

Relief Efforts of private charitable organizations in North China during the Beiyang Government (1912-1928)

Xiong Chenxi

College of History, Xinjiang University, Urumqi, Xinjiang, 830046, China

Keywords: North China; Charitable Organizations; The Red Cross Society of China; the China International Famine Relief Commission; Relief

Abstract: This study concentrates on the North China region from 1912 to 1928, delving into the role and influence of grassroots charitable organizations in disaster relief. During this period, North China was plagued by frequent famines and social unrest, and official relief efforts were largely ineffective due to a multitude of reasons. Coupled with the introduction of Western philanthropic concepts, grassroots charitable organizations emerged in this environment and responded proactively. They partially compensated for the government's inadequate disaster response capabilities. The activities of these grassroots charitable organizations played a positive role in stabilizing social order to some extent and provided significant historical insights for later philanthropic endeavors and disaster response research.

1. Introduction

Between 1912 and 1928, the region of Northern China was frequently beset by famines due to political upheaval and social transformation. With the government's limited capacity for relief, private charitable organizations emerged as a crucial force in famine relief efforts. These organizations exhibited diverse forms and wide-ranging origins, their activities playing an indispensable role in alleviating the impact of famines on the populace. Research into the famine relief efforts of Northern China's private charitable organizations during this period aids in gaining a deeper understanding of the features of the self-help mechanisms and social structures in Northern China during the early modern era. This study particularly draws upon the efforts of the Red Cross Society of China and the China International Famine Relief Commission in famine relief efforts within the region.

2. Decline of Official Relief amidst Internal and External Troubles

2.1. Lack of stable support for official relief due to political instability

During this period, political unrest was predominantly manifested through the conflicts among warlords and the frequent changes in regime. In the 1920s, China was in a state of chaotic warlordism, with various warlords establishing their own strongholds, fiercely competing against one another. Their primary focus was on territorial conquest and power struggles, with scant

attention and investment in civil affairs, including relief efforts. For instance, during the Great North China Drought of 1920, the hostilities among factions persisted unabated. In the afflicted areas, "situated within the crossfire, houses had long turned to ashes, with people displaced and homeless. Even in places not directly within the combat zone, such as the towns and villages around the capital, the inhabitants suffered greatly from the ravages of retreating soldiers. Although buildings were spared from burning, livestock and personal belongings were lost"^[1]. Moreover, to sustain their military expenditures, certain local factions relentlessly exploited the populace, exacerbating the burden on the people and rendering them incapable of receiving effective governmental relief. Additionally, the warfare devastated infrastructure such as transportation and agricultural production, further intensifying the calamity and making the logistics and coordination of official relief efforts extremely challenging.

Moreover, owing to the impact of warlord conflicts, the central government during this era was in a state of constant flux. The government was rife with factions, resulting in tumultuous political instability. The frequent changes in government led to a lack of continuity and stability in relief policies. Often, a relief policy had not yet been implemented or had just begun before it was shelved or abolished due to a change in regime. This political uncertainty prevented the formation of an effective relief system and long-term relief planning, making it exceedingly difficult for the government to provide sustained and robust assistance to the affected regions and populace.

2.2. Financial constraints limit resources for official relief efforts

The prolonged warfare and natural disasters have wrought severe devastation upon agricultural production. The fields have been abandoned, irrigation facilities left in disrepair, and farmers have been displaced, leading to a significant decline in agricultural yields. This has not only resulted in food shortages and skyrocketing prices but also reduced the government's sources of tax revenue. In such circumstances, the government's fiscal income has dwindled, making it difficult to allocate sufficient funds for relief efforts. For instance, in 1920, a rare drought in North China affected a vast area, with a large number of victims. However, due to the excessive burden of military expenses and fiscal constraints, the government could only resort to borrowing and increasing taxes to sustain disaster relief funds. The two foreign debts alone amounted to 9 million dollars, yet despite these efforts, many victims still perished from hunger and cold^[2].

The balance of fiscal revenue and expenditure is crucial to the health of a nation's finances. Military expenditures accounted for a considerable portion of the government's budget at the time, and in addition, the government faced other fiscal pressures, such as repaying foreign debts and maintaining the operations of government institutions. These expenditures consumed a significant portion of fiscal resources, further depleting the funds available for relief. Moreover, due to poor fiscal management and rampant corruption, the efficiency of fiscal funds was further compromised, and the relief materials and funds intended for the victims were siphoned off at various levels, leaving the affected population without much aid.

2.3. Social disorder affects the implementation of official relief aid

In a situation fraught with internal strife and external threats, social order has unraveled, with banditry and thievery rampant. In disaster-stricken regions, unscrupulous individuals seize the opportunity to loot relief supplies, disrupting the distribution process and hampering official relief efforts. For example, in remote disaster areas, relief supplies are frequently plundered by bandits during transport, preventing their timely delivery to victims and severely impeding relief effectiveness.

Furthermore, the inefficiencies of official relief efforts are exacerbated by unclear

responsibilities and poor coordination within relief agencies. A lack of effective communication and collaboration among different departments results in fragmented actions, leading to low organizational and execution efficiency. Additionally, some local officials are apathetic and lack accountability and initiative, failing to diligently fulfill their duties. In extreme cases, disaster victims are driven to desperation, selling their family members, while provincial military and political authorities exploit the situation by establishing markets for humans and levying a ten percent tax^[3]. Such absurdities markedly diminish the effectiveness of official relief efforts.

3. The Introduction and Influence of Western Philanthropic Philosophy

Natural disasters and man-made calamities, along with the government's inadequate relief efforts, merely serve as the backdrop. The true catalyst for the rise of modern philanthropic efforts as a societal consensus lies in the legacy of traditional charity thought, the dissemination of Western ideals, and the gradual embracement of citizen awareness and perceptions of rights. As modern society reconfigures under the influence of Western civilization, charitable organizations and their ideologies evolve with the times^[4]. The benevolent halls and societies that flourished during the Ming and Qing dynasties have subtly transformed in response to changing times: conservative ones have gradually receded from the historical stage, while enlightened ones have progressively "modernized." Concurrently, modern charitable groups, profoundly influenced by Western philanthropic concepts, began to emerge and gradually supplanted the traditional benevolent halls and societies, becoming the leaders of modern philanthropic endeavors.

Modern philanthropic organizations and their ideologies diverge significantly from traditional ones. Initially, while traditional charitable bodies were also propelled by grassroots initiatives, they lacked independence, being subject to government oversight and lacking a long-term vision. In contrast, modern philanthropies, under specific historical contexts, amassed sufficient strength to maintain independence and autonomy, enabling them to swiftly undertake disaster relief efforts to some extent when the government failed to promptly make aid decisions. Additionally, traditional benevolent halls and societies were mostly insular entities, with internal connections primarily based on regional and familial ties. Their function emphasized propagating Confucian ethics through relief efforts to uphold traditional social order and values.

Newly emerging civilian charitable organizations, epitomized by the Red Cross and the China International Famine Relief Commission, prioritized the role of social relief. These organizations transcended regional and industrial boundaries, attracted diverse talents, broadened funding sources, and united various civic forces. Consequently, as modernization advanced, "state-operated charity gradually evolved into the social relief undertakings of modern governments, yet without fully developed relief functions. Civilian charitable organizations thus proliferated like mushrooms after rain, forming a fundamental force in the development of philanthropy in the later modern period"^[5]. A wave of new civilian charitable organizations flourished in North China, including philanthropic groups initiated by local gentry, merchants, and religious organizations. Some merchant associations, in efforts to maintain regional commercial stability and social order, actively participated in disaster relief. Meanwhile, certain religious charitable groups, guided by their doctrines, engaged in activities such as distributing congee and aiding refugees. Among these numerous emerging civilian charities, the Red Cross and the China International Famine Relief Commission held significant influence, conducting extensive relief activities during famines in North China.

4. Relief of the North China Disaster by Private Charitable Organizations - Examples from the Red Cross Society and the China International Famine Relief Commission

4.1. The Red Cross Society of China

The Red Cross Society of China, as a civic organization, has made significant contributions to social relief efforts, helping to maintain social order and stability to a certain extent, and serves as a principal force in civil philanthropy.

In 1917, Beijing and its surrounding areas were struck by floods, affecting over a hundred counties and approximately six million people. More than 25 million mu of arable land was submerged, around eighty thousand houses were destroyed, and agricultural direct economic losses reached ten million silver dollars^[6]. Due to the lack of official relief efforts, the Red Cross Society of China, facing the urgent need for effective aid for the disaster victims, primarily employed channels such as advocacy, persuasion, and reciprocal cooperation to raise funds, while also urging the government to undertake relief measures. The Red Cross Society of China further mobilized societal involvement by conducting charity sales, performances, and similar activities through its various sub-committees. According to statistics, during this great flood, "the Red Cross successively provided emergency relief in Tianjin, Yangliuqing Town, Shijiazhuang, Xushui, Wen'an, Dongguang, and Cang County, followed by winter relief. In total, over 112,000 yuan in relief funds and more than 104,000 pieces of cotton clothing were distributed, along with medicines, flour, and other supplies, amounting to more than 220,000 silver dollars"^[7].

In the course of providing relief for the famine-stricken rural regions of northern China, the Red Cross not only addressed the immediate challenges of aid distribution but also considered the long-term livelihood of the victims. To this end, the Red Cross Society of China established three institutions: orphanages and craft schools, each funded with several thousand yuan, "sheltering over a hundred children from severely afflicted families, providing each child with a set of cotton clothing upon admission, and offering two meals a day". Additionally, "machines for weaving cloth and making sock bands were purchased to teach them crafts, with the aim that these disaster victims could support themselves after leaving the institution the following year"^[8]. Embracing a spirit of "Rescuing the vulnerable and wounded, providing disaster relief and showing compassion to neighbors". The members of the Red Cross Society of China extended compassion and hope to those beleaguered by calamity. They actively engaged in relief efforts, endeavoring to secure the welfare of the afflicted masses, thereby supplementing the government's inadequacies. Their efforts were universally lauded by all societal strata, from government officials to the disaster victims themselves, and garnered them high social esteem.

4.2. The Chinese-Foreign Aid Society

The China International Famine Relief Commission was founded in 1921 and, at its peak, exerted its influence across 16 provinces nationwide. It established 17 local branches, offices, and a Relief Affairs Advisory Committee, becoming the largest non-governmental disaster relief organization in the country at that time. Adhering to the philosophy of "constructive relief and advocating for disaster prevention," it focused on improving the lives of farmers, primarily through "work relief" and "agricultural relief," achieving notable success in its relief efforts.

The Commission believed that effective relief efforts should not only respond to disasters promptly but also emphasize preemptive measures to prevent disasters. They aimed not only to provide sustenance to the victims but also to offer adequate employment, enabling individuals to sustain their lives while contributing to public projects^[9]. Consequently, between 1921 and 1923, in northern China alone, the Commission organized the construction of 866 miles of roads by

mobilizing disaster victims^[10]. In 1922, it conducted a "work-for-relief" program to restore the old course of the Yellow River in Shandong, with an expenditure of 1,500,000 yuan. This effort secured farmland spanning 200 square miles across three counties in eastern Shandong and allowed 250,000 displaced people to return to their homeland^[10]. In addition, the China International Famine Relief Commission also attached great importance to public health and safety during the disaster relief process. During the disaster situation in North China in 1920, it "sent staff to organize new manure plants, set up separate men's and women's toilets, and recruited dozens of health laborers among the disaster victims to be specifically responsible for cleaning and other tasks"^[11].

The China International Famine Relief Commission was well aware that "to provide disaster relief, it is necessary to take preventive measures first. And to carry out disaster prevention, it is essential to adjust rural finance first so that it can regain its vitality"^[12]. Therefore, the Commission carried out large-scale work-relief programs and constructed infrastructure in rural areas, thus improving the backward infrastructure in civil society and strengthening farmers' ability to resist disasters. This is an innovative way of providing disaster relief, which can, to some extent, help people fundamentally defend against the encroachment of famines.

5. The Historical Significance of North China's Civilian Charitable Organizations for Disaster Relief

Civil philanthropic organizations play a significant stabilizing role in disaster relief efforts. They alleviate the suffering of disaster victims, reduce the mortality rate caused by famines, and to some extent, maintain social order. Additionally, the activities of these charitable organizations foster social cohesion, strengthening ties and mutual assistance across different social strata. Furthermore, the relief efforts provided by these organizations promote the updating of societal notions, such as heightened awareness of public health and social assistance.

However, these civil philanthropic organizations also face numerous limitations in disaster relief efforts. Due to the absence of government involvement, a chronic shortage of funds is a persistent issue, restricting the scale and duration of relief efforts. "The leaders of charitable endeavors are civil groups, which cannot, like the government, allocate resources on a large scale"^[4]. Moreover, the lack of effective coordination and unified action between different regions and organizations results in low relief efficiency. In dealing with large-scale, prolonged famines, these organizations' capabilities remain insufficient to fundamentally resolve the deep-seated social issues that famines bring. Organizations such as the Red Cross and the China International Famine Relief Commission achieved notable success in North China's famine relief, yet they were also troubled by funding problems, often requiring extensive publicity to raise adequate funds, which hampers the timeliness of disaster relief.

Thus, one may conclude that the utility of these modern civil charitable organizations does not primarily lie in fundraising for disaster relief, as most funds are reliant on loans and donations. Compared with the vast demand for donations, the fundraising efforts of civil charities are negligible. Their pivotal role lies in stepping into the government's shoes to perform relief duties, conducting on-site disaster investigations and relief distributions, addressing the necessities of food, shelter, and clothing for the disaster-stricken, and gradually transforming the traditional approach to relief that leaves behind issues such as displaced disaster victims, temporary aid, and epidemics.

6. Conclusion

Between 1912 and 1928, folk charitable organizations in Northern China played a pivotal role in disaster relief efforts. Through diverse relief measures and extensive social involvement, they made significant contributions to mitigating the impact of famines on the region's society. The Red Cross

Society of China and the China International Famine Relief Commission, as prominent representatives, demonstrated unique advantages and played an active role in disaster relief during this period. Despite certain limitations, the activities of these civic charitable organizations reflected the capacity for self-help and social responsibility within civil society during this exceptional historical era, offering historical insights for the development of contemporary social aid and charitable endeavors.

References

- [1] Ministry of Agriculture Launches Farmers' Relief Society [N]. *Shun Pao (Shanghai)*, August 5, 1920.
- [2] Negotiation for Tax Increase and Disaster Relief [N]. *Ta Kung Pao(Tianjin)*, Dec. 20, 1920.
- [3] Feng Hefa. *Chinese rural economic data* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Dawn Bookstore, 1933:770.
- [4] Wang Jun, Xiong Yaping. *Modern Civil Charity Associations and Rural Famine Relief——The Case of North China Area in the Northern Warlords Government Period*[J]. *Journal of Hebei Radio and TV University*, 2013, 18(04):13-20.
- [5] Zhou Qiuguang, Zeng Guilin. *An Exploration on Contents and Features of Modern Chinese Philanthropy*[J]. *Journal of Social Science of Hunan Normal University*, 2007,(06):121-127.
- [6] Flood winter relief is still less than three million[N].*Shun Pao (Shanghai)*, November 11, 1917.
- [7] Red Cross Society of China. *Selected historical data of the Red Cross Society of China* [M]. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1993:466.
- [8] Inclusion of the Disaster Victims[N]. *Ta Kung Pao(Tianjin)*, January 29,1918.
- [9] The China International Famine Relief Commission. *The list of affairs*[J]. Beijing: The China International Famine Relief Commission,1933.
- [10] The China International Famine Relief Commission. *Report on Relief Affairs in the Thirteenth Year of the Republic of China* [J]. Beijing: The China International Famine Relief Commission, 1925:4-5.
- [11] A Consolidation of Up - to - Date News during Disaster Relief Campaigns[N]. *Ta Kung Pao(Tianjin)*, October 22, 1920.
- [12] Zhu Sihuang. *The Economic History of the Republic of China* [M]. Shanghai: Society For Banking, 1948: 345-349.