



Revitalizing Agroecology in China

Introduction

China is a large country with diverse agro-ecosystems and numerous different agricultural production systems. These agricultural systems are managed by more than 200 million households who provide agricultural products to meet the needs of almost a fifth of mankind.

Agriculture plays numerous key functions, including not only the provision of food and fiber, but also providing environmental services and employment of national importance, and is at the heart of China's national sustainable development. In recent decades, conventional forms of Chinese agriculture have developed that rely largely on high external inputs, with resulting inefficient use of limited agricultural resources, emission of pollutants into the environment and furthermore the threat of food safety, especially with various incidences of food safety happening in the first decade of the 21 century.

While national agricultural policy is focusing to address these challenges, the threat of food safety led to a growing movement of a new kind of sustainable agricultural production system- the Community Support Agriculture. This has further developed to be an active citizen-based Agroecology movement in China for a decade of efforts.

Introduction about the people involved

“Community Support Agriculture” has many forms and different terms in China. In 2006, Prof. WenTiejun from People's University and Ms. He Huili, a young teacher from Agriculture University, advocated city people to purchase rice by paying in advance for one mu paddy field production to support small scale farmers. In 2007, they also established the Guoren Mutual Rural and Urban Help Group to support the farmers to directly sell their products to consumers – thus creating the earliest form of Community Support Agriculture in China. At the same time, Partnership for Community Development, a Hong Kong based development organization started to support some Chinese NGOs and small-scale farmers practicing Agroecology to address food safety issues.



Figure 1. Shi Yan, the first one involved in establishing CSA in China

In 2009, the Little Donkey Farm started a form of community support agriculture following the principles of “Commonly share risks and benefits”. By recruiting consumers who are willing to pay the costs for agricultural products in advance and to share the risk and benefit together with the farm, the Little Donkey Farm produces different vegetables at different seasons and delivers to the consumers accordingly. The consumers can also rent a piece of land and produce their own while the Little Donkey Farm provides production materials like seeds, seedlings, and production support like tools, irrigation and technical solutions, etc. With these two schemes, the participatory guarantee system was established and nurtured mutual trust between the producers and consumers. It was further helped by building the name and brand of “Little Donkey Farm”.

With wide media coverage on the food safety issues and the alternative that Little Donkey Farm provided, the term “Community Support Agriculture” became popular in China. It caught the attention of general public within short period of time and the Community Support Agriculture

This case study is provided by Zhang Lanying, Institute of Rural Reconstruction of China, Southwest University, representing China Rural Reconstruction Network, member of The International Network for Community Supported Agriculture (URGENCI); Contact: zhanglanying@3nong.org



practices have spread all over China. The term also gradually evolved to be “community mutual support agriculture”, which better reflects the evolution of the importance of mutual support between producers and consumers aiming to bridging the rural and urban connection and reduce the gaps between them.

By the end of December 2015, it is estimated that 300 Community Support Agriculture farms in China are concentrated around big cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Guangzhou and are wide spread over provinces of Guangxi and Guangdong, Sichuan, Chongqing, Fujian, Shanxi and Shaanxi, Hunan and Hubei, Henan and Hebei, Yunnan and Guizhou as well as Inner Mongolia, Liaoning, etc.

These Community Support Agriculture farms are managed by various types of people, including farmer cooperatives, food activists, social entrepreneurs, government and academics. They represented majorly three types of Community Support Agriculture, including 1) youth led, who are operating farms because their reflection against industrialized agriculture and urbanization and seek alternative lives; 2) middle and high-level income group with hope to live with nature, and live healthier lives; this group usually rents land to carry out organic farming and sell their produce through the Community Support Agriculture model; 3) small scale farmers, who directly connect with city consumers.

Description of the Agroecology system

Community Support Agriculture is different from a conventional agricultural system. As a new and emerging agriculture development model, the Community Support Agriculture promotes organic farming and healthy living. It connects consumers in the urban communities with local organic farms or small scale producers aiming to achieve economic, social and environmental sustainability. It seeks to create a new space and new meaning for food production, food marketing and food consumption.



Figure 2. Families work together at their rented field

By emphasizing sustainable production, it applies both knowledge and wisdom carried over from millennia of traditional farming in China as well as current popular organic farming, sustainable farming, natural farming, Demeter farming, which include many components learned from traditional Chinese farming. China’s traditional farming practices have a history of at least 4,000 years. Originating in the Yellow River and Yangtze River basins, the intensive farming coupled with soil fertility management became the essence of China’s traditional agriculture. Intensive use of organic fertilizers is a key to soil fertility management, including the use of human and animal excreta as manure, the use of legumes as green manures, recycling of crop residues, composting, and application of river mud. In his 1910 book *Farmers of Forty Centuries: Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea and Japan*, the American agronomist F.H. King introduced many ingenious examples of traditional Chinese agriculture to the world, and highlighted that the key to long-term maintenance of soil fertility was China’s adoption of an agriculture without waste, with no use of external inputs.¹ China’s traditional agriculture was once among the most advanced and productive agricultural systems in the world.

¹King, F.H. 1911. *Farmers of Forty Centuries, or Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea and Japan*. Rodale Press, Inc., Emmaus, Pennsylvania.



Community Support Agriculture is the Agroecology system which utilizes all the resources and agricultural residues efficiently. It cares about the mother earth by not using chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides etc. It tries to balance the nutrients and microorganism in the soil to grow healthy crops. Most Community Support Agriculture farms use and save traditional seeds, produce or purchase organic fertilizers and apply various traditional methods, natural and biological methods to control pests. Although they have drawn experiences from traditional farming, the issues brought forward by climate change and pollution derived from high input agriculture still need further efforts to resolve them. These challenges are reflected in the following:



Figure 3. Farmers promise to produce safe vegetables for consumers

- First, organic farming is an intensive farming which requires not only the knowledge but the wisdom to understand the interrelationship between human and nature, as well as management capacity. Although dedicated to the production of safe food, the consumers are still very sensitive to the quality of the products. Among difficulties Community Support Agriculture encounters is the challenge to ensure organic inputs such as seeds, organic fertilizers and biological pest control. Although most Community Support Agriculture farmers can save their own seeds and produce their own organic fertilizer through composting, the challenges of accessing a large diversity of seeds and the quality and quantity of organic fertilizers needs to be further addressed.
- Second, marketing often relies on the trust built among the circle of friends and extended networks. However, the consumers are still very sensitive to price although they are dedicated to the consumption of safe food. Since Community Support Agriculture requires consumers pay in advance, the trust building is very critical. If any malpractices happen in the farms, either with respect to agriculture inputs or cost of production, it will jeopardize not the farm itself but the whole sector.
- Third, the quality of services to meet consumers' need for variety of products at different seasons, freshness and tastes is quite challenging. Education becomes one of the key services and its scope can range from production in the farm to cooking at the dinner table.

Young people's involvement in this system

Non-agricultural income as a component of total per capita rural income has increased from 36.1% to 41.1%, while the ratio of farming income declined from 33.7% to 29.1% in the past. Thus, many of the youth in rural areas prefer to move to the cities to seek higher incomes, leaving the elderly and women doing farm work at home.

Although many of the youth have gone to the cities, there is a counter trend of going back to rural areas in recent years. Some youths start returning to their hometown or rural areas by setting up Community Support Agriculture farms as their livelihood. Often they are youth who are originated from rural areas and have become bored with the simple, mechanical work in factories. They are dissatisfied with the exploitation and limited income of factory employment, and choose to start their own businesses in rural areas. Many of them are supported by the state strategy of returning home to start an undertaking, and choose to farm economic crops or breed animals. The second type of youth is white collar urbanites. They want to be new peasants out of the concern for food



safety and life with nature, and they contract a piece of land to cultivate some food or vegetables based on ecological cultivation. The pursuit of food safety and life quality of white collar workers has become a new trend in China. The third type youth is college graduates who are determined to build their home villages. Most of them have participated in trainings held by Community Service Organisations concerning agriculture and development of rural areas, and they believe Community Support Agriculture concepts and model is good approach to realize a more ecological form of agriculture with social participation. All these youth are “fresh blood” for the sustainable development of agriculture considering the aging problems of the rural work force.

Although there are a lot of issues to be addressed, great support lies on national policies encouraging environmental friendly and resources saving agriculture. Policy documents often have provided direction for agriculture development, emphasizing the importance of sustainable agriculture and also providing financial supports through various subsidies to encourage youth and social entrepreneurs to engage in agriculture development.



Figure 4. New generation farmers are applying traditional techniques: vegetable oil to control rice flea

In November 2015, the seventh national conference on Agroecology and sixth international conference in China was held in Beijing. Seven hundred people both from China and abroad participated. The Community Support Agriculture was agreed as an internationally accepted term, and it was agreed that its appropriate translation into Chinese should be shehui shengtai Nongye, which means social ecological agriculture, social mobilization to support and participate ecological agriculture development. Participants fully agreed that Community Support Agriculture’s belief in “Fair Trade,

Care Earth, Care for producers and Conserve the tradition and culture” contributes not only economic gains for the farm owners and small scale farmers, but also contributes to the food safety and health living of people, and nurtures social relations between the rural and urban people through agriculture. At the same time, it also contributes to the reduction of environmental pollution from using chemical inputs.

To summarize, the Community Support Agroecology, social Agroecology in Chinese term, leads us to be a friend of our mother earth and to be a learner from the nature. This is fundamental for us to be able to have safe lives with sustainability.

Message from farmer to farmers

“When we, a group of people from the city, rent a piece of land from farmers, we are not aiming to make money. What we want to achieve is to taste safe food, to enjoy the beauty environment of the village with fresh air, clean water and green mountains while we can also to protect the river free from pollution. We want to be part of the village and live harmoniously with the local people. I believe the rural community in the future will be a group of mixed people, including the villagers, city people and new farmers like us. We live together and make the village economically dynamic, socially cohesive and environmentally sustainable.”

— Message from a Community Support Agriculture farm participant