

Rural Reconstruction Movement

Xiāngcūn Jiànshè Yùndòng 乡村建设运动

Plagued by unstable markets, incompetent government, and local welfare, China's Rural Reconstruction Movement developed in the 1920s and 1930s as a collation of projects committed to non-revolutionary reform of village life. Although they did not succeed in their immediate purpose of saving the Chinese countryside, they helped to shape the perception that rural China was in crisis.

The Rural Reconstruction Movement 乡村建设运动 (*xiangcun jianshe yundong*) of the 1920s and 1930s was a loose coalition of several hundred independent projects, government experimental districts, missionary projects, and schools. The best known projects were at Ding Xian, Hebei Province, under the leadership of Y. C. James Yen (Yan Yangchu), and at Zouping, Shandong Province, under the leadership of Liang Shuming. These diverse groups shared a commitment to reforming village life by nonrevolutionary means but to be independent of the Nationalist government. They did not succeed in their immediate purpose, but they shaped the perception that rural China was in crisis and that any government of China should be judged by its ability to deal with that crisis.

The rural economy in imperial times was considered the responsibility of the emperor and his officials; the weakening of central governance in the early twentieth century left the countryside on its own. In the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the village economy in coastal commercial China actually improved, but the 1920s and early 1930s brought unstable world markets, incompetent government support, local warfare, disruption of access to markets, deterioration of the land, drought, and little access to credit. In addition, the gap between urban intellectuals and the countryside widened. The imperial Confucian cultural world had not been divided into “city” and “country,” per se, but with the opening of China to the world and the new prestige of foreign schooling, many educated youth lost touch with the village. New Culture intellectuals of the 1910s held rural values to be responsible for China’s weakness. Li Dazhao, for instance, wrote in 1919: “The blackness of the Chinese village has reached its nadir, and the common people are all blind to their situation, not knowing how to protect themselves or band together for mutual aid . . . From morn ‘til eve they work in the fields like horses and oxen” (“Youth and the Village,” Chen Bao 1919). In 1923 radical Nationalist and Communist activists organized the Peasant Training Institute in Guangdong. These activists, including future Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong, saw China’s rural problem as “feudalism” and destruction of the landlord class as the answer.

Emergence of Rural Reconstruction

In response to the rural challenge and the radical revolutionary program, a number of intellectuals of liberal and conservative persuasions in the New Culture generation

made their own “discovery” of the countryside. They saw the problem not as class exploitation but rather as social disorganization and lack of support. The answer was neither to return to the past nor to import Western scientific techniques, which were expensive and not fitted to China, but rather to go to the countryside and create a basis for China’s own modernity.

In 1923 Y. C. James Yen and Tao Xingzhi founded the National Association of Mass Education Movements (MEM) to organize and coordinate urban literacy campaigns but quickly decided to start programs in the countryside where the vast majority of the Chinese people lived. Tao founded a teachers’ training school in Xiaozhuang, a village outside Nanking (now called Nanjing), which combined training and activism, but it was closed down, probably for political reasons, in 1927. In 1926 the MEM started a pilot program of “People’s Schools” (*minjian xuexiao*) in Ding County, Hebei Province. These schools, unlike expensive government schools, met at times convenient for the students, in rent-free places such as temples or homes, and used local volunteer teachers. They were cheap, indigenous, and effective. However, one graduate complained, “Dr. Yen, my stomach is just as empty as my illiterate neighbor’s” (Hayford 1990, pp. 53–59). Yen responded by recruiting a team of experts, many of them with foreign graduate

degrees, to live in the villages and make a “laboratory county” to develop scientific techniques that suited poor, agrarian China.

The Ding Xian Experiment, as Yen called it, produced the integrated Fourfold Reconstruction Program to attack the “four weaknesses” of village life—poverty, disease, ignorance, and misgovernment. The U.S. journalist Edgar Snow visited in 1933 and proclaimed that “rural China is being remade.” The program coordinated culture, economics, health, and political divisions. The People’s Schools remained the entry point. Graduates became “little teachers” to spread literacy and create an organizational network. Demonstration farmers tested new techniques, seed, and breeds of pigs, which led to economic buying cooperatives and eventually to cooperative marketing of cotton. Village health workers, trained to form the base of a public health pyramid, kept records, spread public health knowledge, gave vaccinations and other simple medical care, but referred harder tasks to trained nurses in the market towns or to the hospital in the county seat. The MEM also developed a village theater and local publications. In 1932, after the global depression devastated the rural economy, the national government created an institute run by Yen and his colleagues to take control of the county government, collect taxes, and plan for political reform.

A woman separates wheat from chaff in the Lanzhou, Gansu Province. Over 60 per cent of China’s population still lives in rural areas. Because the media so often focuses on “China’s economic miracle” and its booming urban population, many Westerners are unaware that China’s vast hinterland is in a dangerous state of crisis. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.



Zouping (Shandong)

In 1926 Liang Shuming, a Confucian scholar who drew from the past but did not want to return to it, was frightened and inspired by the radical peasant movement in Guangdong. Partly borrowing from the Ding Xian Experiment, partly drawing on the precedent of the *shuyuan* (the traditional Confucian academy), he obtained the political backing of the Shandong provincial government to set up a rural reconstruction program in Zouping. Confucian moral education and group organization were emphasized over technical development, leading some to distinguish “scientific Ding Xian” from “philosophical Zouping.”

By the early 1930s the experiments in Ding Xian and Zouping caught the imagination of the public and the eye of the Nanking government. Almost every provincial government sponsored rural training programs and experimental districts, and colleges sponsored local projects. Liang Shuming and Y. C. James Yen organized the Rural Reconstruction Movement, which held national meetings in 1934 and 1935. The Rockefeller Foundation sponsored the North China Council on Rural Reconstruction to coordinate university, government, and private groups. On the eve of the War of Resistance against Japan the national media reflected a new rural consciousness; the village was the foundation of the nation, China’s path to a unique modernity, and the basis for national defense.

After 1937

The war destroyed the local rural reconstruction projects, and national priorities shifted to military control and political competition. The wartime Rural Reconstruction Party did not achieve major influence. In 1948 Y. C. James Yen obtained funding from the U.S. Congress for the Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction (JCRR). The JCRR carried out land reform and development projects on the mainland, but only after moving to Taiwan in 1949 did it achieve major results. In the late 1980s and 1990s the New Rural Reconstruction Movement, based in Beijing, explicitly modeled itself on the earlier one.

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Further Reading

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