



Experimenting with a global panacea: UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme in China, 1945–1950

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Abstract

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was set up in the aftermath of World War II with the mandate of safeguarding global peace by promoting international intellectual cooperation across national boundaries. UNESCO's first flagship educational initiative, launched in 1946, was the Fundamental Education programme, which ran until 1958. This article traces the role of China in the history of this UNESCO project, both in terms of inspiring the initial concept and in terms of piloting it. The author maps out a transnational network of concepts, ideas, people, institutions, funds, etc. that shaped the programme. Informed by scientific experimental methodology, the design of UNESCO's ambitious Fundamental Education initiative was to implement long-term, systematic and comprehensive schemes addressing illiteracy, public health, civil education and livelihood, etc. While the actors collaborating in this project shared some beliefs, their group as a whole reflected a divergent ideational spectrum, represented multiple interest groups, and was intertwined with both local and international politics. In the case of the interventions designed for piloting in China, these circumstances, as well as the multiple challenges of post-World War II reconstruction, the Chinese civil war and the Cold War had the effect of reducing the original concept to a small snapshot pilot project, limited to a specific subject ("the healthy village"). The article concludes with a consideration of the historical legacy of the cooperation between UNESCO and China in later decades.

Keywords UNESCO · Fundamental Education Programme · Modern China · Mass education · Rural reconstruction

Résumé

Expérimentation d'une panacée : le programme d'éducation de base de l'UNESCO en Chine, de 1945 à 1950 – Créée au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, l'Organisation des Nations unies pour l'éducation, la science et la culture (UNESCO)

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reçut pour mission de préserver la paix mondiale en promouvant la coopération intellectuelle internationale entre les pays. Le programme d'éducation de base, lancé en 1946 et mené jusqu'en 1958, fut son premier projet phare. Le présent article retrace le rôle de la Chine dans l'histoire de ce projet de l'UNESCO, tant du point de vue de l'inspiration qu'elle insuffla au concept initial que de la façon dont elle l'expérimenta. L'autrice délimite un réseau transnational de concepts, d'idées, de personnes, d'institutions, de fonds, etc. qui ont modelé le programme. S'appuyant sur une méthode scientifique expérimentale, la conception de l'ambitieux projet d'éducation de base de l'UNESCO consistait à mettre en œuvre des dispositifs systématiques et complets de longue durée consacrés à l'illettrisme, à la santé publique, à l'éducation civique, aux moyens de gagner sa vie, etc. Certes, les participants au projet partageaient un certain nombre de croyances, mais globalement, le groupe qu'ils formaient reflétait un éventail idéationnel divergent, représentait des groupes d'intérêt divers et était étroitement lié à des politiques tant locales qu'internationales. En ce qui concerne les interventions qui devaient être expérimentées en Chine, cette conjoncture, ajoutée aux multiples difficultés liées à la reconstruction de l'après-guerre, à la guerre civile chinoise et à la guerre froide, eut pour effet de réduire le concept d'origine à un projet pilote de petite envergure, limité à un sujet particulier (« le village en bonne santé »). L'article s'achève sur une réflexion concernant l'héritage historique de la coopération entre l'UNESCO et la Chine des décennies plus tard.

Introduction

The first flagship project in education implemented by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – the intellectual spearhead of the United Nations (UN) established in the post-World War II era – was the Fundamental Education programme. Its purpose was to “contribute to the development of well-rounded, responsible members of society” (Boel 2016, p. 153, quoting from an internal UNESCO memorandum). In an article entitled “Fundamental Education” published in the *UNESCO Courier*, British diplomat and educationist John Bowers, who was in charge of the programme for 20 years, wrote

All over the world interesting and important enterprises are contributing to the Fundamental Education movement. They include territory-wide undertakings like the Chinese Mass Education Movement or the Mexican Cultural Missions, tribal development schemes, such as are growing up in Africa, village improvement projects in India, literacy campaigns now being carried out in Brazil and the South American countries, Teachers' Training Schools, Medical or Agricultural L. C. Extension schemes, or major economic development undertakings, such as the British Overseas Food Corporation's Groundnuts Scheme in Tanganyika (Bowers 1948, p. 4).

Its origins, inception, development and phase-out have attracted much attention from academia. Ever since its launch in 1946, scholars have critically reviewed the initiative in general and the pilot project in Haiti in particular (Dobinson 1953,

pp. 121–130; Mulugeta 1963; Jones 1988, pp. 47–81; Boel 2016). American international relations scholar Ronald C. Nairn's monograph on UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme in Thailand argues that UNESCO and its associated agencies in Thailand attempted to change aspects of a Southeast Asian society by introducing Western values using nothing more than the colonial power of persuasion (Nairn 1966, p. 192). However, China – one of the most populous countries in Asia – is only briefly mentioned in the growing body of literature on the history of UNESCO's post-war Fundamental Education campaign (Dorn and Ghodsee 2012; Verna 2015; Boel 2016; Druick 2020).

Networks consisting of relations among interacting social entities, their patterns and the implications of these relations have been a fascinating research subject in social sciences for some years, e.g. in actor-network theory (ANT) in sociology (Latour 2005) or in social network analysis (Wasserman and Faust 2009). Scholars note that cross-border (either transnational¹ or international) networks play a significant role in a subset of global issues, since experts communicate with one another and produce an international community whose ideas and practices permeate national boundaries (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Rodogno et al. 2015). Historians of education have investigated how intergovernmental organisations such as the League of Nations became the centre and main agent for the establishment of new educational networks (Fuchs 2007a, 2007b). According to Nigerian diplomat Michael Omolewa, who was President of UNESCO's 32th General Conference in 2003, UNESCO discovered very early in its history that it did not have a monopoly for promoting dialogue and conducting meetings and workshops and it was aware of other organisations and institutions that had long been holding meetings and conferences (Omolewa 2007). Throughout its history, "UNESCO as a network and promoter of other networks" as coined by Omolewa (*ibid.*, p. 211), has sought to foster the spirit of cooperation, understanding and partnership among its various Member States and multiple stakeholders through conferences, workshops and seminars (*ibid.*). Educational sociologist Maren Elfert has vividly depicted this multilateralism or even multi-stakeholderism using the case of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in Hamburg as an example (Elfert 2013).

In tracing the roots and routes of UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme, scholars also unfold a transnational network involving the British New Educational Fellowship (NEF), the American Progressive Education Association (PEA), the Rockefeller Foundation and a few other players (Jenkins 1989; Watras 2007, 2011; Verna 2015) – but Chinese expertise is either not featured at all, or only on the margins. While the existing literature does mention two Chinese names – James Yen and Dr Kuo Yu-Shou² (1901–1977) – this tends to occur without further examination

¹ As pointed out in a recent article by Alvina Hoffmann, "the 'transnational' entered the discipline of International Relations (IR)" in 1971 (Hoffmann 2021, p. 1). She adds that Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane "circumscribed transnational relations as 'contacts, coalitions, and interactions across state boundaries that are not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of government'" (*ibid.*, referring to Nye and Keohane 1971, p. 331).

² In Pinyin (romanised spelling of Mandarin Chinese), his name is spelled Guo Youshou, and I refer to him as such throughout the rest of this article.

of their work. Hence, the trajectory and the nuanced history of UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme – particularly its initiation in the immediate post-war era, its critique and politicisation during the Cold War, and its phase-out in the late 1950s – are often depicted without any Chinese input. The question arises, however, how this can be transnational if there is a cultural imbalance (i.e. an overrepresentation of the Western world) in the composition of the network. It is against this backdrop that this article intends to bring in the forgotten and downplayed collaborative input of modern China and uncover the lost link in the history of UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme.

In this article, I analyse both original archive materials and secondary resources to map out the emergence, interaction, and evolution of a transnational network in the making of UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme. The main part of this article is organised into four sections. I begin with a review of the emergence of a collaborative network underlying the mass education/rural reconstruction movement in modern China. This section focuses on analysing shared values and divergent goals of major educationists and foreign agents engaged in this network. The next section traces the evolution and potential of this network in framing debates, setting agendas, and influencing the discursive positions of UNESCO and its Member States regarding the promotion of its Fundamental Education programme. The third section tracks how this network was created in the context of an international conference, where the actors defined an issue area, convinced Chinese policymakers and experts, and recommended solutions. This section also looks into the challenges of implementing the action plan and the adaptative strategies adopted by Hugh Hubbard, one of the key actors. The fourth section delves into the joint UNESCO–China pilot project, analyses the enablers and constraints during its implementation, and discusses the short-term effect and long-term legacy of the educational cooperation between UNESCO and China. Finally, the conclusion at the end of this article provides a summary of the insights emerging from the four sections.

The mass education/rural reconstruction movement: an existing network for reconstructing the “sick man” of East Asia

After a series of overwhelming defeats by the imperial powers, China became the “sick man of the Far East [who] was lying on his deathbed” in the late 19th century (Heinrich 2008; R. Yang 2010a; Wagner 2011). Throughout the century of national humiliation, the “sick man of East Asia” has probably been one of the most famous metaphors among ethnic Chinese at home and abroad, especially among Chinese intellectuals. Influenced by evolutionary theory and social organism³ translated from British liberal works (e.g. Mill 2006 [1859]; Spencer 1873; Huxley 2009 [1893]),⁴ Chinese intellectual elites explored new nationhood to remedy the image of a

³ *Social organism* refers to the idea that society is a living organism (which therefore can become “sick” when parts of its “body” are suffering due to bad conditions).

⁴ The Chinese reformist thinker Yan Fu (1854–1921) played an important role in translating Western liberal works into Chinese (Schwartz 1964, Huang 2008).

dysfunctional and backward country and society (Schwartz 1964; Zhou 2015). They sought to reconstruct a strong nation based upon an organic community consisting of healthy, cultivated, virtuous individuals, and vibrant social groups (Fu 2017; Wan 2019). The expectation that Western expertise would enhance China's national strength led modern Chinese political and intellectual elites to adopt a functionalist and pragmatic approach towards knowledge and education (Yeh 1984). Hence, long before the popularisation of "human capital theory" (e.g. Schultz 1961) in the 1960s, many Chinese educationists had already promoted capacity building among the Chinese populace by setting up various educational associations and conducting educational campaigns during the first half of the 20th century (Pepper 2010). It is estimated that there were more than 600 groups and 1,000 experimental zones in operation in China, constituting a networked system for mass education with a diverse ideational spectrum (Zheng 2000).

One of the well-known and typical associations was the National Association of the Mass Education Movement (中华平民教育促进会; MEM). Set up in 1923, MEM involved educational officials, reformist intellectuals, and educationists such as Y. C. James Yen (Yan Yangchu 1893–1990) (Hayford 1990). James Yen was born in 1893 to a Confucian family in west China. But he received his primary education from a Christian missionary school, and graduated in the United States (US). During his studies at Yale University, he built a close network with foreign missionaries and American liberal elites. As a part of his service with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in France, he taught illiterate members of the Chinese Labor Corps (CLC) during World War I to read and write (McEvoy 1976a [1943]). To lower the barrier for learners, he developed a manual of *The People's Thousand Characters Lessons* (Yen 1927) and went on to launch literacy campaigns to teach the illiterate urban population in many Chinese cities, including Changsha, where the future leader of communist China – Mao Zedong (1893–1976) -- once participated as a volunteer teacher (Xu 2002).

The most important philosophy influencing Yen's MEM approach was Confucianism. During the transitional period from monarchy to republic in the 20th Century, many modern Chinese elites still held with Confucian statecraft that the welfare of the mass people is the fundamental resource of a state's legitimacy. Yen's favourite quote from one of the Confucian classics – *The Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚书) is that "People are the foundation of the nation. If the foundation is firm, then the nation will enjoy tranquillity" (*min wei bang ben, ben gu bang ning* 民为邦本, 本固邦宁) (Yen 2015a [1922]). Yen acknowledged the necessity to develop and mobilise the intellectual potential of the people to the greatest extent to build up a firm "foundation" for China (Yen 1976 [1925], 2015f [1935]).

But Chinese educationists realised that literacy education is not sufficient to enlighten the people and eradicate ignorance. As Yen diagnosed more profound and interlocking symptoms of "illness" (*bing xiang* 病象) in the "foundation of the people", namely ignorance (*yu* 愚), poverty (*pin* 贫), illness (*ruo* 弱) and selfishness (*si* 私), he developed a more comprehensive programme (Yen 2015g [1937], p. 216). To remedy these symptoms of the "foundation", Yen gradually formulated a four-part interlocking programme that included literacy (and arts) education; livelihood education; civic education; and hygiene education (Yen

2015b [1927], p. 78; 2015c, [1934a]). Having realised that the majority of the Chinese people lived in the country's vast underdeveloped rural areas, Yen figured out that the task of rebuilding the foundation needed to focus on rural villagers (Yen 2015d [1934b], p. 88; 2015e [1934c]; 2015f [1935]). Accordingly, Yen-led MEM shifted the city-centred approach to a rural-based one in 1926.

In addition to Chinese tradition, an intellectual component of MEM was the experimentalism informed by American philosopher and educator John Dewey's (1859–1952) pragmatism (Sizer 1966; Keenan 1977; Zou 2010). The ideas put forward by Dewey (1925, 1954 [1916], 1997 [1916]), promoter of progressive education in the US, prompted his disciple, Chinese liberal intellectual Hu Shi, to advocate gradualist (i.e. step-by-step) reform in China and call for more investigation into practical problems (Luo 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). This experimentalist approach – which involves problem formulation, factual investigation, hypothesis, experiment and verification – inspired a large-scale movement of sociological surveys and educational experiments in China (Keenan 1977; Lam 2011).

Deweyan pragmatic theory also prompted Yen to set up a social laboratory in Dingxian, a village in north China, for a gradualist liberal reform experiment. The experiment in Dingxian was one of the most influential educational experiments and led to more similar experiments in modern China (Yen 2015h [1946]). Yen's former MEM colleague Tao Xingzhi (1891–1946), who began his experiment in Xiaozhuang, also aimed to achieve an integration of Neo-Confucianism and Deweyan experimentalist pragmatism (Brown 1990). Another important figure was Liang Shuming (1893–1988), a Confucian-Buddhist-inspired cultural conservative, who absorbed some elements from modernism. He sought to revitalise the neo-Confucian “community compact” system as a mechanism for experimenting with rural reconstruction that aimed at moral improvement, mass mobilisation, political participation, economic and technological development, and even military self-defence (van Slyke 1959; Alitto 1976, 1986 [1979]).

James Yen was a Chinese Christian, but more foreign missionaries sent out to China by the YMCA and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) were involved in the mass education/rural reconstruction movement and were highly interactive with Chinese educationists. One such foreign player was Hugh W. Hubbard, the son of two Swiss Congregational missionaries in Turkey, who arrived in Tianjin in 1908 to serve YMCA as a teacher (Hubbard 1989, p. 6). When he worked for ABCFM in North China in Baoding, he conducted a series of literacy campaigns that used Yen's *The People's Thousand Characters Lessons* (Yen 1927) as teaching material (Hubbard 1989, p. 35). Later, after joining the North China Christian Rural Service Union in 1923, Hubbard embarked on his rural reconstruction experiment and recruited both Chinese and American missionaries for his “village laboratory” (Hubbard 1989, pp. 39, 242). Lamenting Chinese farmers' suffering from poverty, starvation, economic burdens, tradition, social pressure, etc., Hubbard dedicated himself to “preaching the gospel” by reconstructing the entire community on the principles of the kingdom of God (Hubbard 1939). Initially inspired by Yen, Hubbard's work became parallel to that of Yen. Like Yen, Hubbard also expanded the village experiment into an integrated programme that went beyond literacy campaigns and encompassed

agriculture, cooperatives, handicrafts, public health, etc., thereby addressing local farmers' needs (Hubbard 1989, p. 64).

The rural reconstruction network also connected with the community of Chinese social scientists who sought to introduce scientific spirit and rational methodology as efficient ways of reconstructing the dysfunctional social, political and economic systems of a decaying China (Keenan 1977). A number of Chinese educationists set up research institutes in small towns and recruited modern college graduates. For instance, Tao Xingzhi set up the Xiaozhuang Experimenting Normal School, while Liang Shuming led the Academy of Rural Construction of Shandong (Schoppa 1989; Chi 2013; Huang and Li 2014). Yen himself set up the National College of Rural Reconstruction in 1940, seeking to compare and synthesise the observations and practices of previous experiments, turning them into scientific knowledge which college students would apply to transform Chinese villages and villagers (Qu 1976 [1947]).

Many Chinese sociologists affiliated with academic institutions such as Nankai University and Yenching University were also connected to the patronage network of American philanthropists such as the Rockefeller Foundation (Chiang 2001). To carry out a concerted rural reform in China, the Rockefeller Foundation tried to forge cooperation among Chinese educationists such as Yen, foreign missionaries like Hubbard, and social scientists. The Rockefeller Foundation envisioned that the experiments in China would apply and test social theory generated from the American experience like that of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)⁵ (Ekbladh 2002, 2000). In the design of the Foundation's cooperation concept, the lessons learned through the China lab would also inform social and economic reform efforts in other areas and regions where the Rockefeller Foundation had a presence (Mitter 2019). The idea was that the social science community might be able to synthesise a universal experience that could be useful in other underdeveloped communities around the globe. Thus, this collaboration was not limited to one-way traffic, since the ideas, methods and institutions being shared would circulate in the US, Europe, the Caribbean, the Philippines and China (Ekbladh 2010).

These educational activities were downscaled at the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945). But the experience and the collaboration in experimenting with education-driven rural development were useful for UNESCO's post-World War II reconstruction in underdeveloped countries. Instead of relating UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme to a new form of Western colonialism or "civilizing missions" as Joseph Watras and Ronald Nairn term it (Watras 2007; Nairn 1966), it is possible to discern a more nuanced, fluid and dynamic collaborative resource of shared and divergent ideas, persons, institutions, practices and funds, etc. circulating between China and the West. Chinese experimental educationists such as Yen and his peers accommodated Deweyan

⁵ The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was an agency set up in 1933 to provide electricity generation, flood control, fertiliser manufacturing, regional planning and general economic development to the American region of Tennessee, which had suffered particularly badly during the years of the Depression (1929–1939).

pragmatism with Confucianism in promoting mass education/rural reconstruction. While foreign missionaries like Hubbard brought in the heavy tone of social gospel dedicated to Christianity, the Chinese educationists were inspired by the nationalist motivation of national salvation and rejuvenation, thus contributing to nation-building.

UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme: a scientific experiment aiming to build the common foundation of humanity

The founding countries of the UN (created in San Francisco in October 1945) had experienced the common threat to humankind from the devastating Second World War, and this had fostered a shared desire for establishing a permanent world organisation to maintain peace. Focusing on the potential of education in this quest, the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education (CAME) convened in London as early as 1942 (i.e. before the end of the war) to discuss educational reconstruction, and continued its work until 1945. One of the outcomes was the decision to establish a permanent organisation for promoting international cooperation in education after the war. A Preparatory Commission to set up such an organisation (UNESCO) was formed, chaired by British classical scholar, historian and political scientist Sir Alfred Zimmern (1879–1957) as its Secretary-General. His insistence that this post-war UN agency, founded in London in November 1945, should launch a worldwide campaign of eradicating ignorance and illiteracy received wide approval.

After the traumatic consequences of World War II, immediately followed by full-scale civil war, China needed all kinds of aid to rehabilitate and reconstruct educational, scientific and cultural life (Mitter 2013). But China's involvement in the preparation of the creation of UNESCO particularly accelerated the discussion that linked education to development. As demonstrated above, literacy education was not a panacea to remedy the ailments of the "sick man". China's mass education/rural reconstruction movement developed the experimental education-driven rural community development model. James Yen's MEM assistant, Qu Shiyang (1901–1976) was among Chinese delegates attending UNESCO's founding conference in London in November 1945. He spoke on behalf of MEM and promoted the experiments on literacy education and comprehensive societal reconstruction in China.

After an interview with Yen in 1945 in which he introduced MEM and its potential for the world, American Nobel prize winning writer Pearl S. Buck (1892–1973) called for concerted action of post-war reconstruction. She appealed that

Here is the record of a plan already at work for twenty-five years, already consciously tested for just such a problem as the world faces today. The plan was made by a Chinese [James Yen] and put to work for China. ... a country where three-fourths of the people were illiterate, at the mercy of disease, badly governed. ... War struck before the work was complete, but the tests had been made and the plan is ready to put into action, not only all over China but everywhere. ... anywhere where there are people who are hungry and illiterate and badly governed (Buck 1959 [1945]).

The popularity of Pearl S. Buck among readers worldwide helped to boost the reputation of MEM and highlighted the necessity of undertaking thorough reconstruction instead of conducting a mere literacy campaign to rebuild the foundation for the war-torn world.

The experimental education-driven rural community development model was also highly resonant with scientific humanism – the short-lived unofficial philosophy of UNESCO proposed by its first Director-General, Julian Huxley (1887–1975) – and his vision of post-war reconstruction for the vast dependent colonies. Born into a family of biologists, with his grandfather Thomas Huxley (1825–1895) a staunch defender of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Huxley also incorporated evolutionary biology into his philosophical work for UNESCO (Huxley 1946). Scientific humanism holds that the progress of humanity is based on the facts of biological adaptation and advance, brought about through Darwinian selection (Huxley 1972, p. 15). Scientific humanism casts a modern linear concept of temporality, implying advancement, even progress, with increased human control and conservation of the environment and natural forces.

Chinese experimental educationists embraced scientific humanism to varying degrees. This was partly because of UNESCO's significant role and Huxley's leadership at UNESCO and partly because his grandfather Thomas Huxley was very popular among Chinese intellectuals (Huxley 2009 [1893]; Chen 1947, pp. 23–29; Schwartz 1964). Bearing in mind the experience of British colonial education in Africa, Huxley believed that the more structural causes of the inequalities between developed colonial powers and underdeveloped colonies could be programmatically dealt with through “fundamental education” (Sluga 2010, p. 404). The intervention would involve applying scientific research and a scientific spirit to solving social problems in the future of humankind, which Huxley defined as policy based on facts (i.e. excluding prejudice, tradition, authority), and studies on society and social experiments such as TVA (Huxley 1948).

Hence, the scientific education-driven development initiative began with collecting “a view from everywhere” (Selcer 2009). UNESCO experts sought to compare and synthesise the experience abstracted from pilot projects worldwide, to obtain an objective view of social phenomena and thus provide a universal epistemology that would enable diverse peoples to collaborate on building a world community (Selcer 2011, p. 55, 2009). On 12 June 1946, the Secretariat of the Preparatory Commission of UNESCO sent survey papers to 14 experts from different countries, asking for their contribution to this topic and reports from other experts because there was no time to obtain first-hand data worldwide (UNESCO 1947a, p. 21). In his capacity as an experienced Chinese educational official, Dr Guo Youshou attended these internal expert meetings as a Senior Counsellor of UNESCO's Education Section, and presented a “recommendation for the appointment of a Commission on Fundamental Education” (UNESCO 1947a, p. 12, 1947c). This resulted in the creation of an Editorial Committee dedicated to Fundamental Education on 9 July 1946, with Dr Guo Youshou as its chairman (UNESCO 1947a). The Editorial Committee collected the “summaries ... and observations” prepared by “twelve to fifteen world authorities in combating illiteracy. in furthering primary education in less developed countries and in conducting mass education” (ibid. p. 13) and published them in a

book entitled *Fundamental Education: Common Ground for All Peoples* (ibid). As the editor of *Reader's Digest* George Kent put it,

what Yen started a quarter of century ago was paid a great compliment. The program was adopted with scarcely a change by UNESCO for application to the world – a program of fundamental education (Kent 1976 [1948], p. 123).

James Yen's diagnosis regarding the appalling conditions in China – illiteracy, poverty, disease and bad governance – resonated with UNESCO's founding fathers and became well-known in promoting Fundamental Education (Bowers 1947). As mentioned earlier, the mass education/rural reconstruction movement had its intellectual roots in Confucianism and served more as a technique of nation-building in what members of the Chinese elite like Yen regarded as "pathological" and "dys-functional" China. But then it expanded beyond Chinese national boundaries. While Yen-led MEM sought to build a foundation for modern China, now he was urged to extend his work from China to the world (Kent 1976[1948], p. 123).

"Fundamental Education" under the auspices of UNESCO sought to build the foundation of the world, of common humanity. While the Chinese educational official who semi-officially coined this concept, Dr Guo Youshou, did not define this concept very clearly, he did imply that Fundamental Education would not only cover but actually go beyond basic education to include mass education, adult literacy campaigns, popular education and the provision of primary education (UNESCO 1947a, p. 12). Although Dr Guo distinguished "fundamental" from "basic" education, he claimed that the first layer of the concept was basic education, and the education of the mass of the people should reach the largest number of individuals without any limitation, differentiation or discrimination; hence it would be democratic, and therefore essentially popular and universal (UNESCO 1947a, p. 128).

Fundamental Education referred to the fundamental human right laid down in Article 26 in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR; UN 1948): "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages" (Roth 2018, p. 149). Dr Guo proposed that the content of Fundamental Education should be oriented towards teaching the people elementary knowledge such as reading, writing and arithmetic, ultimately enabling the achievement of further goals such as improving the life of the nation, influencing the natural and social environment, etc. (UNESCO 1947a, p. 128). In this sense, Fundamental Education also hinged on a person's "right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [*sic*] and of his [*sic*] family" (UN 1948, Article 25) and "the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits" (ibid., Article 27).

Having attended UNESCO's first General Conference in Paris in November 1946, Qu Shiyong was again in discussion with other educational experts appointed by UNESCO in London in January 1947 who suggested UNESCO should conduct a regional study conference (UNESCO 1947b, p. 5, 1947c). Due to the pioneering experience in China and the importance of China in post-war world affairs, UNESCO decided that the first Regional Study Conference on Fundamental Education would be held in Nanjing, China. In March 1947, UNESCO drafted a paper defining the purpose of the study conference and suggesting various topics for discussion

(UNESCO 1947b, p. 5). UNESCO expected that experts from Asian-South Pacific countries and territories would bring their own experience and expertise to contribute to the project under the auspices of UNESCO (MoE 1947). The Chinese government generously agreed to host the conference and China set up a Preparatory Committee for the Regional Study Conference on Fundamental Education in the Far East (远东区基本教育研究会议筹备委员会) in March 1947 (UNESCO 1947d, 1947e, 1948a). The committee recruited more than 60 Chinese educational experts who studied the achievements and experience in China and formulated a comprehensive programme for the conference. The Preparatory Committee summarised the experiments conducted by James Yen, Tao Xingzhi, Liang Shuming and other Chinese educational associations in a report designed for submission to the Nanjing Conference for further discussion (MoE 1947).

Meanwhile, UNESCO invited Yen to give a lecture introducing his work on mass education in China at the UNESCO-sponsored Summer Seminar on Education for International Understanding, held in Sèvres, France, in the summer of 1947 (Yen 1947, 1948). UNESCO sought to mobilise the pre-existing network and facilitate a dynamic and effective collaboration system worldwide to promote Fundamental Education. Yen's peer in promoting rural reconstruction, Hugh Hubbard, also received cables from UNESCO to attend the Nanjing conference on behalf of UNESCO. He agreed to participate as the Secretary of the North China Christian Rural Service Union; Earl Ballou told him that the contacts and the experience would be of value to his Christian work in rural reconstruction in north China (Hubbard 1989, p. 143).

UNESCO's founding fathers had a belief in expertise and a general interest in mobilising science, education and culture as an instrument to end poverty and ignorance (Selcer 2011, p. 3). Huxley's scientific humanism was highly resonant with the Deweyan scientific experimental pragmatism shared across the network of actors engaged in mass education/rural reconstruction. Together, they shaped the methodology for UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme.

But it is also worth noting that in the development of UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme, the principal basis of the collaborative network came to include the recognition of differences in terms of culture and what constituted universal good. This collaborative network would re-frame ideas and agendas, insert them in policy debates, and influence particular domestic policies in China in the context of civil war.

Networking UNESCO Fundamental Education in China: vision and challenge

The dedicated network was established, fostered and expanded by the UNESCO Regional Study Conference on Fundamental Education in the Far East held in Nanjing on 3 September 1947 (MoE 1948). But the interaction and communication between UNESCO and China was overshadowed by the conflicts between the nationalists and the communists, intertwined with the confrontation between the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The conflicts mounted into a full-scale civil war in China. During the conference, which lasted for several days

(3–10 September), a flock of delegates from far-flung places such as experts from the Far East, UNESCO representatives, and politicians of the Chinese nationalist government, including Jiang Jieshi and Madame Jiang, and others, communicated and exchanged beliefs, information and strategies, etc. regarding Fundamental Education.

After the official addresses by Jiang Jieshi and other politicians, followed by the reports of activities on Fundamental Education by eleven national delegations, four committees or panels convened to discuss the technical problems of policy, administration, finance and personnel; methods and techniques; contents and materials; and the organisation of a pilot project in China (UNESCO 1947d; MoE 1948). The dedicated network became part of an interactive process in which its members negotiated over different goals in the context of their collaborative activity. “Fundamental Education” was highlighted due to UNESCO’s promotion, and panellists agreed that fundamental education should emphasise the common ground for all peoples (UNESCO 1947d; MoE 1948).

But the discussion also addressed rural reconstruction. The panellists pointed out the discrepancy between rural and urban development, arguing that a majority population in both China and India were peasants, who were the main forces of social labour and production but deprived of school education (MoE 1948). The Chinese experience of practising mass education and rural reconstruction shaped the framework of UNESCO’s Fundamental Education programme, as panellists agreed that fundamental education should organically connect to rural reconstruction. Fundamental education was supposed to relieve poverty and improve living standards through all-inclusive educational programmes teaching knowledge in a wide range of subjects, such as agriculture, cooperative organisation, handicraft, hygiene, nutrition, medicine, vaccination, etc. The discussants also approved experimental methodology and envisioned the “Plan and Outline of Experimental Zones of Fundamental Education” (基本教育实验计划纲要) and a plan for a “China Pilot Project” (中国示范设计区) (Shenbao newspaper 1947b, p. 6; MoE 1948, pp. 20–21). The idea to implement the pilot project received a seemingly warm welcome from Jiang Jieshi, international educational experts, and local educationists (Hubbard 1989, p. 143; UNESCO 1948b, p. 2). The resolution approved by UNESCO’s 2nd General Conference in Mexico, which took place in November 1947, two months after the Nanjing Conference, confirmed UNESCO’s dedication to promoting Fundamental Education (UNESCO 1947f).

It seems that the dedicated network converged around the issue of fundamental education, reached a common ground, and subsequently inserted it into global discourse. But the Nanjing Conference finished without any concrete plans for implementing the pilot project. As demonstrated above, the network encompassed a divergent ideational spectrum and multiple interest groups. Furthermore, it was anticipated that the actuation of this idea into a project would face various subtle dynamics, and struggle to operate in unfavourable conditions, in particular in the form of political interventions at different levels.

In January 1948, the Chinese Ministry of Education elected a Committee for Research and Experimentation on Fundamental Education, and created a sub-committee to formulate a plan for research and experimentation (UNESCO 1948b, p. 2).

A UNESCO committee was also elected to supervise this pilot project, with Hubbard as the representative on behalf of UNESCO to conduct surveys in Sichuan province and Jiangsu province and find a possible location for the pilot project in the midst of the civil war (*ibid.*, pp. 2–13). There were many more challenges than UNESCO had expected, which resulted in a much smaller project. Most of the hindrances thwarting the cooperation between UNESCO and China on fundamental education were caused by military conflicts and ideological confrontation between the nationalists and the communists. In contrast to the gradualist reform practised by James Yen, Hugh Hubbard, Liang Shuming, etc., the communists adopted a radical peasant revolutionary approach as their fundamental solution to resolve the rural plight (Thomson 1969; Spence 1969).

At the time of the Nanjing Conference, where Chinese and international experts were talking about Fundamental Education, the communists were revolutionising land tenancy by land redistribution in north China, posing the biggest challenge to the legitimacy of the nationalist regime and the efficiency of the gradualist Fundamental Education experiment promoted by UNESCO (Crook and Crook 1960, 1979). The Chinese civil war itself made large areas of China inaccessible which might otherwise have provided fruitful fields for Fundamental Education (UNESCO 1948c, p. 3). The war also brought about a large amount of displacement among the Chinese population, as well as disruption of communication and transportation. To add to these difficulties, the nationalist government failed to prevent the rampant inflation from worsening, and Chinese money devalued sharply (*ibid.*). With their priority on combating the communists in the military battlefields, Jiang Jieshi and the nationalist government were reluctant and unable to find disposable funds for a programme of long-term reconstruction, even though this could have won them a lot of political assets and legitimacy (*ibid.*).

In his capacity as a significant node in this collaborative network, James Yen managed to persuade the American Congress to allocate a large sum of money to the liberal programme of rural reconstruction in the context of US endorsement of the nationalists to contain the communists in China, which resulted in the creation of a Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction (JCRR) between China and the US in 1948 (McEvoy 1976b [1955]; Hayford 1990). But JCRR, which was a potential financial resource for this UNESCO pilot project, was caught in the fighting and the subtle competition for leadership, which made Hubbard realise that he could not expect funding from this commission and had to look for other possibilities (Hubbard 1989, p. 146). In dealing with nationalist politicians, Hubbard also realised that there would be no funds coming from the nationalist regime, and he became so disappointed about the corruption in the nationalist regime that he suggested UNESCO should run a much smaller pilot project (Hubbard 1989, p. 147). UNESCO approved and formulated a new plan for an experimental project in Sichuan entitled “The healthy village”, which would use visual aids (such as posters, slides and films) to teach villagers about disease prevention, hygiene, etc. (*ibid.*).

The existing network of people and institutions, and the practices, funding resources, etc. constituted a seemingly promising foundation for piloting Fundamental Education in China. However, the ambitious education-driven development experiment, designed as a “panacea” for post-war reconstruction and social

betterment in underdeveloped countries, turned into a much smaller experiment limited to a specific subject – namely to experiment with visual aids on public health – within the broader framework of Fundamental Education. Because of the poor communication during the civil war, the original plan to cooperate with three Chinese colleges shrank into a single experimental Yen-led MEM project at Beibei (北碚), 40 miles north of Chongqing, which Hubbard had introduced in the report made in April 1948 (Yen 1948; UNESCO 1948b, pp. 3–8).

Experimenting with a global panacea: implementation and impact

While Beibei was the centre of an agricultural district, by 1948, it was already a comparatively modern town due to the reform efforts of the local official and social activist Lu Zuofu (卢作孚 1893–1952) and his brother Lu Ziyang (卢子英 1905–1994) (UNESCO 1951, p. 9; Xu 2014). Lu Zuofu, like many other Chinese activists, was fascinated by the notion of national salvation via education and industry and was a successful entrepreneur with a big shipping company – Minsheng Industrial Co. (Liu and Peng 2010). Attempting to modernise Beibei, Lu conducted a comprehensive rural reconstruction programme which achieved noticeable results, especially in the field of public health (Long 2005).

During the wartime period, James Yen and Liang Shuming also located their activities in this area, and they both networked with Lu Zuofu (X. Yang 2010b, 2017). In addition, the National College of Rural Reconstruction Yen set up in Beibei in 1940 had designated the local county of Bishan as its “laboratory” zone for teaching and experimenting with scientific methods of rural reconstruction to integrate theory and practice (Qu 1976 [1947]). The college took on the task of training leadership for rural reconstruction and meeting the tremendous demand for trained personnel in social and economic reconstruction in the post-war period. Beibei was a centre for active and network-enhanced rural reconstruction, or “the Epitome of the New China” in the eyes of Tao Xingzhi (Pan et al. 2020). Having surveyed the situation in Beibei, Hubbard selected this town as the site for UNESCO’s downsized pilot project, as he had previously commented that real Fundamental Education was already in progress here and the foundation had been laid for future development (UNESCO 1948b, p. 7).

As agreed and arranged between UNESCO and Yen, UNESCO teams led by Hubbard and Yen’s MEM colleagues would carry out the joint audio-visual pilot project (UNESCO 1948c, p. 3). Hubbard was very experienced in employing audio-visual materials in mass education and rural reconstruction (Hubbard 1989, pp. 184–185). UNESCO recruited Norman McLaren, the head of the Animation Department of the National Film Board of Canada, offering him a four-month assignment as a special technical adviser to train Chinese artists in making animation and cartoon films (McLaren 1949a; UNESCO 1950a). In January 1949, UNESCO officially authorised the start of this pilot project; in February 1949, they began to recruit the team members for which the existing network in Beibei, especially MEM and the college led by Yen, offered essential assistance. MEM’s deputy General-Secretary, Qu Shiying, was appointed special adviser of the project; a professor from the college was

the adviser of the survey and evaluation; and a MEM public health professional was the medical adviser. Local doctors became the medical consultants, and more field staff and health workers from MEM and local health centres would serve as field workers (UNESCO 1951, pp. 12–15). Dr Clara A. Nutting, who spent many years in preventive medicine in China, was assigned by the Methodist Mission to full-time work with this project (UNESCO 1951, p. 12; McLaren 1949b). The Beibei Administration offered free rooms for the Director's office, a laboratory for McLaren, the theatre, and two staff residences (UNESCO 1951, pp. 12–13). The Audio-Visual Centre of the college, located in Xie Ma Chang (歇马场), offered technical assistance in the photographic work and making filmstrips with a 500 USD grant from UNESCO (UNESCO 1951, p. 12). The entire group had four departments – Business, Art, Health and Field – and the Director's Office hosted Hubbard, MEM field worker Eugene J. Fan, and the project's Secretary (UNESCO 1951, p. 14).

The “healthy village” subject had special significance for China. The profound metaphor of the “sick man” has persistently motivated Chinese nationalists, especially the medical elite, to promote modern public health as one of the country's essential goals (Rogaski 2004; Heinrich 2008; Bu et al. 2012, p. 8). The inclusion of public health as a critical element of modernity and a strong nation was indispensable in the rural reconstruction movement and was also prevalent in colonial Asian societies (Stein 2012). The health problems were relatively universal as they were “nearer to being alike throughout China and around the globe” (UNESCO 1951, p. 7) than other issues. Therefore, health was a suitable topic for piloting and later potential transfer to other countries. As expected by UNESCO, this pilot project would experiment with a global “panacea” for public health problems worldwide, the results of which would be applied not only in China but also in other countries. The focus was on epidemic and infectious diseases, such as smallpox, trachoma, cholera, malaria, typhoid fever, tuberculosis and neonatal tetanus, and remedies such as vaccination, healthy habits of daily hygiene such as safe drinking water, safe food, dishwashing, etc. (ibid., p. 15).

As soon as they received authorisation from UNESCO in January, the project team began to order equipment and materials. The original plan was to employ various media, including posters, flyers, filmstrips, drama, games, animated cartoons, etc. Before McLaren's arrival in China in August, they decided to experiment with simpler media – by February, six artists were engaged and had already started on drawings for posters and filmstrips (Hubbard 1949a). In March, the artists finished their first filmstrip on vaccination and posters on trachoma while Dr Nutting was planning the “healthy village” programme (ibid.). In June, they finished 13 sets of filmstrip drawings; by July, they had completed two more sets of filmstrip drawings and eight posters (UNESCO 1951, p. 11). In the first half of 1949, the team experimented with several types of media. They found the posters and filmstrips very convenient and helpful in the field, while drama or games were less suitable due to the high cost and the lack of appropriate authors and directors (UNESCO 1951, p. 16). In August, McLaren was brought in by Hubbard from Hong Kong and joined in the making of visual aids (Hubbard 1949b; UNESCO 1950a).

The project team produced and tested four kinds of audio-visual materials, including wall posters and connected pictures; picture books; mobile pictures such

as filmstrips and film slides; and animated movies (UNESCO 1951, pp. 26, 41–95). They put these materials to the test in two small counties – Huangjuezhèn (黄桷镇) and Shizi Xiang (狮子乡) in Chongqing’s Bishan district. In Huangjuezhèn, they made 12 trips and 13 shows in total; in Shizi Xiang, three trips and eight shows. The *UNESCO Courier* published a vivid report of the fieldwork (UNESCO 1950a, 1950b). They went to Shizi Xiang on market day, found a place in an old temple, unpacked their equipment, and set up an impromptu outdoor film theatre to show filmstrips featuring stories of people who had become infected with trachoma. Dr Clara Nutting and other health professionals would sit at three tables and offer consulting and eye examinations for the townsfolk, farmers and children. After watching the educational filmstrips, the residents came and had their eyes checked by the doctors and nurse (UNESCO 1950a). The commentator used a loudspeaker to explain the ongoing activities. The posters on walls showed how diseases evolved and were cured (UNESCO 1951, p. 39). The final records indicated that in Huangjuezhèn, the team examined a total of 9,514 people (70% of the entire population of 13,158), found 2,665 cases of trachoma, and injected 1,965 smallpox vaccinations, which influenced a similar smallpox vaccination campaign by the local health centre (UNESCO 1951, pp. 36–37, 39).

The project lasted for one year as the civil war between two camps was approaching its final phase, and the communist troops marched into Beibei in December 1949. The local farmers were heavily in debt and forced to borrow money from the landowners at an interest rate of 50%; the depressing poverty led them to embrace the communist approach of land redistribution and the abolition of usury (McLaren 1949c). Yen took the last plane out before the communists arrived, leaving MEM and the college to his assistant Qu; the foreign missionary Hubbard handed the work over to E.J. Eugene Fan and left China in 1950 (Hubbard 1989, pp. 150–152).

McLaren recalled that the local farmers mocked the modern expensive audio-visual materials and the unaffordable nutrition and treatment being recommended (McLaren 1949c). All they could do in the UNESCO project was to at least put a blueprint in the farmers’ minds, a cultural imaginary, a repository of images, ideas and stories that would potentially provoke a modern consciousness among the local villagers and inspire the vision of a new rural life (McLaren 1949c; Zhang 2013). McLaren also recalled that

although the Healthy Village project took place at the climax of the Chinese civil war between the nationalists and the communists, the programme had an impressive impact. Its philosophy became the basis for the future UNESCO project (Dobson 2018, p. 99–100).

Even Hubbard would call it a classic model of the UNESCO Fundamental Education pilot project (Hubbard 1989; UNESCO 1951). The report, entitled *The Healthy Village: An Experiment in Visual Education in West China* (UNESCO 1951), was available to its Member States through the clearing house of UNESCO.

The ripple effects triggered by the UNESCO–China cooperation exerted influence over the destiny of Fundamental Education in later decades. For UNESCO, China was an excellent laboratory to promote post-war reconstruction in underdeveloped areas because of the existing transnational and transpacific network of players

engaged in education-driven rural development. By emphasising the economic and societal benefits of comprehensive education programmes, UNESCO quickly gained support from its Member States and implemented similar Fundamental Education pilot projects in the Third World (Thapa 1958; Rist 2004; Verna 2015; Boel 2016). The Fundamental Education programme became the UNESCO prototype of UN-based developmentalism (Sluga 2010).

However, in favour of stressing its economic, technological and developmental impact, Fundamental Education tended to downgrade another dimension of education, i.e. education as a pure intellectual activity, which is also a human right (Jones 1990). The discrepancy between the overarching programmes and the limited financial resources would place UNESCO in a disadvantageous position in the competition with other development aid programmes within the UN and beyond (Dorn and Ghodsee 2012). Yen, bearing in mind his experience in China, dedicated himself to the international rural reconstruction movement in the Third World with the support from the US; while the US-funded JRCC relocated to Taiwan, greatly contributing to the rural development of Taiwan (Hayford 1990; Lin 2015). Thus, the evacuation of this project from China and the “loss” of villages to Chinese communists in the broader sense foreshadowed the acceleration of the East–West race in the Third World as the village became the frontline of the Cold War (Cullather 2010; Sackley 2011).

In sum, the gradualist experimental principle of UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme drew heavily upon the guiding methodology of the mass education/rural reconstruction movement in China. It was also highly resonant with Deweyan pragmatism, the ideology of American progressive education, which many gradualist reformists regarded as an alternative to the communist approach to rural development. But UNESCO exposed itself to criticism from the US that it had come under communist influence and that the goals of Fundamental Education were “contrary to American ideals and traditions” (Dorn and Ghodsee 2012, p. 375). Dr Guo did put forward that education would be a force working for progress and evolution or even radical transformation (UNESCO 1947a, p. 128). But it is rarely mentioned that Dr Guo was an underground communist during the 1950s, spotted by the Swiss authorities and escorted to mainland China in 1966 (Chen 2014). Indeed, the egalitarian tone and the liberatory potential of mass education added to American fear about the spread of communism during the Cold War, and led the US to divert its financial resources away from UNESCO. After 1958, UNESCO gave up the all-inclusive, ambitious, seemingly egalitarian, confusing term – Fundamental Education. Ironically, however, the education-driven community development model formed deep institutional roots in other UN agencies and the World Bank in which the US had a big say.

Conclusion

This article traces the emergence, interaction, dynamics and evolution of a transnational network of people and institutions engaged in educational practices using dedicated funds, etc. in a concerted effort to resolve the rural plight in post-war

China. Highlighting the relevance of this transnational network for UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme, this article adds more detail to the history both of that programme and of collaboration between UNESCO and China.

This article offers several findings. First, this highly interactive network shared the ideal belief in the potential efficacy of science and education to end poverty, improve living standards and build up a common foundation for humankind. The experimentalist methodology of UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme reflected the sympathy and resonance between this network and the intellectual atmosphere within UNESCO, especially Huxley's scientific humanism. Following this philosophical line, the experiment in China would demonstrate how to address issues of post-war reconstruction in underdeveloped countries around the globe.

Second, this article maps a more nuanced and negotiable process during the formulation of UNESCO's Fundamental Education programme. The network as a whole reflected a divergent ideational spectrum, including gradualists, who had different ideational agendas (Confucianism, nationalism, liberalism, Christianity) and competed with the radicals (communism). However, the accommodation of indigenous, Chinese and foreign – mainly Western – ideas and resources illustrated the potentials of as well as the challenges to promoting Fundamental Education.

Third, the cooperation between UNESCO and the gradualists, who were more affiliated with the nationalist regime, had to dance with the contingent politics in China and beyond. The factional politics and corruption under the nationalist regime and the civil war between the nationalists and communists intervened in the project, which ended up addressing only one aspect of a programme which had initially been conceptualised as a much more comprehensive endeavour. The experiment with the global panacea for post-war reconstruction became an experiment downscaled to medical exhibition, consultation, examination, vaccination, etc. The victory of the communists further ruled out the possibility of continuing this project in China after 1949. While this education-driven rural development model was the prototype of the developmentalism that marked many international aid agencies in the 20th century, Cold War tensions complicated the ideological tone of this project and pulled UNESCO away from further investment.

Last but not least, this article argues that the Chinese roots and routes of post-war reconstruction have much to tell about the rising and waning of UNESCO's first flagship project in education.

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