when we did not have a unified national government. We wanted to be free to try out our plans and to uphold our intellectual integrity. We conducted a second experimental center in Hunan [Province], Central China, then a third one in Sichuan [Province], West China. We tried out these experiments in typical regions, under varying conditions, so that we could evolve something that would be nationally applicable. Our aim was for the nation all the time, though we worked in different localities....

“We were just thinking in terms of China and trying to work out methods to meet China’s needs. For instance, we did not recommend the abolition of the Chinese characters. We made use of them. There is tradition behind our characters. But we simplified the learning of those characters so that an average man can learn to read and write easily. In other words, we learned to utilize the best of our heritage. This, by the way, is an important principle to bear in mind in undertaking social reconstruction in any nation.

“After we had taught them to read and write we were faced with the problem of providing reading material for them. China has a rich literature but it is written in *wenli*, the classical medium, and is therefore not for the masses. The drama was democratic and available for all, but the literature was for the aristocracy of scholars. Even the *baihua*

literature¹ now being published is still primarily for the intellectuals and student class, and is far beyond the reaches of the masses, in both vocabulary and content. So our Department of People's Literature went to work writing stories and other literature for the people.

“They had a great deal of difficulty. They had been trained in the classical school. In writing for the people, they must change their standards altogether, and achieve simplicity of expression and directness of appeal, with the limitations imposed by the life experiences of their new reading public.

“The creation of a People's Literature was approached scientifically; the writers were trained in the use of language and they studied at first hand the people for whom they were to write. The subjects were stories from Chinese history, general information about modern China, lives of great men and women of China and other nations, simple accounts of scientific discoveries, descriptions of methods of improving agricultural production, information about common ailments and other health knowledge, plays, poems and songs.

“Of course you had the traditional techniques of the traveling theatres and the wandering story-tellers to help you,” I reminded him. I myself, as a child growing up in the Chinese countryside, had learned my first history and literature from the tongues of the story-tellers on the streets and the plays on the hillsides before the temples.

“We made a special research study of folk songs and folk literature,” he replied. “These are the real living literature of the people. Never written down, but passed on from generation to generation. We had to get those who were familiar with them to recite or sing them while our writers took them down, word for word. Studies of this sort helped to bring our writers to a better understanding of the culture of our race. In folk literature they found a great deal that was fine and true and representative of the best qualities of the Chinese.

¹ Literature in the vernacular; see Chapter 8.

“The Fellow-Scholar Association had the job of getting these books to the rural people. They organized reading clubs and conducted traveling libraries to bring the books to them. There is now a ‘People’s Library’ of over a thousand volumes on all subjects, and these books are sold at a price the farmer can afford. So also through drama and painting and folk art we explored China’s long past. Our Art Department selected out national heroes and heroines, who embodied the best qualities of the race. Large paintings of those national heroes were prepared for the People’s Schools. With each painting was a couplet summing up the greatness of the character, which the students committed to memory; and in addition there was a song written about the same personality, which the students learned to sing.

“History is the most valuable material which is given to a nation for the fashioning of its future. We taught it not by the usual copying of beautiful ideas and ideals as expressed in the classics, but through national ideals as actually lived by men and women of flesh and blood in China’s history.”

“But what about Public Health?” I said. “It’s a very new subject, and western in origin. Did you take our American pattern and apply it to China?”

“No, like education we have to work it out in our own way. In this great country [the U.S.] you have one physician for every 800 of population. China has one modern trained physician for every 70,000 of population! And if we aim to have only one physician for every 2,000 population, we shall need about 225,000 physicians. At the present rate of medical training, it would take 450 years! We have to find something that can be done under the present circumstances.

“We have two rather simple but important tests for all our work. One is, can the people do it? The other is, can the people pay for it? We must start with where the farmer is today. In West China we call a poor man a ‘water-rice’ eater and the well-to-do, a

‘steamed rice’ eater. Americans are enjoying ‘steamed rice’ health, but what we tried to do in China was to give our people at least the ‘water-rice’ in public health....

“We found that nearly thirty per cent of the people who died in Dingxian received no medical attention whatsoever, and 220 of the 472 villages in the *xian* [county] had no medical facilities of any kind. The other 252 villages had “doctors,” who prescribed drugs, which they themselves sold, and not infrequently they were illiterates.

“There was little knowledge of contagion or isolation of infectious diseases. In the delivery of a child, mud was often used to stop the bleeding of the cord. People drank water from wells just a few feet from unprotected latrines. Children with diphtheria and scarlet fever lay in the same bed with the healthy children of the family. Tetanus and smallpox were responsible for a large number of deaths every year.

“That poverty and ignorance are among the chief causes of disease in any country can scarcely be disputed. It’s obvious then that any attempt to improve the health of the farmer without simultaneous efforts to raise the standard of livelihood and general education would surely fail....

“It’s also obvious that for some years to come it will be impossible for the average Chinese village to have a qualified doctor or a qualified nurse. The solution as we see it lies in making the villagers themselves aware of their problem, arousing in them a sense of responsibility for it, and giving them the necessary training to work on it. We used laymen in the villages as the foundation of our community health system....

“The village Health Worker is a Fellow-Scholar and is elected by the Association. He gets a brief concentrated course of training at the *chu* or sub-*xian* health station. He is trained to do five things. One, record the births and deaths of his village; two, vaccinate against smallpox and cholera; three, give simple treatments out of his Health Protection Box, which contains sixteen essential and safe drugs, including ointment for the treatment of trachoma, disinfectants and some sterilized bandages; four, give health talks with

demonstrations and charts prepared by the Health Department; and five, maintain a sanitary well in the village. It's amazing to see the amount of good that a Health Worker can do in a village where no medical facilities ever existed before....

“Then as a sort of health power house for the entire *xian* there is a Health Center, with a hospital and laboratory, offices and classrooms. It trains the workers of the sub-*xian* Health Stations and gives physicians supplementary training. Other lines of work at the center are studies of rural health problems, epidemic control, school health, training of midwives, and birth control. We found it possible to give a minimum of medical relief and health protection to the 400,000 population in the *xian* at a total cost of around \$36,000, or ten cents per capita!”

Source: Buck, Pearl S. *Tell the People: Talks with James Yen About the Mass Education Movement*. New York: John Day Company, 1945. 46–52, 55–60.