**RURAL RECONSTRUCTION MOVEMENT IN CHINA**

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As a response to the problems caused by industrialization and modernization in a developing country such as China, rural reconstruction has been designed as a political and cultural project to defend peasant communities and agriculture. These grassroots efforts are separate from, parallel to, or in tension with projects initiated by the state or by political parties. As an attempt to construct a platform for mass democracy and to experiment on participatory, urban-rural integration for sustainability, the Chinese experience of rural reconstruction may be examined as alternative politics.

From the 1920s to the 1940s, several well-known scholars of different visions were actively involved in rural reconstruction movements. James Yen who received a Western, Christian education, promoted a mass education movement and civil society in Ding County, north China, and later in southwest China. Liang Shuming, Confucian, and Buddhist advocated rural governance through regeneration of traditional knowledge and culture in Zouping Township, Shandong Province. Lu Zuofu, owner of a shipping company, established social enterprises and public facilities to modernize Beibei town, southwest China. Tao Xingzhi combined livelihood education with communism. Huang Yanpei designed vocational training programs for rural people. After 1949, James Yen continued his rural reconstruction projects in the Philippines, and different countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

The project of rural reconstruction is a response to the 1979 market reforms and push to export-led manufacture. The consequent demand for cheap labour, aggravated the urban-rural divide and other kinds of social polarization. The global financial crisis also impacted severely impacted the Chinese economy. Rural reconstruction as a necessary movement to defend the rural way of life was proposed in 1999 by Wen Tiejun, then a researcher of the Ministry of Agriculture and later Executive Dean of the Institute of Advanced Studies for Sustainability, Renmin University of China. He coined the term *sannong*, referring to the three rural dimensions of peasants (rural population), villages (rural site) and agriculture (rural production). Since 2004, *sannong* issues have been officially accepted as being of ‘the utmost importance among all important tasks’ in Central Document No.1 of the Party and the State. While the government has prioritized rural development by investing over RMB 10 trillion (approximately USD 1.58 trillion) in infrastructure and welfare in the last twelve years, rural reconstruction is committed to self-organization and popular democracy. Most of these local efforts are autonomous, operating on their own initiative, sometimes complementary to state policies.

Wen Tiejun has mobilized officials, villagers, scholars, and university students to work together for rural reconstruction. Particularly, rural women play an important role in organizing on the ground, and their engagement is extensively documented in the PeaceWomen Across the Globe Project conducted by Lau Kin Chi and Chan Shun Hing, professors from Lingnan University, Hong Kong. Of the diverse rural reconstruction endeavours, some notable events include the ‘Rural Edition’ of *China Reform*, a nation-wide journal which spoke for peasant interests. In 2001, the Liang Shuming Rural Reconstruction Centre was set up to provide training programmes for university students and peasant cooperatives. In 2002, the Beijing Migrant Workers’ Home was set up to provide cultural and educational programmes for peasant workers. In 2003, the James Yen Rural Reconstruction Institute was established, which organized peasant training programs and advocated ecological agriculture. In 2005, the James Yen Popular Education Centre was established to promote localized popular knowledge and courses for peasant workers. In 2008, the Green Ground Eco-Tech Centre was established to promote rural–urban cooperation, community-supported agriculture, and ecological skills and techniques; it manages the Little Donkey Farm, a common project of the Haidian District Government and the Centre of Rural Reconstruction at Renmin University of China. In 2009, the first China Community Supported Agriculture Conference was held in Beijing. In 2013, the Association of Advancement for Loving Home Village Culture was set up to organize campaigns for recognizing grassroots efforts in defending rural heritage. In 2015, the Participatory Guarantee System of social organic agriculture was launched to build a national network of agro-ecological groups. In addition, throughout China, there are rural reconstruction bases with diverse experiments. These include rural integrated development projects in Yongji of Shanxi province, Shunping of Hebei province, Lankao and Lingbao of Henan province; rural finance projects in Lishu of Jilin province; and popular education, cultural transformation, and community colleges in Xiamen, Longyan, Yongchun, Yongtai, Pingnan of Fujian province.

The new rural reconstruction movement has reached out to share experience with popular movements in India, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, Venezuela, Turkey, South Africa, and Senegal, among others. These facilitations have paved the way for organizing eight South-South Forums on Sustainability (SSFS) in Hong Kong and in Chongqing from 2011 to 2021.

Taking note of the consequences and effects on nature and on peoples especially those from the global south, SSFS brings together academic scholars, feminists, peace activists, community workers, food producers, and rural regeneration promoters to review, articulate and debate theories and practices in transformative and collective actions called forth by the crises of capitalism affecting the ecological, the social, the political, and the economic.

Drawing upon experiences of community governance in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the Forum is a platform for dialogues and exchanges among grassroots and resistance practices in the production, dissemination and use of knowledge as instruments of problematization and self-organization, as well as interactions among thinkers in search of paradigms for peace and justice.

SSFS brings together old and new generations of committed people working for ecological and socio-economic justice to articulate knowledge produced by experiences on the field, common reflections, and new findings about the critical reality, in particular, from communities that defend their commons. It helps cross-fertilize initiatives practiced by organizations and networks, not to duplicate the efforts, but to foster further inter-connections. It experiments with creative and self-reliant forms of interacting, networking and managing resources. SSFS recognizes and values the large pool of existing efforts, resources and convergences, and aims at adding to cross-border exchanges in the endeavour for the formation of new historical subjects for cultural and social change for another possible world.

Rural reconstruction promotes social participation, ecological agriculture, and sustainable livelihood. It is committed to the Three People’s Principles: people’s livelihood, people’s solidarity, and people’s cultural diversity. It emphasizes peasants’ organizational and institutional renewal – the implementation of local integrated experiments with the application of grassroots knowledge.

Rural society as the carrier of soft-landing in various crises has experienced fundamental changes in the last two decades. Large-scale migration of young labour force out of villages renders the rural an aged society. Most of the capital gains of rural labour force are taken by internal and external capital as well as developed regions. Collective culture as the foundation of rural society is disintegrating. As a result, the basic condition of “risk-internalizing mechanism,” which means sustaining gains through self-capitalization of household labour force and resources based on peasant household rationality is also diminishing.

After 20 years of market reform giving the “free” market the reins, the Chinese leadership is switching to a policy re-orientation after 2003. New Socialist Countryside was put forward in 2005 as national strategy. The idea of Ecological Civilization was introduced in 2007. A year later, the goal of building a “resource-conserving and environment-friendly agriculture” was set up. Since 2005, over RMB 10 trillion (about USD 1.58 trillion) has been invested into rural development. Such a scale of infrastructure investment into rural regions regardless of short-term returns is unprecedented in the world including developed countries. The effect is quite remarkable. Almost all villages in China now have access to paved roads, pipe water, electricity, communication, and broad-band internet. The business cost of rural small and medium enterprises is significantly reduced. Diversified non-agricultural economy is given room to develop in villages, attracting labour moving back to rural regions.

Nevertheless, local governments, by path dependence of government corporatism, usually cling to the developmentalist “high investment–high debt–high GDP” model. Rural regions are still confronted with the problem of resources drainage and ecological unsustainability. The crux lies in whether it is possible to create an institutional condition to faithfully implement the strategic adjustments by the central government.

To build an ecological civilization, the first step is to abandon the GDP supremacy mentality. Economy must be re-embedded into society and society into ecology. The idea of ecological civilization is a response to the social and cultural crisis of post-industrial civilization. It calls forth a paradigm change in civilization. After all, the development of civilization is ultimately over-determined by ecology. The development of capitalism in the last five centuries must be interrogated. It is high time we ponder on our relationship with nature, with society, with others, with ourselves, which are being shaped by capitalism, and worse still, financial capitalism. If our existence is embedded in ecology, we must hold nature in awe and constantly remind us that nature is not a means to purposes such as economic growth.

China is one of the very few civilizations that have evolved without break for a few thousand years. Its struggle to achieve modernization in the last 150 years is tragic and heroic. After all the pains and efforts, the lesson is to renew ecological civilization which questions morbid modernization we are entrapped in. China’s experiences in the last 70 years may be valuable not only to developing countries but humanity.

Throughout the twentieth century China had gone through several political regime changes, yet regardless of who was in power, the main pursuit had been modernization, its logic being to benefit a small elite at the expense of the majority of the population. However, if rural China can be sustained for the cultivation of interdependent and cooperative relations within and among communities, not only will this protect the livelihoods of the majority of the population, but this will also function as resistance to external crises derived from global capitalism. In that sense, the historical and contemporary manifestations of rural reconstruction, which are based on the small peasantry and village community, provide an alternative to destructive modernization.