

# The Historical Practice and Modern Enlightenment of the Rural Construction Movement in Shandong before 1949

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**Abstract:** The rural social problems in China have continuity. By reviewing and analyzing the rural construction carried out by the government, social organizations, and intellectuals in Shandong before 1949 to rescue the decline of rural areas and revitalize the rural economy, we can gain rich experience and lessons for current rural grassroots governance. The rural construction movement in Shandong before 1949, through practice, ultimately formed various models of rural experimental areas. However, due to the limitations of the times, it ultimately failed due to various reasons. In the new era, grassroots governance in rural areas should adhere to the concept of people-oriented and be close to the actual needs of rural areas; Actively mobilize diverse stakeholders and build a collaborative governance system; Implementing rural education and cultivating a solid foundation for development, these measures aim to promote the modernization of China's grassroots governance system and provide assistance for the development of rural revitalization.

**Keywords:** Rural Construction Movement; Rural Grassroots Governance; Rural Social Work

## 1. Foreword

Throughout the exploration of rural construction and grassroots governance in modern China, it has always been accompanied by the process of modernization of Chinese society. In the new era, the proposal of the rural revitalization strategy has put forward new requirements for the construction of the rural grassroots social governance system. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China pointed out that "the most arduous and heavy task of

comprehensively promoting rural revitalization and building a socialist modernized country still lies in the countryside." Rural revitalization leads to national prosperity, and efficient grassroots social governance is a powerful guarantee for promoting rural revitalization. Comprehensively strengthening the construction of grassroots organizations in rural areas, improving the level of rural governance, accelerating the development of rural community economy, and maintaining rural social stability have profound significance for comprehensively promoting rural revitalization and building a socialist modernized strong country.

From a macro historical perspective, China's grassroots rural governance presents a multi track structure of state power, local elites, and rural society. The interactive relationship between various entities participating in rural grassroots governance construction presents dynamic changes and is influenced by various factors such as society, politics, and economy<sup>[1]</sup>. The rural social problems in China have continuity, and although the focus of rural construction and grassroots governance varies in different periods, the valuable experience accumulated from historical practice is of great significance for contemporary rural grassroots governance.

## 2. The Model and Contribution of Shandong Rural Construction Movement before 1949

Looking back at the rural construction movement rooted in Shandong in the 1920s and 1930s, various rural construction entities were carried out against the backdrop of national political fragmentation, social transformation, and cultural imbalance. This movement was not only a partial governance of the current situation in rural areas, but also a major attempt at rural governance models. It made significant contributions in reconstructing social organizational structures

and exploring rural construction paths.

The rural construction movement in Shandong was carried out under the promotion of the government, social organizations, and intellectuals, and under the guidance of various township construction entities, ultimately forming representative experimental areas: Qilu University "led by foreign church universities, with Christian missionary nature" Longshan Experimental Area; Liang Shuming led the way with intellectuals and demonstrated democratic spontaneity in the Zouping Experimental Zone; Shen Honglie's Qingdao Experimental Zone is led by the government and has organizational and political characteristics. The theoretical ideas, goals, and representative interests of each experimental zone are different, and their practical models have their own characteristics and advantages and disadvantages.

### **2.1 Longshan Experimental Zone, Led by Foreign Church Universities and with a Christian Missionary Nature**

The rural construction in the Longshan Experimental Zone of Qilu University is guided by the rural construction plan initiated by the China Christian Higher Education Development Committee, with the goal of promoting Christian ideology and developing religious believers. It represents the interests of the Western Christian Church. Although it has achieved the least success due to government constraints and conditions, it reflects the thinking of foreigners on rural issues and grassroots governance in China. The difference between the rural construction model of Qilu University and other experimental areas mainly lies in its combination of religious background and educational preaching. As a Christian university, Qilu University's rural construction activities not only focus on material improvements, but also emphasize the enhancement of spiritual culture and the practice of social gospel<sup>[2]</sup>. This model was relatively unique in Chinese society at that time, as it integrated religious beliefs with secular rural construction, aiming to promote the modernization process of rural areas through means such as education and healthcare.

### **2.2 Zouping Experimentation Area with the Leading Role of Intellectuals and**

### **Democratic Spontaneity**

The rural construction of Liang Shuming's Zouping Experimental Zone is guided by Confucian ethics, with the goal of building new customs and forming new groups. It represents the interests of intellectuals and elites, has democratic spontaneity, embodies the professional knowledge, cultural quality, and social responsibility of intellectuals, as well as the autonomy and democratic participation of rural communities. Liang Shuming's rural construction penetrated deep into rural areas and had the characteristic of theoretical advancement compared to other rural construction experimental areas. Firstly, a relatively complete theoretical system and organizational framework were constructed. Later, rural groups were formed through the integration of village learning, rural education, and political education to develop rural self-defense, reshape the construction of the rule of law and moral governance in rural areas, and restore rural order; By carrying out education for the common people and rebuilding rural culture to inspire knowledge and cultivate new people, advocating for the stimulation of farmers' autonomy and the cultivation of their development capabilities, we aim to achieve farmers' conscious participation in rural modernization construction. Liang Shuming's rural construction thought initially aimed to maintain the independent position of intellectuals in rural construction and did not want the government to intervene in the rural construction movement he presided over. However, in the actual process, facing the huge interest groups and clan forces in the countryside, the implementation of rural construction plans, innovation or promotion of rural systems would be opposed and resisted due to various interest disputes. In order to effectively promote the implementation of rural construction plans, they had to accept cooperation with the government and local elites, relying on the power of the government to promote rural construction. At the same time, their political and religious integration and rural self-defense helped maintain the rule of those in power, and therefore received strong support from the Shandong Provincial Government.

### **2.3 Qingdao Experimentation Area with the**

### **Government as the Leading and the Organizational Politics**

Shen Honglie's rural area renovation is aimed at urban modernization, emphasizing the equal development of urban and rural areas. It regards Qingdao's urban and rural areas as a whole, guided by the ten major policy guidelines announced during his inauguration, with the goal of developing urban modernization and promoting urban-rural integration. It represents the interests of the old ruling class of the National Government, and drives economic development and narrows the urban-rural gap through government leadership, the combination of urban and rural areas, and the integration of government and civilians. The significant features of Shen Honglie's rural construction include the city's support for the countryside, vigorous development of infrastructure, and improvement of public services. Shen Honglie served in Qingdao for six years, increasing the mileage of rural roads by 10 times, carrying out the construction of rural school buildings to enrich the number of primary schools in rural areas, investigating the number of school-age children, persuading school-age children to enroll in school, carrying out public welfare undertakings to provide relief to widows, orphans, orphans, sick and disabled people, increasing rural police stations, strengthening security hardware equipment, and improving the public security situation in urban and rural areas. These measures reflect Shen Honglie's strategic thinking of comprehensive development of material and cultural construction. These measures not only promote the rapid development of various rural areas in Qingdao, but also have important significance for promoting urban-rural integration and achieving balanced socio-economic development, and lay a solid foundation for the overall rapid development of Qingdao in the future.

### **3. Reflection on the Limitations of Shandong Rural Construction Movement before 1949**

With the support and acquiescence of the provincial government, Shandong's rural construction has its own strengths and focuses. But in essence, it is a reform movement carried out by the government, intellectuals and university groups under the rule of maintaining the existing social system, peaceful

development and rural innovation. Due to the constraints of political reform and social transformation, there are certain limitations.

#### **3.1 Farmers' Enthusiasm for Participation is Insufficient**

From the perspective of leaders and participants in rural construction, although the rural construction movement in Shandong has won the active participation of local governments, intellectuals and social groups, the participation of farmers in it is relatively low. The main reason for this situation is that, to a large extent, the relevant theories and specific practices of rural construction are often driven by external forces such as the government and intellectuals, rather than by the actual needs and real wishes of farmers themselves. The main body of township construction is obviously lack of deep thinking about the fundamental needs of farmers, overemphasizing their own ideas and methods, and failing to grasp the key points that farmers are most urgent to solve at the moment, which eventually leads to the fact that in the actual operation process of rural construction movement, it is difficult to fully and effectively mobilize the enthusiasm and initiative of farmers.

#### **3.2 The Depth of Rural Construction is not Enough**

All the rural construction subjects failed to realize that in China, which was in the state of semi colonial and semi feudal society at that time, the sharp contradiction of class opposition was extremely prominent and severe. The series of practical contents they carried out basically focused on the development of public education, the active introduction of improved varieties of agriculture and forestry, the efforts to cultivate groups and organizations, and the efforts to improve the social atmosphere, etc., but they have never really touched the issue of land reform, which has the core and key significance. They have not been able to fully mobilize the autonomy and enthusiasm of farmers on the basis of exploring effective channels for rural real income increase, and also failed to meet the needs of farmers for land. There is a serious dislocation between the practice logic of rural construction led by improvement and the behavior logic of farmers

based on survival. The practical means of rural construction and the actual needs of farmers' economic development show a state of mutual deviation<sup>[3]</sup>.

### **3.3 Theory is Divorced From Practice**

Most of the rural construction intellectuals were deeply influenced by the modern western education. The theoretical framework and practical system they designed are too forward-looking and ahead of time for those rural people who have been clinging to the tradition. In the specific process of practical operation, these theories are often difficult to effectively implement due to various practical factors. At the same time, with the gradual promotion and development of rural construction practice, new contradictions and problems will often appear, which requires continuing to summarize the knowledge and experience with local characteristics produced in the process of practice, through this way to further improve the relevant theories of rural construction, and make reasonable modifications and adjustments to the practical program.

## **4. The Current Enlightenment of the Rural Construction Movement in Shandong before 1949**

### **4.1 Putting People First and Meeting the Needs of Rural Areas**

Under the constraints and influences of the historical background and production relations, the needs of farmers in different periods vary. before 1949, the state power showed a state of division, and society was in a state of turmoil. Rural areas faced severe internal and external problems, while the reality of extremely low productivity was in front of them. In such a situation, farmers placed their longing for land and solving the problem of food and clothing in the top priority, failing to accurately grasp the true needs of farmers. This became one of the important reasons for the failure of the rural construction movement.

With the development of the times, the needs of farmers are constantly changing, and rural grassroots governance needs to be rooted in the actual needs of farmers. With the process of urbanization, rural society has gradually become mobile, diversified, and unfamiliar, and the needs of rural residents have shown a

diversified and scattered development trend<sup>[4]</sup>. Therefore, establishing a value concept rooted in the actual needs of rural areas in grassroots governance is an important guarantee to ensure that people's needs, rights, and development are fully valued and met in the process of rural development.

### **4.2 Resource Integration Mechanism**

In the rural construction movement in Shandong, although many entities such as the national government, university groups, intellectuals, and local elites participated, they were in a relatively closed and isolated state when participating in rural governance, and failed to explore and construct effective cooperation mechanisms and collaborative governance systems among themselves. With the development of the times, the traditional governance model of a single subject is no longer suitable for the complex problems faced by rural society today. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a governance system with multiple subjects and collaborative participation.

Multi subject collaborative rural grassroots governance is a complex and multi track system that requires effective consultation and linkage among various governance entities, leveraging their strengths in different fields to empower rural areas and promote the healthy development of rural governance, ultimately achieving the beautiful vision of "co construction, co governance, and sharing".

### **4.3 Developing Rural Education and Laying a Solid Foundation for Development**

In the rural construction movement in Shandong, all rural construction entities have realized the important role of education in rural development. In addition to conducting school education and social education, Qilu University also draws on Western rural construction ideas to carry out women's education, family education, and promote food nutrition in the Longshan Experimental Zone. Liang Shuming attempted to reconstruct social organizations through educational reform, supported by historical and cultural factors, and established collective consciousness and cultural awareness through the popularization of rural education. Shen Honglie implemented compulsory education in rural areas and carried out civilian education on top of establishing a

compulsory education system, in order to maintain governance and improve the skills of farmers' survival. It can be seen that various educational measures were carried out in rural areas to inspire people's intelligence and cultivate new residents. This played a positive role in establishing cultural consciousness, eliminating feudal ideas, and promoting modern education at that time, and promoted the transformation of the closed and backward traditional rural society into a democratic and scientific society.

## 5. Conclusion

The main forms and methods of the rural construction movement became the manifestation of community social work before 1949, nurturing local community social work methods in modern China <sup>[5]</sup>, promoting economic construction and social transformation in rural areas before 1949, and accumulating rich local work experience and lessons for rural social work and community social work in China. Through the practical analysis of the rural construction movement carried out before 1949, the Shandong region has formed a democratic and spontaneous rural construction led by intellectuals; Rural experiments with Christian evangelism led by foreign church universities; The representative models of rural construction, such as the government led and organized political transformation of rural areas, ultimately failed due to the limitations of the times, such as insufficient participation of farmers, insufficient depth of rural construction, and a disconnect between theory and practice. In the new era, grassroots governance in rural areas

should adhere to the concept of people-oriented and be close to the actual needs of rural areas; Actively mobilize diverse stakeholders and build a collaborative governance system; Implementing rural education and cultivating a solid foundation for development, these measures aim to promote the modernization of China's grassroots governance system and provide assistance for the development of rural revitalization.

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