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PRRM

A “Y” Building Civil Society

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AS THIS IS A GATHERING OF ASIAN YMCAs IT might be good to begin a discussion on civil society with a story of an outstanding “Y” who was behind one of the most remarkable civic movements of this century.

My guess is most of us in this general assembly of the Asia Alliance of YMCAs know next to nothing about Dr. Y.C. James Yen and his Chinese Mass Education Movement. Let me walk you back through the story of our unique brethren.

In May 1943 at the Carnegie Hall in New York distinguished scholars and scientists representing over 100 leading universities and research institutes gathered to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Copernicus. And as a tribute to his memory, Copernican Citations were given to ten outstanding “modern revolutionaries”. Dr. Yen was one of the honored ten, together with Albert Einstein, John Dewey, Walt Disney, Henry Ford, Orville Wright, among others. You may take issue with this all-American Hall of Fame list (Dr. Yen became

US citizen at some point) but no one can dispute that it's rare anybody from the East, from Asia, landed there at all.

What had Dr. Yen done to be so honored? And what had it got to do with YMCA and building a civilized and civic society?

Dr. Yen was born in 1893, to a long ancestry of scholars. On graduation from Yale in 1918 he joined a small team of war volunteers sponsored by the War Council of the American YMCA. Then China was persuaded by the Allies to participate in the war in Europe by sending 200,000 Chinese coolies to France as a labor force for digging trenches, building bridges, among other menial works. Dr. Yen had seen coolies everywhere in China before but never imagined his encounter with them in a foreign land would be a turning point in his life and lifetime career.

It all began one night when a coolie came to ask Dr. Yen to write a letter to his (coolie's) wife back home. He obliged. Then next day two more coolies came with the same request and Dr. Yen again was only too glad to be of help. Then he was swarmed with a deluge of requests. The idea came to him: why not teach the coolies to read and write instead of reading and writing for them. It's a leap of faith, pretty much in the spirit of the often quoted adage: "Give a man a fish and he lives for a day; teach him to fish and he lives for a lifetime."

Dr. Yen did just that. He simplified the complicated Chinese language with over 40,000 characters and devised his People's Thousand Character composed of 1,000 most commonly used words. He democratized the elitist Chinese language by making it accessible to the Chinese masses. He found out that teaching coolies how to read and write was much easier than re-educating Ph.Ds to humble themselves and approach the level of mass consciousness. Often he would quote Saint Paul: "Except ye utter words that are easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken?"

And so was born a mass education movement. When Dr. Yen took a first shot at it, there were only 40 coolies who volunteered to be taught. Then there were 5,000, later 200,000. After the war, he returned to China to replicate his experience in Europe and embark on a grand experiment. In a few years, Dr. Yen's schools had five million students and a hundred thousand teachers. And in a few years since the war with Japan started in 1933, 27 million Chinese had been taught to read and write the Yen way.

Like Mao, but a little bit ahead of Mao, Dr. Yen cast his lot with the peasants as the main force in building the Sun Yat-sen republic. Waxing Isaiah, he said: "Two thirds of the people of the world are in the coolie class. No



nation can rise higher than its masses, and until these masses, the world's richest undeveloped resource, are developed through education – until the people are taught to participate themselves in their own reconstruction – world leaders can cry peace! peace! but there will be no peace.”

Dr. Yen is a “Y” beyond compare, so to say. He has left us a legacy of education for citizenship — in the shape of a mass movement — as the foundation of any civil society.

The world has changed a lot. For good or ill, we now have a world that has become much smaller, yet still struggling to come together. The problems of Yen's time remain the same though clothed and expressed in different ways. The ways of thought that caused them remain the same and continue to dominate our everyday lives. The solutions to these problems may not be very different from what had been proposed and tried long ago and through time. There are probably as many new ideas as recycled ones. It seems a little hard to resist the cynic self in each of us.

The *fin de siecle* annual gathering of the IMF-World Bank will herald the themes of equity and sustainability and around these sift and weave the lessons of the exiting century. Perhaps we would be better off to look at these themes as the outstanding deficits that humanity will pass on to the next millennium.

What can the YMCAs do? Where can they make a difference?

To come back to my Yen story. I believe education is key, if not the most critical. But it should not be just any kind of education since education has always been part of the problem as well as part of the solution. Past education has helped create the present world of prosperity amid the unwanted or unintended outcomes of inequality, exclusion and unsustainability. What we need is a different kind of education – an education that results in greater equality and justice, in an inclusive civil society, in shifts of thought and action toward a more sustainable society.

How to do it is one hell of a job. But there are many examples around and everywhere – little success stories that men, women and children create everyday. YMCAs everywhere have shown in thousand ways that they can be a means to educating others as well as themselves on how to create a better world.

May your tribe and good deeds multiply.





About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

