



Unpacking the Engagement: Chinese Christian Engagements in Rural Social Assistance as Social Capital

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Abstract. This study examines the role of Chinese Christianity in rural charity work, using social capital theory to analyze its advantages on social assistance activities. Since the 1980s, Chinese Christianity has emerged as a new form of social capital, creating networks of trust and cooperation that are distinct from traditional kinship ties. By fostering both bonding and bridging social capital, Christian organizations lead to the development of rural charity initiatives and complement the existing social order. Despite challenges like political restrictions and identity issues, Chinese Christianity plays a significant role in rural social assistance, enhancing social cohesion and collaboration with other organizations. The study highlights the potential of religion as social capital in promoting rural development and charity work.

Keywords: Chinese Christianity, Charity, Social engagement, Rural China, Social capital

1 Introduction

With the wave of reform and opening up in the 1980s, the spread of Protestant Christianity (hereinafter referred to as Christianity, distinguished from other Christian religions) in China has increasingly expanded, and the number of Chinese Christians has continuously grown ^[1]. A notable growth was observed particularly in rural areas of China, which increased opportunities for Christian organizations and believers to engage in social affairs in these regions. During the process of social engagement, Christianity facilitated cross-cultural and inter-religious communications with other traditional cultures in rural areas, contemporary political culture in China, and other religions, even Chinese Catholicism, thereby promoting the sinicization of Christianity. As a requirement documented in the Bible: “And God has placed in the church...then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.” (1 Corinthians 12:28, NIV). Social assistance is a significant aspect of the social responsibility of Christianity. Meanwhile, seeking help through faith is one of the important reasons rural believers adhere to Christianity ^[2], which makes social assistance a vital component of Christian engagement in rural society in China, and plays an essential role in promoting harmonious development in rural areas. The

social assistance activities of Chinese Christianity have been developing for a long time. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, religious affairs have been an essential aspect of political management, with religious social assistance also being a governed activity. China's religious policies and official attitudes towards religious social assistance can be categorized into three stages from 1949 to the present. From 1949 to 1978, the development of China's religious policies was exploratory, during which policies gradually tightened. There was a period of prohibition on religious activities ^[3] and it led to stagnation in religious social assistance activities. From 1978 to 2012, influenced by the decreased credibility of official and private charity organizations due to reform and opening up as well as natural disasters, a more lenient phase for religious policies emerged and marked a developmental stage for religious social assistance. From 2012 to the present, religious policies have gradually tightened again, with a call to promote the sinicization of religion in socialism leading to increased organization and professionalization of Chinese religious charity organizations as well ^[4]. The theory of social capital is a framework for explaining social structures and resource allocation. There are various definitions of social capital. It can be generally referred to as anything that facilitates individual or collective action, generated by networks of relationships, mutual benefits, trust, and social norms ^[5]. Based on this explanation, Christianity in rural China can be viewed as a new form of social capital. This study, focusing on the rural organizations of Christianity in China after the 1980s and their social assistance efforts delineated by regional boundaries, analyzes relevant literature and uses social capital theory as a feasible theoretical framework to discuss and explore the engagement paths of social assistance activities by Chinese Christianity since the re-emergence of religious activities.

To have a detailed research about the research question, this study employs literature analysis to examine the research question. It primarily involves two main components: On one hand, it addresses the relationship between Christianity and charity activities, which pertain to Christianity. On the other hand, regarding social capital, I will first provide a brief overview of the social capital theories developed by key scholars in the field, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam. I will then focus on the discussion of religion as a form of social capital and related theories within the context of China.

The study will unfold in the following sections:

First, based on the literature analysis methodology, I will categorize the literature review into three parts. The first part will focus on research related to social assistance and charity activities within Christianity, which is one of the key areas of Christian studies. I will review the literature related to Christian charities. The second part will concentrate on related literature concerning Christian charities in China, given the political uniqueness of Christianity in China. The third part will introduce the significant theory constructed during my literature analysis—social capital theory—and review the literature regarding religion as social capital. In the fourth part, I will describe the application of social capital theory in the context of rural China, which involves an examination of the current state of social capital in rural areas. Subsequently, based on the literature review, I will discuss the research

question of whether Christianity can be regarded as a form of social capital within Chinese society and respond to how Christianity has participated in and developed rural charity activities from the 1980s to the present. Finally, I will summarize my research and highlight its limitations.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Christianity and Charity

Charity is often linked to religion, which is an important form of Christian social assistance. In many societies, charity, such as helping individuals in need, is considered part of religious obligations ^[6]. The connection between charity and Christianity is particularly strong. Christian charity activities have consistently been a focus of research. The roots of Christian charity are believed to be related to the Roman Empire's attitudes toward Christians and the Jewish traditions inherent in Christianity ^[7]. The concept of agape in Christianity represents the highest form of love, which is a reciprocal love with God. Some scholars argue that it is synonymous with charity ^[8]. The Bible emphasizes charity for all ^[9] and underscores the necessity of action ^[10]. The doctrines motivate believers to put the spirit of love into practice. Under the broad spectrum of social practices and the moral advocacy of scripture, the spirit of charity lays the groundwork for Christians ^[9]. Nowadays, charity activities have become a popular cultural phenomenon within Christian communities and among Christians.

Existing literature on contemporary Christian charity predominantly focuses on various conducting models and institutions, including research on the relationship between Western political systems and charity organizations [11]. Since the social shifts of the latter 20th century, Christian charity work has increasingly emerged in the form of non-government organizations [12]. Christian churches began to establish professional charity organizations based on the biblical teachings of love and conduct charity activities. These organizations rely on local churches and businesses started by Christians to perform relief work in pursuit of justice as articulated in Christian doctrine [12]. Currently, the purposes of Christian charity organizations have become increasingly secularized. Some organizations distance themselves from the traditional missionary objectives of Christian charity [13], prioritizing assistance as their primary aim.

The existing literature tends to concentrate on Christian charity itself and the operation and social participation of Christianity in Christian-majority countries. However, there is lacking analysis and comparison of the development of Christian charity in multi-faith nations.

2.2 Chinese Christian Charity

Charity and religion are closely connected within China as well. Different from countries with dominant religions, China is characterized by a variety of religions. Different religions promote their own teachings on benevolence, playing a role in

social assistance activities. Among these religions, Chinese Christianity continues the emphasis on charity in Christianity and carries out charity work in China based on contemporary Chinese theological thought, which occupies a large proportion of religious charity in China ^[14].

Since the incoming of Christianity to China, the church has established public institutions such as hospitals and schools with strong missionary purpose [15]. Following the reform and opening up, some religious organizations resumed their charity endeavors [16]. The most common among these are charity foundations and institutions for the care of orphans and the elderly, such as nursing homes. After 2012, relevant government departments clarified their support and encouragement for charity undertaken by religious organizations. In 2014, the State Council's "Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Healthy Development of Charity" formalized this legitimacy [14]. The charity organizations and activities of Chinese Christianity are developing towards organization and structuralization. In response to the trend of an ageing population in Chinese society, there has been a shift towards the development of elder care services within Christian charities recently [17], actively participating in social services.

However, some scholars have pointed out that religious charity activities in contemporary Chinese society face the dilemma of reconciling the religious feature of charity with their social objectives and scope [18]. It creates challenges related to identity recognition for current religious charity efforts.

In rural China, in addition to Christian charity organizations, various organizations engaged in social assistance fulfil these functions, including Confucian traditional families and other organizations of Chinese traditional religions like Buddhist and Daoist temples [19]. At the same time, during China's poverty alleviation and beautiful countryside construction initiatives, grassroots governments, as the official political force, have participated in social assistance work, including charity, in rural China. Overall, the landscape of organizations involved in social assistance in rural areas of China is quite complex. Current literature focuses on the charity behaviors of different actors but lacks comparisons among multiple actors. The complicated landscape is not revealed in the literature.

2.3 Social Capital Theory

Social capital is a theory in 20th-century sociology used to explain how power and resources are distributed within society. This theory posits that society consists of fields interwoven by practices, where individuals engage in social practices that essentially involve the utilization of capital within that society. Different individuals perceive and pursue capital in various ways, depending on their habits ^[20].

In society, there are different forms of capital, such as social capital, material capital, and symbolic capital. At the inception of this theory, there were varying perspectives on the role of social capital within society. Scholars, represented by Pierre Bourdieu [21], argue that social capital and cultural capital can exacerbate the entrenchment of social class divisions [22]. Conversely, scholars represented by

Robert Putnam [23] assert that such capital serves as a favorable distribution tool. it is an explanatory theory for the operation of social resources.

In the context of China, the theory of social capital has become one of the focal points for social science research. From different disciplinary perspectives, scholars have integrated social capital theory into studies of Chinese society [24]. Within this Chinese context, social capital has various definitions. The prominent scholar in this field, Lin Nan [25], defines social resources as resources embedded in social structures that can be purposefully accessed and mobilized through intentional actions. Social capital is seen with instrumental characteristics and plays a significant role in explaining vital areas such as the economy within the Chinese context.

2.4 Social Capital in Rural China

Since the reform and opening up in 1978, modern social capital has gradually developed in Chinese society. At that time, with the emergence and escalation of social issues, many social groups have voluntarily arisen to address these challenges, compensating for the shortcomings in government governance [24]. Chinese rural society is composed of many traditional Chinese elements. The existing social capital in rural areas is complex, primarily composed of traditional Confucian culture, Chinese traditional religions such as Buddhism and Daoism, kinship-based clan culture, and grassroots party organizations of the Communist Party of China. Among these, kinship ties form the basic community unit in rural societies [26]. These fundamental units, together with Confucian culture, have led some scholars to believe that Chinese rural society has become a society where familism prevails and trust in outsiders is low [24]. However, with the wave of reform, rural societies are also facing transformation, leading to the development of individualization and de-collectivization within society [27]. The ethics centered on the individual have led to changes in the composition of social capital in rural areas. The resurgence of religious organizations has helped people cope with newly emerging risks. As a new form of social capital, it enables Chinese Christianity to enter the social field in rural societies, leveraging its advantages to engage in charity activities in these areas.

3 Results

There is considerable debate regarding how Chinese Christianity integrates into Chinese society for social engagement. However, some theories, such as the Western religious market theory, do not specifically consider the interference of political factors in Chinese society and cannot be fully applied to the current religious situation in China [28]. In contrast, the social capital theory developed in the Chinese context emphasizes the social participatory attributes of religion, which is beneficial for analyzing the social engagement issues of Chinese Christianity. Therefore, this study aims to construct a mechanism for Chinese Christianity's participation in charity

activities in rural areas of China and the advantages for Chinese charity organizations based on social capital theory.

Based on social capital theory, Relationships are an important type of social capital. Religious participation can be considered a social resource that generates networks, norms, and relationships that help individuals and communities achieve important goals [29]. Chinese Christianity can be regarded as a new form of social capital within rural Chinese society. The churches of Chinese Christianity have established relationship networks that differ from those of traditional rural society. The charity acts promoted by their doctrine have made Chinese Christianity a form of social capital conducive to the development of charity work in rural areas.

Scholars such as Robert Putnam and Lin Nan regard religion as a positive force that fosters social cohesion and harmony [30]. Chinese Christianity actively organizes charity work in rural China, demonstrating its positive value by leveraging its capital advantages. Positive social capital can be categorized into bonding social capital and bridging social capital. I will discuss both aspects in the following.

First, Chinese Christianity utilizes its capital advantages to promote the formation and application of bonding social capital in charity activities in rural areas.

Bonding social capital refers to the social capital formed by interpersonal solidarity that often occurs between people who interact over a long period of time in small groups, local communities, and other settings [30]. Christianity is based on church networks, which differ from the kinship-based relationship networks typical of traditional rural China. They are founded on faith. Faced with the dominant kinship networks, which have diminished in status but still hold sway in Chinese society—especially evident in rural areas—Chinese Christianity transcends the boundaries of kinship through its fellowship. The relationship network, which goes beyond mere kinship ties, disrupts the traditionally low trust prevalent in Chinese society. Faith unites Christians, influencing charity activities derived from their doctrine. The highly trusted new relationship network formed by the religious component of Chinese Christian charity demonstrates that Chinese Christianity provides bonding social capital for rural charity initiatives by creating closely-knit, mutually supportive charity organizations.

Second, Chinese Christianity has facilitated the formation and application of bridging social capital in charity activities in rural China.

Bridging social capital refers to the social capital formed by the network of relationships that transcend social differences [30]. On the one hand, the components of Chinese Christian charity transcend the relationship networks of the original traditional society, as a religious form of charity, as a religious form of charity, Chinese Christianity unites individuals from different kinship groups in rural society. It expands the scope of relief efforts to be more inclusive. The charity work of Chinese Christianity does not solely help believers. Its services often extend beyond faith and establish a broader relational network. Combining the long-standing charity tradition of Christianity with the pursuit of "benevolence," it engages in what was predominantly a kinship-based support system within rural Chinese society. On the other side, unlike countries dominated by a single religion, there is no mainstream religion in China, and rural areas feature diverse religious beliefs. Thus, there is no

unified religious group in these regions. Additionally, the grassroots government systems in rural China represent political engagement in local affairs. The social capital in rural areas is mixed, comprising long-established forms like Confucianism and newly in-fluxed social capital from foreign religions such as Christianity and Catholicism following the religious revival in the 1980s. In this complex combination of social capital, the social engagement of Chinese Christianity in charity work demonstrates its advantages. Beyond the expansion of new social networks resulting from an increasing Christian population, the doctrines of Chinese Christianity introduce a new order to rural society. As the progresses of construction of religious socialism in China, the doctrines of Chinese Christianity can serve as a moral order that complements grassroots laws. Based on this moral order, the charity activities of Chinese Christianity can supplement charity work under different orders. The charity efforts of Chinese Christianity and other forms of social capital complement each other, collectively improving the moral order of society and forming bridging social capital in rural areas of China. It allows more entities, despite differing beliefs, to engage in social engagement within the charity sector.

In summary, as a new form of rural social capital in China, Chinese Christianity has participated in the charity work of rural China by re-bridging and bonding the original social capital with the Christian faith as the core.

4 Conclusions

Chinese Christian charity is a charity activity conducted within the specific national context of China. Re-emerging in the post-1980s era, Chinese Christianity undoubtedly faces challenges such as identity recognition and competition among various religions and organizations. However, in light of the prevalence of Pentecostal denominations in rural areas and the resurgence of Christian charity efforts, it is essential to explore the mechanisms through which Chinese Christianity can engage in charity activities within the complex and historically entrenched rural society. This study views Chinese Christianity as a new form of social capital within Chinese society. As a theoretical framework used to describe and explain networks of social relationships and resources, social capital effectively elucidates the advantages and how Christian charity organizations enter rural societies.

Chinese Christianity can be seen as a positive social capital that facilitates the integration of bonding and bridging social capital into rural areas of China for charity work. On one hand, the charity activities of Chinese Christianity are founded on fellowship relationship networks that differ from the traditional kinship-based networks in rural China. The new type of relational network expands the scope and accessibility of rural charity work, fostering widespread trust in society. By uniting more individuals, Chinese Christianity enhances the generation of bonding social capital, thereby contributing to social charity efforts. On the other hand, distinct from the prevalent Confucian, clan-based, and Buddhist influences in the rural areas, Chinese Christianity introduces a new order to these regions. This new order and moral framework fill potential gaps in the traditional rural society. In this way,

Chinese Christianity collaborates with other religious charity organizations and grassroots government entities within rural communities. The generation of bridging social capital enables Chinese Christianity to leverage its doctrine of benevolence and advocacy for charity, facilitating charity activities in rural areas.

It is undeniable that this study has its limitations.

First, this research approaches a literature analyze methodology, organizing and summarizing relevant literature to address the research questions. However, this analysis relies solely on secondary data, lacking supplementary first-hand data. It may contribute to biases in analysis due to the feature of secondary data. Besides, The development of charity activities involves dynamic power transfer and balance, with each initiative displaying variations. Furthermore, there can be discrepancies between real practices and textual descriptions due to operational difficulties and changes in actual conditions. As a result, without first-hand data, the analysis may risk detaching itself from the specific realities of rural China.

Second, because of China's vast territory, significant regional disparities may arise beyond the fundamental national conditions. Due to technical limitations, the study is unable to conduct an analysis and comparison of how Chinese Christianity engages in charity activities in rural societies across different regions. Variations in economic levels and cultural development contribute to regional differences in social engagement in Chinese Christianity. In areas where Christianity is relatively weak or influenced highly by political factors, the level of participation in social assistance is lower, which will result in different degrees of power transfer and transition. Therefore, this study can only serve as a general literature analysis, exploring the advantages of Chinese Christianity and possible mechanisms and patterns of participation in the social assistance efforts of Chinese Christianity, but it cannot provide a comprehensive study or summary regarding rural societies throughout the entire Chinese mainland.

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