James Yen led the Mass Education Movement (MEM) of the May Fourth period, which coordinated local basic literacy programs for an estimated five million people. The MEM then moved to the countryside in 1926 to develop the “Ding Xian Experiment,” a program of economic, political, social, and cultural village reforms that sought to pose a non-Communist alternative to revolution.

James Yen, known to his many American friends as “Jimmy,” represented a patriotic Chinese liberalism that pragmatically addressed mass education and rural reconstruction. Born in the mountains of Sichuan, the young Yen was sent to mission schools, where he became, in his later words, not a “Christian” (implying membership in a foreign institution) but rather “a follower of Christ.” After studying at Hong Kong University, Yen graduated in 1918 from Yale University and worked under the International YMCA with the Chinese Labor Corps in France; he wrote a widely copied literacy primer that used one thousand basic characters.

Yen returned to China in 1921 to head a national mass literacy campaign under the Chinese National YMCA and to marry Alice Huie, a U.S.-born Chinese with whom he had three sons and two daughters. He wrote that “China can never become a truly representative government if the greatest masses of the people are illiterate and ignorant… [or] expect to put a stop or check to the present prevailing corrupt and unscrupulous officialdom if there is not a public opinion formed to battle against it” (Hayford 1990). He adapted the publicity and organization techniques of the YMCA’s science education campaigns and, using non-professionalized teachers in neighborhood classes.
scheduled with the flexibility of the traditional village school, produced a campaign (yundong) model used in hundreds of localities that attracted more than 5 million students (Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong taught in a 1922 campaign). In 1923 Yen and leading intellectuals formed the National Association of Mass Education Movements (MEM).

For the illiterates who lived in villages, illiteracy was not their fundamental problem. In 1926 the MEM set up a village campaign in Ding Xian 定縣河北, a county some 321 kilometers south of Beijing. Rejecting the radical approach, Yen saw “farmers” in need of education and support, not “peasants” in need of class war. In 1928 Yen received an honorary graduate degree from Yale, raised a substantial endowment in the United States, and then enlisted socially conscious specialists to develop the Four Fold Program in rural reconstruction. The Ting Hsien (Ding Xian) Experiment, a kind of commune based on family farming, sponsored People’s Schools, coordinated innovations ranging from breeding hybrid pigs to setting up economic cooperatives, and incorporated existing aspects of village life, like industry and the expertise of local health workers, to further benefit its residents.

By 1931 these successes excited nationwide public and government interest. Yen joined Liang Shuming and other independent reformers to form the National Rural Reconstruction Movement 鄉村建設運動 (Xiangcun jianshe yundong) comprising hundreds of organizations. The 1937 Japanese invasion drove MEM operations first to Hunan, then to Sichuan, but Yen spent much of the war in Washington, D.C. After 1945 Yen found himself increasingly at odds with the Nationalist (Guomindang) government’s military preoccupation; in 1948 he persuaded the U.S. Congress to fund the independent Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction, of which he became one of the commissioners. After 1949 Yen led the Philippines Rural Reconstruction Movement and founded the International Rural Reconstruction Movement, which he headed until his death in New York City in the autumn of 1990.

Charles W. HAYFORD

Further Reading


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