

Challenging Education

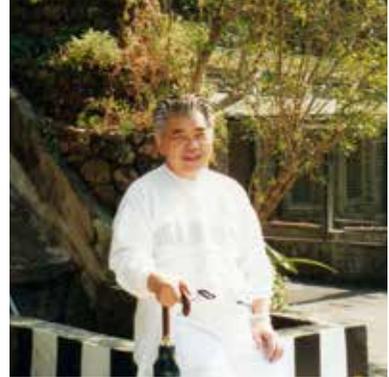
A Vision of 'Happy Reading'



About the Founder

Mr. Robert Yet-Sen Chen (1929-2003)

Mr. Robert Yet-Sen Chen was born at the beginning of China's new Republic, survived the civil wars and the Sino-Japanese War, lived on four continents, and established a thriving international business enterprise. Through it all he never forgot his roots, his boyhood years in rural China. He dedicated significant time, energy and financial contributions in the later part of his life to helping the less fortunate in his home village in Qidong, Jiangsu Province, China.



Mr. Chen was born in 1929. At the age of 14, he left his hometown to study in Shanghai. In 1948, he left China for Hong Kong and eventually went on to attend university in England. In 1957, Mr. Chen returned to work in the family business in Hong Kong. He established the company's presence in West Africa by setting up factories in Nigeria, Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Like many of his generation, Mr. Chen experienced personal loss, war and hunger in his youth which was to prepare him for the rigors and challenges of doing business in uncharted territories. His positive outlook on life and his uncanny ability to see to the core of issues, coupled with his unfailing diligence, contributed to the ultimate success of his personal and professional endeavors. His diligence and sound financial investment strategies paid dividends for the family business.

The elder, Mr. Chen Zao Men, taught his son about the importance of philanthropy – of giving – from an early age. The Chen Zao Men College in Hong Kong was the first charitable project supported by the Chen Family in 1972, and the genesis of a tradition of community service. Mr. Robert Chen built on this legacy of good work by building and supporting six schools, a community hospital, and undertaking much-needed public works in the family's hometown of Qidong. His lifetime of philanthropic work culminated with the creation of the Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation in October 2003, prior to his unexpected and premature passing on November 29, 2003.

Mr. Robert Chen was a successful businessman, a caring family man, a generous benefactor and a respected citizen. Compassionate and generous, he cared deeply about educating the younger generations, in whom he saw unfulfilled potential to excel. His spirit lives on in the Foundation that bears his name.

The Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation

About Us

Established in 2003, The Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation is a hybrid charitable institution with a strategic focus on improving early childhood literacy, through the development of libraries and reading programs. The Foundation also supports experiential out-of-classroom programs which aim to improve personal development of children.

Geographical Interest

The Foundation supports organizations for innovative, cost effective and high impact programs in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Ghana.



Mission Statement

To nurture the potential of the next generation by building, supporting & sustaining innovative approaches that enhance learning & personal development.

This includes:

- Supporting relevant local organizations and people to achieve capacity building
- Introducing best practices or new ideas
- Scaling up successful projects
- Encouraging the dissemination of innovative ideas
- Assisting with people resources in libraries
- Promoting quality literature
- Supporting life skills training

Message from the Board

*We are pleased to present this case study,
showcasing a selection of
the Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation's work
since we began operations in 2003.*

*For us as a Foundation, these retrospectives are a
perfect opportunity for us to reflect on the
work we have done,
what we have learned, and
where and how we might improve.*

*It is also our hope that through sharing our
experiences, we will amplify the lessons learned
and approaches adopted, supporting others on
their own philanthropic journey.*

Challenging Education

A Vision of ‘Happy Reading’

“Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution.”

Albert Einstein

The Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation’s advocacy for literacy reflects its core belief that a happy childhood immersed in reading leads to life-long learning. This case study, prepared by Professor James Henri (Library Consultant for CYSFF since 2007), explores how to develop a culture of reading for pleasure – fun rather than functional.

Good things come out of vision

From its inception, the Foundation was very clear about its mission. A key aim was to foster ‘happy reading’ in rural China. Although the term is not widely used in professional or academic literature, ‘happy reading’ has an uncomplicated meaning. The Foundation was looking to invest resources in programs that would help children enjoy the reading activities. This was motivated in part by the belief that happy reading helps form happy individuals, capable of imagining and exploring alternative worlds. Children living in rural China aged 0-12 years were the natural target group.

The Foundation was concerned not to make a political statement, nor did it wish to push any particular education philosophy. However, it did need to place some limitations on the type of programs it was able to support, and so chose the high impact areas of kindergarten and primary school, as well as at-home and community-based programs that supported the target age group. The focus was narrowed geographically to the city of Qidong, ancestral home to the Chen family. Qidong served as the pilot program, before the project expanded to support neighbouring Haimen, also in Jiangsu province. Projects were then tested in Hefei and other parts of Anhui Province, as well as rural and remote parts of Gansu and Yunnan provinces.

Ongoing oversight of the Board

Once the broad emphasis on happy reading was identified, it was important that the Board maintained active oversight and monitoring. Such oversight entailed providing sufficient funding and resources to ensure that goals could be achieved within a

meaningful time frame; that delivery was effective; that reporting was sufficiently robust to ensure that lessons were learned; and, where appropriate, that initiatives were modified or terminated.

The role of the Executive Director (ED) is a crucial link between the field and the Board. It is the ED who travels to program cities; who negotiates with program partners; who selects projects and provides monitoring of implementation. The ED must be able to negotiate initial arrangements and then to deal effectively with the issues that arise. The ED will be required to visit and monitor all projects, and for this reason it makes sense not to spread initiatives too thinly. Supporting projects in geographical clusters enables good monitoring and also facilitates the exchange of learning.

First Mover issues

Foundations involved in philanthropic initiatives across a number of fields face the challenges associated with being a *first mover*. Significant challenges for the Foundation included: defining how ‘happy reading’ could be introduced to a culture that was largely resistant to reading for pleasure; finding and leveraging expert knowledge; identifying similar-minded local partners, with whom it would be possible to collaborate; convincing stakeholders that a pilot project was worth a risk; and finally, garnering a ‘buy-in’ from local authorities and practitioners. For a First Mover, this must all be achieved without reference to a roadmap of best practice.

These challenges were complicated further by the fact that the Board and the ED had little expertise in these areas. This had three implications: in the initial stages of implementation, it was wise to be conservative; it was essential to seek expert advice; and it was prudent to narrow the fields of endeavour, so as to consolidate knowledge while enhancing expertise.

Good things come from detailed planning

At the inception of the project, libraries were largely underdeveloped in Chinese schools, especially in rural primary schools, and were regarded as a warehouse for study books (vocabulary and knowledge-building). Reading was almost entirely didactic and consequently narrow in scope. Chinese publishers had taken little interest in ‘happy reading’ and there was very limited availability of translated foreign titles. Bookshops offering titles beyond textbooks and aids to learning could not be found in rural areas.

In addition, parents were largely unsupportive of the idea of ‘happy reading’, in the belief that time invested in reading for pleasure was better spent on rote learning for examinations. Children who did engage in ‘happy reading’ in school often read books that were brought from home *into* school, rather than books that were bought by the school itself. These embedded attitudes and habits needed to be addressed.

Good things come from collaboration

The Board members were aware that simply transplanting foreign ideas would never work. Collaborative ventures offered the best opportunity for success. First, it was deemed essential to source an expert on school libraries to brief the Board and map out how to implement 'happy reading'. Library development had already been identified as a central area of educational reform in Hong Kong – a city often referred to pejoratively as 'a non-reading culture'. Members of the Board spoke with a librarian from one of Hong Kong's International Schools, who provided briefings about the way to build a library presence with a major emphasis on 'happy reading'.

Additional advice emphasised the importance of stakeholders. These include: the local education authority (LEA); school principals; and parents. The links between the parents and their schools would be critical. It was likely that the vast majority of rural homes were 'book-free zones', and that parents educated in traditional schools would have little experience of reading and would not share an interest in reading for learning, let alone for pleasure.

As a result of these discussions the Board became aware of the complexity of a modern school library and its significance for the education and recreation of both students and teachers. It was critical to find appropriate pilot schools and a local partner that would provide ongoing support for the project. The ED acquired the requisite skills and understanding to overcome local resistance and to leverage local support. The Foundation had the benefit of familiarity with Qidong, in both the political and educational spheres. This familiarity, coupled with the family's history of philanthropy in the city, paved the way for a speedy implementation of 'happy reading'.

It was particularly important to identify and woo a local partner with the appropriate stature and connections to ensure that obstacles could be successfully negotiated. The Retired Teachers Association (RTA) was identified as a suitable organization, and a strong collegial partnership was established and nurtured. The RTA could provide a link between local schools and the LEA, and could be expected to understand and assist the implementation of the Foundation's plans through their close knowledge of education policy and practice. They were well-placed to assist in explaining and obtaining support for innovative practices.

While this partnership had value, in that it raised the profile of reading to key stakeholders, over time it became apparent that there was in fact a mismatch between the Foundation's goals and the focus of the RTA, which was mostly concerned with raising test scores. The RTA's emphasis on reading was within the narrow confines of rote learning, preparing students for tests without cultivating a culture of literature.

Encouraged by the initial apparent successes in Qidong, the Foundation sought out new opportunities across the country. These arose through a formal application process, but were often the result of informal contacts and ‘friends of friends’ as the perceived success in Qidong travelled through social networks. Unfortunately, the RTA model could not be replicated in other cities and alternative approaches were needed. These included partnerships with local NGOs or the funding of reading initiatives proposed by local organizations. An important lesson for the Foundation was the realization that without a suitable local partner, it is usually inappropriate to consider seeding projects.

Good things come from monitoring and evaluation

The ‘happy reading’ initiative relied heavily on frequent communication, mostly in person. This is essential, especially in the early stages, to ensure that the partnership is developing and the project is on track. Visits provide an opportunity to build relationships, to facilitate networking between projects, to offer support, and to listen to local concerns. Listening is the most important aspect of all, to hear concerns directly and identify indirect misconceptions and areas of need.

For example, in the early days, conversations initiated by schools were invariably about how to organize the library collection and how to ensure that books did not get lost or stolen. Books were regarded as ‘gold’ and often the library was locked, with books kept in secure cabinets. Some libraries did not lend their books at all for fear they would be lost. Great effort was invested in educating the schools that books are food, not gold. They must be devoured, and if they do get lost or damaged through use, that is not necessarily a bad thing. The measure is not how many books a school owns, but how many books each child is reading and enjoying. It is not about spending huge amounts of time cataloguing books and making them safe, but about how to display them so that children can see what they might enjoy. Likewise, the promotion of interesting books, both by teachers and students, is more important than identifying the students who have read the most. Making a library attractive and providing good access to its books are the priorities.

A further challenge was to educate local partners about the difference between cheap books and suitably good material. There was an existing obsession with measuring the efficacy of spending against the discount to be obtained. Partners often spent an entire budget on a single supplier because they were offered a discount. The fact that the purchases were completely unsuitable for the children did not seem to be a consideration.

Often schools in China have little or no discretion about which books are purchased for them. In the worst cases, the LEA assumes total control over the book buying process, and may tender for the supply, granting it to the lowest bidder. It is rare for anyone in an LEA to have professional knowledge of publishing or be equipped to match the needs of a particular school with the books bought for them. Some schools are so embarrassed by the low quality of material that they do not use it at all, only displaying the books during annual inspections.

Another common problem is the appointment of an inappropriate person to be in charge of the library. In most cases, schools seem completely at a loss to identify suitable candidates, and instead select staff such as cooks or gardeners. It would appear that this is the result of a lack of understanding about the power of a well-stocked and professionally-staffed library to improve learning outcomes. Selecting a staff member with a love of reading, or one capable of creating a reading oasis, was not given consideration.

But learning is not one-sided, and an active listener can attain deep knowledge from the local context. The processes of monitoring and evaluation are only as good as the choice of indicators of success. The 'happy reading' project was consistently hampered by this fact, due to the inexperience of those involved. Problems were exacerbated by the lack of suitable research that could be relied upon to guide best practice. The visitation program lacked expertise – the Hong Kong adviser held down a full time position and there was no adequate alternative in the region – which meant that there was a tendency for issues in need of remedial action to drift along.

Sometimes the biggest obstacle to success is a tendency for the client to tell the provider what they *think* the provider wants to hear, rather than what they need to hear; and even to exaggerate to the point where reality becomes distorted. It is essential to grasp and acknowledge – without shame – that not all seeds grow, as a result of many different factors, including: infertile soil; uninformed gardeners; inappropriate soil preparation; inappropriate climate; and lack of weeding and watering. As for gardening, so for 'happy reading'.

Good things come from learning from trial and error

In the period of planning and implementation, progress often arises after encountering failure – this was certainly the case with 'happy reading'. When a project is not progressing as expected, the explanation is crucial: Was it a bad idea? Was it a good idea, badly explained or poorly planned or inadequately implemented?

At the point that the 'happy reading' initiative seemed to have lost momentum, the Foundation made the brave but judicious decision to undertake a root and branch review of the project. The review was conducted by researchers in the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong, with extensive experience in the fields of reading and school librarianship. The review included site visits across China and incorporated knowledge of other models outside the country. The review concluded that there were significant challenges to be addressed, and also noted that none of the prominent providers elsewhere, including Room to Read, had models that could be readily implemented in rural China. Following this detailed review, the Foundation asked the researchers to develop a robust model for ongoing development. It had to be sustainable and scalable. The solution developed by the researchers, named the 'reading mandala' (RM), became the focus of the first of a series of biennial conferences hosted by the Foundation in Hong Kong and China. These interactive forums offered an opportunity to exchange best practice, to float innovative thinking, to challenge existing beliefs, and to give an audience to local voices. Feedback on the RM identified key issues that needed further examination and improvement.

One subsequent change was the name given to 'happy reading'. The RM adopted the term 'reading for pleasure', which had been used extensively throughout professional and academic literature. The phrase had not been 'road tested' in China, where a significant criticism of the RM was that gaining pleasure from reading is a Western concept and has no place in Chinese culture, with its deep-rooted belief that knowledge and success is gained through hard work. As a result, it was recommended that the phrase 'reading for pleasure' should be replaced by the well-established term 'free voluntary reading' (FVR). This approach requires that schools provide convenient access to a library that includes both fiction and non-fiction titles; that schools promote reading as a valued exercise; and that schools provide time for reading and help provide an outlet for the reading experience.

Lessons learned and effect on plans and implementation

Over the past decade, the Foundation has learned many lessons about how best to prepare and implement new initiatives. When selecting a school for any project, it is essential to be informed about the school's motivation. Does it have a history of experimentation? Is the project comparable and compatible with other school initiatives? Does the school work for the success for its students or the fame for its principal? Does the school have a strong relationship with the LEA, to the extent that it will enable the trial of new ideas?

The Foundation has learned that success requires great stamina and relentless focus. It is important to provide opportunities for schools to learn from one another, encouraging reflection and a yearning to improve. But success cannot be readily transplanted across cultures and political systems. Even within China, differences between LEAs and between stakeholders' attitudes are significant, and even the best projects need to be transplanted in a nuanced way. Despite the best efforts to develop a model that is both sustainable and scalable, the differences between schools are always significant and must be considered. (Some principals are political; others are not. Some schools have a history of successful innovation; others do not. Some schools have a supportive community; others do not). Taking time to identify these factors will be important to the success of any project.

Conclusion

The Foundation has gained extensive experience and expertise in the areas of literacy and librarianship, to the extent that it can be described as a market leader in China. Its leadership was recently recognized by the Library of Congress, which gave the Foundation an award for Best Practise. Beyond Qidong, the insights gained from pilot projects have fed into the successful ‘Stone Soup’ initiative in Hefei, the subject of a separate case study.

The challenges faced by the Foundation in Qidong raise a number of crucial questions about its approach to promoting alternative models of education on the Chinese mainland:

- How can CYSFF reform the traditional pedagogy of ‘repetition, imitation, memorisation’ when teaching language skills, as Chinese characters are taught through careful copying? Adapting innovative models to the *local* context is vital here – the radical experimental methodologies of the English-speaking world (such as phonics) were conceived as an alternative way of learning an alphabet, which doesn’t apply in the Chinese context.
- How does one find local partners for new ventures in an unfamiliar environment, without prior experience or knowledge of the terrain? Previous case studies make clear that these relationships tend to make or break a project, and I think the Foundation needs to think more rigorously about what exactly it is looking for in a partner, and how it overcomes a deficiency of skills at the outset of a project. (This is a particularly tricky challenge for any charity that seeks to transform deep-seated habits and attitudes).
- What is the best method for introducing ‘foreign’ ideas and nurturing organic offshoots? Against the straightjacket of Confucianism, which alternative Chinese traditions can the CYSFF look to for inspiration? Just as it is important to have local allies on the ground, it can be helpful to point to historical precedents of reform – of which there are numerous in early 20th Century China, from Sun Yat-sen onwards.

It is important, however, not to be beholden to the chauvinism that assumes ‘indigenous’ ideas are best; trailblazers are always unfashionable, wherever they come from and wherever they go. The Foundation must work from the premise that if a method is worthy of adoption, it can be communicated through the power of persuasion.

- If, by encouraging independent thinking, the Foundation is accused of nurturing ‘individualism’, it is worth noting that China’s greatest social and economic challenges derive from a lack of innovation. If China is to move from an industrial to a post-industrial society, it requires dynamic, imaginative entrepreneurs who can break the mould. The Confucian system is constructed in part to maintain a strict, obedient hierarchy – uncritical and conformist – whereas capitalism demands ‘disruptive thinking’ to shape and grow new industries. The Foundation seeks both to catalyse and respond to the social transformation in Chinese society at large, which can be sustainable only with a responsive and forward-thinking education system.
- In recent months, there has been a flurry of TV documentaries about China’s education system, most of which have focused on tough discipline and high test scores. They remind me of this curious paragraph from the NYRB of Yong Zhao’s *Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon? Why China Has the Best (and Worst) Education System in the World*:

“China is trapped by Western praise. Its education leaders, Zhao writes, would like to break free of the exam-based orthodoxy that limits creativity but they dare not abandon the methods that produce the results that Westerners admire.”

There’s a great irony here – and an insight into the complex interplay between Western and Chinese perceptions. I wonder if there is a space for CYSFF to break this feedback loop, as the Foundation (almost uniquely) seeks to promote the most fruitful practices from both traditions.



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