

'China Reconstructs'

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About 60-70% of China's population still lives in the rural areas. With the media constantly showcasing 'China's economic miracle', people may not know that its vast hinterland is in a dangerous state of crisis. Experts have coined the term 'three-dimensional rural problem' (agriculture, peasants, and rural areas') to summarise the multitude of troubles, such as stagnant income, declining public services, overstuffed but inefficient local government, rampant corruption, declining social capital, degraded environment, escalating crimes, and expanding protests and demonstrations. In China, the rural crisis is generally recognised as the most urgent challenge for the government, yet the proposed solutions differ widely.

Mainstream economists still count on rapid industrialisation and urbanisation as the panacea. However, already about 60% of the water in seven major river systems is classified as heavily polluted. Sixty million people face water scarcity, and more than 300 million do not have access to clean drinking water. Because of this water shortage alone, the current model of industrialisation and urbanisation seems neither scalable nor sustainable. Also there are already as many as 150 million rural migrants working in the urban areas. The majority are working in sweatshop conditions and have little chance to enjoy the convenience and comforts of urban life.

Recognising all these problems, some rural experts have argued that the majority of China's rural population should remain rural in the foreseeable future—there is no easy escape to the cities. They put forward plans to revive community spirit and empower rural people to rebuild a people-centred and community-based local economy. Over the years, many peasants have also reached similar conclusions and have started to self-organise and explore an alternative sustainable and dignified livelihood. Answering these calls, some scholars and activists have joined the grassroots peasants to form the vibrant *New Rural Reconstruction Movement*.

The roots of this movement are old. Y C James Yen, a Chinese educator and social activist, developed an integrated programme of education, livelihood, public health and self-governance for rural development in China during the 1920s. This was the start of the rural reconstruction movement that Yen and his colleagues later adapted to other developing countries. From this and other movements, like the Kerala People's Science Movement, the New Rural Reconstruction Movement draws its inspiration.

One centre of the movement is the James Yen Institute of Rural Reconstruction, which lies in a village about three hours by train from Beijing. The Institute offers training seminars on topics such as organic agriculture, permaculture, ecological building with local materials, community organising, and rural co-operative building. The seminars are free for peasants - the only requirements are junior high school education and an interest in community building. Selected trainees are given seed money (in the form of microcredits) to start rural co-operatives, credit unions or other organisations back in their own villages. The institute stays in contact with these trainees and brings them back together for reentry programmes where they share experiences. So far, graduates from the Institute have founded more than thirty village co-operatives or other types of cultural and civic group across China. Some of these co-operatives and other NGOs have initiated community-supported agriculture, linking consumers in big cities to organic farmers in the countryside. On the policy level, several academics and progressive officials are pushing for China's co-op law, hoping to help rural co-ops to gain more legal protection and governmental support.

Besides these projects, a vital aspect of the movement is to bring the agrarian perspective back into the development narrative. During the last quarter century, the

discourse on modernisation in China has been predominantly about copying the industrialisation and urbanisation model from the West. Most educational materials carry the implicit or even explicit message that everything urban is *modern* and *desirable*, and everything rural is *backward* and *despicable* and should be discarded as fast as possible to achieve modernisation. Farmers' traditional attachment to the land is considered a stupid sentiment, which should be replaced by upward mobility at all cost. All this has fuelled the brain drain and labour drain from the villages, contributing to the rural crisis as well as the growing sweatshops in the coastal regions: migrant rural youths will bear the most horrendous abuses in the export-oriented factories as they are convinced that there is no future in their own villages. With so many young people leaving, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Fortunately, the rural reconstruction movement is challenging this kind of cultural colonisation.

Professor Wen Tiejun, who is generally considered the spiritual leader of the movement, is one of the few Chinese intellectuals who are openly questioning the Western-centred development paradigm. In his 2004 books *Deconstruction of Modernization* and *What Do We Really Need?* he emphasises the resource constraints of China and describes how the vast hinterland has served as an internal resource and labour base to fuel the hyper-growth of the coast. Without another hinterland to exploit, the remaining rural population cannot copy the Western modernisation path. He and his colleagues have also formed rural focus groups in more than a hundred college campuses across China, bringing student volunteers in touch with the rural reality—a *powerful antidote to the elitist and urban-biased education*.

Many aspects of traditional Chinese culture, including harmony with nature, community values, and a sense of sufficiency instead of endless pursuit of wealth and consumption, are being re-evaluated in a more positive light by many advocates and practitioners of the movement.

With the mad rush towards 'modernity' in recent years, peasants' bonds with the land and within rural communities have already been seriously weakened. Chemical farming has largely replaced traditional integrated farming. Application of organic and green manure has dwindled, while dependence on chemical fertilisers and pesticides has surged. With the *family contract system* introduced in the 1980s and the collapse of collective welfare mechanisms, family farms have become much more vulnerable to natural disasters and market fluctuations, and this has forced many peasants to overtax their land. The fragmentation of rural communities has also led to the exploitation and decline of communal assets. For example, between 1985 and 1989, the area covered by windbreaks declined by 48% nationwide. Irrigation canals and other waterworks have also fallen into disarray over the years. All this has resulted in more soil erosion and vulnerability to droughts and floods.

An Jinlei, a long-time organic farmer and volunteer instructor, is trying to restore the love of land and community amongst his fellow peasants. While teaching green techniques, he always emphasises that organic agriculture is just not about money-making by eliminating chemicals or taking advantage of a niche market. Farming is a way of life instead of a business for profit. A good farmer is a humble steward: he deeply appreciates the land and what it offers, and takes good care of it in return; he realises all the animals and plants are precious life forms, and thus works with them, not against them. Moreover, instead of competing for market advantage, fellow farmers work with each other to be a healthy people on a healthy land. Such a vision of reconnecting with the land and each other may sound sentimental to hardheaded economists and industrial agriculturists, but it is really nothing but down-to-earth. As the driving force for the rural reconstruction movement, it may be China's best chance to solve China's most urgent crisis. □□□

—*Third World Network Features*

