

John Black Grant's Public Health Effort in China, 1918-1937

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Archival materials in the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), including correspondence, annual reports, personnel biographic information, and oral history materials, reveal an overall picture of John Black Grant's efforts in public health institutional building in China in the early part of twentieth century.

As previous studies on contributions of the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) to the building of a modern public health system in China have pointed out, J. B. Grant, a member of the International Health Board (IHB) of the RF, was a central figure in the RF's efforts. According to Grant's colleagues, three factors, his language skill, his personal qualities, and his connections to Chinese people, facilitated Grant's prominence in the field of public health in China. Archival materials in the RAC indicate that the experiences of Grant's early life had an impact on the formation of these noted characteristics. Grant was born to Canadian missionaries in 1890 in the port city of Ningbo, China. His father was a medical missionary who not only served his Chinese patients wholeheartedly, but also never forgot to follow the trends of the development of scientific medicine in the West. The cultural and language environment in which Grant spent his first sixteen years gave him the language skills and capacity to connect to Chinese people with ease. His father's orientation towards science influenced Grant's academic pursuit.

Grant became conscious of his language advantage immediately after he came back to China in 1918, as a new member of the IHB's anti hookworm campaign at the Pingxiang Colliery, Hunan. This campaign, which lasted about one year, seems to be the first direct involvement of the RF in public health action in China. That campaign is not as well-known as Grant's activities in the 1920s and 1930s, which is probably due to its unsuccessful ending. Nonetheless, coming back to China with many advantages gained from his more than ten years of Western scientific education, Grant found that his experience in his early life empowered him with a capacity for understanding Chinese people more accurately than his Western colleagues. In a June 26, 1918 letter to Victor G. Heiser he wrote, "no matter how good English a Chinese speaks, there is always a certain indefinable barrier between him and a foreigner if English is the medium of conversation. This is to a large extent removed when Chinese is used."¹ In this same letter, Grant pointed out that the language barrier could lead to misunderstanding with unwanted consequences between foreigners and Chinese. He recognized at a social event when he first arrived Shanghai that a prominent Chinese business man, who was in obvious sympathy with the Southerners, was misunderstood as working for the North even by an American who had been associated with this Chinese business man for a number of years. This misunderstanding prevented this American from forming the right kind of connection with this Chinese.

The strong tendency of following and facilitating the new trend of scientific development, which was a character first formed under his father's influence, was one of the most distinct personal characteristics of Grant. Grant's scientific vision was expressed clearly in his 1923 plan for the Department of Hygiene and Public Health in the Peking Union Medical College (PUMC). He recognized "preventive medicine" as an emerging "definite science after a formulative period of fifty years." He thought that although public health had "not yet been standardized even in the

recently formed special schools of hygiene and that its present position in medical science is definitely one of transition,” in the future the objective would be “to assure the human race the attainment of the full physiological span of life.”

As for his newly created department in the PUMC, he believed it, “could represent as much to the history of medical progress in general and preventive medicine in particular, as did the founding of the Academy of Surgery in France under Louis XV in the development of surgery, or the development of therapeutic medicine in the U.S. by the founding of Hopkins in 1893.”²

With this great ambition in mind, Grant started a new round of the RF’s public health enterprise in China with his intramural activities within the existing structure of the PUMC. Grant came to the PUMC to create the Department of Hygiene and Public Health for the college in 1921. This department formed a foundation for the RF’s future effort on building the Western modern public health system in China. A group of students educated by this department played a crucial role in building national public health organizations, in cities as well as in rural areas in the 1930s and 1940s in China.

From the very beginning, Grant did not limit his public health system building effort within the walls of the PUMC. In 1923, he proposed that the Department of Hygiene, in cooperation with the Central Epidemic Prevention Bureau of the Peking City Government, establish a Health Demonstration Station to test modern health practice under Chinese conditions. This program was realized in 1925. The Station was under the auspices of the City Police Department—an official health organization that implemented public measures in Peking. Grant and members of his department provided academic guidance to this station. The Station oversaw an experimental ward of the city of 55,000. It had four divisions: Vital Statistics, Communicable

Disease Control, General Sanitation and Medical Services, and carried out a variety of activities including the development of modern health organizations adaptable to Chinese communities, the development of an efficient school health program, the establishment of a modest service of industrial hygiene, and the inauguration of the teaching program for both medical students and nurses. Moreover, the Station offered a site for practical experience for the future public officers in training at the Department of Hygiene at the PUMC. This experimental station would become the template of community public health organizations for the entire country.

In addition to this Station, Grant expanded his extra-mural activities in a number of other ways. In 1923, he was a member of the Executive Committee of the Counsel of Health Education, an organization that carried out public health mass education works sponsored and led by American medical missionaries. In 1925, Grant helped the health organizations of the League of Nations to secure support from the IHB in conducting a maritime quarantine survey in China and creating a modern quarantine system in port cities in China. Around the same period of time, he also helped to get about \$100,000/year for five years out of the British Boxer Indemnity Fund, about one-fourth of the total, granted to establish a Public Health Commission and to provide aid to different provinces.

Most of the time, the leadership of the RF supported Grant's extra-mural efforts in public health in China. However, when James Yen started his Mass Education Movement (MEM) in rural China in Ting Hsien, in 1927, Grant's proposal for including a health campaign program with Yen's promising 60 villages (about 120,000 people) was denied. Several leaders of the RF either suspected the probable outcome the MEM or feared the possibility of releasing tremendous force through increasing the literacy of the mass public. The fear of the important policy makers in the RF drew attention of John Dewey, an American philosopher, psychologist,

and educational reformer. In 1928 Dewey wrote a letter to E. C. Carter. In this letter, Dewey expressed his faith “in intelligence and knowledge rather than in ignorance and dullness.” Furthermore, Dewey pointed out that “the logic of the question raised would have condemned the whole world, save perhaps a few superior specimens, to remaining in ignorance for fear of dangers that enlightenment might bring.”³

However, Dewey’s point was not taken. The RF did not directly accept James Yen’s MEM in terms of public health institutional building until Selskar Gunn assumed the leadership of Far East of the RF and started the China Program.

Although the policy debate delayed the direct involvement of the RF and Grant to the MEM, Grant continued his effort to expand American influence in shaping the public health system in the national government and the country. First, through his former colleague, J. H. Liu, who became the head of the newly formed Health Ministry of the nationalist government in 1928, Grant put his ideas into the formation of public health policies and institutions, such as the National Medical Schools, in varied cities. Second, through the graduates of his department, Grant highly influenced the way public health services were carried out in rural China. The most prominent one of these students is C. C. Chen. Chen started to work at Yen’s experimental area, Ting Hsien, in late 1920s. Chen’s persistent effort lasted even during the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1945. During the war, Chen worked in „Free China’ as the head of the public health service in Sichuan province and continued to build rural public health demonstration stations in that province. Chen attributes his contributions to Chinese public health system to the education he received at the Department of Hygiene and Public Health at the PUMC under Grant’s advisory.

John Black Grant’s success in China in the early part of the twentieth proved the vision of Vaughan, a professor of Grant’s and one of the first members of the Board of Scientific directors

of the IHD. Vaughan was the one who suggested Grant go into public health with the RF in the first place. Things turned out exactly as he had insightfully pointed out at the very beginning: a job in public health in China would satisfy Grant better on the one hand; on the other hand, Grant's working for project in China would be an opportunity for China.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ Grant to Heiser, June 26, 1918, Folder 1006, Box 70, Series 1.2, RG 5, Rockefeller Foundation (RF), RAC.

² J. B. Grant, proposal for the department of public health and hygiene at the PUMC, Folder 531, Box 75, CMB Inc, RF, RAC.

³ John Dewey to E.C. Carter, Nov. 20, 1928, Folder 1411, Box 57, Series 1.2, CMB, RF, RAC.