



## Reviving Community Agrarianism in Post-socialist China

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**Abstract** Tasked with feeding 1.4 billion people, China often promotes its success in food security in relation to its self-sufficient grain production. In the post-socialist context, the reformist state has been pursuing a capital-based vertical model to integrate millions of smallholding producers into the market. Yet, the introduction of high-yield hybrid rice to increase production has resulted in a set of related crises, including widespread environmental pollution, food-safety issues and adverse impacts on rural life. However, agrarian communities are challenging these state-imposed practices of food production. This chapter explores an endogenous form of regenerative agriculture that has emerged in South China since the early 2000s, a Chinese form of food and farming activism for reviving community agrarianism. I argue that the revitalization of “traditional” farming practices as a form of *xiaingtu* (rural) knowledge has evolved with and through local peasants’ experience and struggle over the decades. One example that combines diverse aspects of such knowledge is the “fish-duck-rice paddy”, a well-known symbiotic method of pest

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control that also works with native varieties, organic manure and cooperative labour. This method revives peasants' experience of the Mao era as a cultural reference for *community* agrarianism. The revival of community agrarianism allows farming to be narrated as an evolving social and historical practice, not “wasting” peasants' knowledge, in contrast to the capitalist agrarian transformation.

**Keywords** Post-socialist China • Community-supported agriculture (CSA) • Rural knowledge • Farming methods • Peasantry  
• Agricultural commons

## INTRODUCTION: FEEDING CHINA IN POST-SOCIALIST TIMES

Today, China must feed nearly one-fifth of the world's population—1.4 billion people—with less than a tenth of its total farmland. Feeding China not only is a historical challenge in attempting to eliminate famine and hunger (Li, 1982) but also centres on a pressing series of contemporary issues, including declining farming labour, widespread environmental pollution and recurring risks of food safety. Chinese authorities, while aware of these issues, insist that “in the new era, the Chinese people are more concerned with their nutrition and health, from having enough food to eating well and safely” (State Council, 2019). Whether the Chinese can feed themselves or not, feeding China, with increasingly more and better-quality food, indeed poses a global challenge (The Economist Explains, 2015). To better understand this Chinese problem, it is necessary to take a perspective from the post-socialist period.

As China rejoined the world economy in the 1990s, some asked, “Who will feed China?” without threatening global food security and ecological sustainability (Brown, 1995). By saying, “Chinese people will feed themselves”, the Chinese authorities promised the world that they would strengthen “the motivational force” via a market economy and expedite “scientific and technological advances” for increasing agricultural production of grain (State Council, 1996). The introduction of hybrid rice (*zajiao shuidao*) in the 1980s is an important case. The rice could be high-yielding and endure large quantities of inputs like synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and weed control. That “success” has served as a political and scientific promise in China's ongoing politics of food security, exemplified by the national celebration to mark the recent death of renowned rice

geneticist Yuan Longping, also known as the “father of hybrid rice” (Schmalzer, 2021).

The promise of hybrid rice worked in conjunction with land reforms introduced from the 1980s. The new reformist state farewellled the socialist period (1950s–1970s) by introducing a “new socialist countryside”. It dismantled collective agriculture, replacing communal production teams with the Household Responsibility Contract Scheme that instituted two-tiered land rights: land belonged to the village collective, while the right to use land was equally divided and land could be leased to families through a contract procurement system. While guaranteeing the state’s plan for grain purchase, the state also insisted on new arrangements for organising millions of agricultural producers (He, 2017). The reformist model incorporated smallholders into a market that promoted modern farming technology and competition while maintaining a high level of food security. Over the years, combining modern farming technology (like hybrid rice) with the marketized organization of farmers has become the mainstream strategy for feeding China. Yet such reform has resulted in a set of rural crises, commonly known as the “three rural problems” (*sannongwenti*) interrelating peasant, village and agriculture (Wen, 2001).

The dilemma of how to feed China has revealed the recurrent conditions of farming in China: the land is collectively owned and farming methods are privatized. In the post-socialist context, socialism is no longer regarded as antagonistic to capitalism (Dirlik, 1989; Day, 2013, p. 15). Similarly, Huang et al. (2012, p. 140) have observed that Chinese agriculture moves towards neither capitalism nor socialism but towards “something different, along the lines of marketized cooperatives, in the manner originally envisioned [in the Chayanovian notion of peasant family farming]”. He Xuefeng (2017) sees these new arrangements as questioning the peasants’ way of life as historically grounded in the idea of a “household-based economy”, which contracts the so-called small peasant economy in East Asian societies (like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan), whereas today farmland is more likely a profit-driven property resulting from the land-distribution policies of the Cold War period (He, 2017, pp. 5–6). In post-socialist China, farmland that is still collectively owned supports the most basic means of production that “allows householders focusing on agricultural production [instead of becoming rural-urban migrants]” and that “makes various forms of cooperation possible” (He, 2017, p. 7).

In this chapter, I explore the politics of food and farming in post-socialist China with an interest in *the possibilities for (re)organising farmers*

in ways that vary from the state's capital-based vertical integration. My focus is on an alternative model that advocates for rural social revival. I undertake this exploration through a comparison of the cases of hybrid rice and eco-rice. I will examine an endogenous form of regenerative agriculture that has emerged in South China to argue that the revival of community agrarianism involves the creative preservation of practices peasants have carried forward from the socialist era, while resisting the reformist transformation of agriculture. Through this movement, a distinctive Chinese community-supported agriculture (CSA) has been taking shape and expanding.

### THE REFORMIST MODEL FOR CHINESE AGRICULTURAL PROBLEMS

In order to solve poverty in the post-socialist period, the Chinese state introduced a reformist transformation of agriculture. It adopted a reformist discourse of “market socialism” that frames farming labour through access to capital-based methods of input and output (Huang et al., 2012, p. 142). The reform allowed the state to organize peasants differently, shifting from Mao-era rural integration of “commune-production teams-households” to the market-mediated linkage of “company-cooperatives-households” (Yan et al., 2020). In the 2000s, a series of vigorous agricultural and rural policies was launched to “streamline” and “scale up” the ineffective agricultural system (Day & Schneider, 2017). These policies include, first, the promotion of “dragon head enterprises”—the giant agribusinesses that can vertically integrate households with processing and product markets and agricultural technology; second, the implementation of the Law on Specialised Farmer Cooperative that groups householders as an economic unit producing the same product or using the same agricultural service (e.g. “one-village/cooperative-one-product”); and, last, the abolition of the agricultural tax to reduce the financial burden on peasants. This capital-led vertical integration of agriculture was recently reasserted by the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2019 to continue the better linking of company, cooperative and households, while also celebrating its success in grain security, to bring “millions of small farmers onto the track of modern agricultural development” (State Council, 2019).

The reformist model tends to formulate “the problems of agricultural production as the most pressing issue for China” and “the capitalist, industrial forms of modernization as the most important solution”, which paves the way to the rise of “agrarian capitalism” (Day & Schneider, 2017: p. 9; Yan et al., 2020). This capitalist transformation progresses the state’s agenda of food security with a technocratic discourse that focuses on the alleviation of rural poverty and the increase of agricultural productivity. Over the years, vertical integration has introduced further industrial and modern farming technologies (e.g. high-yield seed, artificial inputs and machineries), tending towards homogenization of various agronomic practices across the country (Huang et al., 2012). As a result, the “three rural problems” have intensified. Specifically, the commodification of “the natural land and human resource on which people’s livelihood depended” is expanding, as is capital-intensive, resource-intensive and chemical-intensive agriculture that “not only destroys nature and family but also homogenizes diversified rural indigenous traditional knowledge” (Wen et al., 2012, p. 31). This reformist model is, as Schneider (2017) concludes, “wasting the rural”, because agricultural industrialization disregards the long-standing, ecologically concerned farming techniques, such as the use of organic manure, that Chinese farmers have worked with for centuries.

It is for these reasons that Chinese rural advocates have drawn public attention away from rural poverty to the trend of deteriorating culture and ecology in the countryside. One commonly posed question is how to “organise [rural people] to counter the power and emergence of capitalist hegemony within society and the market” (Day, 2013, p. 9). As He Xuefeng has argued (2017), the rural crisis is far more than an economic problem but rather a form of social disintegration of rural community. It comprises the following factors:

the commodification of agricultural input, labour, public goods and technical service, a steady exodus of educated rural youth as migrants to cities, the aging and feminisation of rural producers, fragmentation of familial life, estrangement of social relations with villages, growing rural disparity, etc. (Yan & Chen, 2013, p. 964)

Thus, rural advocates have called for alternative approaches to rural development, considering the sustainability of agricultural production in relation to rural livelihood (and its reproduction) and the coherence of

rural society (Yan & Chen, 2013). One attends to the emergence of alternative food chains with booming CSA initiatives, ranging from CSA farms, farmers markets and buying clubs, to farmer cooperatives. A form of rural activism is emerging through these activities, leading to “a more economically viable, ecologically embedded rural development model” (Si & Scott, 2016, p. 1094). Despite their limited scale, it is evident that CSA initiatives are improving the local environment through agricultural remediation (e.g. removing pollution and contaminants) and enhancing the social and economic value of farmland to prevent the expansion of non-farming purposes of urbanization and industrialization (Kurl & Ho, 2017, p. 844). Scott et al. (2018) summarize the movement as a kind of bottom-up food activism that brings together food safety and rural revival against the stated technocratic discourse of ecological agriculture.

### THE RISE OF THE AGRARIAN RENAISSANCE IN SOUTH CHINA

In my fieldwork on CSA in Guangzhou city, I found that it was common for grains like rice, wheat and millet to be sold at the monthly Guangzhou Farmers Market (*Chengxianghui*), in addition to fresh vegetables. “Eco-rice” is one such grain. It sells for double the price of regular rice, but consumers are keen to buy it in support of farmers growing native varieties in the countryside. Tracing the origins of eco-rice, I discovered what I term the “agrarian renaissance” movement in South China, an endogenous regenerative agricultural movement that “focuses on the revival of peasants’ indigenous knowledge and respects peasant’s livelihoods and the environment” (Leung, 2021, p. 31). Here, I dig into this more deeply to show that this revival involves reintroducing so-called traditional farming techniques and, in association with those techniques, peasants’ Mao-era experience in the post-socialist context. I identify an evolving form of *xiaingtu* knowledge that, according to Chinese ecological anthropologist He Jun’s (2007) research on “indigenous environmental knowledge”, rejects any static or binary thinking about traditional versus modern technologies. Rather, *xiaingtu* involves a socio-material approach to understanding farming techniques resulting from peasants’ local intergenerational experiences and struggles. Attention to *xiaingtu* prompts questions about farming practices that have evolved across the shifting social organization of rural society.

The data for examining community agrarianism is drawn from archival materials, field observation and interviews I conducted through the

network of Partnership of Community Development (PCD). Established in 2001 in Hong Kong, PCD has played a key role in the introduction of CSA to midland China. It has also documented ways “to explore, practice and evaluate” the grassroots farming projects against reformist and capitalist models of agriculture (PCD, 2019, p. 10). These projects were first trialled in South China, a traditional rice-growing region that was targeted by the state’s project of technological transformation through the introduction of hybrid rice. According to his decade-long observation, Angus Lam (interview, 2019), who worked at Greenpeace from 1997 to 2007 and is now a project coordinator of PCD, points out that the mainstream strategy for improving rural livelihoods “brings in modern technologies such as chemical fertilisers, hybrid seeds, and even invasive eucalyptus timber available from the market” that “resulted in wrecking local farmland, like some terraced field collapses due to soil erosion”. Meanwhile, Lam continues, some rural actors and groups from the fields of environmental protection, indigenous agricultural research, social work and so on, “began to attend to traditional farming knowledge with the approach of regenerative or multifunctional agriculture”. In the early 2000s, PCD launched a series of participatory-action research projects by recruiting villagers, local cadres and researchers as the “community facilitators” to explore and document peasants’ oral histories, their struggles with recent rural decline, and traditional farming techniques they continued to practise (PCD, 2005, 2019).

These pilot projects found that the historical root of “traditional” farming had been integrated into the collectivist agriculture of the socialist era, also known as Mao’s era, challenging its popular impression of “cultural deconstruction” or “cultural homogenisation” (PCD, 2007, pp. 72, 94). The cultural exploration revealed a dynamic relationship between peasants’ livelihoods, food production techniques and the health of the environment, preserving what Schmalzser (2016) calls the indigenous knowledge of Maoist China. It emphasized the public service provisioned by the collective labour that was once maintained by the “work-point” system under village-based production teams and that was threatened by the disorganization of peasants in the reform era (He, 2017). Collective labour had long supported the establishment and maintenance of irrigation (wheel watering, reservoirs, canals) in the rice paddies (PCD, 2007, p. 67). It also supported customary techniques of using manure to improve soil health. The transformation in manure work provides a narrative of shifting rural knowledge. It allows us to trace the changes in the social

practices of farming through peasants' perspectives and experiences in relation to their livelihood dynamics, via the shifting use of chemical and organic manure.

According to Shi Sheungde (PCD, 2007), one of PCD's community facilitators, there were diverse native methods for the production of organic manure drawn from peasants' experience of Mao's era long before the introduction of chemical fertilizers in 1985. For example, manure (*fei*) was a combination of fermented manure mixed with human waste, livestock waste and weeds that was composted for a week to fully ferment as ripe manure (p. 56). In addition, peasants were able to experiment with different kinds of green manure (*lvfei*) on collective farms. They became proficient in techniques of cultivation and crop rotation to improve different soil conditions, in both dry and wet fields (p. 55). "This knowledge", as Shi points out, "is not only passed down from fathers to sons but is also common knowledge that people have been practising for a long time" (p. 56). Peasants are turning back to these techniques to deal with problems like caked soil, frequent pests, disease and even slowing yields, all caused by their adoption of modern farming. As Shi observes:

Most peasants are now using a mixed form of planting, and all dry fields are planted with green manure, except for the time of severe drought. This is a widely used technique for supplementing rice soil fertility for the local peasants combined with local skills and alien crops [e.g. hybrid rice]. Since the 1990s, the technique of [green manure] has matured and, in the lack of farmyard manure, it has become an important component of the local agricultural system, a key strategy that does not overly rely on chemical fertilisers. (PCD, 2007, p. 56)

This agrarian narrative highlights the knowledge of farming inherited from the socialist era and deployed by peasants to negotiate with modern farming techniques in the post-socialist time (He, 2007). However, some also suggest that those customary farming practices are regarded as useless and even forgotten by peasants under the hegemony of modern farming (also see PCD, 2008, p. 13; Dominelli & Ku, 2017).

There are numerous examples collected by PCD and related organizations that demonstrate that peasants are the active subjects initiating and innovating with such knowledge to navigate rural problems as they arise. The body of knowledge ranges across attitudes of stewardship, preferences for farming local varieties, pest prevention, the sharing of experience, cooperative labour and so on. One of the best examples of a suite of





**Fig. 6.1** A native breed of ducks working on a fish-duck-rice paddy in Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou. (Images provided by Xiangdang)

techniques that demonstrates the holistic application of such knowledge is the “fish-duck-rice paddy”, or *yuyadao* (see Fig. 6.1). This is a well-known symbiotic method of pest control that replaces weedicide and pesticide with a traditional method that employs fish and ducks in the field to consume pests and weeds. It works effectively in rotation with green manure (PCD, 2007, pp. 55, 67; also see Dai & Xue, 2019). For PCD (2019, p. 77), if such knowledge is revitalized, the community-based component would help local people and CSA practitioners to explore the historical changes in their village life while broadening the basis of sustainable community development.

The agrarian renaissance movement in South China renders the revival of peasants’ Mao-era experience visible via the continuing practice of traditional, native or indigenous farming techniques. Rather than disappearing, these customary agricultural practices are thriving. As I argue, the approach of *xiaingtu* knowledge is socially engaged and historically grounded in particular ways. It emphasizes the agency of peasants’

collective innovation in “native methods” (peasants here refer to *tufangfa*, a Maoist term, expressed with nostalgia) to transform their local conditions (also see Schmalzer, 2018, p. 9). The embrace of *xaingtu* suggests an alternative approach to organizing peasants—as a form of community making that privileges livelihood and the environment rather than the “wasting” of “the rural” that occurs in reformist developments. For rural advocates, the practice of *xaingtu* knowledge ultimately reveals social foundations for promoting community agrarianism in which villagers and CSA practitioners enact a new collective form of household farming in the post-socialist countryside. Working in support of a different form of economy, commonly known as “community economy” in the field of sustainable rural development, is a key challenge for revitalizing indigenous farming knowledge like “fish-duck-rice paddy” (Dominelli & Ku, 2017; Wen et al., 2012). As a result, reviving community agrarianism often involves grouping farmers together in mutual-aid groups and cooperatives (PCD, 2019). This contrasts with the state-led specialized farmers’ cooperative, which, as another project coordinator of PCD, Edwin Chan (interview, 2018), states, is an economic unit lacking “a culture of cooperation” for community development.

### THE RURAL–URBAN CHALLENGE FOR SUSTAINING COMMUNITY AGRARIANISM

What distinguishes the Chinese CSA movement’s practice of community agrarianism is its alternative approach to the production of grain (specifically, rice) and the shifting experience of village peasants in relation to the changing history of socialism. This agricultural activity needs to be understood as distinct from the increasing number of family-based CSA farms with consumer members operated by passionate so-called new farmers who return from cities (Si & Scott, 2016). There is also a big challenge to improve rural–urban relationships by reconnecting producers and consumers in support of sustaining community economies. One of the urban obstacles goes to the prevailing context of food-safety problems. Recurring food scandals produce public anxiety and lack of trust in China’s chaotic conventional food chains, while leaving space for so-called emerging alternative food chains to flourish (Leung, 2021; Scott et al., 2014; Veeck et al., 2010). Yet, civil authorities attempt to regain public trust in their promotion of safe, quality food sourced from urban communities, in

contrast to the progressive but still ineffective state-led food-safety policy (Leung, 2021; Scott et al., 2018).

Due to such high levels of public distrust, Kelvin Wang (interview, 2019), a rural social worker organising eco-rice cooperatives in Yunnan, still remembers that when CSA commenced, it often experienced poor sales. The movement lacked the capacity to engage consumers (also see PCD, 2013, p. 97). This set of challenges led to PCD establishing a flagship programme of CSA internships in rural initiatives in the mid-2000s in an attempt to improve rural–urban relationships and incubate a number of young food activists to better engage with the ever-shifting urban culture. As CSA interns report, successful examples of promoting practices like rice, duck and fish occurred when they connected with consumers’ (e.g. housewives’) everyday shopping experience for food safety and quality (see PCD, 2008, pp. 10–12; 2009, p. 17; 2014, p. 158). Since then, CSA activists have attempted to build a stronger network at the rural–urban nexus (PCD, 2008). Over time, they have responded effectively to challenges of urban consumption, including food scares.

In recent years, there has been an emergence of urban-based consumer-led groups focused on incorporating urban people into the ways of caring for rural communities via food production. Wang Xiangdang (interview, 2018), a CSA intern, formed Farmers’ Friend in 2006 in Liuzhou, Guangxi, and points out the significance of the involvement of urban consumers in its rapid development: “while demanding safe and quality food, consumers can also be passionate, resourceful, and creative in initiating a consumer–producer connection via organising farmer’s market and buying club”. Another more convivial case is in Guangdong. According to Rao Qihong (interview, 2018), another CSA intern, Guangzhou Farmers Market was founded in 2009 originally to promote eco-rice, where “we use it to make sushi which consumers could try and trust themselves”. Over time, consumers who become volunteers and even organizers have developed a more participatory method to promote a consumer–producer connection in what I call “convivial agriculture” (Leung, 2021, p. 32). Recently, the group has been more ambitious in organising the Canton Harvest Festival (*fengnianqing*) that brings together rural initiatives from across five provinces in South China (see Fig. 6.2).

By examining the case of PCD, which has nurtured food and farming activists from community facilitators to CSA interns, we have seen how community agrarianism develops in and through localized CSA practice. CSA now reaches through the networks of the agrarian renaissance



Fig. 6.2 Poster for the Canton Harvest Festival in 2019 showing the theme of eco-rice

movement in the countryside, in the exchange of knowledge, resources and experiences to promote ecological farming, and then extends to urban areas, where consumers are encouraged to search for ways to participate in processes of production. Community agrarianism is thus taking up the challenge to transform rural–urban relations. Beyond a set of farming techniques, it is a method for making a shared, sustainable agricultural environment.

### CONCLUSION: WHAT WE HAVE SHARED THROUGH GROWING FOOD?

Community agrarianism is a distinctive arm of the Chinese CSA movement in post-socialist China. Adopting the approach of *xiangtu* has enabled farmers to apply “traditional” knowledge to positively transform the conditions under which they farm. Furthermore, this approach opens out to a wider collective effort to, as my interviewee Lam insists, “create the ‘commons’ for all of us”. Romanticized as it might be, creating a commons, in line with J.K. Gibson-Graham’s post-capitalist perspective, is also a process of forming “community”. It is a process of negotiating “the quintessentially ethical concerns ... of how we are living together” (Gibson-Graham, 2006a, p. 82) and that involves “struggle, uncertainty, ambivalence, and disappointment” and discards “any fantasy that there is a perfect community economy” (Gibson-Graham, 2006b, p. xv). Throughout my fieldwork, I have observed long-standing food activists enter these food scenes between the countryside and cities with joy and encouragement, though sometimes with frustration and difficulty. In support of the “commons”, peasants like Xiaoyue (interview, 2019), who struggle to fully adopt organic farming, put it simply but profoundly, “I feel proud of our hard work of farming that can feed the healthy land and feed healthy people”.

Commoning the environment can be approached by rural and urban communities through shared interests in food. As I and others have argued, an “agricultural commons” (Cameron, 2015; Leung, 2021) should take into account the preservation of agrarian knowledge as a basis for improving consumer–producer relationships. Such an approach offers localized knowledge in support of the booming trend of CSA farms and related cooperatives across the country (Cook, 2016). In addition, it can fuel a wave of community economies for rural revival through hacking

ideas of ecological agriculture promoted by the state (Scott et al., 2014) that have often failed or that failed to account for the diverse farming practices of small-scale producers and the environmental concerns of consumers.

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