RURAL RECONSTRUCTION, THE NATION-STATE AND CHINA’S MODERNITY PROBLEM: REFLECTIONS ON LIANG SHUMING’S RURAL RECONSTRUCTION THEORY AND ITS PRACTICE¹

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I. The Sannong Problem

Rural reconstruction (乡村建设) has once again become a topic of theory and practice in contemporary China. Between 1926 and 1936, under the leadership of James Yen (晏阳初), the “Chinese Society for the Promotion of Mass Education” (中华平民教育促进会) carried out a decade-long mass education and rural movement in Dingxian, Hebei Province. In July 2003, the “James Yen Rural Reconstruction Institute” headed by Wen Tiejun was established in Zhaicheng Village, the former center of the mass education movement. The college was jointly established by Zhaicheng Village, the Chinese Revolution Magazine Company, Oxfam Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom Rescue Organization. In January 2005, Meng Lei, a senior journalist and commentator for The Economic Observer (经济观察报), published a book titled From James Yen to Wen Tiejun.² Wen Tiejun, who suggested and researched the important “sannong problem” (三农问题, meaning the three rural problems of agriculture, villages, and peasants), in the beginning traced his own tradition directly to James Yen, the pioneer and reformist of a rural reconstruction primarily dependent on “Westernization” and Western funding. Later, Wen Tiejun reattributed his origins to Liang Shuming, a different pioneer of rural reconstruction in the 1930s who utilized mostly traditional cultural resources.

¹ This is a shortened version of a much longer paper which is a research outline on Liang Shuming’s rural reconstruction theory and its practice. The longer version is still being developed and revised. Its final version will be published at a later point.
² Meng Lei 孟雷, ed., Cong Yan Yangchu dao Wentiejun 从晏阳初到温铁军 [From James Yen to Wen Tiejun] (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe 华夏出版社, 2005).
The Liang Shuming Rural Construction Center headed by Wen Tiejun was established in December 2004 and registered in Beijing. It is a “nongovernmental organization promoting peasant cooperation and harmonious urban and rural reconstruction.” The center is located in the People’s University, where Wen Tiejun works as a professor and dean. In April 2007 the James Yen Rural Reconstruction Institute was closed, but the Liang Shuming Rural Construction Center remains active. The tortuous implementation of Wen Tiejun’s rural reconstruction reflects an urgent need to reorganize the numerous complex rural reconstruction theories and practices in China from the 20th century through today.

The Westernization of James Yen’s movement is apparent in comparison with Liang Shuming’s rural reconstruction in Zouping, Shandong Province. In the eyes of contemporary observers, the rural reconstruction movements in Zouping (Tsou-p’ing) and Dingxian (Ting hsien) respectively symbolize China and the West, old and new. In his book *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity*, American scholar Guy S. Alitto describes it:

> ...observers noted that Yale-educated “Jimmy” Y. C. Yen considered “the five thousand years of Chinese history, its habits and customs, as the enemy. So he worships Western culture unconditionally and wants to use Western spiritual, technical, and material aid to help create ‘modern,’ ‘scientific’ rural villages.” Thanks to American “material aid,” Ting hsien had “ample financial and human resources.” Material standards—at least for the personnel of the two hsien projects—were decidedly different. Ting hsien worker Li Ching-han found a salary of 150 yuan a month “barely enough to live on”; the salary scale at Tsou-p’ing ranged from 15 to 50 yuan a month. Because of Ting hsien’s glamorous influence, its proximity to Peking, and most of all, Yen’s contracts in the missionary and American academic communities, Westerners most often identified the rural reconstruction idea with Ting hsien rather than Tsou-p’ing.

Alitto believes that while James Yen’s experiment in Dingxian was considered a charity and rescue movement, the Zouping experiment was based on the premise that peasants are able to save themselves. At the same time, Liang Shuming was also a critic of James Yen. Yet the

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