

# Evolution and Enlightenment of Rural Planning Theory in China

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**Abstract:** This paper divides the rural planning theories in China into three stages, that is, traditional city-rural interaction (before the founding of the PRC), modern city-rural separation (after the founding of the PRC–2016), and the new-era city-rural integration (after 2017), and summarizes the characteristics of theories in different stages. Traditional rural planning theories in China include geomantic (Feng Shui) philosophy-based physical planning theory and human culture-oriented management ideas and methods; these two parts complement each other. After the beginning of China’s Reform and Opening Up process in 1978, the urban planning theory has been employed in rural planning. The contemporary rural planning theory has developed under the background of city-rural integration and is implemented with a simplified rural administrative licensing system. In recent years, rural planning in China has begun to transform and combine with multidisciplinary theories, thus exploring the origin of the development process.

**Keywords:** rural planning; urban planning; formal governance; public policy; public goods

## 1 Rural construction amid traditional urban-rural integration

By intertwining physical planning theory and humanistic management ideas, traditional rural construction theory is orientated towards respect for nature and people throughout the process of rural construction. It draws inspiration from farming culture and mirrors the aspects of that culture.

### 1.1 Basic theory

*Rural Construction Theory* by Liang Shuming is the first theoretical work on rural construction, and the earliest written and a systematic theoretical summary of China’s rural development. In this book, Liang contends that the core of China’s rural construction lies in restructuring its rural social order, political system, and economic development. China’s traditional rural construction theory has two main components: The first component is its physical planning theory that is based on the country’s simple philosophical ideology and includes the belief that people and nature should be integrated. Specifically, the most important tenet of Feng Shui relates to its basic theory that covers ancient Chinese architecture, planning, environment, and relevant designs through rural construction. Feng Shui, which is an assimilation of Tao, Qi, Yin-yang, and “Five Elements and Eight Trigrams”, and is drawn from fields such as astronomy and astrology, geography and geology, environmental ecology, patriarchal rituals, traditional aesthetics, and environmental psychology. This philosophy is described as both scientific and mysterious [1], and serves as the basis of construction within traditional rural physical space in China and the basic principle of

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the formulation and implementation of the rules guiding people's behavior. Second, there are management concepts derived from rituals and humanities. These management concepts are formal and informal governance systems that have developed within a social realm in which there is respect for Confucianism; they promote education, hierarchy, and status in traditional rural China, which ensures the formation and maintenance of spatial order in rural areas. The construction and maintenance of rural physical space rely on the formal artisan officer system [2] and the informal governance system. The artisan officer system is an ancient standard law of the official governance and is built on both the patriarchal clan system and the ritual system. It comprises systematic management that derives from the top-down and urban-rural application incorporating law formulation, planning and design, artisan recruitment, and organization [3]. It determines the shaping of the residential space in urban and rural areas with strict requirements on the types of the housing for different social classes. The informal governance system is civil governance based on ethical principles from down-top. It is a mandatory code of conduct developed by the rural social authority and social organizations.

### 1.2 Practical application

The traditional rural construction theory is applied to rural construction in three regards. The first aspect for consideration is the location of villages at a macro level. In China, the situation of traditional villages is primarily subject to Feng Shui principles, particularly the principle of "natural environment advantages," which pursues the integration of heaven–earth–human. Thereafter, village site selection is confirmed by the five arts of Feng Shui, namely chasing "Dragon Veins," investigating mountains, observing water, hitting an "acupoint"—a specific and important point, and orientation. The second aspect for consideration includes space planning, infrastructure, and public facilities' configuration at a meso level. The influence of Feng Shui philosophy on a traditional rural spatial structure is applied in orientation, form, and architecture of villages. Typically, Feng Shui's concepts are developed based on eight trigrams (the symbols of natural balance), the principle of "Law Phenomenon," the principles of "Generation-Inhibition in Five Elements," and "Yin-yang balance," while also absorbing layout ideas such as central axis symmetry [1]. Traditional rural formation patterns tend to be auspicious, mainly consisting of a closed and complete surrounding landscape pattern, a pictographic pattern simulating auspicious items and features, and a pattern for cultural and artistic creativity [1]. Rural amenities are mainly divided into agricultural production facilities (e.g., drying sites), public facilities (e.g., old-style private schools, academies of classical learning, Confucian temples, ancestral temples, and Buddhist temples, etc.), communication spaces (e.g., public squares), municipal infrastructure (e.g., water wells and ponds), and intentional space (e.g., towers). The Confucian temples and towers (representation of the state power), ancestral temples (inter-stratum management facility based on blood ties), and village temples (management facilities across blood ties) represent the quasi-administrative institutions in rural areas. The third aspect for consideration is building supervision at a micro level. In ancient times, people believed that Feng Shui emanated from psychology that strove for friendly relations and avoidance of conflict and that Feng Shui of buildings was related to the rise and fall of the family. Therefore, taboos and advocacies have an influence on the spatial layout of the orientation, location, and height of private buildings. As a representative work on Feng Shui of residences, the *Ten Manuals on Residences* focuses on Feng Shui theory, summarizes the spatial relationship between a residence and its occupants, guides the supervision process, and regulates the layout of a village and the daily life of its residents.

### 1.3 Basic characteristics

The theory of rural construction is in harmony with its practice. Traditional Feng Shui theory interprets people's natural ideas through traditional rural planning, construction, and operation. In terms of humanism and practicality, it can be seen in infrastructure configuration, residential layout, residential orientation, architectural pattern, and facility operation of traditional rural planning. In line with the low-cost production and life in rural areas, this theory chimes with local culture and complements the management philosophy of rituals and humanities, so as to comply with non-governmental regulations and establish an orderly, stable, and harmonious space management system [4].

Moreover, formal and informal governance systems are adopted to achieve rural construction management. The standard law of official governance based on the artisan officer system, and the customary law based on non-governmental regulations, directly control and guide traditional rural planning, construction and management processes. These systems help to build a systematic, standardized, local, and practical mechanism of traditional rural planning, design, construction, operation, and management. The formal artisan office system is rigorously designed to strengthen a hierarchy, avoid waste, and reduce cost in order to promote the normalized, standard, institutional,

and ethical urban-rural planning and construction. Subject to the influence by official viewpoints, the informal governance system brings about rural governance through morals and ethics and reduces management costs. On the basis of village authority, non-governmental regulations, and physical places, the system advances the local, unique, practical, and reasonable features of the ancient urban-rural construction.

Furthermore, rural public services are provided by co-financing. The public facilities existing in villages in the ancient China were jointly established and funded by villagers. As recorded in the *Chronicles Volumes of Hong Village in Yi County*, catastrophic floods paralyzed the water system in the northern half of this village in 1470, the sixth year of Ming Chenghua reign. The 77th ancestor Bo Qing Duke then launched an initiative in which men were required to carry four baskets of stone to a mountain to protect the village against floods. In the 13th year of Ming Chenghua reign (1477), the ruler seemingly also planned to construct a dam on Leigang Mountain based on a terrain built high with boulders [5], compatible with the construction characteristics of a volunteer program. Some public land exists in traditional villages, including temple land, charitable land, education land, ceremonial land, charitable granary land, and relief land [6]. Public income and fundraising income from these lands support the construction and operation of public facilities.

## 2 Rural planning amid the modern urban-rural separation

### 2.1 Basic theory

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, and especially since the reforms and opening up, China has adopted a government-centered, growth-oriented national governance strategy, and operated independently in adherence to the urban-rural separation system while continuing with the urban-rural dual structure system. By referring to urban planning as a guiding theory, the awareness of rural planning matches with the level given to urban planning in a planned economy. The urban planning theories that have been used to guide rural construction are as follows:

(1) Functional zoning: This relates to setting up of the residential, working (commercial), and recreational zones in a city and forming a traffic network connecting the above three zones to guarantee normal operation of residence, work, recreation, and transportation. Using this concept, the physical elements of the city are partitioned according to functions to form an organic entity with interactive contact and reasonable flow, creating a favorable environment for urban activities.

(2) Grading allocation: This is the basic theory of allocation of public facilities in urban and rural areas in China. It postulates the grade and scale of public facilities' allocation based on grading. The equalization of basic public services is achieved through allocation and it belongs to the government's single-direction public service supply. At present, this theory has a certain theoretical extension. The grades have evolved from a simple hierarchy of administration and scale to systems. The allocation has shifted from unilateral supply to the realm of supply and demand. Along with this, the change has also happened in grading allocation standards—they have become rigid, flexible, and indicative.

(3) Theory of scale benefits: The core of this theory refers to the optimal economic benefits generated by a moderate scale. It is formed by theoretical extension of the long-term average cost decline caused by the expansion of production scale in microeconomic theory. This theory is mainly applied to infrastructure and public service allocation in rural areas. Based on the government's public investment shortage, the basic principle of the allocation of public facilities and the provision of public services is to maximize benefits, and hence it becomes the theoretical basis for adjustment and practice of the settlement system planning.

### 2.2 Practical application

Urban planning theory is applied to rural areas mainly in three regards. First, functional zoning theory is widely employed on a spatial layout of the land use in rural planning. The construction land-use and spatial layout of villages are determined based on functional zoning principles, resulting in demarcation of the main residential area, public construction areas, and production areas. The theory of functional zoning was applied in planning during different historical periods (Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 3, Fig. 4). Second, grading allocation theory is applied to the configuration of rural public facilities. In *Planning Standards for Villages and Towns* (GB50188-1993), rural public facilities are set by grades of the central town, general town, central village, and grassroots villages. Third, the scale-benefit theory is applied to any adjustments in village patterns and public facilities. In the cost calculation process, this theory mainly considers the maximization of the government's input cost and benefit instead of the input by villagers and

society. Moreover, this theory considers short-term benefits instead of the long-term benefits and economic benefits instead of the residents' spatial needs within a service radius of public facilities and operation demands for ecological, small, low-cost, and less-managed infrastructure.

### 2.3 Problems and challenges

First, the theory and practice of rural planning are dissociated from each other. Drawn from the urban planning theory, the modern rural planning lacks the basic theoretical support for the rural system, which has "technology first" as its basis of thinking. The planning generally adopts the top-down decision-making method of "standard and normative decision + rational analysis of experts." Relevant planning norms and documents are organized from perspectives of a guiding ideology, principles, and content. The quality of the planning faces three primary constraints: (1) long planning period, (2) lack of basic conditions for preparation, and (3) low quality of preparation results. It also lacks an effective connection with construction and management systems. The quality of the planning itself, which does not meet the licensing condition, a deficit of management personnel and lack of demand from residents make it difficult to execute the rules and systems that maintain the basic spatial order of rural areas.

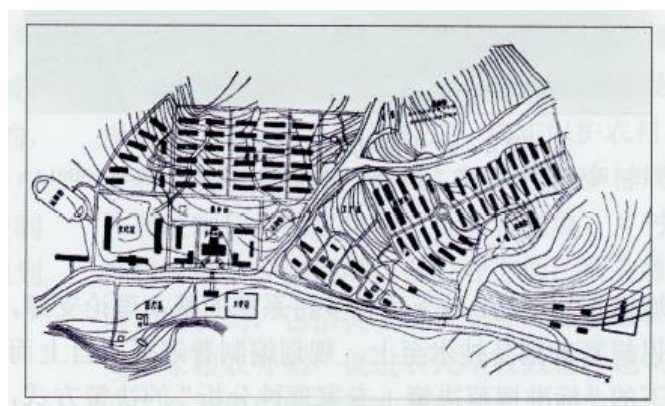


Fig. 1. Planning of Jiumen village of Xingcheng county in the 1950s.

Note: The photo is selected from *Planning of Jiumen Village of Xingcheng County, Liaoning Province* (*Architectural Journal*, 1958, Issue 8).

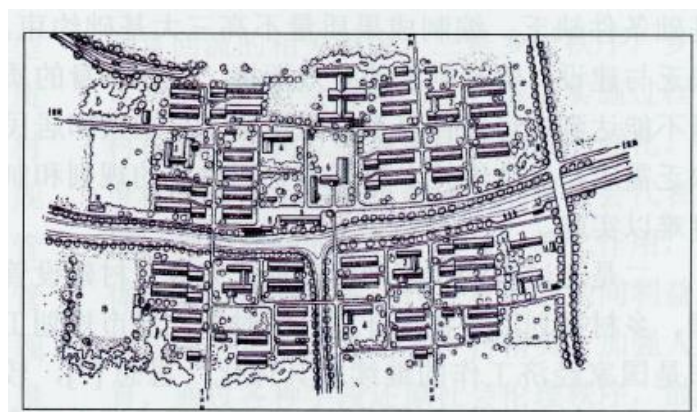
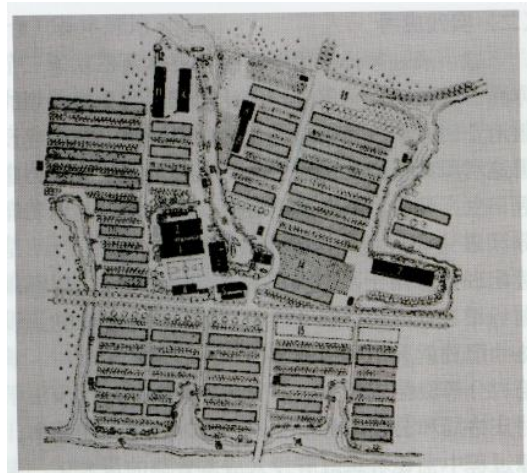


Fig. 2. Planning of Hongqi people's commune in Qingpu county in the 1960s.

Note: The photo is selected from the *Planning of Hongqi People's Commune in Qingpu County* (*Architectural Journal*, 1958, Issue 10).





**Fig. 3.** Planning of Huaxi brigade of Jiangyin city in the 1970s.

*Note:* The photo is selected from the *Planning and Construction of the New Village of Huayuan Brigade* (*Architectural Journal*, 1975, Issue 3).



**Fig. 4.** Planning of Dazong village in Zaozhuang city in early 21st century.

*Note:* The photo is the pilot village of the “Eleventh Five-Year” Science and Technology Support Program (2008BAJ08B01) hosted by the author.

Second, rural construction management is achieved by means of governmental administration and campaign-style governance. Rural planning ends up in paying less attention to the accurate plan and uncertain sources of investment projects in rural areas because it follows the credo “urban planning work is the continuation and embodiment of national economic work” in China’s planned economy period [7]. As a physical plan, it involves rural construction projects on spatial implementation. Although different parties—villagers, village collectives, enterprises, governments, and the planners involved in governance—have voicing rights in the governance process for rural planning and implementation, these rights vary. At this point, China’s rural planning has become elite in style. Out of the desire for political achievement and with little understanding of rural realities, a campaign-style, intermittent, and unilateral decision-making approach is adopted for governance, orienting decisions towards whatever elite value and technical authority they deliver.

Third, rural public services are highly dependent on sectoral inputs. As collective economies collapse in many villages, a system known as “One Discussion for One Case” is adopted for public construction charges. As a result, there is no reliable budget to fund construction, operation, and maintenance; superiors become the main capital inflow channels in rural areas. In this way, the two form a vertical economic relationship. The construction costs of planning complementation are non-conforming, have aspects of projectization, and are used as a sort of campaign in style. Moreover, they lack the institutional design of social capital investment channels. In terms of public service investment in rural planning and construction, only education, medical care, culture, sports, and other aspects at the national level are taken into account. Moreover, the focus is on ways to maximize the return of national investments on construction. The measurement of economic benefits, the government-focused cost calculation method, and the

operational mode of departmental projects lead to planning top-down decision-making. Deep uncertainty and departmental intent on departmental funds cause a lack of stability in rural construction investments and lead to the shift of vanity projects from cities to villages.

### 3 Rural governance amid urban-rural integration in the new era

#### 3.1 Theoretical trends

The strategy of rural revitalization, which was proposed at the 19th CPC National Congress, has epoch-making significance for the development of China's rural areas. In the urban-rural integration era, the positive logic and basic content of China's rural planning were the formulation of the theory of rural development, establishment of people-oriented rural planning concepts, and improvement in village planning methods and technologies. Based on people-orientation and ecological progress concepts, the new-era rural planning followed the multi-disciplinary integration of traditional Feng Shui theory [8]. Combined with social governance and public management theory, a number of theory development trends have emerged. The first trend is the systematic, synergic, and fair rural development. As a large and complex system, villages are composed of several subsystems, namely, industrial structure, settlement system, ecological environment, infrastructure security, and public service supply. The overarching system has its own development rules and operational logic. Through a combination of points, lines, and faces, the settlement system has achieved a comprehensive linking and coordinated development of space, ecology, society and economy, full optimization of the system, overall establishment of order, and a harmony with the implementation approach. With outstanding human, ecological, production, and social values, the rural development needs to break through the urban-rural dual structure. Moreover, it needs to take full account of the farmers' willingness, rural reality, and agricultural background; construct dynamically balanced, two-way systems which flow and interact, facilitate the free flow of people, funds, and goods; extensively promote rural service levels and basic security capacity, advance the coordination of urban-rural economic development, narrow the urban-rural development gap, and demonstrate the farmers' status. The second trend is the uniqueness, directive property, and convenience of the rural space. There are special natural ecologies and regional cultural landscapes in rural areas. The purpose and intensity levels of the agricultural land are regularly redistributed, modern rural industry is constantly evolving, "One Leading Product for One Village" (characteristic development) and six industrial integrations (mixed development) become the development trends, and people's production and lives show overlapping characteristics of plain distribution, group orientation, and locality. Given this, the allocation of public facilities and infrastructure protection should follow the rules of the living area of people with residential needs of facilities, such as the premise and different circle areas, as spatial levels for establishing the production and living service system. The third trend is the policy and normative and collaborative nature of rural planning. Rural planning is an activity of rural public management. The rural planning of the public policy attributes needs to reach a consistent public goal. Through the cooperative management of various stakeholders, such as government, village collectives, villagers and enterprises, a series of codes, guidelines, and strategies and plans should be formed. Meanwhile, the cooperative plan based on the theory of negotiated democracy is contract-based ground-up planning, which emphasizes the maintenance of public interests, the construction of planning systems, the expression of people's livelihood needs, the disclosure of planning government affairs, and the authority of planning implementation. The results are turned into statutory documents and non-governmental regulations through legal procedures, which become a common code of conduct for society. The fragmentation and quasi-privatization of land ownership caused by the "One Residence Base Area per Household" welfare land allocation system and the land contract responsibility system constitute the necessary conditions for cooperative planning [8].

#### 3.2 Basic characteristics

Following the theoretical foundation and governance experience of China's traditional urban-rural integration, new-era rural planning avoids problems arising from rural planning and construction management against the backdrop of modern urban-rural separation, responds to rural functional transformation and subject changes, and establishes the following essential characteristics of rural planning.

(1) Integrity and service orientation: The existing rural planning is a multi-sectoral project planning and macro-planning in some regions with varying operational rules. It means the financial department manages issues on a case-by-case basis, the environmental protection department manages the centralized environment corrections, the agricultural department manages the farmland water conservancy, the transportation department manages highway

construction, and the construction department manages the settlement consolidation. Therefore, rural planning needs to place emphasis on multidisciplinary coordination and intersection, with a comprehensive introduction of related disciplines, such as planning, architecture, landscape, ecology, industry, and society. Subject to inadequate technical management talents and long implementation spans at this stage, the planning preparation unit is required to provide technical services with a long timeframe.

(2) Institutional and contractual style of rural planning: Rural planning and management appear to be all about the control of land development and housing construction in rural areas. In essence, it involves the institutionalized distribution and management of land development rights and their benefits among the government, market subjects, village collectives, and villagers. Therefore, the formulation and implementation of rural planning is, in reality, about the construction of supporting an institutional system. The focus, methods, and tools of rural planning and governance need to be continuously adjusted in practice by emphasizing the importance of planning and implementation. Rural planning is a common understanding about future rural development, including resources' configuration and benefits' allocation between governments, enterprises, villagers, and village collectives. It is a public contract that is strictly observed and implemented by the government, the market, and the society.

### 3.3 Institutional innovation

Against the backdrop of rural revitalization, the rural development requires institutional innovation and renewal as embodied in the following five aspects.

(1) Rural legislation: It provides a legal guarantee for rural governance. At present, the *Urban-Rural Planning Law* (2008) focuses more on cities than rural areas. It mostly sets out rules for rural planning and is consequently less practical. Efforts should be made to learn from the valuable experience of foreign rural construction, pursue the concept of the rule of law, and improve the legal and regulatory system for supporting rural planning and construction. The *Law on Rural Development* should be formulated to effectively protect rural areas, farmers, and agriculture; realize the rule of law in rural areas and gradually promote the legal and institutional construction and management of rural planning.

(2) Rural development: It serves as an economic guarantee for rural governance. The agricultural compensation and reward mechanism should be improved, by enabling the upgradation of modern agricultural industry, continuing to increase national subsidies for grain farmers, promoting rising incomes for farmers, and establishing agricultural enterprises and an all-round agricultural enterprise incentive mechanism. For farmers, basic public services need to be equalized to make villages more attractive, while local systems of talent introduction and wealth backflow need to be established based on actual conditions.

(3) Rural order: It is a social guarantee for rural governance. The implementation of rural planning requires re-establishment of the rural authority and strengthening of non-governmental regulations. Under the current institutional framework, the representatives of village committees elected by villagers take a command role, providing guidance and education in the process of rural governance, which demonstrates the higher level of farmer subject. Hence, the governments at all levels should step up their efforts to cultivate rural elites, enhance the nurturing of human capital, restore social ethical order through various means, and encourage the shaping of rural rituals and a sense of identity. These measures will build a foundation for creation of a new rural order.

(4) System management: The key points of rural system management include the establishment of a long-term rural operation and management system, improvement in the residential base and collective land-use system, and formulation of a rural planning and construction guidance system. On the one hand, rural self-discipline, self-management, and guiding management mechanisms should be formed, the farmer construction and operation subject systems for rural planning implementation should be determined, appropriate technologies should be recommended, and the rural planner and architect systems should be promoted. On the other hand, local governments can adjust policies on residential base and collective land-use according to local realities, develop the policy of using the collective land for enterprises, and create supporting policies for replacing residential base with affordable housing.

(5) Relationship coordination: Rural governance needs to deal with three relationships. The first is the relationship with urban planning management. Urban planning management has a relatively clear entrustment-agent subject and approval supervision process, while the subject of rural planning management is relatively unclear with loose supervision on planning and difficult implementation of "One Permission Note, One License." The second need is to deal with the relationship with the existing rural planning management system, which still retains the characteristics of urban planning management, and is at variance with the realities of rural planning. Rural planning must first achieve "Multi Plan Integration" to avoid the occurrence of "Implementing Failure of Plans." The third

need is to deal with the relationship with the rural governance structure, where the characteristics of elite governance and clan influence still exist. Rural planning should include the influence of rural governance in the entirety of the implementation process. The form and content of rural planning should adapt to local needs and avoid being disconnected from local realities.

#### 4 Conclusions

China's rural development is constantly evolving. Its institutional basis consists of the re-establishment of urban-rural status and the formation of a positive urban-rural mobility mechanism. To stay current, it is essential for rural planning and construction theory to confirm rural status, recognize rural nature, and master the law of rural operation. Against the backdrop of modern governance of the state, urban-rural planning, construction, operation, and management must be ruled by a law, oriented towards people, and further refined. Compared with urban construction, the first and foremost criterion for rural construction is to put ecology first. Compliance with the law of rural development, comprehension of the unique nature of the rural society, respect for the locality of the rural space, and fostering of the governance concept of farmer subject are the way forward towards rural construction practice in the new era and the inevitable choice to promote rural modernization.

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