

Preliminary Research on the North China Council for Rural Reconstruction

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Abstract

In the early twentieth century, approximately eighty-five percent of the Chinese population relied on agriculture for its livelihood. Aiming to improve the well-being of China's vast rural population, the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) streamed philanthropic efforts and resources to rural China. The North China Council for Rural Reconstruction (NCCRR), an RF-funded rural philanthropic program composed of six Chinese institutions, was established in Peiping (Beijing) on April 2, 1936. As a nontraditional and experimental program, the NCCRR brought together the leading professors from various disciplines at different universities into intimate contact with philanthropic and educational activities in rural China. Although the program perhaps pointed to the modest ways in which institutions conducted rural philanthropy, the task of reviving China's countryside was ultimately too heavy for the RF as a foreign private foundation. Due to complicated geopolitical circumstances far beyond its control, the RF had to terminate its rural reconstruction work in China in 1944.

Preliminary Research on the North China Council for Rural Reconstruction

The question one naturally asks is why did the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) attempt to shape Chinese rural administration, in the first place? The answer, upon study, is that the RF perceived favorable social and political circumstances in China. John B. Grant, who was the International Health Division representative in China, said in his report that “China is one of the few countries in which the government is itself trying to institute marked social-economic changes.”¹ Moreover, the RF believed that the current Chinese government encouraged and guided non-governmental aid and cooperation at different levels and in diverse forms. “There is a growing group of Chinese leaders in the field of reconstruction who might welcome assistance from the RF and to whose thinking in turn the RF might lend some helpful direction.”²

Also, the Chinese Nationalist government increasingly realized the importance of strengthening its power and expanding its influence in the vast rural areas of the country. Mayling Soong Chiang (Madame Chiang Kai-Shek), who highly praised the RF’s rural reconstruction work, embodied the spirit of the Nationalist Party’s New Life Movement that “we shall do everything possible to make this program of rural reconstruction an outstanding success.”³ Selskar M. Gunn, as the vice president of the Rockefeller Foundation and the president of its China Program, believed, “It is fair to state our relatively small efforts in this direction during the past year have a significance entirely beyond the financial outlay.”⁴

The Rockefeller family’s personal giving in China dated back to nineteenth-century support for missionary activities. Its organized philanthropy followed on this tradition, focusing on health and education. Soon after the founding of

the Rockefeller Foundation, it started to build the Peking Union Medical College (PUMC) in 1917.⁵ From that point on, the RF generously sponsored a few university aid programs and philanthropic activities in China, including the Plant Improvement Project (PIP) conducted by Cornell University and the University of Nanking (Nanjing), Nankai Institute of Economics at Nankai University (Tianjing), and the College of Applied Social Sciences at Yanjing University (Peiping) via different funding channels. Among them, the PIP, with a relatively small amount of funding from the International Education Board, had been most important in strengthening China's economy which "provided a starting point for the comprehensive program for rural reconstruction" work carried by the RF since 1934.⁶ This led the RF to realize that "the opportunities along these lines are now being developed and in some respects they are even greater than in the United States."⁷ It was even possible for universities to obtain actual administration, and operation of local governments, at least at the grassroots level. The RF was convinced that these positions of control were fundamental, and essential to the early stage of social experimentation. Therefore, the Rockefeller Foundation confidently predicted that "the experiment of the North China Council may be significant outside of China."⁸

NCCRR, 1936-1944

The China Program was inaugurated at the meeting of the Rockefeller Foundation trustees on December 21, 1934. Under the direction of Selskar Gunn, the China Program established its headquarters in Shanghai in 1935.⁹ This China Program was authorized for an allocation of \$1,000,000 for a three-year period.¹⁰ A number of national universities, mission colleges, and other organizations had been allocated approximately \$556,000 in the first two years of the China Program, including Yanjing University, Nankai University, Tsinghua University, Peiping Union Medical College, and the Chinese Mass Education Movement.¹¹ In November 1935, the University of Nanking was

allocated \$41,750 by the RF, including LC55,000 and \$5,500 to its Department of Agricultural Economics and LC17,500 to its Department of Science.¹² There were urgent needs for these pioneering educational institutions to control community facilities in a concrete and coordinative plan, so as to apply their research and teaching directly to practical problems of rural reconstruction.

As a result, the North China Council for Rural Reconstruction (NCCRR), a cooperative organization of these forward-looking institutions was established in Peiping (Beijing) on April 2, 1936. Y. C. James Yen, the founder of the National Association of Mass Education Movements (MEM) was appointed as the president of the NCCRR.¹³ Mei Yiqi, the president of Tsinghua University and Robert Lim (Lin Kesheng) of the PUMC, were appointed as the vice presidents of the NCCRR.¹⁴ The NCCRR was comprised of six institutions, and each of them agreed to supervise efforts in a particular field of training, investigation, and demonstration. Tsinghua University carried the responsibility for engineering, Nankai University for education and social administration, Peking Union Medical College for social medicine, the University of Nanking for agriculture, and the Chinese National Association of the Mass Education Movement for the literacy campaign. As such, the Council members also included Zhang Boling from Nankai University, Lu Zhizhang from Yenching University, Xie Jiasheng from the University of Nanking, Zhang Zhiwen from the National Agricultural Research Bureau, Zhang Hongjun from Yenching University, and Chen Zhiji for social hygiene.¹⁵ Accordingly, six departments were set up under the NCCRR's leadership. The heads of each department are appointed by the NCCRR upon nomination of the institution supervising that field.¹⁶ Then the heads could recommend staff in each department.

The Council considered itself as “an extension of Y. C. James Yen's Mass Education Movement,” however more representative and comprehensive.¹⁷ While the Council's Central Secretariat was based in Peiping, its experimental

field work was mainly conducted in two Siens (prefectures), Tinghsien (Ding Xian) in Hebei Province and Tsining (Jining) in Shandong Province from 1936 to 1937. Work on education, agriculture, and social medicine was mainly conducted at Tinghsien where the existing Mass Education Movement provided already established facilities and consultations.¹⁸ Work on engineering, economics, public works, social administration, and civil administration was concentrated at Tsining, where the intimate relationship with local authorities provided a more favorable political environment for effective policy support.¹⁹ From academic year 1936 to 1937, the Council offered four categories of course work: social health, civil administration, economics, and education.²⁰ Then for the next academic year, it included courses for agriculture and engineering.²¹ Undergraduate and graduate students were required to register in one of these participating institutions first. Then, when they chose one of these two stations for course work and field training, they were expected to engage in three types of learning activities. First, direct observation and study on rural problems and needs; Second, reading, interviews, and discussions with their field instructors; Third, participate in real daily work of rural administration and reform, under the supervision of their field instructors.²² For example, regarding agriculture, the University of Nanking took over administrative responsibility for agriculture in the ten prefectures of the Greater Jining Area.²³ Professor Y. W. Chang of the University was appointed as the head of agriculture. At Jining, an agricultural improvement station was established to provide improved seed supply to local farmers, and also to offer courses and field training to their undergraduate and graduate students. Later, the Council was even able to integrate the personnel and facilities together to establish a controlled community station which was also named the Rural Institute.²⁴ The Council's budget was covered by the RF through its Shanghai Office. "The Council has been given the power of nominating its personnel to official government posts," as one document attested.²⁵ Therefore, university departments lost their different identities, and functioned collaboratively for the whole council. At the

same time, different universities were assigned for different fields, respectively, which avoided unnecessary duplication and overlapping work. Also, considerable amounts of funding were allocated for various local and foreign fellowships and research aid grants to promote rural education and training.

The Japanese invasion of China in 1937 discontinued the Council's work. Both prefectures' stations had to be abandoned in November 1937, just before the occupation of the Japanese army began.²⁶ However, after several months' hard travel, the majority of the Council eventually evacuated and re-established itself at Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou Province, at the heart of the Chinese southwest. Those participating universities also relocated themselves westward. Nankai and Tsinghua re-established themselves at Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, while Nanking relocated to Chengdu, the capital of the Sichuan Province in 1938.²⁷ The Mass Education Movement was headquartered at Changsha of Hunan Province.²⁸ Due to poor transportation and communications conditions in western China during the Sino-Japanese War, most of these universities lost effective contact with the NCCRR. Under this emergency situation, the RF still insisted that its program in China was continuing, and maintained that it was of ever-growing importance. With China's industrial eastern provinces falling to the Japanese troops, and its access to the Pacific severed, China's hope for survival relied on development of vast rural areas and the agricultural economy. This rural development had always been the focus of the RF's China Program. The importance of rural reconstruction was only heightened by Japan's military occupation. As Selskar Gunn indicated in his report, those leading individuals engaged in rural reconstruction activities in China had been brought together collectively under the NCCRR which made further contribution to the training of public administration. "It would be unfortunate if these personnel should be scattered and largely get out of touch with the rural reconstruction field," Gunn stated.²⁹ The war, nevertheless, necessitated the reorientation of the Council's agenda and schedule. The Council's general goal during the war, became to

“collaborate with the national-provincial institutes in Kweichow [Guizhou] province where the Council is located for the training of field personnel and for the technical cooperation.”³⁰ On April 29, 1938, an emergency meeting of the Council was called by the Chairman, Dr. Franklin L. Ho, a professor of economics at the Nankai Institute of Economics. The purpose of the meeting was to recombine the Council, so as to continue its existence during the war. An emergency committee, and a standing executive committee, was created to serve as the directing body of the Council during the Japanese invasion.³¹ Meanwhile, since the Council relocated its headquarter to Guiyang in southwestern China, the original name of the Council was no longer accurate. They, therefore, changed the title from “North” to “National,” thereby changing their group to the National Council for Rural Reconstruction (NCRR).

The Council supported two sections of work, the National Rural Service Training Institute which was previously known as the Rural Institute, and the Wartime Socio-Economic Program Division which was the former Council’s Central Secretariat transferred from Peiping to Guiyang. The National Rural Service Training Institute was located in Tingfan, a prefecture 55 kilometers south of the city of Guiyang. The institute was composed of six departments: Social and Civil Administration, Economics, Social Medicine, Agriculture, Education, and Engineering.³² It mostly served as a community service division, however. As an organization, it had the power to nominate its personnel to positions in the local government of the Tingfan prefecture. As Franklin Ho stated, a majority of the staff of the National Rural Service Training Institute had participated in the administrative work of the Tingfan Hsien Government.³³

The Wartime Socio-Economic Program Division located in Guiyang was composed of four departments: Social Medicine, Agriculture, Cooperation, and Hydraulic Engineering.³⁴ Its main agenda was to develop joint programs for personnel training and technology cooperation with provincial institutes in

Guizhou province, including with Guizhou provincial water conservancy personnel. The Council was not discouraged by this remote and backward region of southwest China. Quite the opposite. It highly appraised the area as “a more or less circumscribed locality offering unique advantages toward the attainment of the objectives for which the Council was founded.”³⁵ The Council’s technical adviser, Dr. John B. Grant, wrote to Selskar Gunn that “the Council is favored with an excellent location, a fundamental program of work for training and research, and full-hearted political and financial support from the central, provincial and Hisen [prefecture’s] government.”³⁶

In this environment, the RF’s budget shrank. It continued its support for local fellowship program to allocate \$22,424.24 to the NCCR even during the war for 1937 and the first half of 1938.³⁷ The Council was still hopeful about the prospect of rural reconstruction after the war. The RF Executive Committee continued to appropriate \$272,600 to the NCCR for 1938-1939 and \$198,860 for 1939-1940.³⁸

However, these idealists were, in fact, too optimistic. Located in an isolated prefecture in southwest China, the Council could not establish effective communication with cooperating institutions. As the fighting between Chinese and Japanese armies penetrated deeply into the southwestern interior of China, the transportation problem became extremely critical. As Rockefeller representative, Dr. M. C. Balfour described in his letter, he saw hundreds of trucks immobilized along the “lifeline of Free China” as the Haiphong-Nanning-Kweiyang Road was known. Tingfan was on this paralyzed traffic line.³⁹ Besides, because of the military demands and local Chinese currency inflation, benzene prices were skyrocketing to about \$1.00 per gallon in the southwest of China, which disastrously raised the cost of car travel to two or three times that of air fares.⁴⁰ Due to the great difficulty of maintaining contact with those cooperative institutions scattered in different localities of western China, the Council failed in its function of leadership in rural reconstruction.

Within the five departments of the Institute, there were no full-time senior heads for any department.⁴¹ Their part-time heads made occasional visits to Tingfan. Therefore, the lack of local leadership led the NCCR to face the most difficult problems in administration.⁴² In addition, there were only 16 graduate students for 1940-1941, and no one from cooperating institutions.⁴³ Without faculty and students support from cooperative institutions, Tingfan became an isolated island for the NCCR.

The constitution of the Institute also limited its effectiveness. Theoretically, the prefecture government should have functioned under the direction of the Institute. However, “no legal provision has ever been made for the Institute to exercise any authority over it.”⁴⁴ In reality, the Council and the Institute lacked adequate prefectural and provincial support during the turmoil caused by the war.

Seeing no hope for self-dependent rural reconstruction work for what seemed to be an endless war, the RF could do nothing but to prepare to conclude its NCCR program in China. Just as Balfour said in his “face-saving” letter sent back to the RF, “I am neither disillusioned nor disappointed in China and our colleagues there, but have gotten to the stage of being a realist, or ‘hard-boiled,’ as the case may be.”⁴⁵

One thing the RF should have learned from the case of the National Council for Rural Reconstruction was that despite of all the Council’s solemn promises to write and send the RF specific proposals and financial estimates, the projects proved to be a bottomless pit, demanding endless support. From 1934 when the China Program was inaugurated, a total amount of \$1,885,560 had been appropriated for rural reconstruction work. In 1944, the RF terminated its rural reconstruction work before the civil war reignited between the Nationalist Party (GMD) and Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

An overall assessment of the program does point to a set of accomplishments. As a nontraditional and experimental philanthropic program, the NCCRR brought together the leading professors from various disciplines in different universities into intimate contact with rural reconstruction activities. The program provided intellectuals necessary funding to conduct research, and even more importantly, prevented them from unemployment and turmoil during the war. As Gunn pointed out, the most important contribution of the NCCRR's work was to provide personnel of high quality for social reconstruction and public administration as a whole in China.⁴⁶ Therefore, after the wars, the majority of them did not lose the continuity of their research and became well-known Chinese scientists which allowed them to continue making contribution to the country.

Witnessing the accomplishments and lessons of the NCCRR, there was a growing voice that urged the Nationalist government to set up a directing committee in the Executive Yuan to coordinate rural reconstruction work nationwide as soon as possible.⁴⁷ The Rockefeller Foundation's sustained effort on rural reconstruction brought the Nationalist government's attention to rural development and international cooperation, including the cooperation between the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and the International Harvester Company from 1945 to 1948, as well as the Joint China-United States Agricultural Mission in 1946. As a forerunner of Sino-US transnational cooperation, the NCCRR set a model for later bilateral communication and cooperation. This is often considered as an original pattern for the post-World War II Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction which had a distinct success in Taiwan.

Before the China Program, the RF had spent over \$37,000,000 in China, starting in 1913.⁴⁸ It was the largest amount that had ever been spent in any country outside the United States. People inside and outside the RF argued that "is it the welfare of mankind best served by enlarging investment in China?"⁴⁹

However, the RF insisted in aiding the NCCRR and other institutions involved in rural reconstruction. Although the Rockefeller Foundation eventually suspended the NCCRR in 1944, it continued to sponsor the Peking Union Medical College (PUMC) which was their primary funding entity, and other universities' teaching and research until 1949. With the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the RF withdrew its aid programs from the country, and turned its attention elsewhere, supporting agrarian programs in such nations as Mexico, India, and a number of South American countries.

¹ J. B. Grant, Principles for the China Program, March 1935, P1, Folder 469, Box 22, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.

² J. B. Grant, Principles for the China Program, March 1935, P1, Folder 469, Box 22, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.

³ Mayling Soong Chiang to S. M. Gunn, Feb. 1937, Folder 458, Policy General 1932-1945, Box 21, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.

⁴ Selskar M. Gunn, as the vice president of the Rockefeller Foundation and the president of its China Program, believed, "It is fair to state our relatively small efforts in this direction during the past year have a significance entirely beyond the financial outlay."

⁵ Rockefeller Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation Annual Report 1917 (New York: Rockefeller Foundation, 1917), 224.

⁶ Agricultural Progress in China, April 1943, P 11, Folder 474, Nanking 1935-1945, Box 23, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.

⁷ Items in connection with current China Program were presented, together with a statement of progress, April 1937, P3, Folder 108, Box 10, Series 601, Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.

⁸ Items in connection with current China Program were presented, together with a statement of progress, April 1937, P3, Folder108, Box 10, Series 601, Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.

⁹ China and the Rockefeller Foundation, April 1944, P6, Folder 458, Policy General 1932-1945, Box 21, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.

¹⁰ Adjusting for inflation that is over eighteen million in today's currency.

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- ¹¹ China Program, May 1938, Folder 469, Box 22, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ¹² University of Nanking-Agriculture, April 1936, Folder 474, Nanking 1935-1945, Box 23, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ¹³ 叶茂/ Ye Mao, “组织华北农村建设协进会”/ “Zuzhi huabei nongcun jianshe xiejinhui,” *Shiyebu yuekan* 实业部月刊, Vol. 2 No.2 (1937):261.
- ¹⁴ 叶茂/ Ye Mao, “组织华北农村建设协进会”/ “Zuzhi huabei nongcun jianshe xiejinhui,” *Shiyebu yuekan* 实业部月刊, Vol. 2 No.2 (1937):261.
- ¹⁵ North China Council for Rural Reconstruction, 《华北农村建设协进会训练研究委员会纪录》/ *Huabei nongcun jianshe xiejinhui xunlian weiyuanhui jilu*, (Peiping, North China Council for Rural Reconstruction, unknown), 24.
- ¹⁶ North China Council for Rural Reconstruction Announcement, 1936-1937, Folder 113, Box 11, Series 601, Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archival Center, NY.
- ¹⁷ Confidential Monthly Report to Trustees, January 1937, P10, Folder 478, Box 23, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ¹⁸ North China Council for Rural Reconstruction Announcement, 1936-1937, Folder 1, Box 1, Series 601, Record Group 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ¹⁹ North China Council for Rural Reconstruction Announcement, 1936-1937, Folder 1, Box 1, Series 601, Record Group 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ²⁰ Editorial, “华北农村建设协进会工作大纲(附录)”/ “Huabei nongcun jianshe xiejinhui gongzuo dagang fulu,” *Minjian* 民间 Vol. 3 No. 23 (1937): 17.
- ²¹ Editorial, “华北农村建设协进会工作大纲(附录)”/ “Huabei nongcun jianshe xiejinhui gongzuo dagang fulu,” *Minjian* 民间 Vol. 3 No. 23 (1937): 17.
- ²² NCRP Program of Instruction, 1936-1937, Folder 113, Box 11, Series 601, Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ²³ Recommendation for Approval of Local Fellowships, Feb. 1937, Folder 108, Box 10, Series 601, Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ²⁴ National Council for Rural Reconstruction, June 1938, P 7, Folder 1, Box 1, Series 601, Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ²⁵ North China Council for Rural Reconstruction, April 1937, P147, Folder 478, Box 23, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ²⁶ 端/ Duan, “本会乡政学院二十六年度工作报告”/ “Benhui xiangzheng xueyuan ershiliu niandu gongzuo baogao,” *Nongcun jianshe* 农村建设 Vol. 1 No. 2 (1938): 71.
- ²⁷ S. M. Gunn, “Report on China Program,” April 1938, P2, Folder 458, Policy General 1932-1945, Box 21, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
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- ²⁹ China Program, December 1937, P 427, Folder 46, Box 22, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.

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- ³⁰ National Council for Rural Reconstruction, June 1938, P4, Folder 1, Box 1, Series 601, Record Group 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ³¹ National Council for Rural Reconstruction Emergency Committee, June 1938, Folder 1, Box 1, Series 601, Record Group 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ³² National Council for Rural Reconstruction Emergency Committee, June 1938, Folder 1, Box 1, Series 601, Record Group 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ³³ Franklin L. Ho to J. B. Grant, Feb. 1939, Folder 1, Box 1, Series 601, Record Group 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ³⁴ National Council for Rural Reconstruction Emergency Committee, June 1938, Folder 1, Box 1, Series 601, Record Group 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ³⁵ China Program, Exhibit I, May 1938, Folder 1, Box 1, Series 601, Record Group 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
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- ⁴² Franklin L. Ho to J. B. Grant, Feb. 1939, Folder 1, Box 1, Series 601, Record Group 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ⁴³ N.Y. letter No.86, July 1941, P 2, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 601, Record Group 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ⁴⁴ Memorandum on the Reorganization of the National Rural Service Training Institute, February 1940, P 1, Folder 149, Box 14, Series 601, Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ⁴⁵ M. C. Balfour to S. M. Gunn and T. B. Appleget, April 1941, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 601, Record Group 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archival Center, NY.
- ⁴⁶ S. M. Gunn, "Report on China Program," April 1938, P9, Folder 458, Policy General 1932-1945, Box 21, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.
- ⁴⁷ 毛起鹄/ Mao Qijun, "乡村建设运动之检讨"/ "Xiangcun jianshe yundong zhi jiantao," *Dongfang zazhi* 东方杂志, Vol. 33 No.13 (1936): 157- 166.
- ⁴⁸ The report of Committee on Appraisal and Plan, December 1934, P107, Folder 469, Box 22, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.

⁴⁹ The report of Committee on Appraisal and Plan, December 1934, P107, Folder 469, Box 22, Series 1, Cox and Reece Investigations, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.