

09

PEASANT AGRICULTURE AND
NUTRITIONAL SECURITY IN CHINA*Jan Douwe van der Ploeg*¹

China's agriculture is the largest such system in the world. It ranks number one in terms of farm output and embraces a little more than 200 million smallholdings. Using just 10% of the world's cultivated land, these smallholders produce 20% of the world's total food supply. Consequently China is largely self-sufficient in meeting the nutritional needs of its huge population.² Yet in the past food and nutritional security has been far from self-evident. In the early 1990s Lester Brown wrote an important essay entitled "Who Will Feed China?". Now we know the answer: China is proudly feeding itself.

While China does not have a specific policy or law to protect and implement the right to adequate food and nutrition (RtAFN or right to food) directly, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China stipulates that the State shall improve the physical and cultural life of its people.³ Since food is an important part of 'physical life' this implies a right to food. Furthermore, Chapter 5 of the Agriculture Law⁴ requires the State to take measures to improve the nutritional structure of its people. The Government has also continually prioritized agriculture, nutritional security and self-sufficiency for food at national level as demonstrated by policy documents including the annual 'Number One Documents', in which the Government outlines its primary policy concerns and decisions.⁵

Outsiders, especially those coming from Western Europe and North America, are often intrigued by the small-scale character of China's agriculture. The average farm has only five *mu* (one third of a hectare) of agricultural land. From the hegemonic Western point of view (deeply rooted in today's agricultural sciences and international think-tanks) this is too small to earn an income. Since without income there can be no savings, and without savings there can be no investment and development, China's agriculture should be stagnant. However, over the last four decades total food production grew more than in any other country in the world.

This impressive performance is due to the peasant nature of China's agriculture. While the term 'smallholding' refers to the size of the farm unit, the notion of peasant agriculture refers to the way in which agricultural production is organized and developed. Peasant agriculture is driven by the quantity and quality of labour. Labour investments improving the quality of resources such as the building of irrigation systems and terraces also play a central role. Peasant agriculture is intensive and efficient. It produces as much as possible with the available resources without, providing conditions allow, damaging the quality of these resources. It minimizes the use of external inputs to be as autonomous as possible, and shows low levels of losses and polluting emissions. Peasant agriculture is also fairly resilient to market

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- 2 The one major exception is soy imports from Brazil for feeding the expanding pig-breeding industry.
- 3 For example, in articles 14, 19, and 21 of the Constitution. Available at: www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/14/content_1372953.htm.
- 4 Available in English at: www.gov.cn/english/laws/2005-10/09/content_75375.htm.
- 5 For more information on agriculture and the annual 'Number One Documents', please visit the website of the Ministry of Agriculture of China. Available in English at: english.agri.gov.cn/hottopics/cpc/.

fluctuations. Of course, while the potential of peasant farming can easily be blocked and hindered, China's experience demonstrates how it can be a powerful and progressive driving force.

In China, the 200 million peasant farms (representing at least 800 million people) easily satisfy the nutritional needs of their families and the migrant workers through, *inter alia*, granaries (in every household), barter systems and multiple cropping. They also produce enough to sell at the widespread and decentralized network of interconnected food markets that enables people living in the large cities and metropolis to access food. The *Xin Fa Di* market in Beijing is one example: here thousands of suppliers provide Beijing with the 16,000 tons of fruit and vegetables required daily by the city's population.⁶

To understand peasant agriculture in China one has to take into account three strategic features. Firstly, the circular nature of the labour migration processes. People leave and return to their places of origin. Young people frequently leave their villages to work in urban construction sites and industries, often in terrible and exploitative conditions. Once a family's first child starts attending primary school the wife returns to the village.⁷ The husband then sends remittances home, and only occasionally returns home temporarily to help prepare and harvest the land. When he eventually returns home permanently he invests his savings in farming and/or other rural economic activities.⁸ Migration is thus not a one-way move from the countryside to the cities. Secondly, one must consider the decisive role of rural women. Although largely unrecognized, they are central, with help from their husbands and parents-in-law, to the success of peasant agriculture in China. Thirdly, the role of the *hukou* system must be examined. *Hukou* is known principally in the West as tying access to services, including health and education, to people's residential status. However, the *hukou* system also allocates usufruct rights to land for all rural people, which in turn helps ensure food and nutrition security for them, and China's larger population. Many social struggles in the countryside gravitate on this fundamental right.

Despite the success of peasant farming in China, there are increasing threats through the trend to industrialize and commercialize agriculture. The relations between China's peasantry and the State are ambiguous. On the one hand there is the *Sannong* policy—the 'Three Rural Issues'—that might be summarized as: (a) self-sufficiency of food at national level (*nong ye*); (b) an adequate well-being for peasant families (*nong min*); and (c) an attractive countryside where the quality of life is well developed (*nong cun*). Together these three policy lines make sure that China can feed itself. However, on the other hand, there is a new policy to develop 'family farms' that will have at least 50 and preferably 100 *mu*. This is ten to twenty times the size of the average peasant farm. This new policy carries the real danger of creating a new 'elitist agriculture'. Other threats to peasant agriculture are discussed in the insight box below.

China's agriculture is therefore at a crossroads. No doubt that the choices to be made—at many different levels—will have profound consequences for both food security and food sovereignty.

6 In China there is a multitude of well-functioning markets that link urban areas and the countryside, and ensure that millions of smallholders can adequately feed the urban populations.

7 People from the countryside are allowed to have two children.

8 Labor migrants are returning home permanently at increasingly lower ages than in the past. Upon returning these relatively young 'returners' strongly develop peasant farming.

INSIGHT 9

Farming in China: From Food Security to Food Sovereignty

*Yiching Song*⁹

China has a long farming history and civilization, with the largest peasant population in the world.¹⁰ Chinese peasants practice intensive agriculture, using methods that sustain a high level of food production without exhausting local resources. Their bio-culture innovation system is the key to this long-standing farming. It includes three main interlinked aspects or components: livelihoods, agro-biodiversity and cultural/social attachment to the land, which provide resources to support individual and collective innovations for adaptation to natural and ecological changes, as well as socio-economic challenges. Over thousands of years, through innovation, adaptation and evaluation, Chinese farmers have accumulated rich agricultural biodiversity and traditional knowledge, as well as evolving resilient bio-culture farming systems to support and help ensure a plentiful and diversified food culture.

However, many serious problems regarding the local food system have been brought about by agricultural modernization, globalization and the rapid development of industrialization in recent decades in China. Ancient peasant agricultural practices and the bio-culture innovation system are threatened and being eroded,¹¹ and local farming species and landraces are disappearing at an alarming rate. Local and ethnic cultures, and traditional knowledge on food production and consumption, are disappearing. At the same time, peasant households and communities are losing their autonomous culture and independence. They have to increasingly rely on external markets for their food production and consumption. This has given rise to a series of social issues, including extreme poverty of, and risks to, small-scale farmers (mainly ethnic minority groups) in remote mountainous areas, food security, nutritional and food safety issues, gender inequality, increasing environmental degradation, and natural disasters. The migration of young people and middle-aged men to cities in search of livelihoods has been a phenomenon in the past 30 years, leaving middle-aged women, the elderly and children behind in rural areas. Consequently, women have to play not only the traditional role of taking care of their children and parents, but they must also take responsibility for most of the farming activities. Women and the elderly have thus become the remaining community members in rural areas, playing key roles in food and nutritional security, as outlined in the article above.

The Chinese public is increasingly aware of these serious social problems and there are signs of a process of change, as evident in the public discourse where the rhetoric has shifted from 'food security' to 'nutritional security', and even to 'food sovereignty' and 'seed sovereignty'. There are public discussions and campaigns on genetically modified food and the demand for safe and nutritional food is increasing. Young people, who have returned to their homelands, have started ecological and organic practices and/or farms. Networks concerned with food sovereignty and seed sovereignty have emerged, emphasizing the urgent need to protect local biological resources, traditional knowledge and cultural practices, as well as consumers' and farmers' rights and interests.

Government policies, under the current national 'ecological civilization' construction,¹² have given more support to ecological farming technologies, such as practices supporting circular farming and Integrated Pest Management (IPM)

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10 The average family farm in China is less than 0.5 hectares and farming activities are mostly reliant on family labor. In most cases, family farms are examples of subsistence agriculture, where farms are self-sufficient.

11 Comprehensive research undertaken in southwestern China in 2013 by the SIFOR China Team revealed these trends. For further information see Song, Yiching, Yanyan Zhang and Xin Song. *Emerging Biocultural Innovations for Climate Resilience in Southwest China*. London: IIED, 2015. Available at: pubs.iied.org/pdfs/G03916.pdf. Please refer to the International Institute for Environment and Development's website for more information. Available at: www.iied.org/chinas-farmers-innovate-adapt-climate-change.

12 The concept of 'ecological civilization' was officially launched at the 18th Communist Party of China (CPC) National Congress in 2012 by the Chinese government as a response to the environmental challenges in the country.

programs. However, increased recognition of peasants' crucial agricultural role, as a root cause of, and base for, sustainable development, is urgently needed for ecological civilization construction. Furthermore, more support for the bio-culture innovation system is required to ensure food and nutrition security in China.