Research On Amish Rural Sentiment

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Abstract:
Against the background of globalization and urbanization, the Amish have steadfastly remained in rural areas. Since the 1970s, the rural economy of the Amish has flourished, with ecological agriculture and distinctive handicrafts adapting to the needs of market economy development while preserving their ethnic cultural characteristics. This article employs methods of literature analysis and field interviews to examine the history and current state of agricultural production and industrial transformation among the Amish. It also analyzes the role of Rural sentiment as a link and driving force in the development of the Amish rural economy, with the aim of providing insights for the revitalization of rural areas in China.
Key words:
Amish; Rural Sentiment; Industrial Transformation; Rural Revitalization

1. Introduction

In today's world, interconnected communications and convenient transportation almost enable parallel coexistence of different cultures globally. However, industrialization and urbanization have simultaneously led to a sharp decline in rural populations and village communities. Amish culture, a distinctive rural culture, has not only survived but thrived amid globalization and urbanization, adapting to socioeconomic developments while preserving and evolving its traditions. Civilization continually progresses through the exchange and mutual learning of cultures. The successful transformation and remarkable development of the Amish rural economy, far across the ocean, offer valuable research insights. To preserve their culture, the Amish choose to live in rural areas and maintain a distance from mainstream societal culture, flourishing in their marginalized existence. Their settlements have expanded from a corner in Europe (where there are no longer any Amish) to 32 states in the United States, four provinces in Canada, and Bolivia in South America.[1]

Lancaster County in Pennsylvania, USA, is the oldest and most densely populated Amish settlement in North America. It attracts an average of 8.3 million visitors annually to observe the Amish way of life. In the early 20th century, Lancaster had only about 500 Amish individuals; a century later, their population increased to 27,000, with an additional 10,000 descendants of Lancaster Amish living in other Amish settlements across the United States. [2]

Figure 1 illustrates Amish settlements, primarily located in the eastern and southern parts of Lancaster County, divided into approximately 160 districts, each averaging 20-40 families, comprising about 165 adults and children. Lancaster's fertile land has continually faced urbanization pressures. In recent years, the county has lost hundreds of farms due to high land costs, intensifying urbanization, and the continuous growth of the Amish workforce, prompting some Amish families to move to other areas in search of cheaper farmland and isolated rural communities. [3]

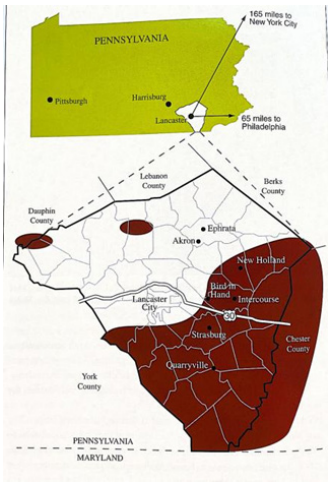

Figure 1: Map of Lancaster and Distribution of the Amish(Source: From Kraybill: The Amish of Lancaster County)

The greatest challenge to the survival of Amish culture lies in the industrial transformation brought about by the development of productive forces. The Amish communities are continually dispersed in search of affordable land, leading to an ever-expanding geographical area for their existence. The Amish Attachment to Rural Life The Amish possess a strong sense of stewardship over the land, with many viewing agriculture as a path to a more peaceful way of life. Although many Amish today no longer primarily engage in agricultural production, they continue to choose rural living, with no Amish residing in cities. To them, cities often symbolize corruption and sin. An Amish author wrote that the emergence of “cities” is associated with human crime. Cain built a “city” after fleeing from the murder of his brother Abel (Genesis 4:17); people’s inflated desires led to the construction of the Tower of Babel, saying, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower" (Genesis 11:4). Therefore, the Amish believe that the man-made environment of cities disrupts the divine order, with cities harboring ethical sins (such as the pride of building the Tower of Babel), leading them to choose avoidance.

In contrast, rural life, nature, and Amish spiritual beliefs are closely intertwined. “Rural living makes us aware of the natural order of daylight and darkness, sunshine and rain, the change of seasons,” they believe. [4] This closer-to-nature lifestyle holds transcendental significance for the Amish, rooted in their beliefs. They believe that self-sufficient rural living enhances the ability to steward nature well, earning divine rewards.

The Amish's love for rural life is reflected in their lifestyle. Most Amish households have vegetable gardens that produce enough for family consumption. The Amish attire (as shown in Figure 2) still follows the 16th-century European peasant dress, eschewing complexity and luxury, with colors predominantly black, gray, and blue. The materials are wrinkle-resistant and inexpensive coarse cloth. In terms of style, adult men wear suspenders, shirts, vests, and coats; women wear loose-fitting, ankle-length dresses and prayer caps; children's clothing is simply a miniature version of adult attire. The guiding principle of Amish dress is uniform, modest, and practical.



Figure 2: Summer Attire of an Amish Family in Lancaster (Source: Photographed by the author in Lancaster on July 7, 2016)

The most evident identifier of an Amish residence is the absence of public utility lines, with telephones installed in fields or barns. They utilize alternative energy sources such as battery packs, propane, solar energy, diesel, and windmills. In their homes, during winter, coal stoves in the kitchen provide heating, while bedrooms remain unheated, with boys and girls sleeping separately in different rooms, often huddling together for warmth. Amish use propane washing machines but avoid dryers, instead hanging clothes on lines in their gardens for drying.

To maintain close familial and community ties, Amish "ordinances" forbid the ownership of cars, favoring horse-drawn carriages for travel. For longer journeys, they predominantly use public transportation, such as trains and buses. In terms of product usage, the Amish prefer traditional and natural methods. For instance, in medicine, they are more inclined to try herbal remedies or essential oils than most Westerners.

The core of traditional Amish society is agricultural production and lifestyle. In recent decades, many Amish, adhering to their values and committed to farming, have migrated from urbanized rural areas in the East to other counties with cheaper land. Rapid population growth and the quest for more affordable farmland have driven their continual relocation. Cultivating land holds religious significance for them.[5]

2. Amish Attachment to Rural Life and Agricultural Transformation

In the context of modernization, the Amish's dedication to family farming cannot stop the progress of productive forces and industrial transformation. Amish agricultural production faces

numerous challenges, such as rising land prices, the use of electricity, advanced technology, and the need for large-scale production, making it increasingly difficult to maintain traditional farming practices. Faced with the irreversible forces of social development, the Amish can only adapt and negotiate their way forward through industrial transformation.

2.1 Amish Ecological Agriculture

For over three centuries, the Amish's self-sufficient agricultural economy has provided them with the material means to separate from mainstream societal culture, essential for the enduring development of Amish culture. Compared to non-Amish neighbors, "traditional Amish farms are smaller, more diversified, and less integrated into the market economy. On the other hand, they use different types of fertilizers and pesticides in crop production".[6]

Ecological agriculture focuses on the impact of agricultural practices on the environment, society, and economy, aiming to achieve a diversified, healthy, and productive ecosystem. Key biological focuses include pollution control and organic farming methods. Maintaining and stabilizing farm dynamic balance requires animal diversity on the farm, avoiding potential pollution, and using renewable resources. Research by Caroline Brock and others has found that Amish organic milk production took off in the 1990s and is one of the fastest-growing segments in dairy product sales, with demand for Amish organic milk far exceeding supply.[7]

Katharine V. Blake's research indicates that Amish farmers, owning small and diversified farms, avoid the specialization and monoculture characteristic of industrialized agriculture. As shown in Figure 3, non-Amish people, represented by black bars, prefer to follow the propaganda and magazines of large companies, while the Amish, represented by white bars, lean towards organic pest control methods to prevent chemical pollution of the environment. Generations of accumulated experience allow Amish farmers to identify pests and diseases earlier than common farmers, for timely prevention and adjustment, thus preferring their own experience as a guide in agricultural practice. The Amish's methods of weed and pest control, based on centuries of farming experience, have proven to be superior to the use of herbicides and pesticides. Other ecological management methods employed by the Amish include crop rotation, integrated pest management, and pest control. These practices contribute to ecological agriculture as they have been proven to enhance biological interactions while limiting external inputs.

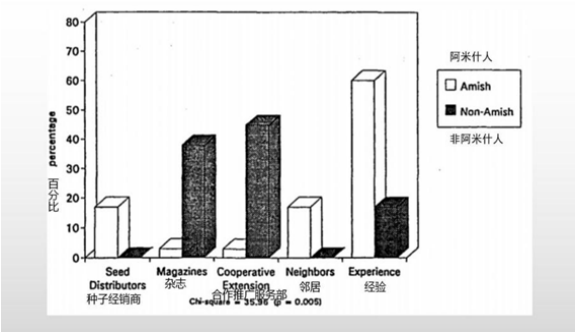

Figure 3: Information Sources for Amish and Non-Amish People (Source: From the paper "Modern

Amish Farming as Ecological Agriculture" by Blake et al.)

Regarding Amish fertilizers, the author observed on Amish farms in Lancaster that they extensively use organic fertilizers made from human and animal manure. Figure 4 shows a manure pit outside a dairy farm, a common fixture in Lancaster's Amish dairy farms, along with solar-powered fences surrounding the area. In the fields and along the roads, one often sees “Honey Wagons” – manure spreaders pulled by horses. The Amish affectionately named these manure spreaders “Honey Wagons”, because, to the land, manure is as sweet and nourishing as honey. This name reflects the Amish’s intimate and loving attitude towards nature. Non-Amish residents of Lancaster also find this name amusing, often covering their noses but smiling silently as the “Honey Wagons” pass by on the roads.



Figure 4: Manure Pit at an Amish Dairy Farm in Lancaster (Source: Photographed by the author in Lancaster on July 18, 2016)

In summary, Amish ecological agriculture aligns well with modern ecological culture, with most of its practices acclaimed for contributing to sustainable ecological development, though some are questioned by modern society. The impact of modernity on the Amish’s ecological construction is not too intense, and they have successfully continued their ecological values.

2.2 The Marketization of Amish Agriculture

Although Amish communities vary in their economic development methods and levels, in recent years, Amish farms have become increasingly commercialized and specialized. While traditional agricultural production is still respected among the Amish, in many settlements, most have gradually abandoned traditional farming. Before the 1960s, Amish lived on farms that were small and diverse, rearing a dozen dairy cows, a flock of chickens, and several bulls. However, today, Amish farms have become more specialized and even mechanized (as shown in Figure 5).

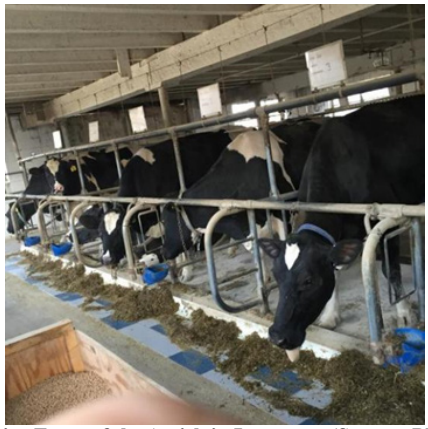

Figure 5: Large-Scale Dairy Farm of the Amish in Lancaster (Source: Photographed by the author in Lancaster on August 5, 2016)

In the context of modern mass production, Amish farmers, seeking profit or continuity in agriculture, must adapt to market demands, notably in the dairy industry. Standards and technology in modern milk production directly influence the Amish dairy sector. In the 1950s and 1960s, some states introduced new milk regulations requiring the installation of electric bulk tanks with cooling systems to ensure the marketability of Amish milk.

The small-scale, self-sufficient dairy economy has gradually been phased out by the market. The Amish use modern technology to extensively plant and store corn and fodder for feeding dairy cows and employ the latest storage methods (large milk tanks, as shown in Figure 6) for preserving and transporting milk.



Figure 6: Cooling Milk Tanks at an Amish Farm in Lancaster (Source: Photographed by the author in Lancaster on July 16, 2016)

Some of the larger Amish dairy farms in Lancaster have already started using automatic milking machines as a replacement for manual milking (in Figure 7).



Figure 7: Automatic Milking Machine at an Amish Farm in Lancaster(Source: Photographed by the author in Lancaster on July 16, 2016) The marketization of the dairy industry has led to the following changes: smaller operators have been driven out due to reduced profits, there has been an increase in herd sizes, and the rise of large, factory-like farms. The greatest challenge for the Amish has been the technological demands of marketized dairy farming. Amish farmers, traditionally cautious about adopting new technologies, have had to update them according to market needs.

Dairy farming, as their cornerstone agricultural sector, has become a bellwether in the Amish community's adoption of technology. Today's Amish agriculture in highly marketized areas, such as Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is vastly different from traditional small-scale family farming, with significant levels of technology and scale. As Henri Lefebvre pointed out in "Critique of Everyday Life": Alienation separates each person from their essence and from what they can do. Alienation is relentless and everyday. The Amish, despite isolating themselves from the world as a strategy to mitigate the impact of new technologies, have found it challenging to halt the development of productive forces and production relations. To minimize the forces of alienation and prevent a large number of young Amish from leaving their communities to work in the outside world, thus not joining the Amish church, the Amish have taken an active role in experimenting with rural economies—establishing specialty craft factories and nostalgia stores.

3. Amish Attachment to Rural Life and Handicraft Industry Transformation

Kraybill pointed in The Amish that "nationally (in the USA), it is now estimated that two-thirds of (Amish) family income comes from non-agricultural sources." This shift towards non-agricultural work represents the biggest change in Amish society in the last century. Even though they engage in broad-sense agricultural production (dairy farming, ecological agriculture, etc.), it differs from traditional agriculture before the 1960s, being more dependent on external conditions and market needs.

While the Amish still live in rural areas, many families combine non-farm commercial work with hobby farming. Most Amish people love farms, and for those who love the land and agricultural production, abandoning farming might only be a temporary measure, an adaptation to the tightening credit market, scarce farmland, and expanding population. Non-agricultural employment is seen as an opportunity to accumulate funds to purchase farms in the future. In the past fifty years, the Amish have been innovating in ecological and agricultural management

in rural areas; they have gradually moved away from agriculture, working in rural factories and engaging in large, medium, and small-scale handicraft production and processing, and operating nostalgia shops and inns in their front yards and backyards.

3.1 Amish Specialty Handicraft Factories and Industry

With the industrialization of the rural areas, other non-agricultural employment opportunities for the Amish have increased. Many landless and livelihood-lacking Amish youths have had to work in factories. Family and community are at the heart of Amish life, so having workplaces close to home is important for maintaining their social order. The development of urban areas in the northeastern United States has brought commercial and industrial activities to the surrounding rural areas, providing the Amish with opportunities to work relatively close to home. Therefore, these businesses and factories, mostly operated by non-Amish, attract a large Amish workforce from the surrounding countryside. They typically bring lunch boxes and work long hours, returning home late. Around 5:30 PM, the author always sees Amish youths with lunch boxes waiting for the bus to return home in Lancaster. They appear to be in their twenties, mostly unmarried (without beards, as married Amish men begin to grow beards). They don't drive horse carriages to work, indicating that their jobs are quite far from home. To avoid the risk of many Amish youths working far from home and disrupting family and community life, the Amish community in Lancaster has explored a new path: they can establish family-run handicraft factories guided by Amish values right at their doorstep.

Amish-made handicrafts and furniture are of high quality and popular, with more and more Amish-operated specialty woodworking and construction factories emerging. These factories mainly produce wooden products: household and outdoor furniture, gazebos, small barns, and lawn decorations, as well as contracting construction projects. More Amish youths are starting their own Amish specialty handicraft factories, and those without capital work as carpenters, plumbers, and painters in factories run by their kin. Amish-operated handicraft factories mainly come in three forms: family-run workshops, suburban large-scale manufacturing factories, and mobile contracting crews. The first type, family-run workshops, are based in Amish homes, employing family members and neighbors, such as craft workshops, repair shops, assembly workshops, etc., as shown in Figure 8, a carriage assembly workshop in an Amish home in Lancaster.



Figure 8: Amish Carriage Assembly Workshop in Lancaster(Source: Photographed by the author in Lancaster on July 8, 2016)

The second type of nearby large-scale manufacturing factory is located on the edge of farms or rented premises, typically employing fewer than 15 Amish people, producing agricultural tools, hydraulic devices, storage barns, furniture, and fine woodworking items. Figures 9 and 10 show exquisite children's craft toys, each less than half a meter in diameter, intricately made and favored by high-end consumers. These toys are also relatively expensive.



Figure 9: Lancaster's Exquisite and Expensive Amish Handcrafted Toy "Ball Roller"(Source: Photographed by the author in Lancaster on November 6, 2016)

For example, the toy vanity cabinet priced in Figure 9 costs $79.95.



Figure 10: Lancaster's Exquisite and Expensive Amish Handcrafted Toy "Little Girl's Dressing Table"(Source: Photographed by the author in Lancaster on November 6, 2016)

The third type refers to mobile contracting factories that build houses in areas near the Amish community, with teams exceeding 15 people. Amish construction crews, carrying tools and mobile power sources (as the Amish do not use public electricity), travel in hired vehicles (since the Amish are not allowed to own cars) to construction sites. Unlike other crews, Amish teams in Lancaster mainly work on projects close to home and do not undertake jobs too far from their community.

3.2 Amish Nostalgia Specialty Stores

The industrial transformation has greatly changed the production and life of the Amish in Lancaster, with family-run Amish small businesses springing up since the 1980s.[13] An Amish shop owner said, "We try to run businesses that allow our families to stay together." To avoid leaving their families, in addition to establishing family-run handicraft factories, the Amish have also begun operating various retail and specialty stores, such as bakeries, health food stores, florists, vegetable shops, handcrafted quilt shops (as shown in Figure 11), dry goods stores, bulk food stores, furniture stores, and shoe stores.



Figure 11: Handcrafted Quilts by the Amish in Lancaster(Source: Photographed by the author in Lancaster on August 26, 2016)

Many Amish women set up a room in their homes with their own or their sisters' handcrafted products to start a business (as shown in Figure 12, a handmade soap store). They can earn money without leaving home. If Amish specialty handicraft factories create jobs and income for Amish fathers and sons, nostalgia specialty stores create many job opportunities for Amish mothers and daughters. Their daughters, sisters-in-law, and girls from neighboring families can work as cashiers and sales assistants. These stores are not large in scale and require little investment, but their income is quite substantial.



Figure 12: Handmade Soap Store of the Amish in Lancaster(Source: Photographed by the author in Lancaster on September 27, 2016)

With rapid development in modern society, the nostalgia for a beautiful past remains indelible,

hence the increasing demand for unique services and custom handcrafted products. The Amish, preserving their traditional production and lifestyle, attract people with their finely crafted agricultural and handcrafted products, especially with the development of Amish tourism. The tourism route from Philadelphia to Lancaster planned by Universal Vision, a travel company, is popular among Chinese tourists, showing a strong interest and purchasing desire for Amish culture and specialty products. In the summer of 2016, the author volunteered as a tour guide here and noticed about five buses from different travel companies bringing tourists to Amish homes for visits and shopping every day. Before the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2021, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Lancaster for Amish cultural tourism was increasing year by year.[14]

The Amish tourism industry emerged in the early to mid-20th century, and the intrusion of outsiders brought income but also problems. However, just as they adapted to other challenges and changes in Europe and America over three centuries, the Amish have also adapted to the scrutiny and judgments of tourists. [15] Tourism brings considerable consumption, and Amish specialty stores increasingly rely on the tourism industry. For example, over half of the retail volume of 10% of Amish businesses in Lancaster County comes from tourist spending. The rise of Amish rural tourism injects fresh vitality into the development of the Amish rural economy.

4. Conclusion

The Amish are known for their simple lifestyle and strong community spirit. They usually avoid using modern technology and conveniences to maintain the tradition and purity of their community. The Amish economy is primarily based on agriculture, but over time, some communities have also started engaging in other types of work, such as handicraft production, small-scale manufacturing, and tourism. Their transformation process reflects respect for tradition and limited acceptance of modernization. To address the challenges of urbanization and high land prices, on one hand, the Amish moderately adapt to the market, adopting technology, and modernizing agriculture; on the other hand, they actively undergo industrial upgrading and transformation, encouraging families to start rural businesses instead of working in non-Amish factories, thereby protecting and passing on their cultural heritage. In this process, the Amish's attachment to rural life is both the motivation for them to stay in rural production and life and the driving force for actively undertaking industrial upgrading and transformation.

The communication between Eastern and Western agricultural civilizations has promoted mutual learning in agricultural technology and culture. Although Amish rural culture, due to its religious, cultural, and regional uniqueness, is incomparable to Chinese rural development, the Amish share common rural sentiment and value for the extended family with the Chinese. Their active response strategies to urbanization and marketization provide some insightful references for the development of China's rural tourism economy.

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