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### **2013 CUL Grant Research Report**

I used the Columbia University Libraries 2013 Research award to conduct research vital to my dissertation, which investigates the development of China's first popular education programs during the late Qing and early Republican period (1898-1937), which a focus on how education reformers understood the relationship between literacy and citizenship. From July 28<sup>th</sup> through August 16<sup>th</sup>, I conducted archival research using materials at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, and using microfiche materials available through general circulation at Columbia. While at Columbia, my research focused primarily on the records of the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR), and specifically the institutional records of the Chinese National Association of Mass Education Movements (MEM), co-founded by James Yen in 1923. These materials will form the evidentiary basis for my dissertation's fifth chapter, entitled "Reevaluating Literacy: The Evolution of People's Education and Local Experiments in the Rural Reconstruction Movement, 1926-1934."

Of the documents I accessed while at Columbia, the most important were the promotional materials, fundraising letters, and public speeches outlining the goals and accomplishments of the Mass Education Movement's signature pedagogical initiative: a system of "people's schools" (*pingmin xuexiao*) and village-level civic organizations established in Dingxian, a county in modern day Hubei province, 200 miles south of Beijing. The majority of these materials were accessed as part of the IIRR archive, housed by the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, but I also accessed important early newsletters about Dingxian at Burke Library. Nearly all such documents were emblazoned with the MEM's slogan, "To Eliminate Illiteracy and Make New Citizens," and their contents reveal the ways in which MEM staff members understood the relationship between these two goals, as well as how they expressed this relationship to local political leaders, Chinese educational organizations, and overseas investors such as John D Rockefeller. Often, these understandings of how to "make new citizens," varied considerably. The organization's English language secretary Ellen Auchincloss, writing for the alumni bulletin

of her former boarding school back in New York City, even suggested that the purpose of the experiment was as much “*to find out* the meaning of citizenship in modern China,” as it was to actually educate villagers about how to become citizens. The differing ways in which James Yen and other leaders of the Dingxian experiment promoted their endeavors in publications like *Asia* and *The Yale Review*, or explained their ongoing efforts to members and trustees of the American Cooperating Committee of the MEM show how the organization constantly produced new understandings of the meaning of citizenship to address the expectations of international audiences.

Archived personal correspondence between James Yen and close friend Sydney Gamble proved vital in demonstrating the extent to which the MEM staff was courted by local warlords and other major political powers like the Nationalist Party. Despite being focused on the process of establishing civic education in Dingxian, these letters reveal that James Yen was determined not to align himself with any particular political power, despite repeated requests from rising leaders like Chiang Kaishek. On the one hand these letters reveal the ways in which Yen articulated a new form of civic engagement centered on the rural county rather than the nation. On the other hand, they also reveal the ways in which, despite Yen’s protests, national leaders drew inspiration from Dingxian in constructing their own popular education projects.

Finally, the IIRR archives also included many of the Chinese language publications produced by the MEM staff, including village dramas, civic readers, and informational pamphlets on agronomics and environmental science. I also accessed microfiche copies of the MEM’s signature journal, *Nongmin* [The Farmer], which was the first vernacular publication produced specifically for rural communities of new readers. These materials, which often constituted the bulk of the “people’s libraries” established by MEM illustrate how the organization’s pedagogical aims were actually presented to students, and reveal the degree to which the MEM articulated a new understanding of popular education. Whereas previous popular education efforts (including Yen’s early efforts teaching literacy in urban China) focused on literacy as a moral imperative, these village teaching materials positioned literacy not as a normative moral good, but rather as a practical means to become an economically productive citizen. In sum, the archival materials at Columbia help demonstrate the ways in which the Dingxian experiment not only drew upon previously circulating ideas about citizenship and

literacy, but actually produced new notions about what it meant to be a citizen and about how to understand the relationship between individuals and the modern Chinese state.

I often feel that the best research arises from a conversation between a historian's own questions and the archives themselves, and there is one instance in which the archives at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library interjected themselves into my project in ways that my research questions had not anticipated. On my first day in the archive, I discovered that I had used the wrong finding aid to order my materials, and thus found myself with a completely random selection of boxes that, while taken from the IIRR archives, were mostly from the 1940s and 1950s, and thus outside the chronological bounds of my dissertation. Indeed, following the lead of many other Chinese historians, I had naively assumed that the Japanese invasion in 1937 put a firm stop to any ongoing popular education projects in the countryside, as most national state actors mobilized themselves to stop the Japanese threat. Nevertheless, as I did not wish to waste any time in the archives, I gamely decided to sift through these materials anyway, in hopes that I might find correspondence from MEM members reflecting on the Dingxian Experiment launched decades earlier. What I found instead was an ongoing, robust effort to promote new Mass Education initiatives in the context of the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949), which Yen frequently liked to claim would be won "not on the battlefield, but the rice field." The robustness with which the MEM continued its operations through the war against Japan and afterwards has caused me to reconsider the chronology of my dissertation and has even given me ideas for a future project on the "People's Films" program, for which Yen sought the collaboration of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America.

Prior to visiting the archives at Columbia University Libraries, all of my archival work for this dissertation had been conducted in mainland China, where so much historical material is available only through digitized collections, if it is accessible at all. An unfortunate consequence of this trend toward digitization is that researchers often only find what they are explicitly looking for, and nothing else. I was incredibly thankful to have the opportunity to work with the IIRR archives at Columbia University Libraries, as much for the ways that the materials challenged my research questions as for the ways that they helped me answer them. I also deeply appreciated the help of the staff at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library and the Burke Library, who made my brief trip to New York one of the most pleasant and productive archival experiences of my career.