

# *Development and Enlightenment of “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” in Guangdong China*

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**Abstract:** Under the background of China's large rural population base, the serious status of building restoration, and the lack of professional guidance in the protection of a large number of villages, the “three professional groups to rural service movement” has built a bridge between villages and professional volunteers, providing technical consultation, assisting in organizing activities, and helping the application of funds for the village in South China Historical Trail protection and provincial poverty-stricken village planning. The “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” is a action taken by Chinese society to participate in the protection of traditional culture. Its development relies on the cooperation of the Government, villagers, volunteers and so on. It is still constantly exploring and perfecting the theoretical system and practical experience, with a view to promoting it in the field of rural social services in China and even the world.

## 1. Introduction

The “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” advocated by the Guangdong government of China refers to the professional volunteers going to the countryside who are represented by architects, planners and engineers. The movement supports professional and technical personnel expert, as well as college teachers and students to form volunteer service teams. It guides the participants to volunteer to help with a poverty-stricken village long term, furnishing high-level professional technical services that are difficult to obtain in local villages in terms of protecting traditional villages, architectural features and improving environmental facilities. The “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” was launched in 2014. Xu Ruisheng, the then deputy governor of Guangdong Province, was the founder of the movement. Xu Ruisheng met in Zhongshan to discuss improving the level of village construction, and began to propose the establishment of a professional team to help the poverty-stricken villages<sup>[1]</sup>. He wrote this idea into a proposal for the National People's Congress, suggesting to launch the “Three Professional Groups Rural Counseling Volunteer Movement” in rural areas, offering free professional

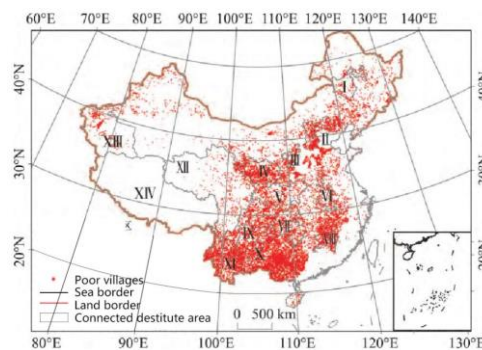
services to underdeveloped rural areas. Xu Ruisheng’s appeal was supported by a large number of professionals, and social groups such as Guangdong Engineering Exploration & Design Association (GDEEDA), Guangdong City Planning Association (GCPA), Guangdong Registered Architects Association, Guangdong Construction Industry Association (GDCIA) and Guangdong University of Technology (GDUT) responded positively. On December 5, 2016, the “Three Professional Groups Volunteer Committee” was established in Guangzhou, and the Guangdong Provincial Government officially named the event “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement”.

During the three years from 2016 to 2018, the “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” in Guangdong Province has achieved great influence and outstanding results. The volunteers are active in 29 county-level administrative districts in the province, providing professional services to 83 underdeveloped township farmers, focusing on the development of 247 special poverty-stricken villages [2]. The promoter Xu Ruisheng believes that volunteers should become a powerful force for the city to help the countryside. The participation of professional volunteers in rural construction consulting services is a concrete action of social participation in the protection of traditional culture, reflecting the strong sense of social responsibility of planners, architects and engineers. In September 2018, the “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” rose to the level of China's national policy and was named "Design to Country Movement” [3].

## 2. Realistic background

### 2.1 China’s large number of poverty-stricken villages to be get rid of poverty

The "13th Five-Year Plan for Poverty Alleviation" issued by the State Council pointed out that there are currently 14 concentrated contiguous areas in China, 832 poverty-stricken counties and 128,000 poverty-stricken villages [4]. Among them, Guangdong Province with the best economic base has 2,277 poverty-stricken villages, including 19,012 natural villages with more than 20 families. Poverty-stricken villages are mainly concentrated in the northern mountainous areas and the eastern and western regions of Guangdong Province. Apart from the lack of employment and economic income sources, more lacking is technical talents and planning ideas, and the task of getting rid of poverty is very arduous. Chen Yefeng and others of Capital Normal University used the software ArcGIS to analyze the measurement and spatial distribution characteristics of poverty-stricken villages, and generated vector data of poverty-stricken villages in Chinese mainland [5] (As shown in the figure 1).



(Source: Chen Yefeng. Analysis on the Measurement and Spatial Distribution Characteristics of Poverty-stricken Villages in China)

Figure 1: Software ArcGIS generates vector point data for poverty-stricken villages in Chinese mainland

## **2.2 Rural long-term planning is absent and environmental pollution is serious.**

In the development of traditional villages in Chinese mainland, the villagers' self-built houses lack design and are all the same, and traditional architecture and historical culture have gradually disappeared in rural areas. Hu Binbin and others' "Blue Book of Chinese Traditional Villages: Chinese Traditional Village Protection Survey Report (2017)" pointed out that from 2000 to 2010, the number of natural villages in Chinese mainland dropped from 3.63 million to 2.71 million, and the number of natural villages decreased by more than 900,000 in 10 years, with an average of 80 to 100 disappeared per day, including a large number of traditional villages with historical value[6]. According to the "China Urban and Rural Construction Statistical Yearbook (2016)", by the end of 2016, the national average administrative village planned coverage rate was 61.46%. Among them, the planned coverage rate of Guangdong villages is 59.03% [7]. A large number of rural styles are lacking in documented records, and many rural buildings remains without historical verification. It is very urgent to rescue and protect the traditional culture of the countryside.

## **3. Conditions for launching the movement**

### **3.1 There are many employees in construction, planning and engineering, and the number of potential volunteers is huge.**

There are many employees in China's construction, planning and engineering. According to the statistical survey report on engineering survey and design issued by the MOHURD in 2016, there are 3.202 million employees in the national engineering survey and design industry, including 1.54 million professional and technical personnel [8]. There are a large number of potential volunteers in Chinese colleges and universities. There are 270 colleges and universities in the country that have established architectural design majors. A total of 226 colleges and universities have established urban and rural planning majors. A total of 392 colleges and universities have established civil engineering majors [9]. Although the number of designers in the construction industry is huge, but they mainly gather in large and medium cities to work, and there are few excellent designers who can directly contact the village. The "Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement" convened designers to participate in volunteer activities to provide rare and high-quality professional consulting services for rural residents.

### **3.2 The protection of rural culture has increasingly become a social consensus, and civil professional power is growing stronger**

China's cultural undertakings have developed rapidly. However, rural cultural resources still have problems such as low degree of openness, lack of means of utilization, and insufficient social participation. Developing and protecting rural cultural landmark resources such as relics, clan ancestral halls, and field artifacts, actively guiding experts and scholars and other volunteers to participate in rural construction, and promoting excellent rural culture to promote rural revitalization has gradually become a social consensus. Nowadays, the power of civil society has gradually become a system. With the strengthening of the awareness of social cultural protection, there have been many civil organizations that protect the immovable cultural relics such as ancient villages and ancient buildings. The protective organizations of this kind are gradually forming a system, but their strength is relatively weak, and they lack financial support. According to the official website of Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, among the 2,306 national social organizations, there are only a hundred of the main purposes of cultural heritage protection, research and dissemination. Launching activities together with non-governmental organizations and the numerous professional

volunteer teams can be an important supplement to the protection organizations.

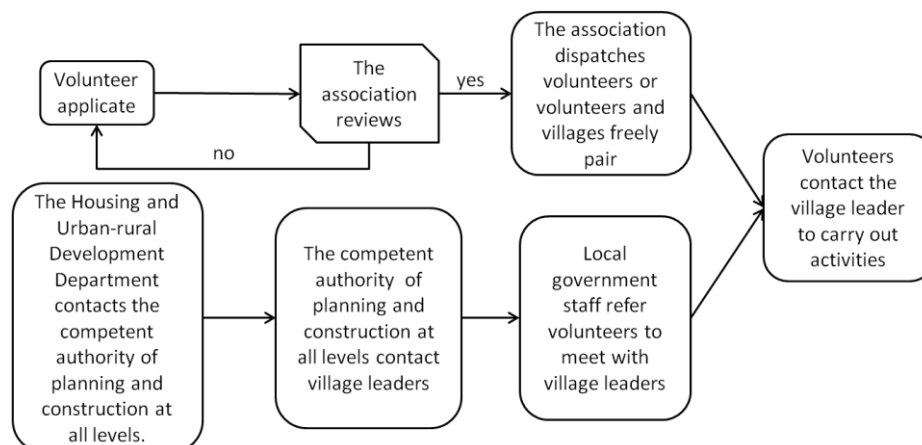
### **3.3. The strategy of rural revitalization and the work of precision poverty alleviation have contributed to the development of the movement.**

The rural revitalization strategy is an important strategy of the Communist Party of China. It aims to improve the participation and benefit of villagers in industrial development and solve the problem of “agriculture, rural areas and farmers”. In the five years from 2012 to 2017, a total of 68.53 million people in China were lifted out of poverty, accounting for three-quarters of the world's poverty alleviation. The Chinese government's poverty alleviation work has achieved remarkable results [10]. “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” has helped to implement the rural revitalization strategy and the precise poverty alleviation work, and effectively guided the rural rectification and poverty alleviation work. Launching architects, planners, and engineers to go to the countryside is not only sending plan, sending knowledge, and sending jobs, but also a process of two-way learning of professional practice. Professionals can explore the civilized paradigm attached to rural buildings by studying architectural style and details, and revive traditional architectural culture from the level of academic research. The “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” can conform to the general trend of rural development, and obtain government support and policy assistance through rural revitalization and precise poverty alleviation.

## **4. Conduct of the movement**

### **4.1. Organizational structure and service processes**

This movement is led by Guangdong Engineering Exploration & Design Association (GDEEDA) which is commissioned by the Guangdong Provincial Department of Housing and Urban-Rural Development. It is organized jointly with Guangdong City Planning Association (GCPA), Guangdong Registered Architects Association and Guangdong Construction Industry Association (GDCIA). Guangdong Engineering Exploration & Design Association (GDEEDA) is mainly responsible for volunteers’ information collection and coordinating work. Guangdong City Planning Association (GCPA) is in charge of Information collection of villages in need. Guangdong Registered Architects Association is responsible for managing the network platform, and Guangdong Construction Industry Association (GDCIA) is responsible for guiding construction. The professional volunteers who go to the countryside include professionals in architectural design, urban and rural planning and engineering management, as well as teachers and students in related fields of higher education institutions. As of May 2018, a total of 471 architects, engineers, and planners in Guangdong Province have successively registered as professional volunteers. Volunteers signed a “Commitment to the Countryside Service Commitment” with the counterpart village, and volunteered to provide peer-to-peer professional consultation for the village. Based on the “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” work manual [11], the service workflow is as follows (As shown in the figure 2).



Source: “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” workbook

Figure 2: Service flow chart

## 4.2. The main work of professional volunteers

### (1) Types of villages that volunteers focus on helping

The volunteers focused on guiding and providing technical services for the planning and construction of several types of villages. villages that need environmental remediation, villages with rapid industrial development, villages along the urban-rural junction or along the main roads, historical and cultural villages, landscape tourist villages, and villages that have recently implemented projects and implemented funds, villages with whole relocation, as well as villages that need technical consultation when encountering technical difficulties during the transformation process, etc. Volunteers classified them and form technical teams with different expertise and designed in accordance with different characteristics of the countryside.

### (2) Participating in the protection and utilization of South China Historical Trail.

In conjunction with the South China Historical Trail cultural revitalization activity being carried out in Guangdong Province, under the coordination of the Guangdong Provincial Department of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the professional volunteers of the “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” set up a supervision team to guide and supervise the key routes in South China Historical Trail. Each supervisory team member is mainly composed of professional volunteers. Volunteers set up 10 supervision teams for the key routes of the South China Historical Trail [12]. Each group conducted at least one activity every month to guide local farmers to discover and excavate the culture of historical trail, and effectively strengthen the professional strength of the rural areas.

### (3) Participating in the planning work of the poverty-stricken villages.

In 2017, Guangdong Province carried out the planning work of 2,277 poverty-stricken villages in the province, recruiting volunteers in the professional fields such as urban and rural planning, landscape architecture and architectural design. At the time, a total of 140 planning and design service teams were established, successfully completing the urgent and complex planning task within the scheduled time. The professional volunteers also set up a rural planning technical guidance service team to realize 1 service team to guide 1 county-level administrative unit, and 1 professional volunteer to guide 1 township. They helped the village actively carry out training, inspection and supervision, technical guidance and results review, and continued to serve in various poverty-stricken villages in the form of volunteer services

### 4.3. The service mode of professional volunteers

#### (1) Provide technical training and guidance on implementation

The movement was carried out through professional volunteer field investigations, including: on-site investigations, villager interviews, symposiums, on-site consultations, unified training, knowledge presentations, and studying abroad. For example, Volunteers went to the Xinzheng Village, Shangping Town, Lianping County, Heyuan City, along the Meiguan Road. The villagers carried out professional training in the areas of Hakka residential activation, rural landscape utilization, rural sewage treatment, local cultural conservation and beautiful rural construction [3]. The movement also actively promotes professional volunteer services through the Internet, providing various forms of consultation and counseling for rural construction. For example, in the preparation of the provincial poverty-stricken village rectification planning in 2017, Shaoguan City held a video training conference attended by about 2,000 people, and two training sessions were held in Shanwei, Jieyang, Huizhou and other cities.

#### (2) Provide professional consulting and technical services

The professional volunteers provide technical guidance and professional advice on and off line. They give suggestions and specific implementation on traditional villages, residential buildings, characteristic historical buildings and improvement of rural living environment (As shown in the figure 3). For instance, Maoming Xinyi launched the “Beautiful Livable Rural Action Rural Housing Reconstruction Demonstration Project”. The volunteer Chen Xiong architectural design master combined the surrounding environment, regional culture and the specific needs of the farmer’s owner to design and renovate the farmhouse in Shanbei Village, and gave professional guidance to Maoming local volunteers, artisans and student volunteers on rural planning and construction, village residential reconstruction, garbage sorting and comprehensive environmental improvement, and made suggestions on the long-term sustainable development of Shanbei Village [13].



Source: photo by author

Figure 3: Professional volunteers conducted on-site investigations and interviews

#### (3) Carrying forward local culture and organizing activities

The professional volunteers who participated in the activities exerted their professional strength to organize various forms of local cultural renaissance activities such as ancient village research, cultural creation competition, sports competition, orienteering, etc., and hosted the “South China Historical Trail Cultural and Creative Competition” and “Art Trail Study Tour Children's Painting Competition”(As shown in the figure 4). The Cultural and Creative Competition has visited historical trails and ancient Villages in 6 cities including Jiangmen, Shaoguan, Qingyuan, Shantou, Chaozhou and Guangzhou as well as more than 20 historical relics. These activities have activated the use of

traditional ethnic culture such as the Maritime Silk Road, landmark buildings such as the Mei Family Courtyard, traditional crafts such as Yao embroidery, and local resources such as Taishan rice. The competition promoted the creative enthusiasm and participation of the teachers and students from 21 colleges and universities. The Art Tour competitors have traveled to Meiguan, Raoping, Conghua, Yunfu and other cities along the historical trails to sketch. The event website recorded more than 100 study tours. The relevant websites received more than 20,000 children's registration data. The painting contest received more than 40,000 entries. The official Weibo page of the final day exceeded 3.1 million.



Source: Photo by author and Guangdong Three Professional Groups Volunteer Committee

Figure 4: Professional volunteers assist in the organization of country directional cross-country activities

#### **(4) Helping villagers increase their sources of economic income**

Through their own information and financial advantages, professional volunteers play an active role in helping villagers to innovate rural formats, expand rural industries, and promote economic development. The volunteer team helped the village of Xinan in Meitang Town and Guling Village in Xintang Town, applied for the list of Traditional Chinese Villages and successfully been selected, and won the special funds of the country to subsidize the protection of traditional villages, establishing the foundation for the historical and cultural protection and sustainable development of these two villages. Volunteer Architect Zeng Xianchuan counterpart supported Nantang Village, Jiangwei Town, Wengyuan County. The village houses have a perfect drainage system but had been in disrepair. Zeng Xianchuan instructed the villagers to apply for government water conservancy construction support funds to provide support for river repair and long-term maintenance of the village's water system [3]. The volunteer team of Zengcheng District in Guangzhou assisted Xiajie Village to set up an entrepreneurial space of the “South China Historical Trail”, and sponsoring the Zengcheng Lam Sculpture craftsman to open the Craft Exhibition Hall "Lan Ren Lan Yuan" and become a local cultural and artistic brand [14].

## **5. Revelation**

The “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” assembles professional volunteers, establishing a cooperative platform between villagers and these volunteers, and has created a talent database. It spreads the concept of rural protection, provides various technical services, and aids villagers in establishing confidence in their traditional culture. In this movement,

professional volunteers, villagers, the government, and other sectors of society play different roles, each contributing to the continuous improvement of volunteer services in their own way.

This campaign benefits all parties: the government, the countryside, and the professional volunteers. The government acts as an intermediary, connecting volunteers with rural areas, and guiding the planning and construction, historical preservation, and engineering management of the villages. Professional volunteers also gain the opportunity to study historical rural areas, delve into local culture, and accumulate research materials, thereby further enhancing their professional development. The movement also promotes a two-way benefit for both urban and rural residents, advancing the integration and coordinated development of both [15].

The “Three Professional Volunteer Groups to Country Service Movement” originated in Guangdong and has since grown into a nationwide supported public welfare initiative. It offers a novel approach for Chinese cities to support rural construction by establishing professional teams, expanding urban-rural interactions, spreading professional knowledge, and enhancing rural governance, thereby encouraging local villagers to play a more active role in rural construction and ecological protection. The professional volunteers plan to expand their services, establish a long-term talent and data library for rural services, and explore a sustainable, replicable, and promotable model for organizing activities. Furthermore, this campaign also provides a model for professional volunteers to serve in impoverished areas, which can be emulated by other developing countries around the world.

## Acknowledgement

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