



# Touching the Heart Taking Root

CSA in Hong Kong, Taiwan &  
Mainland China



社區伙伴

Partnerships for  
Community  
Development

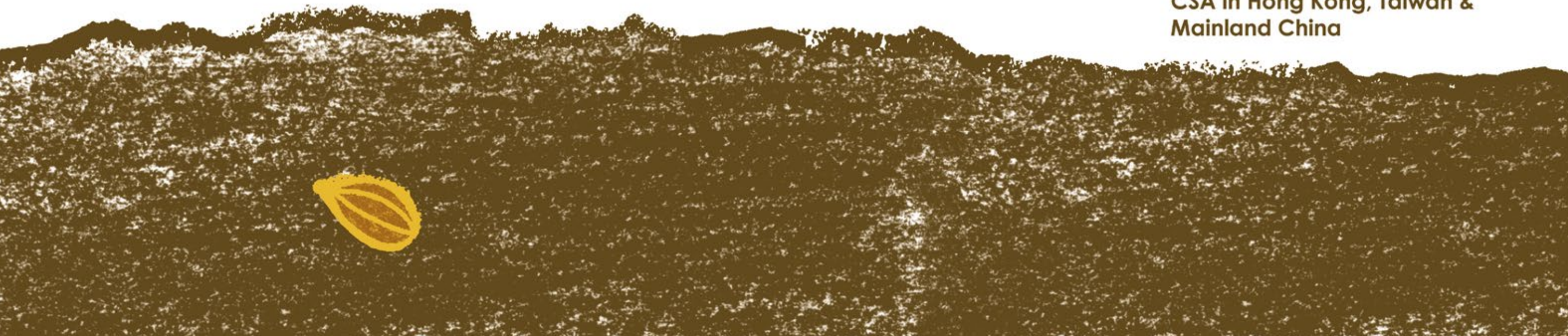


Editor's Note:

This book is an abridged and translated version of PCD's Chinese publication *Taking Root: Vitalising CSA*, published in 2014. The original Chinese book was in turn the outcome of an important seminar on CSA jointly organised by PCD and Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden (KFBG) in October 2012. The seminar gathered 120 participants from Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, mainly active CSA practitioners and supporters, to exchange their experiences and ideas of CSA. In order to share the CSA experience in these Chinese communities with global supporters of the movement, we have selected some articles from the Chinese book and translated them for this English publication. Hopefully this book will provide momentum to the further development of CSA across countries.

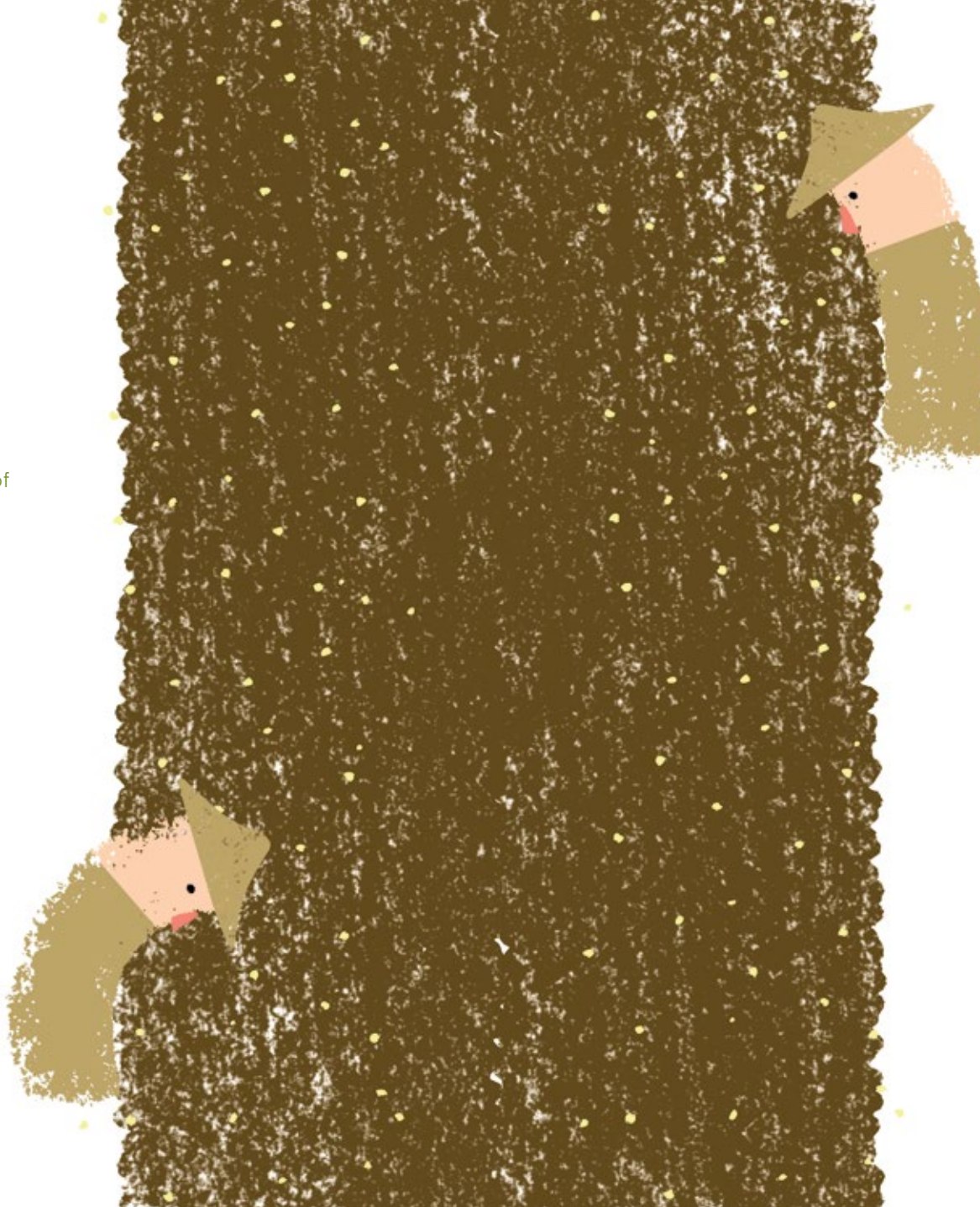
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# PREFACE

In biological terms, food is central to life. Food is where all of life interconnects: we are all food for each other and we are all made of food... so the task of restructuring our socio-economic system in such a way as to allow human beings to live in harmony with themselves and with the rest of nature naturally begins with food.

Mainstream economic theory assumes that nature's 'resources' are infinite, that growth can be sustained indefinitely. Now we are learning, to the cost of all beings on this planet, that such thinking is fundamentally flawed. Yet we remain trapped within this model of debt-/interest-fuelled, ever-increasing cycles of production and consumption – sustaining, and sustained by, the misguided assumption (whether conscious or unconscious) that the key to wellbeing lies in technological growth and acquiring new possessions.

To facilitate this conversion of living nature into consumer products, government policies and subsidies target expanding global corporations at the expense of small, local producers – and economic growth indicators ignore or distort the costs to people, to cultures and to the rest of nature. Consequently, in spite of the huge amounts of waste and pollution generated, many of us remain under the illusion that 'economies of scale' result in greater efficiency.

Yet the rapid depletion of fossil fuels and other 'resources' that are vital to sustaining industrial growth, coupled with the consequent accelerating climate change, are leading humanity to an impasse. If we do not start scaling down our economies and investing in new paradigms of simplicity, regeneration and 'prosperity without growth' - whilst we still have the capacity to do so effectively - then nature will surely force us in this direction anyway and the ride will be much bumpier.

Therefore, for the sake of the health and happiness of the Earth and all beings, we urgently need a return to community-scale, local economies – that conserve 'resources' and are based more on relationships than financial profit. In the process, we may find our hearts opening to new possibilities for how to live in this world, bringing the goal of lasting wellbeing within our reach.

The Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) principle plays an essential role in establishing such new pathways for humanity – for the benefit of all of nature. Hats off to all those courageous souls who are working hard to bring this principle to life!

Andrew McAulay  
Chairperson  
Management Committee  
Partnerships for Community Development (PCD)



## A note of thanks

**Christine Chau**

Director,  
Partnerships for Community Development (PCD)

1. The views below are drawn from the articles in this anthology.

The ecological crisis on Mother Earth, our home, has been escalating over the last few decades due to rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. Communities around the world wonder: where is human society going? Increasing numbers of non-governmental organisations and others are exploring paths towards a sustainable future. In this wind of change, many seeds have landed on the ground and taken root. Some have dropped on the soil of Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan over the last decade, and time and perseverance have quietly nourished them. PCD and many of its partner organisations are among the groups that have sprouted and grown.

In the course of exploring how people may coexist harmoniously with nature and find a simpler and more sustainable way of life as earth's resources become scarcer, we are naturally drawn to one path: to live a life that allows us to love nature and the countryside and to rebuild our relationship with the community while seeking autonomous local values and a more holistic physical and spiritual existence. Such a life can be lived in many ways. Through their efforts in the last decade, many of our partner groups have found an effective means: Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).

On October 15 – 21, 2012, a seminar on CSA experience entitled *Taking Root: Vitalising CSA* was held in Hong Kong. There were over 120 participants—farmers, supporters and facilitators. All of them were involved with CSA. They shared their experience and conviction that CSA had helped them rebuild their relationship with nature and live a life that was healthier, more sustainable and served the common good of the urban and rural area. Their thoughts on CSA—rebuilding an everyday life and an economic socio-cultural order around sustainable farming—have the following aspects<sup>1</sup> :

- **Reflection on the historical basis of the relationship between human beings and nature:**

Soil and farming have nurtured human civilisations. Our ancestors developed a view of nature that took ecology as a whole into consideration and respected heaven and earth. Our future must incorporate this wisdom and see soil and land as our root, and farming as our primary choice.

- **Local farming and a holistic social context:**

Faced with challenges in terms of social institutions and mainstream development in addition to the predicament brought by environmental destruction, in order to encourage smallholders to resume ecological

farming we need 'deconstructive' as well as 'constructive' strategies. We have to rebuild the processes from food production to food consumption and the links between people and rural areas, land and farmers. From the field to the dining table, from farmers and producers to consumers, we need to foster mutual support and the common good for the countryside and the cities.

Some also believe that support for CSA and the resumption of ecological farming by smallholders does not simply involve changes on the personal level, but also the promotion of policies on the political level, in order to restrain the forces that undermine ecological farming and to foster stronger cultural identification. In this way, we may change the priorities in economic development and ensure that farming can once again be an important choice.

- **Rebuilding community and communal relationships:**

Since the 1920s and 1930s, China's new rural regeneration movement has led innumerable Chinese youths to join in responding to the needs of the people. In the new era, the goal is to build an ecological civilisation and to encourage sustainable livelihoods. Rooted in diverse cultures, facilitators have been nurturing community sovereignty and solidarity in ecological resources.

The experience of Taiwan shows that the relationship between urban consumers and smallholders is mutually supportive and beneficial. In many places, the development of collective purchase has built a movement with a sense of mission because it nurtures communities that share a common vision and that have been willing to make quiet efforts for change. This is not only a convergence of *nong*<sup>2</sup>, but also a shared commitment to building a beautiful and sustainable life by using everyday resources wisely.

- **Green cultivation of people's hearts:**

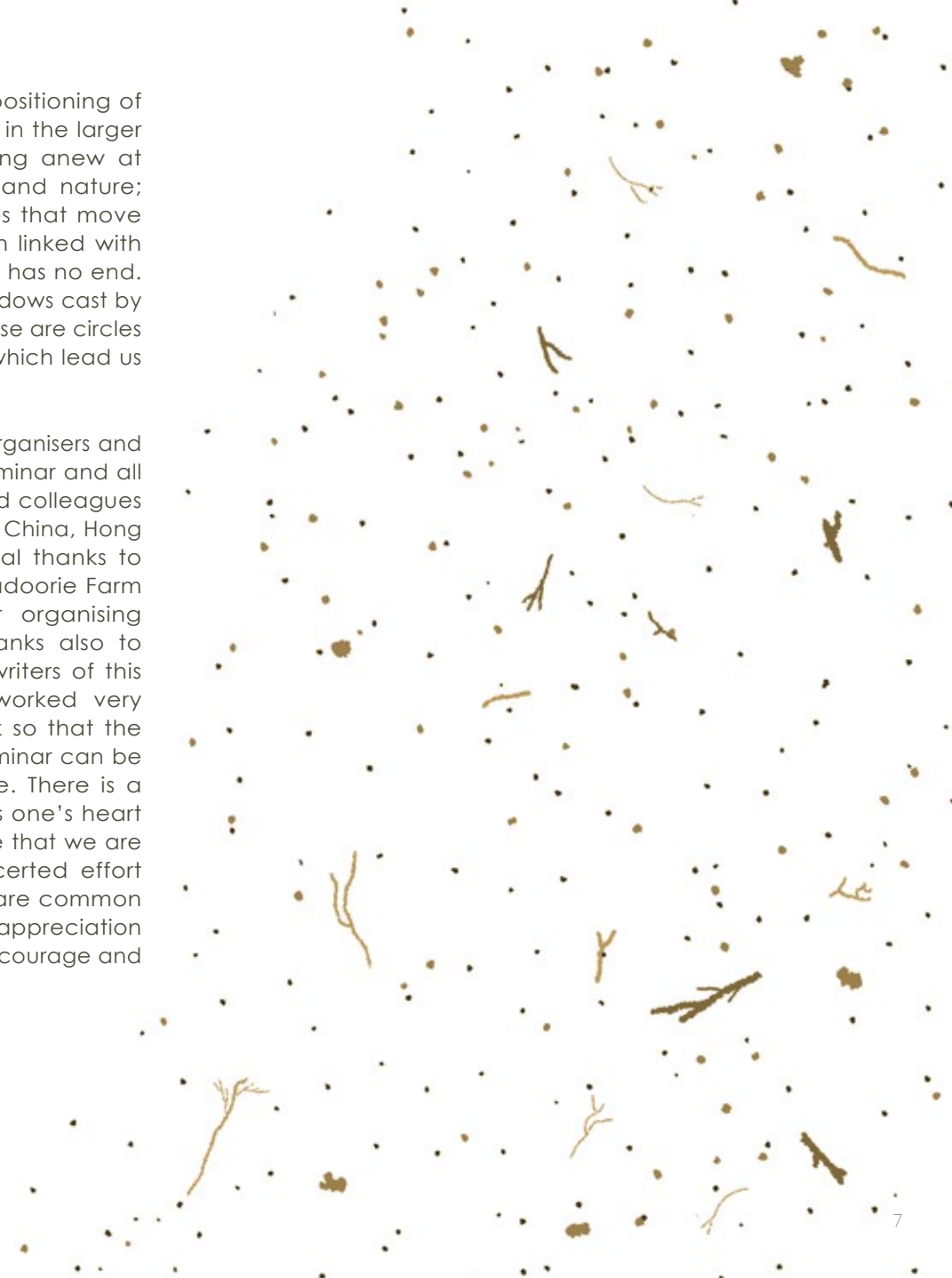
In the face of a confused, noisy, repressive and even distorted form of social development, some young people have chosen to return to their rural homes to take up farming. What they are doing is safeguarding the field within themselves and living a life in which they can feel free. In this process, they have found new values such as humility and modesty toward nature and respect for others. As rural people start farming again and urban dwellers begin to join in, we will be nourished and become calm and pure, so long as we connect ourselves with the soil and land.

From the greening of the field inside each individual to rebuilding communities and communal

<sup>2</sup>. Translator's note: *nong* is a Chinese word that can mean farmers (*nong min*), rural area (*nong cun*) and agriculture (*nong ye*).

relationships; from the positioning of the holistic perspective in the larger social context to gazing anew at the history of people and nature; all these are like circles that move in endless cycles, each linked with another in a chain that has no end. Compared with the shadows cast by the ecological crisis, these are circles that give off light and which lead us onto new paths.

I would like to thank the organisers and the participants of the seminar and all the speakers, partners and colleagues who came from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Special thanks to our sister organisation, Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden, for organising this seminar with us. Thanks also to the editorial team and writers of this anthology. They have worked very hard to publish this book so that the rich experience of the seminar can be shared with more people. There is a kind of strength that thrills one's heart and from which we realise that we are never alone in this concerted effort to build networks that share common visions and in our mutual appreciation of each other's creativity, courage and persistence.



# Understanding anew the value of an everyday life with its roots in *nong*<sup>1</sup>

**Prof. Chan Shun-hing**

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1. Translator's note: *nong* is a Chinese word that can mean farmers (*nong min*), rural area (*nong cun*) and agriculture (*nong ye*).

## The *nong* complex: “Every person is a farmer.”

“Every person is a farmer,” said Mr Zhou Yuanbin from the Waldorf School in Chengdu when describing the Waldorf educational philosophy at the *Taking Root: Vitalising CSA* seminar. His words clicked in my mind as though something had become clear to me. My idea about rebuilding the relationship between the community and *nong* seemed to be on the same wavelength. I would try to interpret Mr Zhou's words, summarised as ‘the *nong* complex’, from two perspectives. Firstly, farmers and soil, representing the whole of nature, are intimately connected. Every person is closely connected with the soil. On the one hand, we could not live without the food that grows from it; our physical bodies are the incarnation of the food we eat and ultimately the soil from which it springs. On the other hand, when we die our bodies return to the soil and nourish new life. However, modern urban dwellers have become too distant from *nong* and soil. We have forgotten our original identity as farmers and cannot grasp the idea or the wisdom of *shen tu bu er*, the non-duality of body and earth. If we could identify spiritually with the idea that every person is a farmer, urban dwellers would relate with, admire and be grateful to farmers who toil throughout the year working the land to grow the crops that feed us all. We might even be willing to go back to the land and try to unearth our lost instinct for farming or learn about how

it is done. In this way, we may reveal the hidden face of *nong* in human beings.

Secondly, from the point of view of everyday life, even though we usually call the place that farmers inhabit and where they labour *nongcun*, the rural area or village, I think this phrase should not be understood simply in its geographical sense. As has often been discussed in rural sociology and anthropology, *nongcun* is a place with multiple functions and where many levels of relationships are maintained. It is also a space where diverse forms of culture grow and are practiced. The community of everyday life, rooted in *nong*, is actually the archetype of the urban community. The interdependence and the cyclical relationship between human life and soil or land as mentioned above can also be observed among people. Farming culture differs from the cultures of hunting, gathering and nomadism in that it is a way of life in which people make a living by holding fast to the land and soil. Self-sufficiency in life cannot be achieved alone. Instead we need communication, mutual help and support, exchange and emotional interaction between people. People naturally live together and different groups or collectives emerge and form different kinds of villages and communities. An interdependent mode of life (in material and in nonmaterial terms) gives rise to knowledge exchange, accumulation and inheritance. We therefore have different kinds of cultural activities (sacrificial

ceremonies, festivals, markets, traditional schools, etc.) and different social orders and values (such as revering nature, the oneness of human beings and heaven, symbiotic harmony, mutual help and complementariness, respecting teachers and their teachings, honouring the elderly and caring for the children).

The traditional rural community is a holistic one in which the functions of and the relationships among people, between people and the soil and land, between production and knowledge, and between everyday life and learning are inseparable. In the urban community, the various aspects of a holistic life are taken up by modern functional organisations, such as factories, companies, schools, social service agencies, government departments, and so forth. As the foundation and values that arose from *nong* are gradually lost, our lives have become fragmented, alienated and unsustainable. For example, what children learn in schools often has nothing to do with their everyday life, nor can it be fed back to the community. The idea that every person is a farmer can therefore motivate urban dwellers to reflect on our origins and to start considering how we may revive some elements of a life rooted in *nong* as the starting point for rebuilding the modern community in our day to day existence. Before we go into specific cases of how *nong* may help us unearth the original face of everyday life and bring about connection within the community

and transformation of society, I would like to briefly review the historical context and processes of *qunonghua* (the relinquishing of *nong*) as experienced by farmers, the rural areas and agriculture in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. I will discuss some common issues as well as unique ones I see in the three societies. I hope the rural issues we are facing and the everyday crises Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) addresses will become clear.

### The historical process of *qunonghua* (the relinquishing of *nong*) around the Taiwan Strait

As an important national economic sector, agriculture has gone through a historical process of serving (directly or indirectly) government policies and the needs of capital and the market in all three societies around the Taiwan Strait. During the Japanese occupation, agriculture was developed in Taiwan to support the industrial needs of Japan. Economic function was emphasised and agriculture was industrialised for capital accumulation. Between 1920 and 1939, chemical fertiliser and modern agricultural technologies were introduced into Taiwan by the Japanese colonisers to expand the scale of agricultural production. When the KMT government moved to Taiwan, its main agricultural objective was to increase overall production. Apart from having to feed the armies and their families who came from Mainland China and the growing general population,

2. Under the 'grain for fertiliser' policy, the KMT government disbursed fertiliser to farmers in exchange for rice. In this way, the farmers provided the government with a form of tax which was then used to develop industries. It was considered unfair that farmers had to sell their rice to the government at 20% lower than market price when they wanted to buy the fertiliser, the marketing of which was monopolised by the government. In other words, under the terms set by the government, fertiliser was over-priced while rice was under-priced. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, Taiwanese farmers paid a price that was 50% higher than that paid by Japanese farmers for ammonium sulphate, a fertiliser that was used most in the fields in Taiwan. This shows the large amount of tax revenue that the Taiwanese government acquired through this policy. See Hsiao Kuo-ho (1991), *The Rise and Fall of Taiwan's Agriculture in 40 Years*, Taipei: Independent Evening News, P.86. (In Chinese).

3. Taiwan Rural Front, which was set up in 2008, comprising a group of people who are concerned about Taiwanese agriculture. They include farmers, rural workers, NGOs, media workers, scholars, writers,

legal experts, engineers, artists and students. The organisation was established in response to the enactment of the Rural Rejuvenation Act in that year. The members of TRF form a community network in support of smallholders' economy, sustainable farming and food sovereignty. With the diverse backgrounds of its members, the organisation raises awareness among Taiwanese society of the values of agriculture's multi-services through their different actions, from theoretical discourse to village operations. The organisation is determined to realise sustainable existence on the island of Taiwan.

4. Tsai Pei-hui (2011): Choose Another Future: Farming, the Sun and 'Partners', *Farm Mindfully, Live Mindfully!—A Complete Manual on CSA*, Foreword/Recommendation (In Chinese)

5. According to statistical reports, in 2007, Taiwan's food self-sufficiency rate fell to a historical low of 30.6%. See Tsai Pei-hui (2010): Behind The Rape Flowers Fields: Structure of Agriculture and Food Security, *The New Messenger*, Issue no. 120 (September, 2010) (Chinese)

increasing agricultural production served an important political need. For example, the ideology of fighting communism and enemies was used to motivate farmers, who were given land, after reform, to quickly increase production and not only to feed themselves, but also to support the government's policy of using agriculture to nurture industries. Making use of the foreign currency that agriculture earned, the KMT government sought to develop state power as well as Taiwan's light industries. The first wave of the 'green revolution' took place between 1945 and 1968, and measures to increase output included improvement of crop varieties, use of chemical fertiliser and introduction of agricultural machinery. Policies that disadvantaged farmers, such as 'grains for fertiliser'<sup>2</sup>, were also introduced during this period. According to Tsai Pei-hui of Taiwan Rural Front (TRF)<sup>3</sup>, even though the income of Taiwan's smallholders stabilised after 1970 because the government purchased their rice at a guaranteed price, they had to face problems arising from increasing liberalisation of agricultural policies. For example, Tsai says that in the 1980s, because of pressure from the USA, "a subsistence agriculture which had been production-oriented changed and became a competitive agriculture that was 'market-oriented'". After 1990, Tsai adds, the Taiwanese government went as far as "to give up food sovereignty, opening up the agricultural market and demanding that farmers leave the countryside and stop farming,

which resulted in the bitter fruits of food dependence and rural decline,"<sup>4</sup>. So agriculture was used to serve political needs in Taiwan. Consequently self-sufficiency in food production continued to decline on the island<sup>5</sup>. In the meantime, to industrialise agriculture, policies which are often hostile to smallholders have been introduced. The exploitation of smallholders has become worse in recent years because of escalating attempts to appropriate land by the government.

Like in Taiwan, agriculture in Mainland China has been used for political purposes since the 1950s, with agricultural policies being tailored to support the country's industrial development. Through its planned economy, the Chinese government accumulated capital created by the agricultural sector and used it to support national industrialisation. The difference in Mainland China was that under the Cold War ideology and scenario, the goal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was not only to achieve self-sufficiency in agricultural production, but also to surpass Great Britain and catch up with the USA. In addition, during the period of the Great Leap Forward, the slogan was to "set food provision as the guiding principle". Because of this, the CCP had to increase agricultural production and achieve industrial progress to demonstrate the advantage of socialism and collectivised production over western capitalism.



Unfortunately not only did the CCP fail to reach its ideological goal, Chinese agriculture, environment, farmers and the countryside suffered unprecedented, massive destruction towards the end of the 1950s: agricultural production did not increase like “sending satellites into space”. Instead, it fell drastically because of natural disasters and other reasons. To reach unrealistic production targets, there was excess development of land (such as encircling lakes to make fields) that resulted in ecological destruction. Farmers were lauded as among the revolutionary classes (workers, farmers and soldiers) and gained honour as ‘masters of history’, enjoying the glorious identity of ‘labourers’. However, innumerable smallholders died from hunger as a result of terrible starvation. The structure and life of rural villages was uprooted and collectivised. Cooperative production and socialisation of everyday life, ordered from the top down (such as the People’s Communes in the 1960s), did not bring about long term change in people’s consciousness nor the support of non-governmental organisations and social forces. They inevitably collapsed at the end of the 1970s when there was an ideological change.

According to Prof. Wen Tiejun, an expert on *san nong wen ti*, or the three-dimensional agrarian issues in Mainland China, “[the] period of capital accumulation for national industrialisation was a special period of time. What this period left behind was not only hundreds of billions

of *renminbi* of national capital owned in the name of all people but in reality monopolised by various government departments and which has been redistributed and appropriated in the name of reforms by later generations. This period also left behind a dualistic social economic structure in which the urban area and the rural area are separated, contradictory and antagonistic.”<sup>6</sup>

In the so-called period of reform and opening up in the 1980s, collective production teams were replaced by the household contract responsibility system (renamed as the household contract system in 1998) and the tradition of a smallholder economy was restored in China. However, farmers had become fragmented and could no longer achieve self-sufficiency. The market economy had become dominant and rural culture had completely changed under socialism. Farmers were now all ‘self-employed producers’. In the meantime, the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation escalated as policies on foreign investment were introduced and special economic zones were built. The dualistic and antagonistic urban-rural social structure left behind by the earlier period worsened. Not only did a large number of farmers flow into the towns and cities as migrant workers in construction sites or for foreign companies that had flooded China, many also became housekeepers or salespersons in the city. The countryside has now lost its young

6. Prof. Wen Tiejun (2009): *The Three-Dimensional Agrarian Issues and Structural Change*, Beijing: China Economic Publishing House, P.18 (In Chinese)

and adult labour force, much farm land is abandoned and those who continue to farm have become more and more dependent on pesticides and chemical fertiliser. Traditional knowledge and culture are no longer passed on to future generations and human relationships have become distanced. These have all led to the collapse of *nong* as a way of life, culture and values.

In recent years, the central government has given instructions to speed up the urbanisation of rural areas. Local governments have been appropriating farmland to develop commercial and industrial facilities and infrastructure. University students who have left their rural homes to study in the city are not allowed to revive their *hukou* (household registration) in the countryside while migrant workers from rural areas want to stay in the city for good. Farmers who have stayed behind feel that farming has no future. Primary schools in rural areas are closing down. In the minds of most urban dwellers (and even farmers), farmers and rural villages are still associated with backwardness, ignorance, old age and poverty. Under the wave of *qunonghua*, relinquishing of *nong*, and the pressure that urbanisation exerts on rural villages, small agriculture is declining and production has become more large-scale and dominated by large companies (and therefore more monocultural and technological). In the meantime, food provision has become more import-dependent than

ever. In other words, whether in terms of ecological environment or national survival, agriculture in China is in crisis.

The *qunonghua* problem in Hong Kong is the worst of all. Many people from abroad think that in Hong Kong there are only high-rise buildings, malls and financial centres. In their eyes, there are no rural areas, agriculture or farmers. It is true that the larger society of Hong Kong is not concerned with the three-dimensional agrarian issues because a large part of the countryside (in the New Territories) has been turned into land for apartment blocks, container yards, car parks and garbage dumping sites. Farmers have been forced to give up farming because their land can be turned into cash, the local market is flooded with imported food and there is a lack of support for the development of agriculture on the policy level. Because of this, the output value of primary production sources such as agriculture and fisheries in the overall economy is minimal, and Hong Kong is highly dependent on imported food. Since 1997, government policies have become even more urbanisation-oriented. As a result the land in the countryside and the rural villagers are under a lot of pressure. This situation continues today. The recent demolition of Choi Yuen Village and neighbouring villages in Pak Heung, a district in Yuen Long, to make way for the construction of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong high speed rail link and the plan to demolish a number of villages in

Fanling in the name of developing a new town in the north-east New Territories are outstanding examples. According to the mainstream discourse and values, Hong Kong's development is supported by the financial industry, real estate, commerce, tourism and services; agriculture should of course give way to these industries. Villagers who are still farming have long been marginalised and traditional rural culture and knowledge have long been forgotten.

### **The interrelationship between community and agriculture: some insights from everyday life practice based on *nong***

Summarising the experience of *qunonghua* around the Taiwan Strait, it can be observed that the three societies share some common problems. Agriculture, a form of production that has rich cultural elements, has been turned into agribusiness, a sector for the accumulation of political and economic capital. Because of government policies and the force of capital, traditional agricultural civilisation has been marginalised and even destroyed on the ground and in the lives of farmers. Today's ecological crisis, the alienation of modern life and the unsustainability of life as a whole are largely linked with the loss of the ways of *nong* and its cultural values (that is, *nong* as 'civilisation'). I think the idea that every person is a farmer can help rouse us to respond to the crisis, the alienation

and unsustainability, that are discussed above. This does not mean that everyone should go to the countryside and take up farming, which is of course impractical. Nor does it mean that I see rural areas and farmers as the prescription to save human beings. Only that the remark reminds us of the relationship between *nong* and our everyday life. I believe that only when the ways of *nong* and its cultural values are revived or recognised or become universal values will we have the opportunity to alleviate the crisis. In other words, only when the agricultural civilisation that has lasted for thousands of years is recognised for what it is can the alienated and unsustainable modern life be transformed and reconsolidated.

With this understanding, I think that we could interpret the 'community' and the 'agriculture' in CSA differently. The two cannot be separated nor can they be dualistic. I believe that CSA should not be seen simply as an organic process in which urban consumers support smallholders (or vice versa)<sup>7</sup>. Instead urban dwellers and farmers should be seen as sharing the same origin. Both urban and rural areas can be seen as communities whose everyday life is rooted in *nong*. They differ only in terms of their forms and shapes. If we deconstruct the geographical or administrative ideas of 'urban area' and 'rural area', or the functional implication of 'consumer' and 'producer', or the boundary between 'centre' and 'margin', new meanings can be applied to the practice of 'support',

7. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is translated into *shequxielinongye* by Taiwan Rural Front and into *shequhuzhunongye* by Little Donkey Farm in Beijing. In the first translation, *xieli* means 'joining in common effort' and the whole term reads as 'community joining in common effort for agriculture, while in the second translation, *huzhu* means 'mutual help' which renders the meaning of the term as 'community and agriculture are in mutual help'.

8. Chen Fen-yu: *Youth Practice in the Small Farm Rehabilitation Scheme*, International Seminar on Rural Community Development and Taiwan Rural Sociology Society Annual Meeting, 2011.

'join in common effort' and 'mutual help'. Community is agriculture, and vice versa. We are all farmers, farmers are us. By practicing CSA on different platforms, we will be able to see the re-emergence of cyclical, symbiotic, holistic and rich relationships in communities supported by an agricultural civilisation.

Taiwan Rural Front (TRF) was established in 2008 and is an alliance of farmers, rural workers, NGOs, media workers, scholars, writers, lawyers, engineers, artists and youths. Its forerunner was an alliance fighting against the Rural Rejuvenation Law. Though its goal is to safeguard rural areas, it has drawn the participation of citizens of many different backgrounds, which is a breakthrough in the social movement in Taiwan. The issues of destruction of farmland, the decline of agriculture and the control of food production by external politics and economics are no longer questions that farmers are facing alone. They involve the survival of the whole of Taiwan. The front supports smallholders' economy, sustainable agriculture, and food sovereignty—concepts that guide TRF actions. These guidelines result from critical reflection about larger rural issues. What is interesting is that TRF is not only involved in policy advocacy, social lobbying and organising farmers; it also uses farming as an entry point to bring young people to the countryside and to learn from the farmers. What do they want to learn?

First, they want to learn how to build a relationship with the land. Only when one is able to do this does one become a farmer. TRF believes that young people must learn such basics. TRF also addresses the problem of the drift of the young labour force from the countryside, attempting to use CSA as a way to support smallholders' economy, and bring young people back to farming. After the 8th of August typhoon in 2009, TRF gave support to smallholders in Taitung and Kaohsiung to start farming again and convert to an ecological approach. TRF also helps farmers to organise cooperatives and to develop diverse marketing channels, while emphasising the role of young people. Chen Fen-yu, who led the programme, said: "At this stage, middle-aged and elderly farmers are the main force in the field, but young people are playing the role of liaison and building links with people from all walks of life. The role they play is indispensable."<sup>8</sup>

Even though very few young people have chosen to become full-time farmers, being able to build up relationships with people from all walks of life is something important that young people in cities are learning. At the CSA seminar, Tsai Pei-hui, the TRF spokesperson, described how young people gain education and break out of the alienation they feel by working in the field and taking part in the Festival of Bowing to Land, the Bow to Land Farmers' Market, a survey chronicling grassroots rural life, and in supporting smallholders

to start farming again. The young people are able to feel and see the larger social context and social relationships underpinning daily life. In this process, they learn to commit themselves and to become rooted in an organisation while fighting for land justice. I believe that the practice of TRF, based on *nong*, has gone beyond the implication of 'support' in the normal practice of youths and university students returning to or staying behind in the countryside. It involves the life cycle, physical labour, communities concerned with our everyday life, systems of civilisation and social structure. As Pei-hui put it, it is to address the question of sustainability of life in Taiwan as a whole.

Because of the severance and alienation between modern education and everyday life, between people and land and among people, youths in Hong Kong share the problems faced by their counterparts in Taiwan. As in Taiwan, struggles for land justice in Hong Kong have also nurtured a group of young people who have become closer to the countryside and farming. Fighting for Choi Yuen Village to prevent it from being demolished was the core action of a movement against the high speed railway in 2008. The public realised how the mainstream development of Hong Kong had eroded our land in the countryside, holding agriculture in contempt. People started to discuss what sort of life we wanted to have. In this process, young

people known as the 'post 80's' carried out a procession in Central District, the heart of Hong Kong's urban area, holding rice in their hands and kneeling down and touching their foreheads to the ground after each step they took. This ascetic action aroused a very strong response from the larger society. Even though the action, unprecedented in Hong Kong, was not as stunning as the scene at the Ketagalan paddy in front of the Presidential Palace in Taiwan, its impact on many young people was far reaching. The Land Justice League (LJL)<sup>9</sup> was set up later to monitor plans of land use in Hong Kong to try to ensure that it is fair, just and ecological. To strengthen their relationship with the land, some people started to practice organic farming. For example, when Choi Yuen villagers were fighting for the right to farm, a group of people (including professors, artists, social activists and university students) raised the banner of Choi Yuen Village Sanwoodgoon<sup>10</sup> and started farming in the as-yet undemolished village, producing their own food in an effort to demonstrate the meaning and importance of a life based on *nong* in a highly urbanised city such as Hong Kong. In 2011 after Choi Yuen Village was demolished, Sanwoodgoon moved to a nearby village and its members continued to practice farming on land that they rented. Three young people became full-time farmers and began to grow rice, long absent from the fields of Hong Kong. They also launched activities such as

9. The Land Justice League is formed by different organisers and groups who are concerned with different agendas related to land in Hong Kong. The organisation actively supports the fights against forcible relocation as well as conservation campaigns in all districts of Hong Kong. It promotes the development and research in local agriculture and community economy, and nurtures a new generation of builders of democratic communities. The League advocates six principles: symbiotic relationship between the rural and the urban; conserving the ecological environment; defending residential rights; anti-property developer hegemony; ending the collusion between the government and the businessmen; and implementing democracy in town-planning.

10. Translator's note: 'Sanwoodgoon' is Cantonese transliteration which means a venue of everyday life.

11. The Hope Farmers' Market was formed in 2006 and is located in Taichung, Taiwan. It is an organisation working for public benefit by supporting organic farming. Its members are farmers, volunteers and consumers. Through cooperation, the group hopes to promote CSA as well as the principle that local needs of a place should be met by local resources.

collective purchase and farmers' markets. In the meantime, the Pak Heung Green Club under LJL collaborated with some Choi Yuen villagers and set up Choi Yuen Agricultural Vanguarders to start farming again, launching a CSA plan with the slogan, 'Pak Heung people eat Pak Heung vegetables'. Over the last few years, there have been an increasing number of small scale CSA practices in Hong Kong. Even though these practices have not managed to change the trend of *qunonghua*, more urban dwellers are now embracing *nong*. They make compost and grow vegetables on rooftops, in gardens or on balconies. Some have become weekend farmers while others start from making changes in their own life by reducing garbage and recycling used water, etc. I was touched by the fact that many young people belonging to the 'post 80s' and 'post 90s' generation are willing to learn from the land and farmers and to labour in the fields. They are taking part in a movement of land conservation and a movement of everyday life with their bodies and labour.

I have also been deeply touched by the philosophy and actions of Waldorf Education. Waldorf's ideas of anthroposophy (optimising physical and mental well-being) involve building education on the close relationship between human beings, nature and everyday life. The whole human person is integrated into the educational process and the community while the campus provides the setting for the social and

cultural movement to take place. In the experience of the Waldorf School in Sichuan, China, not only are children, parents and teachers stakeholders of education, neighbours of the school and villagers are stakeholders, too. If the work of TRF and LJL is to turn the agricultural community into a school, Waldorf education turns the school into an agricultural community. Waldorf schools are usually located at the outskirts of urban areas. They have their own fields or farms in which gardening and ecological farming are taught, with parents taking part in teaching as well. What I appreciate most is that the countryside is seen not just as an environment, or a space which provides land. Instead, it is viewed as a part of local rural communities. Children, parents and teachers are able to build up a close relationship with the local farmers by integrating the school into local rural life and learning from them, for example by helping them to sell their produce. Some parents (mostly urban middle class people) even move to homes near the school or in nearby villages. We can say that Waldorf education has very effectively created a mode of learning, in which *nong* plays a central role, in helping children and their families integrate with the community. This is a kind of integration in which separation between citizens and farmers, educators and educated, mind and hands, everyday life and knowledge has been overcome.

CSA practitioners of Taiwan's Hope Farmers' Market<sup>11</sup> have been trying to

integrate *nong* and learning, everyday life and community, organically in similar ways. Chen Meng-kai, the convener of Hope and his partners were the first people to open a farmers' market in Taiwan, in 2007. However they did not do it simply to provide a venue for organic farmers to sell their produce or to provide consumers with healthy food. It was instead an attempt to build a good life as a community (farmers, volunteers and consumers). They believe that "a good life which is healthy and sustainable requires that everyone works together, respects the land and lives a simple life; a simple life that uses resources appropriately means that we have to start reflecting on agricultural skills, production and knowledge, support each other as a group and grow together while becoming self-sufficient in the practice of 'cooperation and simplicity'".<sup>12</sup> Hope differs from TRF and Waldorf School in that its learning platforms include the monthly farmers' market, a permanent sustainable agriculture education centre and a collectively-owned field. A series of courses that have a strong element of everyday life, entitled 'Eat Rice Mindfully', is regularly held. For example, one course was on making bean curd the old way, aimed at helping the revival of soybean cultivation in Taiwan. Other regular activities are 'Collective Kitchen' (learning the skills and culture of food processing), a course series entitled 'Farm Mindfully' in which participants experience the wisdom and hardship of a way of life that is dependent on nature, and a series of talks, 'Study Mindfully', that aims to enhance participants' knowledge.

Hope also makes use of blogs to promote long term concerns, such as advocating the conservation of Taiwanese rice (through farmers' actions in saving seeds and consumers' actions in eating local rice), and to provide a space to sustain the work of and the relationships between farmers, consumers and volunteers who take part in the market. The aim is to build a new model of life of "a small and beautiful community based on principles of mutual help and self-sufficiency."<sup>13</sup> No wonder Chen Meng-kai, the founder of Hope Farmers' Market, thinks that what is most precious about Hope, and its greatest value, is that it "has a group of partners who trust each other"<sup>14</sup>, from all walks of life. These smallholders, citizens and social activists have joined together to build an alliance of *nong-xue* (farmers, scholars and students)<sup>15</sup> to bring about changes because Taiwan society, as a whole, has ignored and neglected agriculture, people are becoming more and more alienated in modern life, and there are problems with the industrialisation of food production. Solutions to these problems may be summed up in the core spirit of *nong-xue* which Cheng Meng-kai said was "to abide by the laws of nature and to return to nature". This applies not only to farming but to the ways of a good life. As expressed by Hope: farm mindfully, eat rice mindfully, live mindfully, and study mindfully.

### Conclusion: "taking root"

In the CSA seminar, there were many CSA practitioners who had been farming quietly over the last one or two decades. For

12. Chen Meng-kai (2012), *Hope and Community Supported Agriculture*, September 10, 2012, P.1. Translator's note: *He Pu*, which is the name of Hope in Mandarin, is made up of two words that mean 'cooperation' and 'simplicity' respectively.

13. Chen Meng-Kai (2012), *Hope and Community Supported Agriculture*, September 10, 2012, P.4.

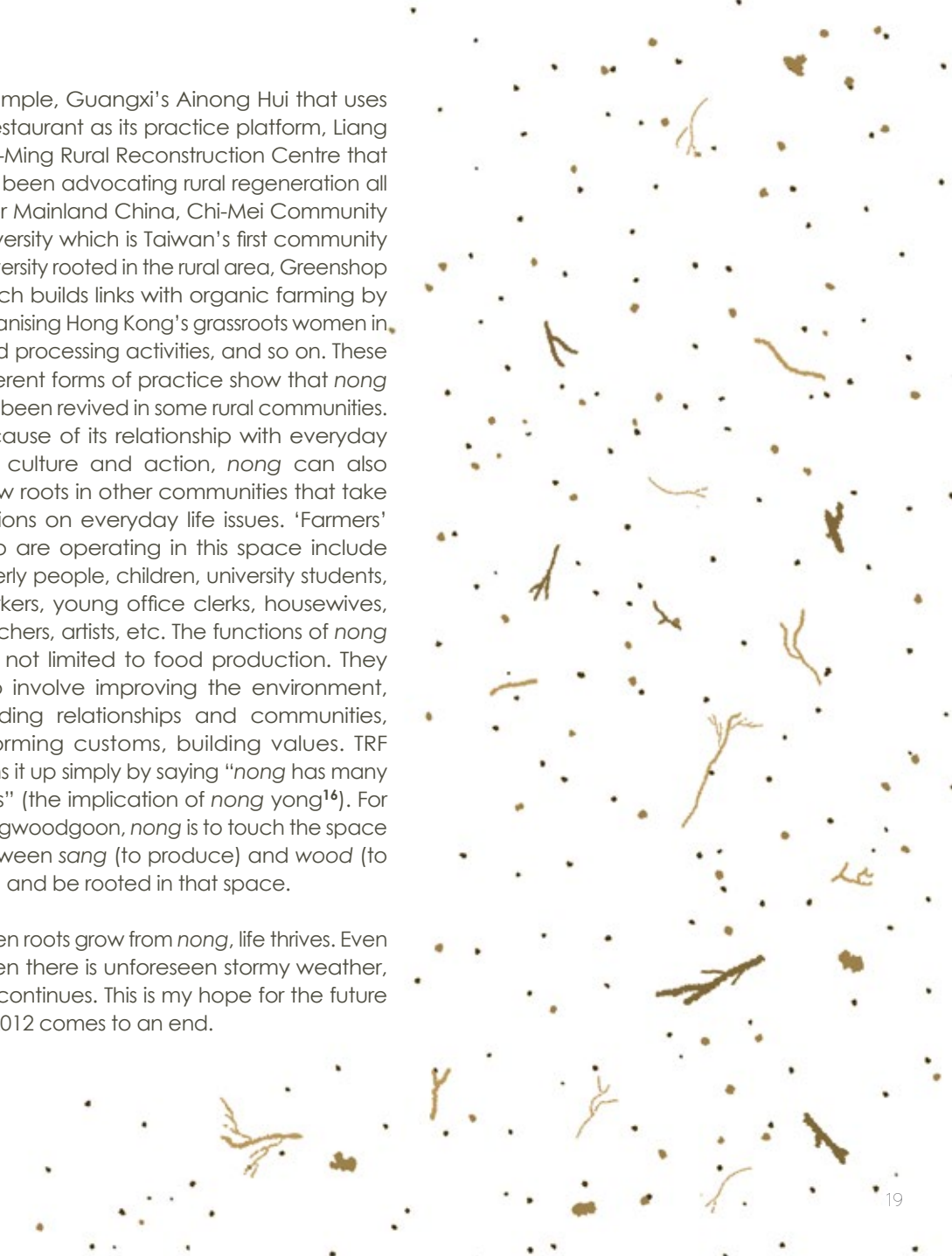
14. Chen Meng-kai (2012), *Hope and Community Supported Agriculture*, September 10, 2012, P.1.

15. Chen Meng-kai (2012), *Self-Sufficient and Free—Life and Actions of Hope*, in *Hope and Happiness*, Issue no 4 (Jan.-Mar., 2012), published by Hope Farmers' Market.

16. Translator's note: the two words in Chinese character mean 'use of *nong*'.

example, Guangxi's Ainong Hui that uses a restaurant as its practice platform, Liang Shu-Ming Rural Reconstruction Centre that has been advocating rural regeneration all over Mainland China, Chi-Mei Community University which is Taiwan's first community university rooted in the rural area, Greenshop which builds links with organic farming by organising Hong Kong's grassroots women in food processing activities, and so on. These different forms of practice show that *nong* has been revived in some rural communities. Because of its relationship with everyday life, culture and action, *nong* can also grow roots in other communities that take actions on everyday life issues. 'Farmers' who are operating in this space include elderly people, children, university students, workers, young office clerks, housewives, teachers, artists, etc. The functions of *nong* are not limited to food production. They also involve improving the environment, building relationships and communities, reforming customs, building values. TRF sums it up simply by saying "*nong* has many uses" (the implication of *nong yong*<sup>16</sup>). For Sangwoodgoon, *nong* is to touch the space between *sang* (to produce) and *wood* (to live) and be rooted in that space.

When roots grow from *nong*, life thrives. Even when there is unforeseen stormy weather, life continues. This is my hope for the future as 2012 comes to an end.



# What is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)?

**Angus Lam**

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Over the last few decades, the rapid pace of globalisation has had a huge impact on agriculture, and on the livelihoods and lives of farmers in many countries that had been self-reliant in food production. Globalisation has resulted in the industrialisation of agriculture, the vanishing of traditional farming culture and the emergence of human-centred values leading to the destruction of nature and catastrophic environmental pollution.

The urban population has come to outnumber that of rural farming areas, and farming has slipped from many people's awareness. Yet, rural and urban areas are interdependent. In recent years, because of their concern for food quality and health issues, and for sustaining food security beyond fossil-fuel-based agriculture, urban dwellers have begun to understand the importance of preserving local traditional farming. They have realised that such farming is the foundation for sustainable urban life.

The concept of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) emerged in the West as early as the 1960s. Many successful cases have since proven its viability – so long as concrete local conditions are taken into consideration and appropriate adjustments are made. CSA not only helps to reduce the many problems arising from globalisation such as food miles (carbon footprint), pollution due to the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and food security; it can also tackle the

problem of vanishing biodiversity, partly a result of chemical- and industrial-based agriculture, and social problems arising from the migration of rural dwellers to urban centres.

The concept of CSA means that every person in a consumer community enters into a relationship of mutual support with the farmers in terms of the operation of the farm to enable it to become a farm of the community, both legally and spiritually, and to share in the risks and benefits of food production. This is in fact a cooperative form of local, small-scale economy based on a fair relationship and mutual support between urban and rural dwellers and on the development of local production for local consumption. CSA emphasises the values of ecological agriculture, eschewing the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, for the health of both the soil and people.

The concept can be traced to practices that emerged in Germany, Switzerland and Japan in the 1960s. Now CSA can be found all over the world, and the practice of CSA by grassroots organisations, in particular young rural returnees, in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China has resulted in diverse experiences.



# HONG KONG

Over the past three to four decades, agriculture in Hong Kong has declined drastically, giving way to massive industrialisation and urbanisation. In such an environment, the advocacy and development of CSA is an uphill struggle.

The two stories in this section capture the arduous efforts of some who have tried to introduce CSA in Hong Kong and to promote farmers' markets as a way to support organic farming and for the common good of the urban and rural population.

The initial emergence of CSA 20 years ago stemmed from the issue of food safety, but over time the emphasis of the CSA movement has shifted to getting people back onto the land, working the soil and living a life rooted in the local. The two stories tell why the people involved are motivated to attempt such a tall order in a place where agriculture is so highly marginalised. Despite difficulties, the seeds of CSA have already been sown and its meaning for sustainable living has been cultivated in people's minds.



**Cheng Yi-yi, Debby**

This article was written based on an in-depth interview with PCD staff for ecological agriculture Angus Lam, veteran collective purchase organiser Yeung Po-hi and experienced development worker Chan Wai-fong and on information collected by the writer, who works for Oxfam Hong Kong, an NGO.

# Twenty years of collective purchase

a brief history of CSA in Hong Kong

In a concrete jungle such as Hong Kong, where agriculture — an industry that provides food to human beings — seems to be declining, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is like a quiet undercurrent beneath the roaring turbid waves of the finance and real estate industries.

## 20 years of ups and downs: the story of CSA

The first name to appear in the history of CSA in Hong Kong is The Organic Farm, founded by Chu Pui-kwan (also known as 'Ah Pad').

In 1989, well-publicised incidents of vegetable contamination resulted in Hong Kong people becoming more concerned with food safety and related issues like environmental protection and farming. Chu Pui-kwan, who had returned to Hong

Kong after studying Arts and Design in the USA, set up The Organic Farm in 1995 with a farmer, Patrick Lam. While she had started the farm because she wanted healthy food herself, Chu marketed her crops in a manner similar to that used in CSA, a concept that challenges consumers' trust in and loyalty to the producers. This happened in Hong Kong at a time when the market had been developing vigorously but very few people had heard of CSA.

Yeung Po-hi is of the same generation as Chu Pui-kwan and became concerned with agriculture and sustainable living at around the same time. Po-hi recalls, "When The Organic Farm first started, they were using the box system. Customers placed their order beforehand. They then received vegetables, the type and quantity of which depended on what was harvested during the week. The

vegetables were delivered in a box and the customers could not choose what they got. In those days, the term CSA was not yet popular, and everyone was only talking about ordering vegetables.”

The box system was a method that Chu, who likes good food, learnt in the USA. Chu did not use the term CSA. For her it did not matter what the system was called. She was only thinking about having healthy vegetables and she was targeting consumers concerned with healthy fresh food. The price she set was also rather high. This approach is slightly different from what later practitioners had in mind. The latter uphold CSA and advocate support for a certain type of farmer. However, the mode of operation that Chu adopted was essentially CSA. In an interview with *Ming Pao Weekly* in 2003, Chu mentioned three ways in which consumers might take part: as farmers supplying other customers; as farmers growing food for their own consumption; and as consumers who do not work in the field but collect money to support farmers and farms, after which they share the output. Organic vegetables were initially very expensive. Chu spoke about the advantages of CSA in the same interview: “We have come up with this new idea because we want more people to be able to eat organic vegetables. For example, some families cannot afford organic vegetables, but through a CSA agreement, they can exchange their labour for vegetables. Because there is no middleman in collective purchase, farmers

are in direct contact with consumers. Nowadays organic vegetables cost over \$20 to \$40 a catty in supermarkets. In the future, we may be able to buy organic vegetables at less than \$10 a catty.”<sup>1</sup>

The Organic Farm set the stage for CSA in Hong Kong by preparing a table of tasty organic vegetables, but an organic farm founded by Bing Law Sanders in 1994 on Lamma Island was the real beginning of the story of CSA in Hong Kong because it was the first farm that produced organic vegetables under the name of CSA. Bing Law learnt about organic farming in Produce Green in the 1990s. She fell in love with the serene and open environment of Lamma and founded Green Cottage Farm with two partners on the island in 1994. This formally raised the curtain on the development of CSA in Hong Kong.

### **From quantitative to qualitative change: the watershed around the Year 2000**

Financial crisis provided the opportunity for a return to rural life

After the financial storm in 1997, Hong Kong's economy entered a period of recession. The ancient occupation of agriculture was put forward again as a way out for society and the economy. “Many workers in ‘the three trades’<sup>2</sup> and in construction had no work and they didn't want to apply for welfare<sup>3</sup>, and so they asked the government if there was land

1. ‘The Forefront of Hong Kong's Organic Revolution’, *Mingpao Weekly*, 2003.

2. This is a local term referring to the work of bricklaying, tile setting and plastering, carpentry, and painting.

3. Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), a form of income assistance in Hong Kong's social welfare system to act as a safety net for those Hong Kong citizens who are unable to support themselves economically.

4. Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden is a centre for conservation and education in Hong Kong. Being funded by the Kadoorie Foundation, the Farm strives to promote conservation and sustainable living in Hong Kong and South China, and runs various programmes to foster conservation of plants and animals as well as organic farming.

where they could open farms because they knew how to build sheds, install pipes and plough fields,” recalls Angus Lam, who used to work at Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden (KFBG)<sup>4</sup> and advocates sustainable living in Hong Kong. “It made the government suddenly realise that there were novices who were interested in farming.” Also the year of 2000, a group of laymen started farms themselves. This encouraged the government to think of farming as a way out for Hong Kong and to support farmers switching to organic production. Measures and policies were subsequently introduced to promote this switch, and in 2000, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department of the Hong Kong government introduced the Organic Farming Conversion Scheme to help farmers who had been using chemical fertilisers and pesticides switch to organic farming. All these paved the way for collective purchase a few years later.

### **New substance of CSA: emphasising everyday life and relationship between individuals and community**

Angus Lam believes the years between 2000 and 2003 marked a watershed. Organic farming had grown, not only in terms of the number of farms practicing it, but also in the nature of CSA. There was a change in its substance, with the relationship between individuals and the community becoming a new factor. “Before this period, those involved were concerned about the environment or how

to manage an organic farm successfully. At that time, their concerns were on growing organic vegetables successfully. There was not much emphasis on the relationship with the community.” Initially, and for a long period of time, discussions about organic farming in Hong Kong focused on food safety and environmental education. After 2000, however, practitioners deepened their ideas and beliefs. Organic farming drew the attention of the public as a new direction for farming. In the meantime, CSA was growing, although still a minority concern. Later, in 2007 and 2008, CSA had a short boom when NGOs, including welfare and labour organisations, applied for government funding to run CSA programmes.

After the SARS outbreak of 2003, the government began to think about ways to revive the local economy. One outcome of this was the setting up of the Sustainable Development Fund. As noted above, the government had already introduced schemes for organic farming in 2000, and some farmers had been practicing organic farming for a few years by 2004 and 2005. There were now more organic vegetables in the market and more organic farmers. Some NGOs now thought about collective purchase and also extended ideas about CSA into humanistic concerns, such as community building, social systems, and so forth. One example of this was Green Women, a grassroots women's organisation set up in 2002 by a social service agency, Yan Oi Tong, in Tuen Mun.



Members of Green Women came from families in the local community and were typically occupied with household chores: shopping, cooking and cleaning. They wanted to be sure that the food they bought from the market was healthy. They had to know how to cook too, and to make sure that their families had enough to eat well. They also had to be careful about the safety of the cleaning agents they used. In order to help women have access to cheap local organic vegetables and an opportunity to experience the hardship and rewards of farming, the Green Women organised The Organic Women Farmers Group. Members of the group worked in the field and adopted collective purchase. Later they even made compost in their flats and set up a group to collect used oil from restaurants in the community, making soap from the oil so collected.

From a starting point of personal and family needs, Green Women built a relationship of mutual help and benefit between consumers and producers. They were soon involved in wider issues such as the development of the district of Tuen Mun, agriculture and ecology of Hong Kong. The platform also fostered personal growth and group development. Luk Siu-king, one of the earliest members, has long been an active participant in the environmental movement of Tuen Mun and Hong Kong. After a few years, Green Women disbanded. Luk and a few other women established the Greenwise

Workers Co-operative and continued to produce soaps from waste oil while also taking part in environmental education around Hong Kong.

### **An approach to development that adopts the perspective of *nong*<sup>5</sup>**

According to Angus, apart from the effort of NGOs, there was another turning point that brought organic farming into local communities. “[There were] some enthusiastic people, such as TV [Yuen Yik-tin]<sup>6</sup>, who opened farms at Pak Sha in Sheung Shui around this time. Because of their concern for society and their background, Hong Kong's organic farming movement gained a broader social perspective. Some of them might not have been very good at farming, but they very quickly broadened the discussion about agriculture. That's why I think they created the conditions for this watershed and enabled people from a wider spectrum to become concerned with this issue.”

At around this time, KFBG started to cooperate with community groups, including residents' organisations and schools, to bring organic farming into the community in the hope that it would take root. Some people were advocating community farms while one group paid special attention to the subject of nutrition, and the 'organic ambassador' concept emerged. Previously there had only been talk about organic farming. Now one could talk about organic living. Hong Kong

5. Translator's note: *Nong* is a Chinese word that can mean farmers (*nong min*), rural area (*nong cun*) and agriculture (*nong ye*).

6. TV started to promote ecological agriculture actively in 2000 and is a member of Hong Kong Sustainable Agriculture Association (HKSAA). The association was engaged in farming activities in Nam Chung at Mainland China border. A land conservation movement was subsequently launched to conserve rural farmland and ecology and to challenge the rampage of real estate development dominated by an outlook urban capital and market expansion as the ultimate goal. To build sustainable farming communities, HKSAA set up the Mapopo Farm with farmers in Mashipo Village in Fanling in the northern New Territories a few years ago. By late 2013, residents of the neighbouring high-rise buildings and people from other districts were regularly visiting the farm and its market and buying organic vegetables from the farming community.



Organic Farming Association [HOFA] was formed to gather the collective strength of organic farmers. In the background, KFBG was focusing on how its work could be further expanded into the communities, and how it was possible to integrate agriculture with everyday life.

A former employee of KFBG, Po-hi, says: "Initially we conceived the idea of organic ambassador to use food as an entry point in advocating organic products. If we started with something too theoretical, it would be very hard for ordinary citizens to grasp the idea. Because of this, we started with a cooking class and borrowed a kitchen from a community centre. We conducted a four-lesson cooking course. Then we recruited organic ambassadors. Only then did we talk about theories and environmental protection."

### **Birth of organic living: integrating agriculture with everyday life**

Tai Po Collective Purchase Group grew out of KFBG's organic ambassador scheme. It remains a staunch supporter of CSA. In late 2003, KFBG held a seminar on community-based organic agriculture in which the concept of CSA was introduced. Many social workers, including university lecturers and community workers, took part in the seminar, and the foundation for the community context of CSA was laid.

In the meantime, Man Si-wai<sup>7</sup>, a professor who had retired from teaching in 2000,

had started a CSA scheme with her friends which gradually took shape.

After retiring from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Man Si-wai took up farming. Three years later, she was joined by a retired farmer, nicknamed 'Uncle'. Man also opened a bookshop, The Backwaters, in which she sold books on farming, science with a humanistic perspective, and on local citizens' movement, aimed at encouraging readers to reflect on the meaning of life. Man was also a prolific writer, critical of the capitalist system. She organised a collective purchase group among teachers and staff of the Chinese University.

At the beginning of 2005, Man and her friends ran a shop, Tushengliangpin (Locally Created Good Products), for a short period in Hong Kong's Yau Ma Tei district. It was an important step for CSA in Hong Kong. The shop sold freshly harvested organic vegetables grown by farms in Tai Po, including rooted peanuts and large sweet potatoes, rarely seen in local markets. There were also common vegetables such as broccoli, pumpkin, radish, taros and red beets. In addition the shop sold processed foods with no chemical additives such as citrus jam, cashew nut butter, bread and Indonesian cakes and snacks. Even though the shop was open for only a month, people were talking about it for a long time.

7. Man Si-wai passed away peacefully on December 17, 2013. Her very close friends shared a piece of writing that she wrote in early 2008 entitled "An Ancient Road, the West Wind, a Lean Horse". In memory of Man Si-wai and for mutual encouragement, we would like to publish it here: "I would love to become a horse, whether it is a lean one or not. Standing in silence beside an ancient road taking in the west wind, or northwest wind. I miss the coldness, the swaying scenery, and the stony narrow road that leads to a far off place. The stones on the road are smooth and bright from being trodden on by many before us. We may or may not have met each other on this narrow road, but we know we have once been there and wish that those who come after us will go on walking this road. Sometimes I raise my head and look at the Milky Way—a much more ancient road on the sky. So much light flows from it that I am not afraid of the setting sun going down. The heart-broken ones may gain comfort from it too. When the lyric ends, the lean horse has already merged with the west wind and the ancient road. There is no need to mention it especially."

### **Who left? Who remained? Who is remembered?**

Looking back, during the peak period of collective purchase, there were as many as a dozen NGOs involved, including such varied groups as the youth centre of Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service in Shatin and the social service centre of Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood. However, after a few years very few remained. Some may have persisted painstakingly, while others only briefly bloomed. Whatever might have happened, they crafted something deep in people's minds. But if one has to talk about reasons for 'success' or 'failure', what would they be?

Man Si-wai began organising Tusheng Collective Purchase Cooperative in 2006 and it lasted for about a year. Po-hi was one of its first supporters. She thinks the main difficulty was that it was a network of individuals only. Although members of the group had strong beliefs, were willing to pay beforehand, supported farmers, took part in meetings and even became stock holders, "the membership was individual-based, its impact was small and it died fast. Even if a member contributes \$3,000 or \$8,000, or even \$10,000, they are only individuals."

Po-hi adds, "I think it was because its beliefs were so strong that it set limits for itself. It started with intellectuals, but actually intellectuals didn't cook food themselves. They took them [the organic vegetables]

home and gave them to their mothers. As individuals, they might want very much to support the idea, but it could be a different story with their families who might find it difficult to cook the vegetables. They felt they had to throw away a lot of greens. Besides, Tushengliangpin was selling grains and staple food which were not only difficult to market, their circulation was also very slow. I may buy 10 cattles of rice, but you'd have to wait for two months before I would buy again. But vegetables are something you have to buy every day. So it was the type of food sold that determined whether the cooperative could endure. For a business to survive, the circulation is an important factor."

Collective purchase schemes led by NGOs have not been successful, either. Angus thinks this was because of the social context and the conditions. "Some of them had their own beliefs and wanted to do a good job but the entry points they adopted might have been a bit opportunistic. They were not familiar with the issue, but since it was in some ways connected with their community work, they joined without much preparation, thinking that they could learn as they were doing it. However few were able to do that successfully." Sound farm production and a good marketing system were not built up effectively. It was therefore difficult to sustain the operations after the allocated funds had been exhausted. Po-hi points out that the closing down of Green Women had partly to do with the fact that

the Yan Oi Tong social worker responsible for the project resigned and there was no one else to organise it. But, "There's no need to sigh because the project trained many people who later became active on different platforms." As mentioned earlier, Luk Siu-king, one of the veterans of Green Women, is still active today and participates enthusiastically in the collective production of environmentally friendly soaps within a kind of democratic cooperative economy. Man Si-wai's former partners are still coordinating a collective purchase group working mainly with two local farmers. Group members prepay for half a year's vegetables and receive seasonal vegetables every week.

### Enriching the community context of agricultural production

Tushengliangpin, the shop with which Man Si-wai brought CSA into the community, was opened before the Chinese New Year in 2005 under a short term lease similar to that given to markets opened for the Lunar New Year period. Although it only lasted for a short time, Chan Wai-fong (Fongie), a member of Tushengliangpin, often recalls the experience. "When it began it was very exciting. First, we got a shop. Second, we got incredibly good food, including processed food which used produce from local farms, like radish cake for the New Year. For me at that time it was something new: apart from supporting health through agricultural produce, ideas of community relationship were introduced into food

processing. So, people enter the picture too. Tushengliangpin was short-lived, but something new has grown from it."

### Expanding CSA: autonomous food consumption, connecting hands and minds, a sustainable future

Po-hi explains how Tushengliangpin helped spread ideas of CSA: "Because of the shop, we had the chance to meet people in the neighborhood and were able to spread our beliefs through them. It was fast. The people who came to the shop were housewives. They were very supportive and were sad when the shop closed."

After pausing for a moment, Po-hi continues: "We have to admit that it was because Tusheng Cooperative had very strong beliefs, it was always able to hit the nail on the head and put forward some fundamental questions. We held exhibitions in which we were clear that we were against supermarkets and supported smallholders. I remember there was a couplet: 'Commodities that travel a long distance have nothing to do with green life; only with restrained consumption do we have a sustainable future.' There were other couplets and slogans, too: 'Do Farming Do It Yourself, Give Up Supermarkets; Autonomous Food Consumption, Bodies and Earth Are One'; 'I cook what I eat, my hands and my mind are connected'; 'Love labour, love the land, love health', and so on. These

8. Ai-hua is a full time housewife in Tuen Mun. She was a member of Green Women and was known for her fine cooking.

ideas, which were then very *avant-garde*, sowed seeds inside and outside the circle and are the basic beliefs in today's CSA movement."

In recent years, some farmers have joined hands with the social movement, such as villagers of Choi Yuen village who are building a local farming economy under the slogan 'Pak Heung folks eat Pak Heung vegetables', and Ma Shi Po villagers' initiative to conserve the farming life through Mapopo Community Farm. Collective purchase has given rise to practices with rich social implications and the belief in the pursuit of social justice has taken root in the movement.

### CSA and the larger society: what are the constraints to overcome, and what conditions should be created?

Over the last 20 years, CSA has been stumbling along in Hong Kong and there are very few successful cases. How much of this failure can be attributed to external conditions? Could it be that Hong Kong is not yet ready for CSA?

Perhaps we can find some clues in the experience of Life in Harmony, which was established by Po-hi. Constraints attributable to 'objective conditions' can now be identified. To bring about changes, we may have to work hard to create favourable conditions and suitable soil. Po-hi says that Life in Harmony learnt from the experience of

Tusheng Cooperative and recognised the limitation of having individuals as members. Because of this, they encouraged NGOs to work with farms in establishing collective purchase. "We delivered only to a collective purchase point and saved a lot of transportation cost." But Life in Harmony had a severe weakness similar to that of Tusheng. "What we sold were not daily necessities and we did not normally sell vegetables. Only when farmers were unable to sell all their vegetables did we help them to sell a bit." The organisation supported smallholders. Whether it be rice or vegetables, the emphasis was that the produce came directly from the farm and Life in Harmony knew the farmers. If it was processed food, it had to have been made locally. "Tofu was a product that we were able to sell at a relatively high price, but you could not send a van just to deliver a few tubs of tofu," Po-hi says. High operation costs were still an issue.

There is also a legal constraint in producing processed food. "I remember one time I wanted to ask Ai-hua<sup>8</sup> to make some fevantine glutinous rice puddings, but because of the legal restrictions, we dared not publicise openly. We didn't have the license and I did not want to commit civil disobedience for this. Only some friends in a small circle bought some, and Ai-hua had to pay for her own transport."

Life in Harmony discussed ways to expand the local economy but did not have any

opportunity to practice them. This was followed up by Greenshop of St James Settlement. According to Fongie, "St. James initially only helped its members to buy and sell processed food. Only later on did they set up a food processing team. We were gradually building something local and close-knit. The community we are talking about had reached another level, called community economy<sup>9</sup>. By discovering and consolidating community resources, and identifying the abilities of people in the community and connecting them with the possibility and opportunity for food production, the practice of collective purchase was enriched. In general, about 70% of the food people consume is processed. The link between vegetable farmers and consumers is weak. Not everyone wants to be a farmer, but if more people can join in this economy and in exchange of labour, it can be very interesting. The development of CSA will become more diverse. Besides, you have the names of the producers, and can start to understand the stories behind the food".

Hong Kong's food laws are strict. To develop CSA, there is a need to bring about changes at the levels of producers, consumers and the social system. As a movement, we have to have an in-depth analysis of society and we must explore new social possibilities.

Fongie points out some other difficulties apart from the legal ones: "Production is far from Hong Kong and so it is difficult to have a consumers' movement. The

government made policies that killed agriculture rapidly. In the 1960s we still had rice and a lot of vegetables, but soon fields had no water and the price of land rose, and thus the farmlands dwindled. If there are no producers in Hong Kong, it is difficult to foster a consumers' movement. In Taiwan, it is easy to build up a relationship with farmers. In Hong Kong, things are too convenient. People would think: Why do we have to do collective purchase, especially if we have no choice over the vegetables we get?!"

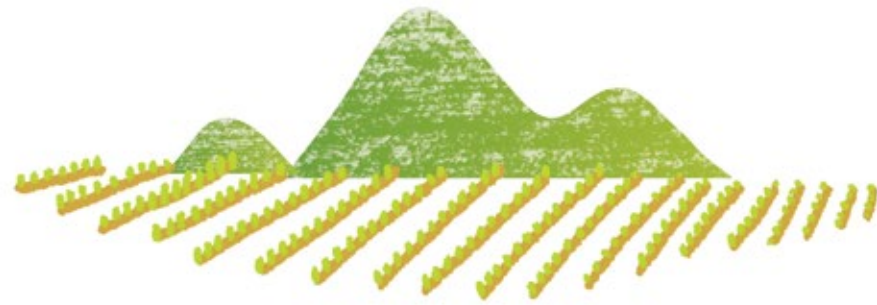
As a model of CSA, collective purchase may currently face many constraints in Hong Kong. However, consolidating and adjusting the resources in the community and creating diverse forms of food production could overcome these constraints and create the conditions in which collective purchase can flourish.

9. 'Community Economy/ Social Economy': Generally, it refers to the practice of an alternative economy which exists beyond the mainstream market or is challenging the logic of capital operation in the mainstream market. The social economy movement advocates these values:

- 1 emphasis on the development of the individual as well as that of a society, and objecting to the notion that economic activities only serve for individual profits and capital accumulation;
- 2 economic justice and social equality;
- 3 cooperation and mutual benefit as well as mutual complement;
- 4 protecting the ecology and the environment;
- 5 democratic management and supervision from the participants;
- 6 multiple types of development and diversity.

There are various kinds of practices of social economy, including producers' cooperatives, consumers' cooperatives, fair trade, social enterprises, social currency, conscientious consumption, collective purchase, CSA, etc.





**Angus Lam**  
The writer is PCD's  
Programme Coordinator.

# Farmers' market: manifesting the spirit of everyday life

1. Translator's note: *nong* is a Chinese word that can mean farmers (*nong min*), rural area (*nong cun*) and agriculture (*nong ye*).

## A love revived?

With the departure of the Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese participants, the seminar on CSA experience entitled *Taking Root: Vitalising CSA* finally came to an end. I let out a deep sigh of relief as I lay down beneath a phoenix tree. One has to have a certain degree of confidence to hold an exchange on agriculture in Hong Kong, I thought. The indigenous people in Hong Kong's rural areas had long been abandoning farming since the sixties of the last century. Hong Kong's tenant farmers, who had been quietly cultivating the land, are migrants in Hong Kong. They left their rural homes a long time ago and their native villages may have already become a faded memory for them. The post-war generation was swept into the wave of industrial development when they were teenagers. They are now indifferent to and distanced from *nong*.<sup>1</sup>

Because of this indifference, the transformation from agricultural to industrial production over three decades ago was easily rationalised. In fact this drastic change took only a few years and was done in such a nonchalant and unruffled manner that it seems that no one even hesitated.

It so happened that a few days before the seminar we were fighting to protect Hong Kong's last agricultural hinterland in the north-east New Territories. It seemed that it was inevitable and right that a new social movement should emerge. The day before the seminar started, we took our friends from Mainland China and Taiwan to visit a group of elderly farmers who were trying to start growing rice again. On our way there, we saw banners calling for the defence of the village and the land and for the protection of agriculture. Why are we becoming concerned with our old friend—agriculture—again?

I once heard Waldorf teachers<sup>2</sup> talking about their philosophy of education—that every person is a farmer. Perhaps layer upon layer of social changes in recent years have been reactivating our farmer's genes, dormant for a long time, while our reactions and actions are also being retuned.

When I listened to colleagues at Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden (KFBG)<sup>3</sup> talking about organic farmers' markets in Hong Kong, I realised we need only look at a map of these markets in the last decade to discover at which point Hong Kong's agriculture started to grow again.

### **Traditional market (Xu)<sup>4</sup>: the fulcrum of an autonomous life**

A carnival for organic farm products was held at KFBG as long ago as 2000. This was the precursor of organic farmers' markets in Hong Kong. Even though it lasted only two days, it was a breakthrough in terms of face-to-face contact between farmers and consumers. Two years later, the first permanent organic farmers' market was opened in Tai Po.

The site of Tai Po Farmers' Market was a part of the original Tai Wo Market (Tai Po New Market). Before the Second World War, the New Territories was a rural community composed of scattered villages. Rice cultivation was the main livelihood of most villagers, while raising livestock, fishing and small handicraft

making were sideline activities. Villagers consumed their own crops and products. What was left was taken to a designated *xu* or market on a fixed date and sold.

*Xu* refers to an open place in the countryside where local products are bought and sold. We can infer the life and culture of the local people and their relationship with nature from the items on sale at every *xu* or market. In the old days, the left-over farm products that villagers took to the *xu* included chickens, ducks, fruits, vegetables, firewood and herbs they had collected in the wild or wild birds and animals that they had captured. One could feel the seasonal change from the goods that were sold and the vendors' calls resonated with the sense of nature and season.

Because the market was usually a long way off, villagers had to leave home early in the morning. Bargaining was a common practice in the market, and villagers would also exchange all sorts of information. It therefore provided an opportunity to absorb new knowledge and wisdom. Usually villagers sold all their produce before noon and used the money they had earned to buy other daily necessities in the market. In this way, resources in the countryside were circulated for everyday consumption. The *xu*, or market, was not only a centre of economic activities where the urban and the rural intersect; it was a cultural space brewed by relationships and wisdom.

2. Waldorf education, which originated in Germany, is a holistic and independent education system for more than 90 years in different places around the world. It is human-based education that aims at a harmonious development of the natural environment and human society. Through healthy and balanced modes, it strives to enable holistic growth of a child embracing the development of three capacities, namely willing (body), feeling (soul) and thinking (spirit). Chengdu Waldorf School is the first of its kind established in Mainland China. The School has four elements: kindergarten, primary school, adult training centre and biodynamic farming.

3. Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden is a centre for conservation and education in Hong Kong. Funded by the Kadoorie Foundation, the Farm strives to promote conservation and sustainable living in Hong Kong and South China, and runs various programmes to foster conservation of plants and animals as well as organic farming.

4. Translator's note: *xu* is a Chinese word that refers to the old type of rural market.

5. Angus was a staff member of Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden at that time.

Life in those days involved close interpersonal relationships and a high level of autonomy, self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

### **New town: a compressed everyday life**

In the 1980s, Tai Po was developed into a new town, resulting in a new layout of community space. The rural area, which belonged to all living things, was concreted and became people's private property. Thanks to the electrification of the railway line, there was an influx of people from the overcrowded city. They worked in the urban centres in the day time and returned to their homes in the new towns in the evening, becoming little more than visitors to their own homes. Subsequently, traditional neighbourhoods and communities crumbled. In addition, people's conception of time has changed dramatically. We have lost our sense of natural rhythms. Things have become one-dimensional. We have forgotten that the four seasons reflect the alternating mood of all creatures. With the increased speed of transport, the rhythm of our lives has also quickened. Our ability to feel the environment and relationships is undermined by a fast moving physical body.

### **The Tai Po Organic Farmers' Market: reversing the logic of development of Hong Kong agriculture**

In 2003 I was about to leave my job<sup>5</sup> to work in Mainland China. Before my departure, I

was working with my colleagues to open a new organic farmers' market in Tai Po. We wanted to link up the organic farmers scattered around Hong Kong and were worried that if we didn't act quickly, Hong Kong's agriculture, which already looked rather precarious, would fade away. We and our partners felt that it was our duty to do something!

The present site of Tai Po Organic Farmers' Market was selected for its proximity to the Kam Tin plain, in which many organic farms are located. This saves transport costs. Also, it is located in an area of Tai Po, next to Tai Wo Public Estate, where the old and new grassroots communities meet. The market challenges the common assumption that organic vegetables are targeted only at the middle class. Because of its geographical advantage, the prices of the organic vegetables sold in the market are lower than those sold in exclusive shops, and consumers are able to have long term and direct contact and dialogue with the farmers. Over time, a relationship of mutual trust and concern has built up, and a few thousand consumers now visit the market every Sunday.

After ten years, Tai Po Organic Farmers' Market is still filled with the sound of hawking and laughter. When we consider the organic market in the context of the rise and fall of the original Tai Po Market, we see a reversed development. If the former Tai Po Market was an incursion of

the countryside into the town, the present day organic market could be seen as an initiative of urban dwellers to know about the rural areas. And the fact that today more and more people in Hong Kong are concerned about agriculture is a reflection of this reversed development. Suddenly I seemed to have understood something, and could not help smiling, though sadly!

### The Wanchai Farmers' Market: a reflection on local community

There were two incidents in 2005 which initially had nothing to do with each other. The first was the scandal of contaminated vegetables sold in the stores of a supermarket chain. The other was the struggle against the redevelopment of an old neighbourhood in Wanchai. As fate would have it, the trajectories of these two incidents crossed each other, interwove and brought about the Wanchai Organic Farmers' Market.

The redevelopment plan of the old neighbourhood of Wanchai had set off a community heritage preservation campaign that lasted five years. It became an important milestone in Hong Kong's history of urban development. Accustomed to a linear model of economic development, we were awakened by the old-time *kaifong*<sup>6</sup> who insisted on safeguarding their community network and criticised the way community space was planned under the redevelopment scheme. They attacked

the conventional idea of development and changed our understanding of town planning. We were also enlightened as to what a community actually is.

In the meantime, the issue of contaminated vegetables, quiescent for over a decade, blew up again and shook the whole of society like a dormant volcano that had suddenly erupted.

Because of the development of new towns, a visitor's way of life has become the norm in many communities as people leave their homes early in the morning and return late in the evening. Supermarkets are now everywhere and people have become dependent on them, and our lifestyle has changed drastically. Traditional markets only provide local and seasonal produce, but goods in supermarkets come from all over the world and all seasons. The fact that there are no more geographical and seasonal boundaries is considered a giant step forward in the history of human beings. We think that so long as we have the purchasing power, our life need no longer be constrained by the natural environment.

Our dependence on supermarkets has always been built on consumer trust. This is why the contaminated vegetables incident was such a big shock for society. We suddenly realised that it was risky to be so dependent on supermarkets. Even though they had allowed us to become free from some constraints, it also meant

6. Translator's note: *kaifong* is a local Cantonese term that means residents of a neighbourhood.

7. Outside work. Angus is actively involved with Sustainable Ecological Ethical Development Foundation (SEED), an NGO that promotes sustainable living.

8. 'Social economy' is sometimes referred to as 'solidarity economy' or 'community economy'. Generally, it refers to the practice of an alternative economy which exists beyond the mainstream market or is challenging the logic of capital operation in the mainstream market. The social economy movement advocates: 1 emphasis on the development of the individual as well as society, and rejection of the notion that economic activities only serve for individual profits and capital accumulation; 2 economic justice and social equality; 3 cooperation and mutual benefit as well as mutual complement; 4 protecting the ecology and the environment; 5 democratic management and supervision from the participants; 6 multiple types of development and diversity.

There are various kinds of practices of social economy, including producers' cooperatives, consumers' cooperatives, fair trade, social enterprises, social currency, conscientious consumption, collective purchase, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) etc.

we had stopped learning and knowing about the food we eat.

By that time, we had already gained some experience in running organic farmers' markets. We<sup>7</sup> were preparing to open a farmers' market on Hong Kong Island. The panic created by the contaminated vegetables quickly transformed into support for local organic produce. The opening of a farmers' market on Hong Kong Island became imperative. With the support of the Wanchai District Council, we were able to use the public space outside of the government offices in Wanchai as the market venue.

At that time, the *kaifong* of Wanchai had put forward an alternative set of values in relation to community redevelopment that challenged the mainstream development model and provided a different Hong Kong story. It was summed up as local characteristics, community economy<sup>8</sup> and community network. It was under such unique circumstances that Wanchai Organic Farmers' Market was born and tried to demonstrate these core values. To respect the struggle of the local *kaifong*, on the market's first day a banner was hung prominently across the central part of the venue. It read: "We support local organic agriculture." It was interesting that what used to be called 'New Territories organic vegetables' had transformed into 'local organic vegetables'.

When I think about what happened more deeply, I realise that local organic vegetables have actually gained a new meaning in the history of Hong Kong's agriculture. Why?

In the past, we had a concept of 'land' but not of 'soil'. This was understandable in the context of Hong Kong's development. Our concept of land was very narrow. We were so convinced that estate and property development was inevitable that we could not even separate 'land' from 'property'. Because of this, our understanding of *nong* was relatively narrow. It could be said that most people only know about agricultural products but not so much about agriculture. We have always known about local vegetables from the New Territories, but had not heard of 'local organic vegetables'.

### One does not truly know agriculture if one has no concept of soil

Soil is a public property on Earth. The lives of all living things depend on it. Farmers live on the soil and know that all living things are interdependent. Informed by traditional wisdom, they know that agriculture is not there just to feed people; rather, it is to be shared by all living things. It is the original point of relationship between human beings and nature.

Even though Wanchai Organic Farmers' Market lasted only two years, it left behind an important legacy for Hong

Kong—the sprouting of the concept of 'local agriculture'. We were also prompted to rethink agriculture and human beings. In the seminar, *Taking Root: Vitalising CSA*, Chang Cheng-yang of Chi Mei Community College<sup>9</sup> and Prof. Hui Po-keung of the Hong Kong Lingnan University talked to us about the meaning of 'local'. In recent years we have been debating how to define 'local' agriculture in geographical terms, especially in relation to food miles.

It was only after some time that we realised that 'local agriculture' was actually a concept of relationships and not a purely geographical one.

Looking back, I found that Wanchai Organic Farmers' Market and the community movement at that time actually had the same origin. The *kaifong* opposed the redevelopment of Wanchai which was planned according to a development logic dominated by the real estate industry. They insisted on preserving the original relationships and networks in the community. We were inspired to reflect on 'local agriculture' by going beyond market-oriented ways of thinking about local vegetables. We had to understand the original point regarding the relationship between agriculture, people and nature by gaining knowledge about soil. It could be said that local agriculture is actually knowledge of and a respect for relationships.

## Returning to the ground

The Wanchai Organic Farmers' Market was located on Gloucester Road, which some say is the dragon's vein of our economy. Every time the market closed, we had to get to the MTR station located in the old part of Wanchai by walking on a long pedestrian foot bridge that crosses several main avenues. Sometimes we distributed leaflets entitled 'Visit the Local Farmers' Market, Support Local Vegetables' on the foot bridge. Other times, when we were tired, we would stand at the end of the bridge. Suddenly we realised that we actually inhabited a suspended space, living and working in high-rise buildings and walking on one flyover after another. It seems that modern cities are not owned by people. Roads are only spaces that facilitate efficient flow of cars and people. We no longer have an everyday culture close to the soil. Instead we drift in an urban space that is divided into administrated zones. Living mid-air, how could we know the soil and respect relationships? There is only one way out—we must turn and go downwards back to the ground!

### Star Ferry Organic Farmers' Market: weaving a space for slow living

For a long time, Star Ferry Pier was a landmark in our urban life. Located at the shore of Victoria Harbour, the centre of Hong Kong, it played an important part in the lives of Hong Kong people. So in 2007, when it was made known that the pier

<sup>9</sup> Chi-Mei Community College was established in Kaohsiung City, Taiwan in March 2001. It is Taiwan's first community college of an agriculture type. Its orientation is 'to learn from villages and let villages learn'. Its development is based on the belief that villages are a school. Apart from classroom teaching, the college has accumulated a wealth of community work experience over the past decade. Its strengths are education, ecological agriculture, community culture and networking.

In 2006, the College began to organise *Conference on the Long-term Prospect of Agriculture* in which there is hopefully a further study on the concepts, actions and experience accumulated over the years and the promotion of these through organising and collaboration for exchanges in rural development work and rural-urban cooperation.

was to be demolished, a wave of emotion surged through the population. The Star Ferry is an enchanting symbol of the rhythm of life in days gone by. However, its tranquil mood seems to be incompatible with today's speed-obsessed society.

In 2010 we were looking for a new venue to replace the Wanchai Organic Farmers' Market. One day we got a phone call from the Star Ferry Company. They said they wanted to open an organic farmers' market at the new pier.

In the last few years, the organic farmers' market has unexpectedly become a messenger for the spirit of local agriculture. Trembling with anxiety, we moved down from the feet of Tai Mo Shan, the highest mountain in Hong Kong, to the shore of Victoria Harbour—the Star Ferry Organic Farmers' Market. Batch after batch of rustic vegetables and fruits became art installations at the waterfront of Central District. For two days every week, organic farmers at the frontline of Hong Kong's primary industry break through the divide between the urban and the rural by displaying the culture and life of the countryside at the Star Ferry Pier. Sometimes a dozen bamboo chairs would be placed beneath the International Financial Centre tower, where we would share the concept of slow living with Hong Kong citizens.

In 2004, Taiwanese writer Lung Ying-tai pointed out that the values of Central

District represented the values of Hong Kong. Today, it is where the ferry, organic farmers and local vegetables meet. Together they weave a space of slow living which is open to citizens who want to join.

### Conclusion: taking root

A decade has gone by. How did agriculture become a hot issue in the community and find a new point of growth?

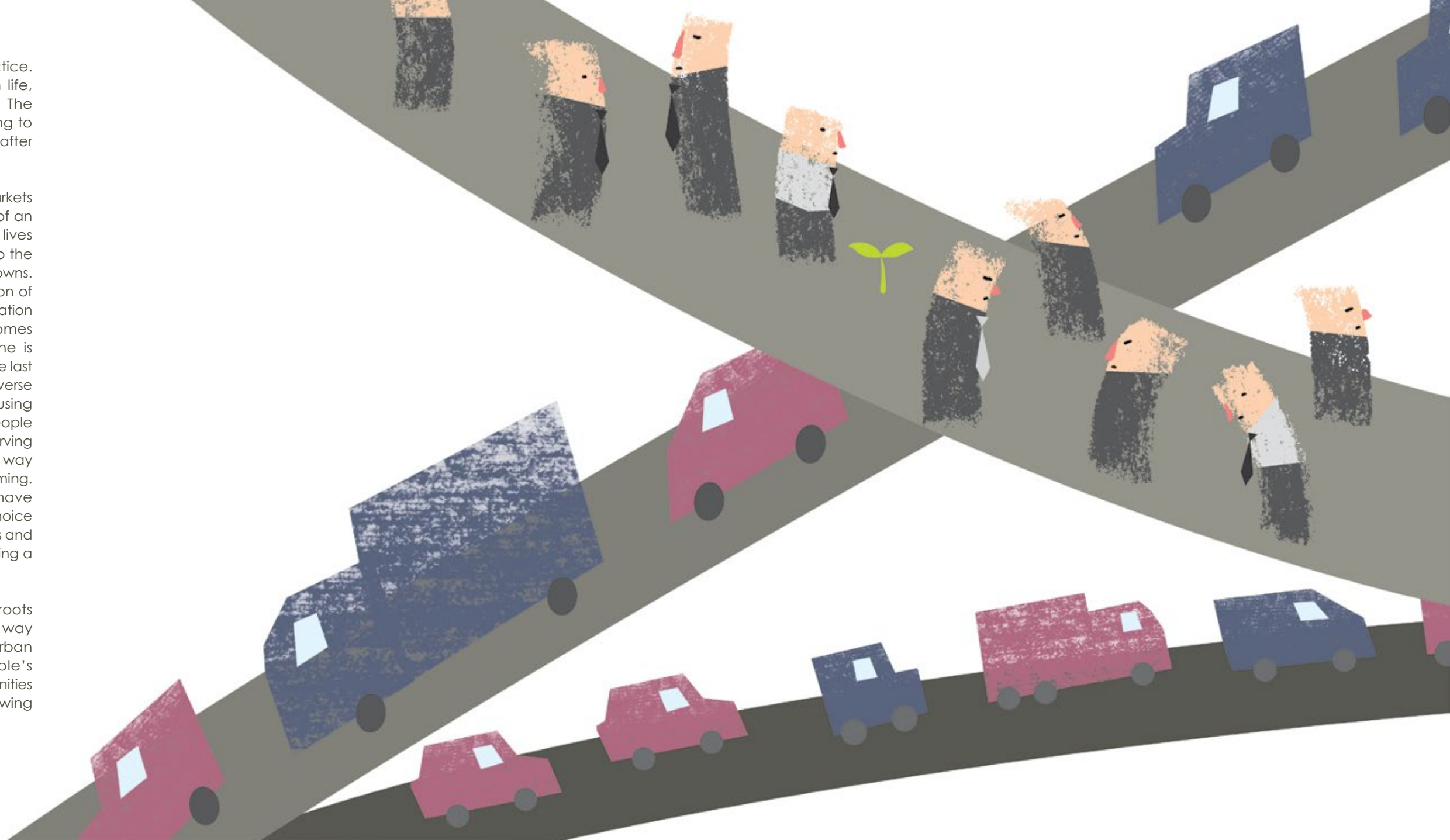
A few years ago, I heard Prof. Wen Tiejun, expert on *san nong wen ti*, the three-dimensional agrarian issues (namely village sustainability, agricultural security and farmers' rights) in Mainland China, saying that urban dwellers show concern for agriculture because they feel unsafe and threatened. After the Second World War, the USA and other western countries exported the linear model of development to the whole world, encouraging the world to move from primary industry based on agriculture to tertiary industry dominated by finance. However, the US has not followed the same path herself. Instead she has been heavily subsidising her own agriculture while introducing a number of policies to maintain a certain percentage of manufacturing industry. The reason is that a real economy and a real life must always rely on the production of real things.



Agriculture is the most real life practice. Whenever people feel insecure in life, they naturally think of agriculture. The last time we saw a wave of returning to agriculture and farm life was in 1997 after the financial crisis.

The disappearance of traditional markets implies that we have lost the pillars of an autonomous life. The space of our lives has been compressed terribly due to the planning and development of new towns. A life in mid-air results in the alienation of human relationships and the disintegration of community networks. One becomes impatient and restless because one is mentally suspended in the air. Over the last few years we have been trying to reverse the course of development by using organic farmers' markets to help people to understand the meaning of preserving agriculture and the value of a local way of life by coming in contact with farming. Today we are glad that we still have agriculture and people still have a choice to turn back and walk on earthy paths and return to a life on the ground, rebuilding a sense of security within themselves.

We are happy to see that the roots of agriculture have made their way through the soil and spread to urban communities, engaging people's imagination. Agriculture and communities are supporting each other and growing together!



# TAIWAN

The structure of agriculture in Taiwan has been undergoing changes since the 1980s, shifting from a system based on smallholders to one based on mechanisation, large-scale farming, marketisation and opening up of the food market to foreign agricultural products. Under a policy that favours trade and industrialisation, the government even encourages smallholders to abandon farming. In spite of this pressure, some people have recognised that small-scale agriculture and CSA are the way towards sustainable, eco-friendly living, and have therefore become engaged in farming and rural construction.

In this section, a youth who once lived in both city and countryside tells how he eventually realised that participation in farming was the ultimate destination of his dream, and how growing rice in the countryside in a CSA manner gives him satisfaction and tranquility. Another farmer and rural worker shares how he sees the meaning of CSA as not only confined to the economic context, but as a holistic way of life also.





**Lai Ching-sung**  
Farmer, Ko-Tong Rice Club

# A young Taiwanese activist's journey home to a life of farming

1. Translator's note: This is the first line of a poem, *Returning Home*, by Tao Yuanming, a great Chinese poet of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (AD317-420) known for singing praise to rural life in his poems. This line is from a translation by Lin Yutang (1895-1976), renowned writer and translator.

2. The seminar, *Taking Root: Vitalising CSA*, took place in Hong Kong and involved over 120 leading CSA practitioners from Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong gathered to share their experience in CSA. It was jointly organised by PCD and Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden in October 2012.

3. Translator's note: In Chinese, *nong* means farmer, agriculture and rural.

I grew up in the city but spent a year living in a rural village when I was 11. I started to be concerned with environmental issues when I was a teenager and became involved in the social movement when I was a young man. Eventually, I left the city and returned to the countryside. This journey will forever be engraved on my memory, never to be forgotten.

The year I turned 30, I decided to leave Taipei City, the political and economic centre of Taiwan, and went to Yilan, a rural township on the other side of the Snow Mountain Range. I was tired and frustrated with the social issues that had once fired me and to which I had once devoted all my energy. I felt I could not persevere with them anymore. "Ah, homeward bound I go"<sup>1</sup>—this was the truest cry of my heart at that time. I had never thought that flowing springs and the rich soil would comfort and nourish a bruised seed like me, but

because it had a chance to fall to the ground and touch the rich soil, it found the courage to grow roots!

Thanks to PCD and the participants at this seminar<sup>2</sup> who have come from different places, I realise that there is a group of fellow travellers to lend me their support as we walk together on this remote path that so few tread. I have also had the chance to recollect this journey of forming ties with *nong*<sup>3</sup> and to have the courage to sort out the story of the first half of my life which ended in my return to a life of farming—a story which could be described as: "cut it yet unsevered, order it yet the more tangled."<sup>4</sup>

## The essence of *nong*

I have an umbilical cord of *nong* that I have never been able to sever. My grandfather was a farmer all his life, and

my father grew up in the countryside, although he moved to the city to raise his family. During festivals and holidays, we would return to his rural home. Because of this, the impression I had of rural life which I gained during my childhood was of something distant yet familiar.

When I had just started secondary school, economic misfortunes befell our family. “Your father’s factory has closed down. Quick! Get on the train and leave!” Because of Grandpa’s anxious plea, we left the city and went to my father’s rural home in Taichung. It was then that I first picked up the hoe and the cow halter and lived the life of a village kid. Even though it was only for a year, in my 11-year-old eyes, actually living in the countryside was very different from the light mood and happy atmosphere of the occasional visit during festivals that I had previously experienced.

In those days, to be a farmer meant growing paddy on a bit of land, making just enough to survive and living in a three-sided, single-story courtyard house built of mud bricks covered with plaster. There were neither flushing toilets nor toilet paper. A buffalo helped to plough the land, while transplanting rice seedlings and cutting crops was a manual labour. Few rural families sent their kids to school because they could not afford to pay the fees. In short, rural life meant poverty. Because of this, to tell the truth, becoming a farmer had never been on my wish list.

### The novelty of the traditional culture of everyday life

For a city kid, it was of course difficult to adapt to life in the countryside, but it was also filled with wonders and novelties. Forced to live there, I had to adapt myself to the local way of life and learn to live as a rural kid. Because of this, I gained a view of the village which I had never had before.

“You mean there’s no toilet paper?” In front of me was the latrine pit. On one side, there was a bundle of white sticks, the use of which I did not yet know. There were also flies everywhere and their number never seemed to diminish. “Where’s the gas stove?” I soon realised that dinner in the rural area began with building and lighting a wood fire. Although this meant that there was no gas bill, my aunt had to be busy chopping wood and tying grass into tinder bundles every day. Grandma loved to grow green vegetables. Her grandchildren readily became her workers for weeding and carrying manure. Grandpa was dexterous of hand and was always making everyday objects such as wicker scoops and baskets from materials he collected from the bamboo thicket next to the house. In my young eyes, he was like a magician.

However, the skills of everyday rural life, which had been passed on for generations, are gradually being lost in the wake of modernisation. This collective decline in

4. Translator’s note: this is a line in a lyric written by Li Yu, the last ruler of the Southern Tang State during the Period of Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms in the history of Imperial China. It is translated by Chu Ta-kao, published in *Chinese Lyrics*, first published by Cambridge University Press in 1937.

5. In 1987, a group of Taiwan housewives felt the changes brought by social transformation were too drastic and that prompted them to action in response to various environmental and educational problems. The aim was to improve the quality of life. In such circumstances, the Taiwan Homemakers’ Union was born. The Union wished to protect their land and homes through green consumption. In 1993, the Union tried collective

purchase to buy rice and grapes directly from farmers, and that was the prototype of a cooperative later run by the Union. The cooperative was the first of its kind established by housewives for daily consumption. Members of the cooperative are shareholders who pull together capital, cooperate and think together, organise consumers’ power and persuade farmers and producers to make products friendly to the environment and ecology as well as crucial to family health. In 2013, the cooperative had close to 50,000 members, collaborating with 110 Taiwan farmers and six sales and marketing groups to provide members with more than 600 types of products.

such skills and know-how in everyday life only became a concern for some people when Chi Mei Community College began to conduct rural workshops during summer vacations, on the theme ‘Rural Village is a School’. Soon people started to promote urban-rural exchanges of skills and culture from the perspective of rural villages.

Another thing that left a deep impression on me as a city kid was the culture of collective labour in the village. In the city, it is the parent’s job to make a living, but in the rural village community life embraces all. Everyone has a share of the food and everyone, from the young to the old, contributes his or her effort. Life is a continuous pattern of labour. By taking up all sorts of rural work, I became a member of this new community. It might sound as if I am exaggerating, but I feel ill at ease folding my arms beside someone sweating from their labour.

### The close-knit and profound relationship between villagers

I had always heard people saying that country people were warm and hospitable. However, it was only after I had lived in a rural area that I realised that behind the warmth and hospitality, the relationships between villagers were complex and profound. Most of our relatives actually questioned our return to the village and objected to our dependence on Grandpa who earned a living by growing rice. “Do you mean we

can’t manage a few more rice bowls?” Grandpa retorted. So the old man, who was already over sixty, kept his young grandchildren with him while the burden on his shoulders became even heavier.

A walk in the village is completely different from a walk in the city. Virtually no one is a stranger. Because of this, your every act can become a subject of gossip in the village. I have always believed that villagers can become terribly calculating because of limited land and resources and the close connection between everyone’s rights and duties. Even the friendly gift-giving among relatives and friends is inevitably loaded with expectations of returns. A young and impetuous mind could find such an atmosphere suffocating. But when we eventually moved back to the city I found that the isolation and indifference between urban neighbours was even more unbearable. In the experience of the Japanese Consumers’ Cooperative Union (JCCU) and Homemakers Union Consumers Coop<sup>5</sup>, urban dwellers who have a rural background are usually the ones who are willing to participate in various kinds of labour. Looking back on my own life, it seems that I have been exploring the appropriate relationship and the right distance between human beings, one that is close-knit but not weighted with expectation.

## Nature as the life coach

“When I grow up, I want to open a zoo!” Even though these words never appeared in my composition book, they express my very first unforgettable wish. Since my childhood, different forms of life have always drawn my gaze. Biology was my favourite subject in school. In the wet market, I loved to hang around the seafood stalls which were selling fresh fishes and prawns. On the way home after school, the ditches of the few vegetable gardens along the road were the best classroom for studying nature.

When we were back in our rural home, the door to the natural world and its living things was wide open for me. My first memory of honeybees is the swelling and soreness that lasted for a long time when I caught them with my bare hands. My playmates, who were about my age, seemed to know the hiding places of all the small animals. First, look for a pile of mature compost. Dig into the compost for earthworms. Use the earthworms to fish for frogs. Feed the ducks with frogs. The sight of the frogs jumping around and the ducks shaking with excitement was really unforgettable! Life in the village was like a lesson in practical biology. The strong young Buffalo was the main source of draught power for tilling the fields. The fat bloated sow in the pig pens could consume food waste and the baby pigs she gave birth to every year were our main source of cash. The flocks of chickens and

ducks made the best dishes for festivals, banquets and as offerings to the gods. Outside of home, the mussels or snails in the ditches could always be turned into a delicacy on the dining table. Stag beetles that hid themselves beneath dried leaves in the orchards were pets that the boys fought over. The dancing butterflies in spring and the chirping cicadas in summer would very quickly become captives of wild kids! Then there were the legions of giant caterpillars hiding and perfectly camouflaged on the acacia tree. They soon became the target for a chain of mud-made shell bombings!

Apart from these animals, the fruit trees planted by Grandpa himself also allowed me to have a taste of sweetness—something hard to come by in a childhood of distress and destitution. At the doorway there was the guava tree which bore fruits all year round. Beside the irrigation ditch was a tall wax apple tree, *lian woo*. Near the duck shed there was a star fruit tree and next to the cow shed was a peach tree. Mulberry trees could be found everywhere. There were also lychee that children looked so forward to in summer as well as longan, the supply of which seemed unending during the summer vacation. When we got off school, the first thing we did was to climb up the lychee trees and feed ourselves with bunch after bunch of the delicious fruit as though it was the only thing that mattered. Such boldness seems to belong only to the wild days of youth and will never return. I remember in those

days our best natural history teacher was my cousin who was a bit older than me. No matter what time of the year, any day we saw him putting on a mysterious expression early in the morning we knew there would be a wonderful exploratory trip that day. It might be to search for the wild jelly ear fungus beneath the lush vegetation, or going upstream to look for the legendary giant mottled eel. After so many years, that childish excitement still seems to be a thing of yesterday only.

I sometimes say jokingly that I have chosen to become a farmer because it is another way to realise my childhood dream. In a paddy field cultivated in an eco-friendly manner, I see again the small living things of my childhood memory. This was also one main motivation that made me bring my children to my wife's rural home and settle down there. However, I knew I could not play the role that my cousin had played, because my childhood experience of rural life had been all too brief. So my children's rural experience is poorer in comparison. In addition, after the redivision and redistribution of farmland, the irrigation ditches have all been cemented and much of the vibrant life in the ditches has been destroyed.

## A reflection on *nong*

As fate would have it, in my second year of high school I moved back to Taipei with my family. After I had left the countryside, I began to reflect on *nong*. It was only

then that the countryside rose above the horizon of my thinking. We had moved into a small apartment of about 20 *ping* (1 *ping* = 3.3 m<sup>2</sup>). With a sewing machine it became a workplace, in addition to a bedroom with a big wooden bed. There were also a kitchen and a bathroom. The little space left, if there was any, was for study and play.

The living conditions were completely different to those in the countryside, where life was an unbroken succession of space. In the morning when I left home to go to school, I would pick up my lunch box in the kitchen, filled with the fragrance of wood. Walking out of the rice court where the grains were spread out to dry in the sun, I was met with the morning fog as I stepped on the bumpy footpath between the paddy fields. Then I passed through the green air beneath the guava tree in front of the gate and crossed the bamboo bridge beneath which a babbling stream flowed. Children liked to grope for mussels under the bridge. Further ahead was the slope of stone steps where the buffaloes cooled themselves in the water. Because the houses were located in the midst of the paddy fields, the children had innumerable ways to go home. It all depended on which tree was flowering or bearing fruits, which field had ripe melons, and in which stream fish could be found.

Soon I began to become concerned with environmental issues and learnt about the harm caused to the environment by

pesticides and chemical fertilisers used in conventional agriculture. I remembered how Grandpa would urge us to wash and shower after we had helped to spray pesticide. He would also quickly rinse his mouth with salt. This path led me to study Environmental Engineering at a university on Chianan Plain. It was 1987, the year when martial law was lifted and the anti-pollution movement was at its peak. The site of protest of the residents of Houjing in Kaohsiung, who were fighting against the construction of the Fifth Naphatha Cracking Plant, became the frontline where I studied for my credits for the Sociology Course.

In my youthful mind, the confrontation between the Chinese Petroleum Corporation (CPC) that owned the polluting plant and the farmers who were marginalised by the city embodied the injustice that I was witnessing. Behind the high walls of CPC, its staff enjoyed the use of a gym, a swimming pool, a library and a wide, green garden. Outside of the walls, Houjing farmers were faced with land expropriation and never-ending pollution of air and water. What I can never forget is the underground water, which was clear yet smelt of petroleum. It was pumped out to water the lush and panoramic paddy fields around the refinery.

### The destruction of the natural ecology

Looking back on Taiwan in the 1980s, if a name were to be coined for this period,

it would not be an exaggeration to call it 'the Decade of Enlightenment on Anti-Pollution and Environmental Protection'. Perhaps this was because Taiwan had reached the stage of rapid economic development, where every action has only one purpose—money-making. As a result, there was a proliferation of major pollution events caused by factory production, as exemplified by the case of airborne dioxin pollution in Qieding Chiating District Township of Kaohsiung, resulting from the burning of discarded electrical cables. Other cases included cadmium pollution of rice caused by Coin Chemical Industrial Co. (Guanyin Township in Taoyuan County), pollution caused by San Huang Sunko Pesticides Factory (Dali District in Taichung; factory closed down due to protests by the common people) and pollution by LCY Chemical's formaldehyde plant (Hsinchu; the factory stopped production as a result of a protest joined by university professors). The protests of the local people, such as residents of Houjing who protested the construction of Fifth Naphatha Cracker, were struggles and actions of the public to save themselves after years of grievances.

The case of PCB-contaminated rice bran oil (Changhua, Taichung) in 1979 drew back the curtains on the issue of food safety in Taiwan. Then, in 1986, oysters cultivated along Taiwan's southwestern coast turned green because of river pollution, creating a storm in the mass media. In 1988, cadmium-contaminated

rice was found being sold in the market (Kuanyin, Taoyuan). The secret bream *bi-diao* fish incident in 1993 (abnormal growth of fish in water near Kuosheng Nuclear Power Plant in Jinshan District, Taipei) and the media's reports of environmental pollution caused by pesticides and over-use of chemical fertilisers increased the Taiwanese people's anxiety about food safety.

It was during this turbulent period that a number of environmental groups were formed, such as the Consumers' Foundation, Environmental Quality Protection Foundation, Homemakers' United Foundation (HUF) and Taiwan Environmental Protection Union (TEPU). I took part enthusiastically in the activities of TEPU in my free time after school and during summer and winter vacations. Through the many activities and field studies, I learnt that the land of Taiwan has paid a very painful price for economic development. For me, the case of cadmium-contaminated rice in Kuanyin, Taoyuan and the issue of nuclear waste and the danger of nuclear power plants are issues I can never forget. After all, these momentary, point-source and irreversible pollutions amount to a death sentence for the land. All living things have been created by heaven and earth to nourish human beings. Why do people have the right to harm the natural environment to such an extent? Motivated by this internal drive, I took part in demonstrations, sit-ins and marches, which I found more alluring

than the empty classrooms. However, I also felt helpless and afraid in the many direct confrontations with the government.

### Is traditional life and culture 'superstition'?

In traditional rural life and culture, the customs related to religious beliefs, offerings and rituals are probably the most distinct. Most of the children who have left their rural homes continue to give offerings to their ancestors or conduct sacrificial rituals to pay respect to heaven and earth as well as to the dead and the immortals on the first and the fifteenth day of every month. I remember when we were living with Grandpa, faced with the unfamiliar, I often felt anxious. However, on the first and the fifteenth day of every month, the atmosphere was so different from that of the ordinary days that one was able to forget the everyday worries and nuisances for a while. On my way home along the path in the midst of the paddy fields, I could see from afar the yellow halo of the courtyard light, which was rarely lit. A table of vegetable dishes was placed in the courtyard as offerings to the gods. Chanting and sanskrit singing was played. After all these years, when I reflect on this experience, it seems to me that weekends are actually products of industrial and commercial society while giving offerings to heaven and earth twice every month is the respite that truly belongs to farmers and during which they can really relax.

I went to the southern part of Taiwan when I started university. It was only then that I found that, compared with Taipei which had been ruled by various foreign political regimes, traditional beliefs had remained more intact in rural villages and towns in southern Taiwan, built by Han people in earlier times. Even the customs of aboriginal tribes that were not completely assimilated into Han culture could still be observed. In those youthful days of hiking in the hills and descending to the sea to survey sites of environmental pollution, I became aware of the language problem. The common language (*Guoyu* or Mandarin), which was an essential tool in urban life, was not that common at agricultural sites, whether it be farming, fishing, forestry, or livestock breeding. I realised that *Guoyu* (or *Putonghua* or *Mandarin*), a language that came from the north, had its limitations in the south.

It was also around this period, in the wake of the anti-pollution and environmental protection movement, that some people began to rethink and reaffirm the values of traditional culture embodied by the common people. They conducted surveys of the beliefs and customs of all the rural villages and fishing communities in Taiwan. I learnt that the *Pat-ka-tsiang* (or *Ba Jia Jiang* in Putonghua) troupes, which were very popular in the rural area, were not gangster groups as they had been depicted in mainstream stereotyped opinions. Instead they were a kind of rural

practical arts, involving physical memories, created by our ancestors by combining changes of seasons and movements of astral bodies with actions of the limbs and beliefs in ghosts and gods.

In the protest against Fifth Naphatha Cracker, the local people of Houjing carried a sedan chair for gods and formed the *Song Jiang Zhen*<sup>6</sup> battle array in their protest march. They also staged a mock funeral for CPC, carrying a symbolic coffin, before which the police withdrew. On the day before the local referendum on the construction project was held, in the temple which was the centre of religious beliefs at Houjing, the burning incense suddenly flared up into flames. As a result of this extraordinary phenomenon, CPC, which had been trying to manipulate and divide the local people, suffered the ignominy of its construction plan being overruled by the referendum. Some people suggest that this showed not only that the locals rejected the values of the governing elites, but that popular rituals and culture actually overpowered the establishment. Such episodes were deeply impressed in my youthful mind, so much so that after I established *Ko-Tong* club<sup>7</sup> I also gave offerings to the gods before transplanting rice seedlings, before harvest and in winter. *Ko-Tong* club members and I also went to the temple to worship the gods before these activities so that the urban consumers would have a chance to experience indirectly the

6. *Song Jiang Zhen* is a kind of traditional performance integrating Chinese martial arts and other art forms. There was a traditional belief in China that performing *Song Jiang Zhen* would help to resolve turmoil in the community and protect the people.

7. See the section below entitled 'Future of *nong*'.

genuine interaction between farmers, heaven and earth.

### Connecting with *nong*

My concern for the countryside grew after I had left it. However, my cousins and friends who had remained there had chosen early on to abandon the *nong* path. Once, when I was back in the rural village, as usual I was making grand remarks about farmers' self-reliance and saving the nation by rejuvenating agriculture. An older male cousin said bluntly before he left: "You'll be a loser all your life if you become a hick farmer!" Left behind alone, I could not find words to say to myself.

Is it not true that it is much more difficult to stay in the countryside and live the real life of a farmer than to live in the city, arguing about it? I was young and could not understand how, in the old days when people were poor in material terms, our illiterate grandparents were able to raise eight or nine children by tilling the land. Why, in modern times, when the younger generation was more educated and had more money, could people not afford a life working the land? It is obvious that unless farming can bring more income to meet the ever-rising cost of living, we cannot persuade our young people to continue to engage in it.

I finished college with these questions in mind, but I saw a gleam of hope when I learned about the Japanese Consumers'

Cooperative Union. JCCU was founded in Tokyo in the 1960s. Urban housewives have organised themselves into consumers' unions cooperatives and become a stable and sustainable purchasing power. They negotiate directly with farmers and manufacturers to bargain for a more reasonable price or better quality for the products they purchase. They pay more for produce from farmers who are willing to cut down the use of pesticides or chemical fertiliser. This also guarantees the livelihood of people living in the rural area.

### The livelihood of activists

However, theories are, after all, theories. In real life it is not easy to gather a group of indifferent urban consumers who are willing to act for shared values. Fortunately, by the early 1990s, people had become more conscious of environmental issues after more than a decade of anti-pollution struggles. Homemakers Union and Foundation (HUF) was established during this period and was concerned with all sorts of issues—status of women, education, hiking trails and quality of consumer goods, etc. Its Consumption Quality Committee became the starting point of the movement of collective purchase. Collective purchase started off with only a few items (grapes, rice) and the work space was small (a corner in HUF's office). It felt like a children's game. No one ever imagined that it would grow and become such a big movement later on. The first group of participants was very

idealistic and highly proactive at the same time. They could endure overtime work and lengthy meetings and used all sorts of non-mainstream and alternative ways to organise people. For example, money was raised to establish a labour cooperative for an urban community (Tanqian Community Cooperative in Taipei County) in an effort to address the plight of urban nuclear families facing a lack of basic facilities and services in the community. The cooperative also functioned as a collection point for consumers in the collective purchase programme.

Even though the salary was low when I joined HUF, working hours were flexible and I was able to learn from all the new things that came my way. I was therefore willing to give it a try. I also felt that I was fortunate to be able to earn a living by working as a full time activist. There were friends who took part-time work in the cooperatives and got paid on an hourly basis. Even though the small income they received was not much as a subsidy for the expenses of their families, it could at least soften the complaints of other family members about them spending too much time working for the community.

As the collective purchase programme grew bigger, some members who were interested in cooking set up the Mothers' Food Production Class. They processed blemished agricultural products or surplus crops and sold them. In this way, they

provided their members with a more stable source of income. To create a diverse and friendly labour environment, people suffering from mental disability were invited to join.

HUF adopted the model of mutual concession between producers and consumers in setting the price of organic farm products. JCCU's principle in price-setting, taking into consideration the expenses of producers, was adopted. In this way, farmers had an opportunity to take part in setting the price of the fruits of their labour and learnt to establish a reasonable flow from production to marketing, and also learnt farm management.

### Communities of visions

Any discussion about collective purchase or cooperatives would highlight the importance of consumer education. However, the history of Homemakers Union Consumer Coop has shown that the existence of communities of vision is critical. It is these communities of actions that are the subjects of consumer education and advocacy.

After the wave of the anti-pollution movement in the early 1980s and the political shock of the lifting of martial law a few years later, there was much discontent and tension in society in anticipation of actions for change. HUF was the first to attempt to bring changes on the level

of everyday life and to take root at the community level. Many feminists, who had been nourished by HUF's activities of personal development, also began to return to the community in the 1990s and blossomed into beautiful flowers in response to the needs of different communities. An example is Taipei County Books and Reading Association established by Ms Chen Lai-hung in 1996. It was set up on the basis of the many Kangaroo Mom Reading Associations in rural villages and townships which had gathered mothers with infants together. The Associations had the twin objectives of meeting the development needs of mothers and engaging them in reading children's books with their small kids. These reading clubs later became the first strongholds for collective purchase and gave birth to Tanqian Community Cooperative in Taipei County—the first delivery point for community purchase. Chi-Yen Community Association (1994) was also set up in response to women's needs for personal growth. Beginning with training for trail guides, it developed gradually to become a delivery point for collective purchase, a community kitchen and a space of community life. In the meantime, it also provided women with the opportunity for reemployment and to make use of their talents. The movement of collective purchase in Taichung was also closely related with HUF's Taichung Branch (1990). Sanmin Coop, Taichung's first stronghold of collective purchase, shares an office with HUF Taichung. In Tainan, Green Concern Association set up

the first collective purchase group which later became independent and joined Homemakers Union Consumers Coop as its South Branch, while in Hsinchu, the office of Hsinchu City Environmental Protection Association was also used initially as a delivery point for collective purchase.

Looking back on the first 10 years of the collective purchase movement, Homemakers Union Consumer Coop could not have built such a strong base if not for the quiet contribution of various communities around Taiwan and the effort of those who have been advocating the idea of collective purchase. Although the collective purchase groups were small in those early days, they had a strong sense of mission and massive momentum for movement. Today, cooperatives might have grown to 10 times as big, but the participation of communities of visions seems to have declined and advocacy work has again fallen on the shoulders of the limited number of paid staff. Thus the foundation of trust and interaction between consumers and producers is weakening and the distance between them is increasing.

### The practice of nong

I turned 30 years old in the year 2000. Life seemed to have become a swamp from which I could not free myself. I had left HUF Collective Purchase Centre. My hectic schedule of travelling frequently between the city and the countryside had slowed



down. I did not have to get up early in the morning to drive to the suburbs to visit farmers and bring their products to the city, and there was no need to use up weekends visiting urban consumers and organising all sorts of activities for publicity! For a year or two, my life felt like a deflating balloon. My only source of income was occasional Japanese translation work. Every day, from morning until night, I was stuck moving between the computer room, the kitchen and the bathroom. I could only place my longing for nature, the countryside and the wilderness in the few wretched plants on the balcony and a tank of mosquito fish that I had got from a friend's fish pond.

“Why don't you set up a marketing channel yourself?” some farmers whom I befriended when I worked at HUF's Collective Purchase Centre suggested enthusiastically. The Collective Purchase Centre was set up as a company and was one of the few marketing channels for organic agricultural products in those days. And as the Internet became more popular, there might be a chance to start something new by liaising on the web with organic farmers I knew.

However, I quickly dropped this idea, not because of any problem at the consumers' end (a group of active and highly conscious urban dwellers, with very clear demands and capacity for actions, had been organised, thanks to years



of effort of HUF's Consumption Quality Committee), but because of one with the producers. In my interactions with farmers, I found that in the context of smallholders or household-based farming, there were usually specific personal reasons or family factors influencing a farmer's decision to turn to organic farming or use less pesticide and chemical fertiliser. Moreover, these farmers were scattered all over Taiwan. Apart from a few cases which had support from external sources (such as Sanchih Vegetables Production Group of Taipei County, set up with the support of National Taiwan University Building & Planning Foundation), most of them had been struggling on an individual basis and were competitors when vegetables were in season. It was therefore difficult for organic farmers to develop their own discourse and to have a dialogue with urban consumers as agents of a social movement. Under such circumstances, if I had remained in the city and organised consumers, I would still be faced with the issue of imbalance in the dialogue between consumers and producers. I began to wonder if it would be possible for me to travel upstream on the long river of production and marketing, and to live in the countryside, or even become a farmer.

### The Waldorf community

In the spring of 2000, I moved to Yilan County with my family. We decided to leave behind the unchanging urban life of Taipei and wanted our small daughter

to receive education in a Waldorf school (Waldorf education is a humanistic approach to pedagogy for young children which is largely experiential and sensory-based). We rented a house set amidst green paddy fields.

Maybe because of the educational spoon-feeding that I had had at school, I was always concerned about education reform. I heard that someone was advocating Waldorf education in Yilan and found some initial information about it. I sensed that it was similar to what I thought education should be. We decided not to hesitate anymore and left Taipei for Yilan. Tzi-Hsin Waldorf Kindergarten in Tung Dongshan Township is the first Waldorf school in Taiwan. It completely changed my idea of 'learning'. In its classrooms, which have no textbooks, learning follows the rhythms of life and is a joyful activity. The teacher must do his or her best to create a learning experience which for the children is a sky under which they fly freely!

In order to better understand the ideas of Waldorf education I joined the school, teaching Japanese, and took up a course to learn the fundamentals of biodynamic farming<sup>8</sup>. Since Waldorf education places lot of emphasis on parents growing together as a group, I joined many teachers' training and learning courses which rapidly helped me to build up connections with other people in our new rural home. I was also motivated to take up farming. Later, during my free time

<sup>8</sup>. Biodynamic farming, which is a concept and practice developed on the basis of Waldorf education, sees the animals and plants, the ecological environment, the movement of the earth and the changes of the stars as living phenomena. It advocates a return to nature by restoring the vitality of the soil using non-polluting methods so that crops can flourish healthily. However, biodynamic farming can only be carried out on the basis of an organic way of farming. A piece of land on which conventional farming has been practiced is polluted by pesticides and chemical fertilisers. It must stay fallow for a few years for it to return to a non-polluted state before organic farming can be practiced.

when I was not doing translation work, I began to grow some vegetables and rice on a field which belonged to my father-in-law. Whenever I harvested more than my family needed, I took the vegetables in a wooden crate to the school and sold them at the office. In this way I became the first farmer unofficially collaborating with the school.

At the end of the summer of 2001, I harvested the rice which I had cultivated as a first trial. There was still a lot left even after I had given some away to friends. I sought help from the parents' network of the Waldorf school again and received a lot of encouragement and positive feedback. This would later become a main support for me in making up my mind to earn a living as a rice farmer. I could still remember the warm words in an email message from a mother who was the first to buy the rice: "Reading the notes of Ching-sung and looking at the yellow glistening rice, I felt I saw the rice filled with the energy of the sun. To be able to eat this rice is a blessing for which we must feel exceptionally thankful and which we must cherish. We thank you for your hard work and your thoughtfulness!"

### Exploration of 'relations' in the common effort for the Farmers' Fair

However, my rice-growing experience of 2001 was a failure from the perspective of earning a living from farming. Although I was able to sell half of the rice that I

produced, I had to give the other half away to friends. In other words I was still unable to cover the cost of production from selling the rice and I was only a 'half farmer, half X'. The life was fulfilling both physically and psychologically, but I could not find the balance between my goals and reality. In the end I decided to leave Taiwan for a while and look for other opportunities to learn farming. I considered Israel's kibbutzim (a Hebrew word referring to collective farms) and Australian biodynamic farms, but in the end I went back to Japan to study Environmental Law in graduate school.

During my stay in Japan I did not have any opportunity of doing farming myself, but I noticed that farmers' fairs and venues for direct sale of agricultural products were sprouting around the country like bamboo shoots in spring. They were alternative marketing channels for organic or natural food. In 2006 the first farmers' fair in Taiwan was initiated by Chi Mei Community College as a model to promote the ideas of local consumption of local food, self-sufficiency and self-reliance. At the end of that year, Hope Market was established in Taiching. Today it is the oldest farmers' market in Taiwan. In summer 2009, Green Life Farmers' Market was launched in Yilan by Lishan's A-Bao. To tell the truth, initially I was not particularly interested in taking part in a farmers' market because it involved mobilising a lot of people. A farmers' fair lasts only a short while but requires a lot of effort. For me, it was a significant

burden, but thanks to the enthusiastic support of the parents at Tzu-Hsin Waldorf Kindergarten, I was later able to take part regularly. Looking back on the experience of Japan's consumer cooperatives, while agricultural products and information are usually sent to the consumers directly point-to-point, the annual offering rituals conducted in autumn are like a large-scale food and agriculture festival in which the cooperatives pass on ideas of the movement and new members are recruited.

After I started taking part in the Green Life Farmers' Market, I soon realised the importance of the modern fair as a catalyst for interpersonal relationships. Farmers, who are busy people day in and day out, are able to meet, exchange information and seek help from each other. Consumers interested in food security issues or organic farming can get reliable information. Most importantly, the farmers are able to plan and set up the venue together. From the experience of working together for a common goal, a sense of a collective grows, gradually developing into a symbiotic relationship of collaboration for mutual benefit. With this inspiration, since 2009, the *Ko-Tong* club has been holding gatherings in the fields three times a year (during transplantation of rice seedlings, harvest and winter solstice) in which local smallholders at Yilan are invited to take part in a farmers' fair to provide consumers with safe agricultural products. *Ko-Tong* club members also display their talents in

cooking and craft making in the farmers' fair, making their participation more varied.

### Future of nong

In the spring of 2004, I completed my graduate studies at the Graduate School of Law at Waseda University in Japan. After much mental debate, I finally decided to return to Yilan to work the land. I had given up my study for a doctorate to become a farmer! In my mind, I was very clear that I should return to farming immediately, rather than waiting for a few more years. To put it in simple terms, at the bottom of my heart, farming was my only choice.

I remember it was spring when I returned to Lanyang. The newly transplanted seedlings in the paddy fields were fresh and green. Looking at the extensive paddy fields, which covered over 5 *kah*<sup>9</sup>, I exclaimed to myself, "I'm finally back!" After being torn between all sorts of ideals and realities in the first half of my life and rushing between cities and rural villages, it had become increasingly clear to me what I really wanted. I knew the city did not suit me and I did not belong there. But could I earn a living as a farmer?

At that time my good friend, Mr Heo Chin-fu, had just rented a piece of farmland through the Farmers' Association and had recruited a group of urban consumers who agreed to support farmers by ordering and prepaying for their products and sharing the risks. For me, this was like

9. Translator's note: *Kah* was a measurement of land introduced to Taiwan when it was under Dutch rule in the 15th century and is still used in rural areas by farmers to measure farmland under cultivation. One *kah* is about 0.97 hectare.

10. Translator's note: The term, *ko-tong*, in Chinese means shareholder of a crop.

a gift that fell from heaven—something that I must try! Before I had returned to Taiwan, I was asked to draft the first introduction about the idea of a *ko-tong* club for the purpose of recruiting *ko-tong*<sup>10</sup>. The title of the introduction was 'An invitation to cultivate rice: let urban dwellers eat rice they grow themselves.' To raise funds for growing rice, urban consumers were invited to join as *ko-tong* by prepaying TWD1,500 for which they would receive 30 catties of rice at TWD50 per catty. In this way, the field manager, who was employed to cultivate the land, was guaranteed an income for his labour. I gained the confidence to start on my endeavour as I saw a new future for agriculture.

### The relationship in the *ko-tong* community

The idea of the *Ko-Tong* club actually originated from collective purchase, but there was only one product—rice! To strengthen the relationship of mutual support between producers and consumers, and share the risk, a cooperative model of production was chosen. Moreover, to maintain and sustain interactions with club members, the rice was delivered to their homes. On the one hand, this obviated the need for members to find storage space for rice at home. On the other hand it ensured that they got fresh rice. However, what was more important was that, by delivering rice on a regular basis, information about the

working conditions in the field could be delivered to the members in writing.

In this way, a club member had the opportunity to evolve from being only a consumer of rice to becoming a co-producer who not only understood the conditions but also had the chance to take part in labouring in the field. In 2006, in addition to the printed newsletter, a blog was established to communicate information. In all seasons of the year and all weathers (even typhoons), club members had the opportunity to grow with the crop in the field and share the joys and worries of the farmer through the blog.

Such a close interaction between producers and consumers was designed with the expectation of a more diverse organisational development. We were even thinking of a collective transportation and marketing system on the production end and a community supported farm in which more farmers could take part. Such expectations had been flowing in the air as early as the first *ko-tong* meeting. Someone even suggested setting up an association. However, among the first club members, no one was willing to take an active part in organising a non-profit organisation. Instead some members thought, from the perspective of profit-making, that the club might be able to find a niche for itself in the increasingly competitive organic produce market. Because of this, the club would later become more dependent on the field manager who had to take

up both production and administrative tasks. The opportunity for the subsequent development of a community of *ko-tong* was reduced.

### The diverse livelihood of farmers

In the early period of the development of the *Ko-Tong* club, produce prices were raised twice. The first time was due to a lack of knowledge of the cost of rice cultivation and an underestimation of labour costs. The second was due to the relocation of the farming site. Since there was a need to find out all over again how to grow rice at the new site, the total area of cultivation was reduced, resulting in a rise in the cost of production per catty of rice. Fortunately, because of the trust between farmer and club member, the price hike did not have too big an impact on keeping the balance between production and marketing.

In 2009, *Ko-Tong* club entered its second stage of development. The club members were no longer obligated to share the risk of production. Instead, the new approach was based on pre-ordering and planned production. The change was introduced to increase the distance between the producer and the consumers. This is because the organisation of manpower (including paid and non-paid staff) had yet to be developed smoothly. Prior to this, as the field manager, my work in terms of liaison with club members and promotional activities, as well as farm

activities for consumers who were not club members, had been increasing and had actually become too much for me. The change allowed me to shift from the role of a paid field manager to a farmer who was responsible for selling his own products and bore the risk of production himself.

After I lost the income security guaranteed by the *ko-tong* system, I had to re-examine the problem of livelihood. Labour power is the only thing a farmer can depend on in production. However a farmer's labour capacity will definitely diminish as he or she gets older. How can we ensure that a farmer can earn a living? Apart from the development of agricultural enterprise which has been promoted by the Taiwanese government, is there another alternative for smallholders, an alternative which belongs to them?

In the last decade of experience of *ko-tong* contract farming, we have found that as smallholders come into direct contact with consumers through farmers' fairs and direct sales, farmers may also start to produce and sell processed food according to the needs of consumers. Not only does this help to reduce waste during a bumper harvest, but their crops also gain added value and a new group of consumers can be developed. Apart from this, as urban areas continue to expand, the experience of rural life becomes rare and precious. Hosting consumers, who want to visit farms and experience the country existence, becomes another

source of income for farmers. So long as a farmer is willing to maintain a good ecological environment, diverse sources of a stable livelihood can be created and developed on the original base of production and marketing. Of course, what is most important is for farmers to develop an environment of sustainable farming according to their own needs and taking into consideration their own conditions and those of the land being farmed.

### Rejuvenation of the community of smallholders

*Ko-Tong* club was established in 2004. For me, it has been a wonderful experience of returning home to a life of farming. In this process, I have been transformed from a rebellious young man who was eager to pursue outside excitements to reach superficial goals to a middle-aged man who is focused on the present and is content with a simple life.

As I ponder on this journey of mine, with its various way-points (environmental education, ecological survey, collective purchase or my translation job), they all seem to only have been means that allowed me to come close to my dream. It was only when I became a full-time farmer that I realised farming could be the final destination of that dream! It does not require any evidence. The inner satisfaction and peace I gain from it explain it all.

In terms of livelihood, not only does the system of *ko-tong* ensure that the basic needs of my family are met, it also provides the space for me to be my true self. So long as the cultivation process in the field is open and reported honestly, there are always people who are willing to lend their steadfast support. The effect is much more direct than gaining organic certification for organic products.

Culturally, I have been trying to learn and pass on traditional rural wisdom by learning traditional skills in farming, brewing and fermentation. Through *ko-tong* gatherings and activities such as farmers' fairs, urban consumers have the opportunity to enter the everyday life arena of rural producers. Young people and children, who have never had any experience of farming, have the opportunity to touch the soil and allow it to leave marks inside them.

With regard to interpersonal relationships, because of my farming, I have been able to gain the recognition of rural farmers and to share their language and ways of thinking. Consequently, I can help to build bridges between rural producers and urban consumers who have always been distanced from each other.

Ecologically, a farming method which is friendly to the environment helps to reduce the pressure on the farmland. The ditches and the dykes of the fields provide the spaces for small animals to live. Because of the pressure of rural land development

and the need to maintain a certain level of crop production, it has not been possible to provide more space for biodiversity. However, we have been trying to shorten the distance between urban consumers and living things in the fields by organising visits to the farm and other experiential activities in the hope that consumers pay attention to the importance of maintaining a sustainable ecology in farming sites.

Finally, the focus of my concern right now is the formation of a new rural community! The history of the countryside is woven by the lives of innumerable smallholders. The decline of rural areas is also a result of more and more smallholders abandoning their farms for the city. In the past, many rural youths have gone to the city in search of a better life. The only way to rejuvenate the countryside is to have a new generation of young people who are willing to leave the cities. The emergence of the *Ko-Tong* club a decade ago seemed to suggest that a new way of living in the countryside was possible. It is therefore surprising that only a few people have followed our lead.

In spite of this, the wheels of history never stop. The issue of agriculture and farmers continues to brew and more and more young people are exploring alternative paths home to their rural roots. After a decade of exploration, *Ko-Tong* club has also won the trust of farmers. More and more of them are willing to contract out their land for rice cultivation. Many ecological farmers have now gathered in

Shenkou Village in Yuanshan Township. There are now about ten paddy farming households that do not use pesticides or chemical fertiliser. They cultivate about 15 hectares of land, including a plot cultivated by student supporters of Taiwan Rural Front. This year for the first time they are going to employ a part-time field manager and will be cultivating a hectare of wet paddies. Apart from this, they have also contracted a local farmer and will be purchasing a hectare of rice from him.

The impact appears to be small but its effect can really be seen in Yuanshan. I have always felt that a strong characteristic of the city is its ability to change. However, what comes fast also disappears fast. The countryside appears to be conservative, but once a change occurs, it is thorough and long-term! Even if it takes one's whole lifetime, it is worthwhile if one person is able to change the village where he or she lives. This is because in this process, watered by one's meticulous efforts, other people's homes have, with the passage of time, become your own home.





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# CSA is a way of life

1. Translator's note: the writer uses the term, "qiang qu", which is used by Hakka people to describe winnowing. After the grain is harvested, a wind-driven winnower is used to sift out the chaff from a pile of grain. The chaff is blown away and the heavier grain is left behind.

2. Translator's note: the writer uses the term, *pan shang*, which is a term used in Taiwan to refer to the middlemen who purchase agricultural products from the farmers.

I come from a farming family. We have been working the land since the time of my grandfather or even earlier, and it's the same on my mother's side. As is typical of smallholders in Taiwan, we have a few small, scattered plots. In my memory agriculture has always been part of life. Winnowing<sup>1</sup> and sun-drying rice, harvesting soybeans and bananas, transporting farm products... these laborious activities have remained with me in all stages of my life and have had a considerable impact on my subsequent development.

In the past, farmers' activities were generally limited to agricultural production. Except in very rare cases, no matter what the farmers grew, they either handed their produce to the Farmers' Association or sold it to the middlemen<sup>2</sup>. Looking at it from another angle, the existence of the middlemen meant that farmers were unfamiliar with the marketing network and

the rules of the game. They had no access to the market and no way of finding out what consumers thought of their produce. Over time this situation solidified into a structure in which the role of farmers was only in production.

In the last few years this structure has started to loosen. Farmers have begun to meet with consumers through all sorts of channels, such as websites and farmers' markets. Some farmers even organise events for consumers to experience farming activities such as harvesting. In this way, they find out what consumers think. The fact that the producers can meet the consumers and vice versa has huge ramifications. Farm products are no longer just commodities. Instead they have some sort of personality, circulating not only money, but also feelings and emotions, ideas and principles, and even some sort of belief.

Of all the attempts to loosen the above-mentioned traditional structure, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is without doubt the most ambitious and challenging. Because of the difference in social context, CSA assumes different forms in different countries. In USA where CSA flourishes, the Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines CSA as follows:

“Community Supported Agriculture consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production. Typically, members or 'share-holders' of the farm or garden pledge in advance to cover the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer's salary. In return, they receive shares in the farm's harvests throughout the growing season, as well as satisfaction gained from reconnecting to the land. Members also share in the risks of farming, including poor harvests due to weather woes or pests.”<sup>3</sup>

### CSA: producers and consumers sharing the risks and harvests

From USDA's definition, it can be seen that the basic principle of CSA is that producers and consumers participate in and share the risks and rewards of production. The CSA approach is very different from the traditional approach in which smallholders

had no say over the price of their products while they had to face production risks on their own. It is also different from corporate farming in which the farm owner not only has the power to decide the price but also controls the harvests. Experienced farmers say: “Skill in farming is not what makes a farmer smart; skill in selling is what makes a farmer smart!” In the past, farmers not only had to face the risk of crop failure as a result of poor weather or natural disasters, they also had to face the risks of price collapse caused by a bumper harvest. In Taiwan, CSA is translated into *shequxielinongye*. The term *xieli* ('join in common effort') vividly captures the essence of CSA<sup>4</sup>.

Ms Elizabeth Henderson, a CSA practitioner in the USA, is an advocate for the CSA movement. She has been invited to visit Taiwan for exchange a number of times in recent years. Two things that she said about CSA on the few occasions I have met her were very memorable. First, when a CSA operator recruits members, he/she has to calculate the cost and his/her needs. The latter is calculated on the basis of one's basic needs. In other words, for Elizabeth, it is sufficient that the payment she receives from the members covers her basic living costs. There is no profit-making motive. Second, after she has calculated the cost, she does not set a fixed price for each product. Instead members make their own assessment with regard to the price that they are ready to pay. A white-collar member may be

3. See <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml>

4. In an article written by Mr. Shu Shi-wei in Issue No. 13 of the Taiwanese magazine, *Qing Ya Er*, CSA is translated into *shequxielinongye*. This is the first time CSA has been translated into this term.

ready to pay a higher price for the farm products while a blue-collar member may pay a lower price.

The above-mentioned practices shed new light on our way of understanding agriculture and life. The first practice of simple living creates a form of caring interaction with an Earth that is running out of resources. The second practice brings tremendous insight into how, as a member of a group or society, a person may do their best in performing their duty while taking their personal circumstances into consideration. In other words, CSA is not only a new way of farming, and its implications are not only for economics. Instead it is a way of life which is forward-looking, progressive and holistic.





# MAINLAND CHINA

Among Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, the concept of CSA is newest in Mainland China, with a history of about ten years. Yet the situation on the mainland offers favourable conditions for CSA, which helps address certain problems with which the country is faced. The most serious problem for agriculture in China is the *san nong wen ti*, or three-dimensional agrarian issues, mainly concerning farmer poverty, the withering of villages and the marginalisation of agriculture. CSA, with its emphasis on small scale farming, offers an alternative to help smallholders sustain a living. While food safety issues have swept across China in the past few years, CSA, which encourages ecological agriculture and healthy agricultural produce, represents an opportunity for change.

Rapid industrialisation and urbanisation has drawn a few hundred millions of youngsters from rural areas to the cities, but they do not find their new life happy or satisfying. Some of these workers have chosen to return to their home villages to work as farmers. CSA offers a helpful way for these rural returnees to rebuild their withered villages and farming life. In this section, we learn about two cases of CSA work in the countryside and how the people involved strive to resume the values of a smallholder-based agriculture. In the third article, we glimpse the history and features of rural regeneration in China, mainly led by youths and intellectuals.





**Chen Jing**

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# Great rice from Nurture Land

1. Nurture Land is a non-profit making organisation set up in 2006. The founders were a group of urban dwellers who had been reflecting on the intricate relationship between "human's physical and mental health and the health of land" in the course of which they realised that many social problems could be traced to the exploitative 'urban—rural/farmer—land' relationship in a commercial society. They chose the name Nurture Land because they wanted to nurture their mind and the land through actions in pursuit of a form of social development which was healthy and harmonious.

It was a Wednesday afternoon. Beneath the big banyan tree in Guantang Village in Panyu District of Guangzhou City, there were two small inconspicuous warehouses with rolled-down gates—a scene common in innumerable urban villages. I entered by a small door on the gate. On the left hand side was a low cabinet. Hongping, a member of Nurture Land<sup>1</sup>, was weighing peppermint leaves beside it. There were jars labelled with all sorts of fractions and signs. Hongping was mixing table salt with herbs. In the middle of the warehouse was a big, long table. Fresh leafy vegetables, eggplants and other crops were placed neatly along it. They were organic vegetables grown by Su Debiao in Wuguishan, a mountainous area in Zhongshan City. The vegetables

had arrived only the day before but over a hundred catties had already been sold through collective purchase. The shelves along the walls were stacked with other products for sale. There were soaps from Taiwan's Leezen Shop, cleaning agents produced by Nurture Land, skincare products handmade by Jinzhanhua Workshop, brown sugar and dried tofu strips from Guangxi, Hona organic soy sauce from Shandong, grains and dried food from all over the country. Of course, there was also rice—the staple food of the southern Chinese.

## 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 of rice from Nurture Land

### 1 Persistence:

- Environment-friendly farming

### 2 Principles:

- Support environment-friendly farmers;
- Promote healthy consumption

### 3 Bases:

- Lianshan Rice-Fish Farming Group in Guangdong;
- Daoxiang Nanyuan Ecological Wet Paddy Cooperative in Jiangxi;
- Chentang Village Ecological Farming Cooperative in Heng County, Guangxi

### 4 Principles of farming:

- Preserve old crop varieties;
- Make organic fertiliser;
- Use ecological methods to control pests;
- Unpolluted environment

### 5 Main reasons for choosing the rice from Nurture Land:

- Support livelihood of smallholders;
- Preserve old crop varieties and traditional ways of farming;
- Healthy;
- Tasty;
- Fresh

Nurture Land's main business is selling rice, and its publicity is handled by A Yan. Since she started to work for the organisation, an attractive leaflet has been published to promote its rice. The "1, 2, 3, 4, 5" listed above comes from the leaflet and the keyword is "friendly"—friendly to the environment, to smallholders, and to consumers. This friendliness can be seen across the whole operation of Nurture Land.

### Inherit, break new ground and pass on

Nurture Land's rice comes mainly from three areas: Heng County in Guangxi, Lianshan in Guangdong, and Yifeng in Jiangxi.

PCD started to promote ecological agriculture in Chentang Village in Heng County, Guangxi in 2005, by supporting traditional and environment-friendly farming methods and initiatives on urban-rural interaction and sustainable livelihood. To start with, it was natural that farmers were worried about production output and income, but after years of experiment and direct communication with consumers, the farmers finally gained confidence. They now know that the output of environment-friendly farming can be high and the produce tastier. Even though the rice is more expensive than that sold in normal markets, urban consumers are willing to pay a premium for rice cultivated in such an environment-friendly manner. In 2008,

2. To provide training to young people who want to engage in CSA, Nurture Land hosts interns taking part in PCD's CSA internship programme.

Nurture Land started to sell the Heng County rice in the Pearl Delta region.

Lianshan is located in the northwestern part of Guangdong Province, bordering Guangxi and Hunan. It is mountainous and relatively inaccessible. Because of this, unlike the Pearl Delta region which has lost most of its fields and fish ponds amidst rapid economic development, Lianshan has preserved its traditional farming culture and skills. In 2009, Nurture Land met a farmer called A Guang in Lianshan. He became the first farmer to work with the organisation. A Guang tried to grow old varieties of rice and raised fish in the fields at the same time. He was the first of many. By 2012, Nurture Land was working with 10 farmers and expected to sell over six tonnes of rice grown by them in 2013.

Yao Huifeng was a CSA intern<sup>2</sup>. A devout Christian, Yao is cheerful and popular with Nurture Land's long-standing customers. He returned to his rural home in Yifeng in Jiangxi Province to practice rice-fish farming. Nurture Land started to sell his rice in March, 2013. It was the first batch of rice that Yao had harvested from his paddy fields, in which he simultaneously raised ducks.

For Nurture Land, the building of these collaborative relationships with its three partners in Heng County, Lianshan and Daoxiang Nanyuan mark a progression in its growth. The beginning of ecological agriculture in the village of Chentang in

Heng County had a lot to do with PCD. Chentang then naturally became a partner of Nurture Land. In Lianshan, Nurture Land identified a partner of its own accord for the first time. In the first case Nurture Land inherited what had been done earlier. In the second case Nurture Land was breaking new ground for itself. Daoxiang Nanyuan, which was established by CSA intern Yao Huifeng after he returned to his rural home, was the result of Nurture Land passing on its knowledge and experience.

Since all three cases of collaboration were started at different stages of Nurture Land's growth and were shaped under different circumstances, they naturally take different forms.

In the case of Heng County in Guangxi, the farmers had been exploring ecological agriculture for a long time before they started working with Nurture Land. The collaboration was therefore simple and smooth.

It was very different in the case of Lianshan. When Nurture Land first met the farmers there, they had no prior knowledge of CSA or of Nurture Land. Initially, they were unsure they could trust the young people coming from outside. They also doubted they could make much from selling their fish and the rice, or even that they could sell their produce at all. Nurture Land had to pay them in advance to encourage them to try. They also visited the farmers

regularly to build up a relationship with them and to increase mutual trust. This was also a means to monitor the production on behalf of the consumers.

At Daoxiang Nanyuan, Huifeng is a former intern of Nurture Land and there is mutual trust between them. Nurture Land believes that Huifeng will abide by their principles and be responsible with respect to the environment and to the consumers, whether in the choice of seeds or in his farming.

Nurture Land faces similar issues in its experience with other farmers. XiaoHao, the leader of Nurture Land goes to the countryside a few times every year to visit farmers the organisation works with and to identify new partners. In the beginning, Nurture Land worked mostly with veteran farmers, but in recent years, there has been a growing number of young and middle-aged people who have returned to their rural homes. Tong Jun, for example, used to own an electronic factory in Shenzhen. He began to do natural farming after he returned to Zhangjiajie in Hunan in 2009. Xuemei was a CSA intern in Shuangshan Natural Farm in Guilin<sup>3</sup>. She returned to Heqing County in Yunnan Province when she finished her internship and is now growing herbs to make essential oil. Guo Rui returned home to Conghua in Guangzhou to do farming and to rear chickens after he graduated from South China Agricultural University. Zhichang used to work for Huaiwei<sup>4</sup>. Now he is

back in his rural home in Huangmei County in Hubei.

These new farmers have had a college education and have experienced urban life, but they have not previously spent much time in the countryside. Initially, sales pressure and non-acceptance by their families troubled them. They lack the skills of veteran farmers, but they make up for it with their perseverance.

Huifeng joined Nurture Land as a CSA intern six years after he graduated from university. He worked for a pharmaceutical company at that time and his income was not bad. In his family's eyes, he had a decent job. But he was unsatisfied. He felt that a higher position or better paid jobs would not bring him the internal peace and satisfaction that going home to the countryside and farming would give him.

When Huifeng first came to Nurture Land, he said: "My village has beautiful mountains, clear streams and fertile land. I used to help my parents to grow rice when I was small. Even when I studied in the university, I would help in the field when I went home during vacations. Farming was strenuous, especially during the period of *shuang qiang* [when harvesting rice grown in the earlier season and transplanting seedlings for the next season coincide]. It was so tiring that one could not help crying. However, I have always loved farming and I have always had a dream of going home to work the land."

3. Shuangshan Natural Farm in Guilin was a host organisation in PCD's internship programme in 2010-2012 during which Xuemei joined the farm as a CSA intern.

4. Translator's note: A leading electronic firm in China.

5. Translator's note: *you zhong* literally means 'to own seeds', but it is also a colloquial term meaning 'to have the courage'.

6. Ainong Hui was established by a group of urban consumers in 2004 in Liu Zhou City of Guangxi Province. The organisation tries to consolidate consumers' power through CSA. In rural areas, it encourages smallholders to collaborate and to engage in mutual help for the development of local agriculture; whilst in the city, it markets healthy agricultural produce, grown using local agricultural methods, through alternative marketing means such as restaurants and community farmers' fairs. The organisation attaches great importance to training youngsters and actively participates in internship programmes, and also encourages interns to create their own business in CSA.

The reality is not as bright as the dream, however. When a farmer gives up conventional farming in favour of natural farming, not only will his crop be on trial, his faith will, too. The rice seedlings are yellow and small but no chemical fertiliser is permitted. Pests are attacking the crops but no pesticide is allowed. One must calmly face what is happening and quietly accept whatever nature gives and creates.

"If what you do is right, you only have to persist. Sooner or later you will win all kinds of help and overcome all sorts of difficulties. When I came home a year ago to take up natural farming, my mother nagged at me every day and my father treated me like a stranger. My folks criticised what I did and other villagers laughed at me. A year later, my mother no longer nags at me and my father is labouring with me enthusiastically. Villagers ask me about natural farming and want to work with us. Don't give up. Don't leave. Persist and you will find a new heaven and earth!" Huifeng posted this message joyfully on his blog in May, 2013. He sowed persistence and harvested everyone's recognition.

### Look for rice and be someone you zhong<sup>5</sup>

Most rice sold today is hybrid rice. Compared with traditional varieties, hybrid rice requires more fertiliser and pesticide and also uses more water. Huifeng says that a catty of traditional rice seeds costs

about 5 or 6 *yuan* while hybrid rice seeds cost up to 30 *yuan*; moreover, hybrid rice seeds cannot be conserved. It is possible that farmers get higher yield but not necessarily higher income. In terms of environmental cost, the excessive use of chemical fertiliser and pesticide leads to land degradation and pollution. The productivity of traditional rice varieties may be less than that of hybrid rice, but the fact that they have been cultivated for hundreds of years is a proof that they suit the local climate and soil. Huifeng likes to use the slogan of Ainong Hui<sup>6</sup> (Love Farmers Association) to express his persistence in searching for traditional crop varieties: "I want to be someone you zhong."

Consumers may support ecological farming in spirit and be ready to pay more for rice cultivated in an environment-friendly manner, but if the rice has a poor taste support will sooner or later fall away. This is clear to Xiao Hao and Huifeng, who both used to work with urban consumers. They know they have to look for and preserve traditional rice. They also have to select the rice varieties that consumers like. Huifeng travels around looking for traditional varieties of rice whenever he has the time, and has found five. Xiao Hao uses the networks he has built up over the years and has found a few varieties from Guangxi and Guangdong. He gave the seeds to Huifeng to try to grow them. In 2013, Xiao Hao made two visits to Jiangxi. In the first visit, he and Huifeng visited the

farmers of the cooperatives to enhance trust. In the second visit, Xiao Hao visited a friend in Jiujiang who had over 20 varieties of traditional paddy rice, to identify varieties suitable for cultivation.

After finding suitable varieties of traditional rice, Huifeng grows them one by one. The early crops of *simiao* and *zhongjia*<sup>7</sup> were harvested. Then, in mid-August, a rice tasting session was held for Nurture Land customers in Guangzhou. Huifeng would harvest the middle crop and hoped that the consumers could visit his beautiful village to taste the rice there.

### Xiao Hao's dream of a rural life

Although Hao Guanhui, the head of Nurture Land, is a father of two kids, his friends still call him Xiao Hao.<sup>8</sup> Since he was a higher secondary school student Xiao Hao has known he wanted to live in the countryside. When he graduated from university, he joined PCD's first cohort of CSA interns. Below, he describes his dream of a rural life: "Higher secondary school is the age when one starts to think about the meaning of life. I kept thinking, am I destined to become an urbanite and live a life of going to and from work every day? Is this the purpose of my life? I saw no value in this way of living. So I kept thinking and searching. One day I was reading Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Levin, a small farm owner, was depicted as living a full and colourful rural life in which he treats everyone around him sincerely and kindly. *Isn't this*

*what I want?* I thought. After I finished high school, I applied to the Northwest Agriculture & Fisheries University in spite of my family's objections. The university was probably the only Chinese agricultural university located in a rural setting.

"College days were soon over, but going home to my village remained a far off dream. Because of pressure from my family and resource scarcity in my village, going home then was not a feasible choice. Fortunately because of PCD's healthy agriculture internship programme, I was able to go to Dicheng Village in Dingzhou City, Hebei Province to work for James Yen Rural Reconstruction Institute. We explored skills and technology of ecological agriculture, which I really liked. I was living in the countryside, too. It seemed that I was getting closer to my dream. However, a year later, for some reason we had to leave Dicheng and moved to Beijing. In the meantime, we had to look for new projects. During those times in Beijing I used to joke that we were urbanites in the rural area and villagers in the city. Where are our roots actually? I often wondered.

"In 2008 I left Beijing for personal reasons and came to Guangzhou to work for Nurture Land. I was to build a marketing platform for an ecological farmer. Guangzhou was hot and the environment was far from ideal. I thought of leaving many times. Perhaps I should simply move to places like Lijiang in Yunnan and be a part-time farmer, I thought. However

7. *Zhong jie* is a variety of early paddy.

8. Translator's note: *Xiao* means 'little' in Chinese. It is common in Mainland China that a young person is called by his/her family name preceded with the word, *Xiao*.



I decided to stay on because of my responsibility here. In doing so, I gradually realised that being an urbanite in the countryside and a villager in the city was perfect for someone whose role is to build bridges between the urban and rural areas. Gradually our mission became clear to us: to support smallholders practicing ecological agriculture and to foster healthy consumption. We make friends with farmers and support them in practicing ecological farming. In the city we make friends with consumers and ensure that they have access to food that they feel is safe."

In spite of his many attempts, Xiao Hao is not yet back in his village, but his dream of a rural life has been realised in a different form. The life he dreamt of is more remote than he imagined but it is also larger. Nurture Land allocates 10% of its income to a smallholders development fund which provides Huifeng and Xuemei— young people who returned to the countryside to start a business—with small interest-free loans. Thanks to the loans, they do not have to worry about start-up capital. Nurture Land also helps them with marketing by assuming nearly full responsibility for the sale of their products. Under these circumstances, Huifeng and others are able to focus on taking care of their fields and not worry about the problem of selling their products. And so Xiao Hao's dream farm is all over Guangdong, Jiangxi, Yunnan and Hunan.

### Small is beautiful

When food is regarded only as a commodity and measured by those standards, human relationships and the beauty of nature that food embodies are lost to us. In the pursuit of stable output and high productivity, we cease to care if the earth is breathing or not. We cultivate only one crop on a large scale. In the roiling tide of economic development, there is no difference between the production line of agriculture and that of factories. Most farms are now factories, producing more commodities than are actually needed. Food is produced not for the benefit it brings to people but for the contribution it makes to the economy. For a farmer who does not use pesticides, chemical fertilisers or herbicides, life is not easy. While other people are playing mahjong, watching TV or chatting with neighbours, the farmer is still labouring in the field. However, that farmer knows about the conditions of the soil and is aware that nature is formidable and that food is not there just to feed us. The gist of traditional farming is the integration of farming and livestock rearing in a small but beautiful farm. The leftover food at home is fed to the pigs and chickens, and animal manure is used to fertilise the land for farming. Crops are harvested as food for oneself and one's family. Surplus products are brought to the marketplace and exchanged for other things or for money. For Nurture Land, smallholders are the subject of production. By paying them a reasonable

price that is higher than the market price, Nurture Land helps smallholders to earn a decent living. In so doing, the organisation expresses its affirmation of and gratitude to smallholders for engaging in environment-friendly farming.

The produce of smallholders may not be as abundant or look as perfect as that produced by commercial farms. The size of the harvest depends on the weather and on the differing approaches of individual farmers. But this is what Nurture Land likes about its collaboration with them. Most farmers are sincere and honest. If you respect and support them, giving them the opportunity to make a living through farming, they will reward you with hard work and care. Building a direct relationship with smallholders can be a complicated and tedious affair, but it minimises the distance between the production site and the dining table. Producers can harvest the crop when it is really ready for harvesting, and consumers do not have to pay for the layers of added marketing that generate profit for middlemen only. Consumers are paying the same price, yet the farmers' income is tripled.

A while ago Xiao Hao visited Tong Jun at Zhangjiajie in Hunan Province. He found that it was a common practice among local villagers to grow peaches behind their houses for the families' own consumption. The peach trees are nearly wild because people pick the fruits only

after the insects have finished eating. No fertilisation, no application of pesticides, no weeding. It is actually a kind of natural farming. Xiao Hao collected the peaches that the local villagers could not finish so that Guangzhou consumers had the opportunity to taste them. Zhangjiajie is developing tourism and all other industries have been scrapped, so there is very little freight traffic, and Xiao Hao was able to send the peaches to Guangzhou at a very cheap rate by air. The peaches and the Chinese bayberries that Tong Jun grew himself were picked in the early morning at 5 am, were put on the 9:50 am flight to Guangzhou and arrived at 10:30 am. Consumers who had ordered the fruits received them by the afternoon.

### Consumption of health vs healthy consumption

Dealing with urban consumers is at least as difficult as working with smallholders. Most urban consumers are relatively better educated. Though they may not be very close to land or nature, they are often well aware of nutrition issues. To gain their trust, one has to be more professional than they are. Fortunately Xiao Hao graduated from an agricultural university, acquired some basic knowledge of agriculture, and over the years has been learning and practicing farming constantly. Now he can almost be considered an expert.

Because of their concerns about food safety, urban consumers are willing to pay

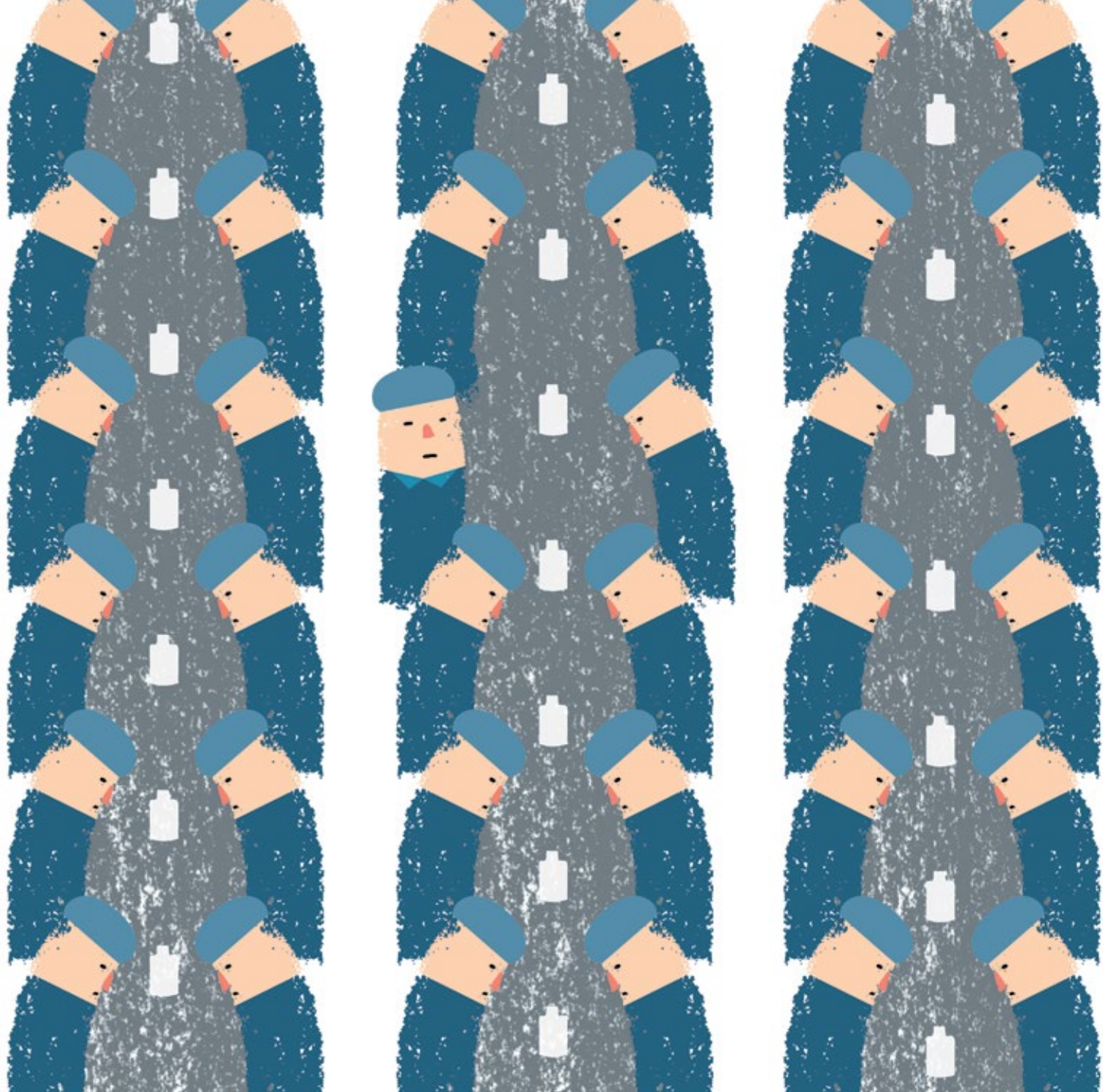
more for safe, healthy food if they can afford it. A growing number of shops now sell organic food. However, from their decor to their product packaging, these shops exude an elitist aura. While the agricultural products they sell may be healthy, they are usually cultivated or reared on a large-scale. The farms are often located in beautiful but remote areas which necessitate long distance transportation. The packaging of the products may be attractive but it means more garbage. Yet all of these inconvenient facts are covered up by the prestige surrounding terms such as 'organic' and 'healthy'.

What CSA advocates is small regional collaboration based on the principle of local production and local consumption: healthy consumption and not consumption of 'health'. This is what Nurture Land understands by 'healthy consumption': first, consumers have access to healthy food; second, planned and rational purchase is encouraged among consumers—no overconsumption, no waste; third, consumers are encouraged to be concerned not only with their own health but also that of the ecology and producers. If urban consumers could visit the countryside regularly and labour in the field, they would understand better how hard the farmers work, and would treasure the hard-earned food all the more.

Xiao Hao, Xiao Tan and A Yen work in a small house that functions as an office.

Not far away is a larger warehouse, which Nurture Land rented in early 2012. During my visit, Xiao Guo and two new interns were busy dividing up and packaging products that had recently arrived. Nurture Land would have to look for another warehouse soon. Huifeng and farmers in his village set up the Daoxiang Nanyuan Ecological Rice Cooperative. They would soon be harvesting the rice grown on a hundred *mu* (equal to an area of 0.07 hectares) of land, as Nurture Land needs a new warehouse for this, too.





**Cheng Yi-yi, Debby**

This article is based on an interview with Prof. Zhang Heqing, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Sun Yat-Sen University, and his speech delivered in the 'Taking Root: Vitalising CSA—A Seminar on CSA Experience' in October 2012. Cheng Yi-yi works for Oxfam Hong Kong, an NGO.

## Guard the community and carry out a revolution effected in everyday life

an interview with Prof. Zhang Heqing

*The middle-aged woman had probably left Pingzhai, a village in Yunnan, three or four years ago for Guangzhou, and had since been working in a factory producing cosmetics and related accessories. She sat on the long bench in the hospital weeping in distress. She had been suffering from abdominal pain for a long time but had not seen any doctor because she was worried about the expense. Finally, the pain had become intolerable. After initial examination, she was told that there was a shadow on her uterus. Was it a tumour or cancer? Did she need surgery? How could she pay for her medical expenses with no insurance?*

*She was filled with doubts and fear, made worse because she only spoke her local dialect and could not understand the doctor and the nurse, who were chatting in Putonghua and Cantonese. The anxiety was suffocating. She was afraid to think*

*any more. She had been working 15-hour days on a production line making powder puffs for famous makeup brands. The workplace was full of dust and her chest was often badly congested. Maybe she had pneumoconiosis.*

*Why had she left her home in Yunnan and come to this far off city? She and her husband had had a happy life at home, farming and weaving, and they had never felt that life was hard. Now, working in the city, she missed her land terribly. She had once begged her husband, who was also in Guangzhou, to go home with her. "It was you who wanted to come initially! How could we go home now that our land has become waste land?" her husband retorted.*

*That was true. It was she who had wanted to leave home, to earn money so that her children might go to school. The family had*

been able to feed themselves by farming even though they earned little. They had not thought money was that important. The education of her children was the only reason for the woman to be in the city.

There were a few young people from the same village who had also journeyed to Guangzhou, a while later. How she envied them. After a few years these young people had realised that in the city, workers from the countryside were only cheap labour and were treated with no dignity. They had joined together and submitted a proposal to Guangdong Centre for advancement of Rural-Urban Sustainability (CARUS)<sup>1</sup> to apply for a starting fund to return to their home village and set up a business.

### 2001: first visits of CARUS in rural areas of Yunnan

Prof. Zhang Heqing told me the above story at a café next to a lawn in the Sun Yat-Sen University. He is one of the founders of CARUS—an NGO that promotes CSA in Mainland China.

CARUS began to work in the remote village of Pingzhai in 2001. It has been advocating rural sustainable development through capacity building and strengthening villagers' ethnic identity, and also documenting the history and customs of the village, holding evening literacy classes for women. A community centre has been set up and women in the village

have been organised to produce fair trade embroidery products.

Like tens of thousands of rural villages in Mainland China, Pingzhai has little arable land and the dominant mode of activity is small scale farming, but the profit villagers earn from agriculture falls short of the production costs. When CARUS first visited the village 12 years ago, it was isolated from the rest of the world because of poor transport and communications. Thanks to its inaccessibility, Pingzhai villagers lived a simple life untainted by capitalism and consumerism.

Zhang treasures the mode of production and the way of life of Chinese smallholders in which the land provides them with all they need in everyday life.

“Most Chinese people—eight hundred million—still live in rural areas. The traditional mode of production and way of life are still there. The family or the household remains the basic unit of agricultural production. It has never collapsed—not during the land reform period when land was distributed to smallholders or during collectivisation. It remained intact also in the succeeding period of household responsibility system when land was returned to smallholders. Land is the source of livelihood. It is not for making money but for earning a living. Farmers still follow a rural way of life. For example, they get up when the sun rises and go to bed when the sun

1. CARUS is a professional social work services organisation in Guangdong Province. Its predecessor is the Sun Yat-Sen University – Hong Kong Polytechnic University Green Farming Urban-Rural Mutual Aid Association. Those teachers and students who founded the association in 2001 launched rural social work in Pingzhai Village, an ethnic minority village in Yunnan Province. The team has all along focused on the development of urban-rural community work and social work in villages. At present, CARUS provides social work services in Yunnan, Sichuan and Guangdong Provinces.

CARUS makes use of the platforms of urban-rural cooperation and fair trade to help improve farmers' livelihood through collaboration with villagers to run village hostels, launch tourism for experiencing village life and initiate fair trade sales on agricultural by-products. These activities are to realise the goals of sustainable development including community mutual aid, cultural inheritance, gender equality and ecological conservation.

sets. Their relationship with the land and with nature has not been severed yet.”

This traditional mode of production and lifestyle will not bring about rapid economic development, but for Zhang, this is what he cherishes about Chinese smallholders in the face of global capitalism.

### Farmers: where there is land, there is dignity

“What I cherish about smallholders is that they can live with dignity so long as they can produce and live their life this way. I am my own master and I live with dignity. Even though the land is contracted, I'm still my own master, a free person. I cultivate the land for myself and I'm autonomous. I have the right to decide what to grow, how it should be grown, how much to grow and when to grow. I am not subservient to anyone. Where there is land, there is dignity.” Zhang said. Smallholders are the masters of land and not workers of farms. They do not sell their labour. They are subjects who have control over their means of production.

Capitalist development is built on the endless plundering and consumption of the earth's resources. The subsistence form of production of smallholders, on the other hand, conserves and revitalises ecological resources. It allows one to reclaim and benefit from a natural way of life. Zhang pointed out, “The way of life of

smallholders is very sustainable. It is exactly what we need, what we advocate and what should be revived. It emphasises sustainability and a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature. That's why there is no large-scale production. There are no big machines. It's different from the unrestrained exploitation of nature by big farms. Smallholders use natural resources with restraint and respect the law of nature. The relationship between smallholders and nature is very harmonious since it emphasises the thriving of all animals. The way of life of smallholders is very valuable. It is very ecological.”

However, over the years, the simple way of life of smallholders has been eroded. The television set has become a household item in every family and mobile networks are penetrating rural villages such as Pingzhai. Villagers are manipulated by all sorts of official policies and the natural ecology of the countryside is destroyed by urbanisation. Smallholders are robbed of their simple way of life. Previously they could have raised their families by working the land but now they are penniless.

### Three roads to poverty for smallholders in Mainland China

In the seminar, ‘Taking Root: Vitalising CSA’, which took place in October 2012 in Hong Kong, Zhang Heqing pointed out there were three roads to poverty for smallholders in Mainland China.



“In China we talk about low income resulting in production poverty. Production is now part of global production (industrialised agriculture). Smallholders have no idea that they are actually growing so-called crops that cater to the needs of globalisation. When the price plummets, many smallholders lose all they have put in. There have been many cases of farmers committing suicide by taking pesticides. This is what we mean by ‘production poverty’ under globalisation.

“Another very grim phenomenon in Mainland China is that people do not have enough money to spend, i.e. ‘consumption poverty’. Consumption fuels domestic demand—this is a trump card for China. In the countryside, many villagers buy mobile phones after selling their pigs. They sell their chickens to pay for top-up calling cards for their mobile phones. When we were working in Ying Xiu (in Sichuan), the women in the village did embroidery work for over a year and managed to save some money. When the government launched the ‘Home Appliances to the Countryside Programme’<sup>2</sup>, some women bought two or even three televisions though they lived in makeshift homes. They had been told that they would live in three-storey villas one day and there should be a television on every floor. A few months after they had bought the televisions, their makeshift homes were demolished and as they moved from place to place waiting for a permanent home,

their home appliances were stolen or dumped because they were unable to bring them along. This is what you call ‘imported poverty’. Then there are other consumption needs such as education and school fees which are real burdens that break the backs of smallholders.

“The third road is ‘ecological poverty’ resulting from overconsumption, i.e. the vicious cycle of natural and man-made disasters as a result of which the lives of people at the bottom of the social ladder become more vulnerable. Many development plans are reckless and very short-sighted. They bring transitory prosperity at the expense of natural resources for later generations. Growth in GDP attained by violating the laws of nature will only lead to vicious cycles of natural and man-made disasters. Examples are the large-scale landslides along the high speed railways after earthquakes.

“It is of course the development outlook of capitalism, which has gained global hegemony, that leads to these ‘roads to poverty’ and blinds us to all other possibilities. Even farmers and urban dwellers believe that there are no alternatives because they live in the midst of this form of development.”

Zhang thinks that the mode of production and way of life of smallholders in China run counter to capitalist ideology. However, without themselves realising it, smallholders who have been living a simple rural life can

2. After the global financial tsunami, overseas demand for consumable electronic products dropped dramatically. In 2008, the Chinese government announced that, as a way of expanding domestic demand, subsidies of 13% of the retail price of four kinds of home appliances (colour TV, refrigerator, mobile phone, washing machine) would be provided by the government to encourage the rural population to purchase them. The subsidy is as high as RMB2000 for each television set.

3. With China’s rapid urbanisation, young male labour power leaves the rural homes to seek work in the towns and cities. The number of these migrants has been increasing drastically. Women, children and the elderly people are left behind in villages and become a special group that draws a lot of attention. They are jokingly called ‘the 386499 brigade’ (38 Women’s Day, 61 Children’s Day, 99 is the Double Ninth Festival during which people visit the graves of their ancestors.)

fall prey to illusions created by advertising and other propaganda. They are drawn to the ‘modern and convenient’ city and are repelled by the ‘backward and reclusive’ countryside—an illusory dualistic opposition.

In the story at the beginning of this article, the woman from Pingzhai persuaded her husband that they should seek work in Guangzhou when the market economy of the country had intensified and cash had become more important than ever in the countryside. To earn a living in the city, she and her husband gave up their life and livelihood in which land had played a central role. As young, energetic villagers leave their rural homes to work in the city, the countryside is drained of its labour supply, and inevitably declines when only women, children and the elderly, the so-called ‘386199 brigades’<sup>3</sup>, are left behind.

“It is our nature as human beings to seek happiness and to live the life that we want. This is how we realise our subjectivity. Human beings are animals that seek to realise their dreams! Capitalism extinguishes all our potential and turns us into nails and screws or tools,” Zhang said. However, when we fail to see how the structure and development of our society are controlled by ideologies, we cannot really know what a happy life is.

## Smallholders excluded and demonised by urban culture

Zhang continues, “This involves a deeper level of discussion and that is: what is a happy life? Farmers fancy the city because it is convenient, fast, bright, neat and beautiful—an image created by the ideology of mainstream media. They reject the values of their own way of making a living when they embrace the so-called dreams. However, their dreams often get shattered when they are in the city. There are many sad stories under the neat, bright and beautiful cover of the city.”

On the other hand, because of a judgmental and dualistic world view, smallholders represent short-sightedness and ignorance in the eyes of urbanites. Zhang is very angry with this attitude. “It is a construction of the urban culture that turns smallholders into the ‘Other’ and demonises them. First, urbanites have never really tried to understand smallholders. Many have never even set foot in the countryside and have no idea about the mode of production and way of life of smallholders. Their perceptions are shaped by so-called mainstream media and ideologies and are full of stereotypes that denigrate smallholders. I have always been horrified by such attitudes because their concepts of modernisation and their values are urban-centric in that they demonise smallholders as uncivilised. The dangers of such attitudes are: the urban way of life is seen as superior and the

pros of urbanisation, consumerism and materialism are exaggerated while the belief that some people are superior to others is legitimised. At the same time, the existence of rural areas and of smallholders are considered to be of no value."

Smallholders are now on the brink of death in terms of economic development and they are often targets of cultural and ideological smears. However, Zhang is far from pessimistic. He finds hope in his belief because, as a social movement activist, he is backed up by his own faith and persistence.

"Over the years we have put all our efforts in the countryside to revive smallholders' mode of production and way of life. We've made considerable progress. More and more farmers are willing to go back to farming. Some middle-aged villagers have never left their land and they insist on remaining in place. Some urbanites are tired of city life and want to move to the countryside too."

### **A history of the people: smallholders will never disappear**

The mainstream discourse that denigrates the countryside poses the biggest danger and threat. It is therefore sad to see the ideology of development, that urbanisation and consumerism brings bigger growth in GDP, continuing to gain ground in the countryside. However, Zhang notes, "On the one hand, you

see the crisis; on the other hand history is people's history. Even though our policies are not perfect, if they can reach tens of thousands of rural households as well as communities where ways of life of smallholders are intact, with the power of the people, you will see hope."

Zhang is optimistic enough to declare "It is impossible for smallholders to disappear". He articulates his case with lucid arguments. First, Chinese society has been very diverse since ancient times. "It is not possible to eliminate all the farmers on this land of 9.6 million sq. km. You cannot destroy the diversity of China. For example, in Yunnan, there are different regions, ethnicities, landscapes, cultures. They are very different. Even in Guangdong which is so developed, life in the Pearl River delta is completely different from that in western or eastern parts of Guangdong and from Qingyuan where ethnic minorities live. They are two different worlds. It is impossible to destroy the diverse ways of life and ecology and replace them with only one set of values."

Zhang recently visited Hulunbuir, a prefectural city in Inner Mongolia. More and more people there are asserting that their ancestors were nomads. They cannot leave the grassland and move into apartments. "It was the same after the Sichuan earthquake. Many farmers were forced to move into flats. Now they constantly fight for their livelihood because their ancestors were farmers and they

were farmers themselves. They have their own way of life."

Zhang believes that the most important *raison d'être* of China is its smallholders. A large majority of its population— 800 million—still earn their living in this way. Such a huge number cannot be turned into zero. "It is impossible for everyone in China to buy their food or for everyone to become [urban] dwellers who earn a wage."

### **Increasing numbers of people are questioning urban values**

What is more important, however, is the increasing number of people who question urban values, and this is probably what gives Zhang hope and where social activists gain strength in their actions. "For many people, the smallholder's mode of production and way of life is like a dream of returning to a simple life and rediscovering one's true self. There are smallholders who are used to this way of life, and there are more and more novice migrant workers from the countryside. Though they are very dependent on money, there is also a chance that they will one day make a U-turn. Many are returning to their rural homes."

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, some young people from Pingzhai have gone back home to start their own business. In PCD's CSA internship programme, launched in

cities in Mainland China and in which CARUS has participated, many interns are educated youths who want to move to the countryside. Even urban elites are attracted by the simple rural life.

"When we recruited staff to be stationed in the countryside, a husband and wife applied," says Zhang. "The husband was a judge and the wife worked in external trade. They wanted to sell their apartment and resigned from their work. They wanted to go to the rural area and live an alternative way of life in which they could do what they want." This is of course an encouragement for CARUS as one of its goals is to advocate reflection on life and culture.

However it is also clear to CARUS that a village that has been bereft for years can only bring back its villagers after it is remade. Only then is it possible for the villagers to realise their dreams there. "The rural areas have to be rebuilt. If not, how will people be attracted to move to them? We have been organising villagers to improve their livelihoods through ecological farming. But what is most important is to rebuild and create public spaces together with them," Zhang says. In Pingzhai, CARUS built a community centre and renovated the public square. In villages in Guangdong, CARUS has restored ancestral halls and opened guest houses. Its mission is to help villagers to have a stable and sustainable livelihood and to create a kind of alternative and

fair trade with no middlemen, engaging both urban and rural dwellers. In other words people are encouraged to advocate the value and the meaning of the existence of smallholders, starting from their personal life.

“Take healthy food, for example,” says Zhang. “We need to first consume healthy food ourselves and become fit and strong. Then we can encourage people around us to eat healthy food, too. Before, when we grew rice without using chemical fertiliser and pesticide, we did not eat it ourselves. We sold it to rich people at a higher price. Later we reflected and said we were not there to provide a service for the privileged classes. We should eat the vegetables ourselves. Villagers need to eat them. This was really good. Our health improved and this encouraged more people to stop using chemical fertiliser and pesticide and to eat traditional rice varieties. When more people eat this kind of agricultural produce, companies that make pesticides and chemical fertiliser will close down!” Zhang laughed.

### Rural reconstruction and creating public space

The process of rebuilding the countryside also empowers villagers politically. “By creating public space, we want to encourage everyone to participate, to practice democracy, to speak out and to empower women. These political goals are very important for the good

governance of the countryside. We have to advocate cultural heritage. Whether someone agrees with it or not, we have to do educational work. We have to raise consciousness and empower smallholders so that they rediscover their own selves and identify with their own values,” Zhang argues.

CARUS worked for five or six years in Pingzhai with no progress. Urbanisation, industrialisation and globalisation have hollowed out the countryside. It is not possible to bring about sustainable development when the rural and urban areas are separated or by simply relying on the power of farmers, because most of the countryside’s problems are a result of urbanisation and industrialisation. It is therefore necessary to advocate urban-rural interaction and to restore a symbiotic urban-rural relationship.

In 2007, CARUS launched an urban-rural collaborative programme that advocated rural development with the support of residents of urban communities. As part of the programme, three farmer cooperatives were set up to grow red rice, breed local chickens and do embroidery. These agricultural products and handicrafts were sold to urban dwellers. CARUS also began to organise urban consumers. It cooperated with community resident committees, property management companies and apartment owners’ committees, and conducted talks on food safety in housing estates, in

4. “Social enterprise’ is a form of enterprise that emerged in Britain and engages in business related to public benefits. It deploys social forces through a market mechanism, with the aim of solving social problems. Profits earned should be directed to social organisations or public business. It does not serve to maximise profits for shareholders or owners of the enterprise.

Today, the meaning of social enterprise has become broader. In Britain, how to utilise profits earned is the crucial element to distinguish a social enterprise from other organisations. In North America, the crux lies in profit making and solving social problems. In Europe, the difference between ‘co-ownership by the community’ and ‘private ownership’ is emphasised.

5. In 1987, a group of Taiwan housewives felt the changes brought by social transformation were too drastic and that prompted them to action in response to various environmental and educational problems. The aim was to improve the quality of life. In such circumstances, the Taiwan Homemakers’ Union was born. The Union wished to protect their land and homes through green consumption. In 1993, the Union tried collective purchase to buy rice and grapes directly from farmers, and that was the prototype of a cooperative later run by the Union. The cooperative was the first of its kind established by housewives for daily consumption. Members of the cooperative are shareholders who pull together capital, cooperate and think together, organise consumers’ power and persuade farmers and producers to make products friendly to the environment and ecology as well as crucial to family health. In 2013, the cooperative had close to 50,000 members, collaborating with 110 Taiwan farmers and six sales and marketing groups to provide members with more than 600 types of products.

the course of which ecological agricultural products and by-products were introduced to the participants. It also made use of Internet and radio broadcasts to publicise farm experience activities to attract more consumers to experience life in rural villages and to see crop production in the field.

Later, a complex fair trade network was built when CARUS helped forge linkages between villages in Yunnan, Sichuan and Guangdong, and urban communities in Kunming, Chengdu and Guangzhou. A rural village’s agricultural by-products can be supplied to many urban communities, while an urban community can sell products from many rural villages. Through these support networks, the communities in the urban and rural areas complement and benefit each other.

CARUS has also opened specialised shops to sell agricultural by-products in cities such as Guangzhou. The shops are run as social enterprises<sup>4</sup> in communities and sell farmers’ ecological products directly. Urban-rural community support networks have evolved with the gradual transformation of consciousness in everyday life. CARUS also collaborates with other urban organisations, such as vegetarian groups, and social groups that share similar concerns, such as environmental organisations, to widen its urban network. Organic farmer markets are regularly run in urban communities to advocate environmental protection, healthy lifestyle and support for farmers.

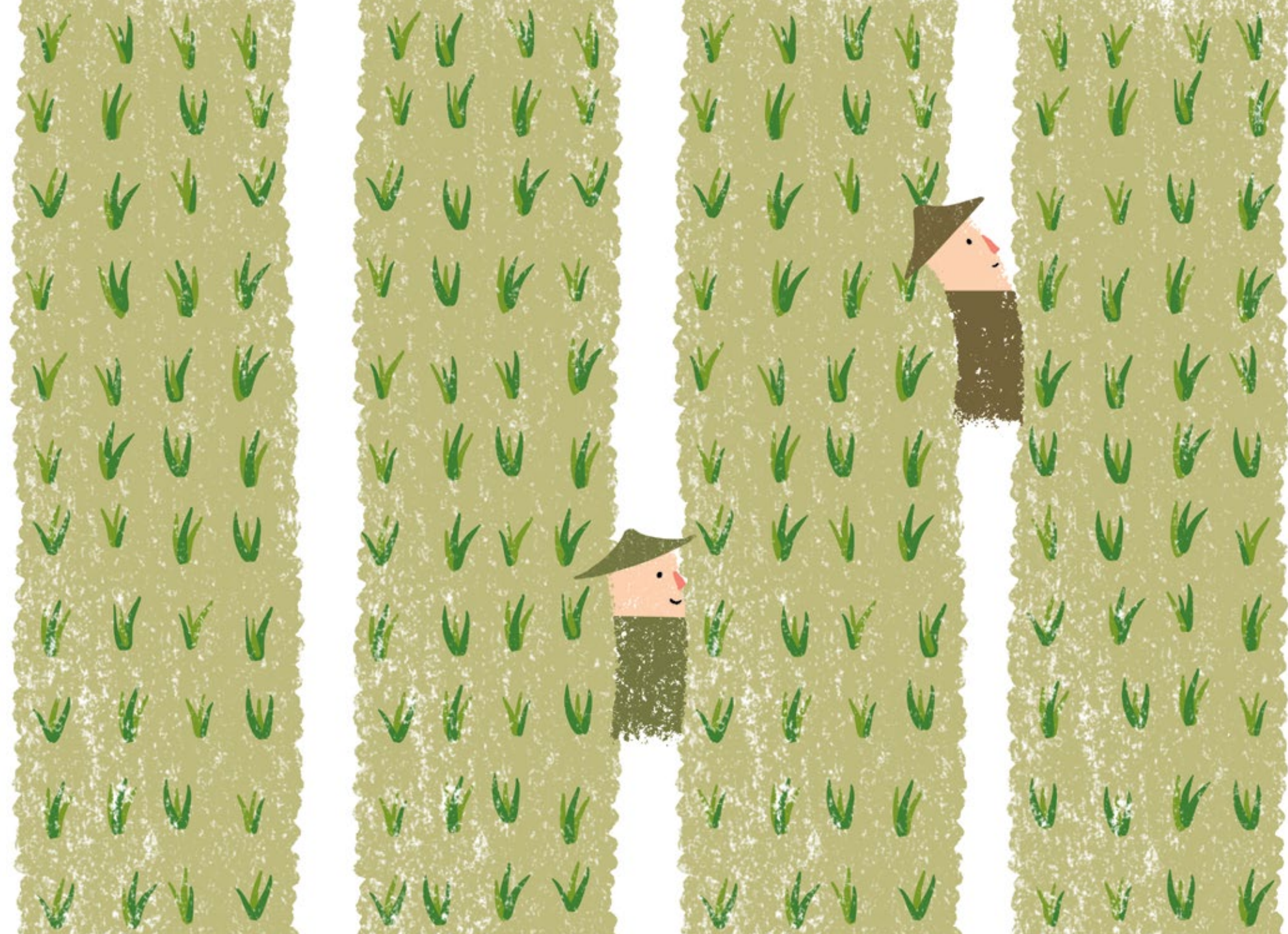
Zhang says, “Apart from buying food, consumers have responsibilities too. We hope that they will join or set up consumer cooperatives. I think this is a very important mission.” But when asked to compare their work with Taiwan Homemakers’ Union<sup>5</sup>, which has a solid network of consumer unions, Zhang answered humbly: “We have to admit that we are not strong in organising urban consumers. The most important reason is we do not have the human power nor the resources and experience.”

The main goal of urban-rural interaction is to facilitate sustainable development of the countryside. “We got out of the villages to build bridges between them and cities, and miracles happened,” says Zhang. “There is always someone who wants to buy the rice. There are opportunities to talk with smallholders about the importance of cooperation, or about why chemical fertiliser and pesticides should not be used, how to plan and develop a village, and how women may take part in politics. Women in the animal rearing cooperatives got to discuss whether a road should be built for the village and who should build it. Then a group was elected and everyone now takes part in the village’s public affairs. This is public governance of the rural village.

“First, CARUS looked for the poorest and most disregarded people in the village. Then a social worker moved to the village and lived in it so that he/she could accompany them for their growth, talking and reflecting with them. In this

way, changes take place. Every village and every community in the mainland is divided into two extremes. The rich families look down on the poor in the village and exploit them. Since the disadvantaged people are our priority, we identify the most 'disadvantaged' people when we visit villages or talk with rural families or when we visit victims after a natural disaster. We then use a case, family or group approach to organise people in the lowest social strata. First they are put into mutual help groups. They are then organised into cooperatives with the goal of capacity building through self-help and mutual help activities. When a group of people is organised in a village, the power relationship changes. Women in our programmes in rural Guangdong used to be afraid to speak. Now when they meet the head of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, they can tell him about their village guesthouse. The belief of social work is that everyone can change.

"Guard a community; build networks of support between communities. One community has changed, then seven, eight, nine, and ten. This is what society in the mainland is about. Communities can bring about social changes. It is a bottom up social movement of everyday life and starts from the lowest stratum. It believes that everyone can start from everyday life and the fruits of the changes can be witnessed in the community," said Zhang.





**He Zhixiong,  
Zhang Lanying,  
Prof. Wen Tiejun**

He Zhixiong is Supervisor at the Department of Youth Training of Liang Shuming Rural Reconstruction Centre in Beijing and Zhang Lanying is the Centre's Director. Prof. Wen Tiejun is the Director of the Rural Reconstruction Centre of the Renmin University of China, and the Executive Dean of both the Institute of Rural Reconstruction of China, Southwest University and the Institute of Rural Reconstruction of the Strait, Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University.

# New rural regeneration in contemporary China

1. This was a social movement advocated by intellectuals, the purpose of which was to build and revive the countryside and to solve the farmers' problems. Among all the groups, the National Association of Mass Education Movements established by James Yen had a relatively big impact. It taught farmers to read and write as a means to bring enlightenment to the people and to heal the "diseases" of farmers—stupidity, poverty, weakness, selfishness. Liang Shuming's Shandong Rural Reconstruction Research Institute advocated rural reconstruction as the road for China's reconstruction.

2. Translator's note: This refers to the programme of economic reforms started in 1978 by the Chinese government.

Known as the 'Golden Decade of Economic Reconstruction', the 20s and 30s of the last century was a period of rapid economic growth for the new Republic of China, and a massive movement for rural regeneration<sup>1</sup> sprang up all over the country. To bring relief to the countryside is to save the country—this was what most intellectuals of the time thought and innumerable well-meaning people turned their thoughts into actions. With the rapid economic growth since the implementation of the reform and opening up policy<sup>2</sup>, *san nong wen ti*<sup>3</sup> or 'the three-dimensional agrarian issues'<sup>4</sup> faced by Mainland China today worsened in the latter part of the 1990s. It was in this context that some intellectuals, who had 'the compassion of women'<sup>5</sup> and held fast to the ideals of rural regeneration of their worthy predecessors, advocated a new rural regeneration movement and encouraged tens of thousands of farmers,

citizens and young students to join in. After over a decade of arduous exploration and development, it has now had an impact on a great many people.

Even though in the New Rural Regeneration Movement there have been many exciting cases of mutual help between urban dwellers and rural farmers, and the movement has accumulated a wealth of experience of rural practice and manifested the values of a heterogeneous and ecological civilisation, the mainstream ideology of China, which has long been under the influence of developmentalism, has continued to ignore the experience of the movement. The intellectual circle, a captive of Eurocentric modernism, has also failed to objectively examine and draw lessons from the experience of the movement.

Young students and intellectuals are one of the subjects of the movement. As they try to understand their own actions and to build a cultural identity, they must also cleanse themselves of toxins remaining in their own thoughts and reflect on developmentalism which 'has capital as its basis'<sup>6</sup>.

### 1. A brief description of the New Rural Regeneration Movement

The New Rural Regeneration Movement was begun in the mid and late 1980s when young and middle-aged scholars, who took part in central government's study and survey of rural policies, set up pilot areas for rural reform. Even though the experiments ended one after another in the early 1990s, experience was gained and lessons were learned about the need to have organisation innovation and system innovation built on the basis of the power of grassroots society.

By the second half of the 1990s, social contradictions had become more complex due to a series of policy changes. The central government began to address the 'three-dimensional agrarian issues' at the turn of the millennium, emphasising that they were of the utmost priority in the adjustment of the country's strategic plans. The agricultural tax<sup>7</sup> was finally abolished from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2006. This action is a historic move since the land equalisation system was implemented in 1949. Hence the country entered the 'Post Tax-and-

Fee Period'. This provided the external conditions for organised rural researches and actions in safeguarding farmers' rights.

These kinds of activities to support farmers started as early as 2000-2001. At that time a few student organisations went to the countryside to conduct rural surveys, experience rural life, and do short-term teaching, legal education, etc. The trend accelerated after 2001, partly because of the intervention of the magazine *China Reform*, which had become a platform that further boosted university students' rural activities. At the same time, to alleviate the pressure of unemployment due to the Asian financial crisis in 1997, education was industrialised nationwide. Four years later when the students graduated, they faced unemployment and an uncertain future but did not know which way to turn. More of them began to seek alternatives. University students began to go to the countryside to conduct rural surveys and used the rural edition of *China Reform* to help farmers safeguard their rights. University students' rural actions won the support of Wen Jiabao, then premier of China, who sent a letter to the students. Subsequently the 'three-dimensional agrarian issues' gained widespread attention and more students and young people left the campuses to go to rural areas for practice, in the course of which they gained knowledge about the larger society, concerned themselves with social reality and developed their own selves.

3. *San nong wen ti* or 'the three-dimensional agrarian issues' refers to village sustainability (*nong cun*), agricultural security (*nong ye*) and farmers' rights (*nong min*). This concept was put forward publicly by Mainland China economist Prof. Wen Tiejun, one of the writers of this article, in 1996. Since then the concept has been extensively discussed in mass media and drawn on by the government. In the beginning of 2000, Li Changping, the party committee secretary of Cipan, a township in Jianli County in Hubei, wrote to Zhu Rongji, then premier, saying: "Farmers had a really hard life, the rural area was really poor, agriculture was in real danger." He even published a book entitled, *I Told Premier the Truth*. At the end of 2001, Prof. Wen Tiejun strongly stated the severity of the issues in front of China's highest ranking officials. In 2003, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council officially put 'the three-dimensional agrarian issues' into its work report according to its highest priority.

4. Translator's note: The English translation of the term *san nong wen ti* comes from an article entitled *Ecological Civilisation, Indigenous Culture and Rural Reconstruction*, of which Prof. Wen Tiejun is one of the authors.

5. *Fu ren zhi ren* or 'the compassion of women' is an idiom from *Shiji* (Historical Notes), a historical work on ancient China published over 2,300 years ago. The idiom is often used to denigrate someone who is regarded as too soft-hearted. Here the writers use it self-deprecatingly.

6. Translator's note: Here the writers play on the word "capital" which in Chinese is *zi ben*, a term made up of two words, *zi* (capital) and *ben* (basis).

7. Since the 1990s, the burden of agricultural tax has resulted in a deteriorating relationship between rural cadres at the grassroots level and the farmers as well as a legitimacy crisis for the central government. Because of this, the central government introduced a series of reforms to alleviate the farmers' burden, including tax reform which went through three stages: reform initiated by local governments between 1993 and 2000; reform at pilot sites where agricultural tax and other fees merged into one type of payment between 2000 and 2002; reforms launched across the country in 2003 and abolition of agricultural tax from 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2006.

8. See Note 6.

In 2004, the substance of the work of the New Rural Regeneration Movement underwent some changes. On the one hand, the rural edition of *China Reform* was closed down by mainstream reformists who 'had capital as their basis'<sup>8</sup> and the base for the New Rural Regeneration Movement was moved to Renmin University. On the other hand, the national policy to abolish agricultural tax began to take effect. National measures in favour of the countryside that emphasised 'give more, take less and loosen control'<sup>9</sup> were implemented one after another. In response to changing social conditions the movement shifted its focus to training farmer cooperatives and building farmer organisations. This was also an effort to further explore and practice organisational innovation and system innovation, which had been advocated for rural reform in the 1980s.

The reasons for this drastic change were: first, under the current system, the price farmers paid for their *weiquan* (safeguarding legal rights) and *shangfang* (appealing to the higher authorities for help) activities was extraordinarily high and often to no avail; second, the state had started to abolish agricultural taxes, and many contradictions built up in the previous two decades at the grassroots level were resolved to some extent. Since then, university students who went to the countryside no longer involved themselves in farmers' *shangfang* and *weiquan* actions. Instead they made

use of government policies in support of agriculture and farmers under the state's New Socialist Countryside Construction Programme<sup>10</sup> to encourage farmers to organise for development. Taking the circumstances into consideration, farmers who had been collaborating on *weiquan* activities set up cooperatives and explored models of autonomous development based on the principle of self-organising. Even though external circumstances were unfavourable and the state had not yet implemented any law or preferential policy to encourage the autonomous development of farmer cooperatives, thanks to the hard work by volunteers of the New Rural Regeneration Movement in the preceding years, cooperatives around Mainland China were able to sum up some practical experiences, such as 'cultural reconstruction has the best result; collective purchase has the least risk; the system of cooperative financing is most important', etc. In the meantime, volunteers also organised free farmer training to promote 'ecological farm house, organic farming and eco-village'.

In 2005, New Rural Regeneration Movement volunteers reached a consensus on basic principles of their work, expressed in the shorthand '3P', representing people's livelihood, people's solidarity in social institution, and people's cultural diversity. By upholding 3P, we sought to achieve '3S'—sovereignty in community resources, solidarity, and security in ecological terms. We also began

to make use of the activities of farmer cooperatives to disseminate international experience in 'fair trade'. The New Rural Regeneration Movement became the first social initiative in Mainland China to adopt the concept of fair trade. This was recognised internationally and the impact grew gradually both in Mainland China and abroad. In the same year, Rural Reconstruction Centre of Renmin University of China was established and its work was built on the rural regeneration work done prior to its establishment.

Since 2006, the New Rural Regeneration Movement has had four main areas of activity: developing university student organisations to encourage volunteers to go to rural areas to support farmers; building cooperatives and social organisations to safeguard the rights of farmers and disadvantaged groups in rural areas; building new citizens' service centres to help migrant workers to integrate into the urban areas; fostering citizens' participation in urban-rural exchange networks by encouraging them to become involved in fair trade.

The last area of work is relatively new and has a comparatively big impact. Its focus is to advocate experiments on ecological agriculture and urban-rural mutual support using farmer cooperatives as its base. There are three main background factors leading to such a change. First, given the current market-based economic structure and a social

resource distribution system that favours urban areas, work that advocates only farmers' specialised cooperatives has its constraints and farmers gain very little from it. Second, the external conditions in terms of government policies were favourable. In 2005, new rural regeneration became a national strategy for the central government. In 2006, the concept of 'the multifunctionality of agriculture' was put forward and in 2007, the philosophy of 'ecological civilisation' was advocated and the Farmers Professional Cooperatives Law was issued. In 2008, the central government put forward the idea of developing resource saving and environment-friendly agriculture. The third factor was the impending pressing needs of the community. It was during this period that the problem of food safety and pollution drew widespread attention in society. The New Rural Regeneration Movement subsequently started to explore ecological agriculture and urban-rural mutual support.

In 2006, Green Ground Union was set up jointly by seven farmer cooperatives which were exploring ecological agriculture. The objective was to build a marketing platform for ecological farm products. In 2008, Little Donkey Farm was set up and became the first CSA farm in Mainland China. The new initiatives of the New Rural Regeneration Movement have gained widespread attention for the society as well as media coverage bringing positive results.

9. According to an article posted on the website of Jilin Normal University, the Chinese government adopted 'give more, take less, and loosen control' as early as October, 1998, as a guideline in its work to address the three-dimensional agrarian issues. To 'give more' is to increase input for agriculture and rural villages, to accelerate building of infrastructures of agriculture and rural areas, and to raise the income of farmers directly. To 'take less' is to reduce the burdens of farmers. To 'loosen control' is, on the policy level, to revitalise rural areas by allowing farmers to make full use of their creativity .

10. In 2005, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of CPC made a resolution on "constructing a new socialist countryside" and stated that resources should slant towards the countryside, manufacturing industry should repay agriculture and the urban area should support the rural area. It was also stated that the characteristics of a new countryside were "advanced production, improved livelihood, civilised social atmosphere, clean and tidy villages and democratic management".

The above is a general description of initiatives undertaken by the New Rural Regeneration Movement in the last 12 years. There is something that we should pay special attention to and that is the participation of university students and graduates who come from the rural areas. The movement, to some extent, has contributed to the training and development of young people who, in their practice and self-reflection, have gained an understanding of rural society and the meaning of their participation in rural regeneration. However, farmers are the real subject of rural regeneration. This is a large but silent population.

Nearly a hundred years have gone by since the first rural regeneration movement was launched. Chinese society has undergone dramatic changes during this period of time and has achieved industrialisation. China is now going through the irreversible process of financial capitalisation. For young intellectuals to become as one with the 'silent farmers' in the process of rural regeneration, prompting the farmers to join them and to rejuvenate rural society, they must look at China's enormous population of farmers from the perspective of the expansion of globalised capital and China's path of industrialisation.

## 2. The 'Three-Dimensional Agrarian Issues' under globalisation

The Chinese people have a long history of civilisation in which irrigated agriculture

played an important role. Chinese people domesticated and bred wild silkworms 7,000 years ago and domesticated wild rice 6,400 years ago. Irrigated agriculture was our way of life and has nurtured the cultural substance of the collective genes of the Chinese people. During the transition from the Old Stone Age to the New Stone Age, Chinese people formed settled societies as clans and tribes. With the evolution of a diverse farming culture, village communities gradually formed and became a medium for families and clans in an economy and society of smallholders.

For thousands of years, Chinese people have lived together in villages. To put it in general terms, they have shared the resources and properties, such as land, water and mountains, within the boundaries of their villages for generations, in the course of which a rationality of farming households and of village community was developed. Through this type of society/community specific to the oriental agricultural civilisation, Chinese people have been managing the costs of collaboration and transaction by internalising them and minimising external risks. This kind of rationality is in great contrast to the rationality of the individual or of capital developed in the history of the west. If you compare the history museums of the west and those of China, you will find that in Chinese history, large scale killing has nearly never been depicted in art. It shows that the Chinese have never been a people that plunder foreign lands

and expand. Instead the Chinese people are attached to their native land and are not willing to move to other places. On the other hand, European murals, sculptures, carpets and many art works depict war which shows an objective fact: the division of Europe into many countries was the reason why wars continued up to the 1940s. The unification of the main European countries as nation states, such as Germany and Italy, occurred only in the mid and late 19th Century. China, on the other hand, was united by the state of Qin 2,000 years ago and became an enormous continental state. It was only in modern times that China came under invasion by western imperialist powers. China then carried out a 'follow on' kind of industrialisation by learning from the way western powers had modernised. It was when western external powers arrived in the rural society of China as a powerful species that Chinese village communities were faced with the danger of total decline. That was why new rural regeneration became imperative for Chinese people in the early 20th century.

As a developing country, from the 'Westernisation Movement' (*Yang Wu Yun Dong*) in the 1870s to integration with the global economy in the 21st century, China's course of industrialisation was deeply influenced by international geopolitics. After 1949, China won unprecedented opportunities twice for industrialisation. On both occasions, there was an influx of traditional industries from

developed countries into developing countries. The first occasion occurred during the 1950s when arms and heavy industries migrated from the USSR to China for the Korean War, and then in the 1970s when China opened up to western countries. In the latter case, to a certain extent, China's geo-strategic position in the Asia-Pacific region grew because of the competition between the USA and the USSR, the two main imperialist states, and it was during this period that China completed the change in the structure of her industry, moving away from arms and heavy industry.

Industrialisation is not only an economic process of inputting capital and technology. It is also a process of expropriation, the first step of which is primitive accumulation of capital. For this reason, any developing country, which could not externalise social contradictions by way of colonialist expropriation like its western suzerain had done, had to appropriate surplus from *san nong* (farmers, rural villages and agriculture) or the natural environment. In the same way, urbanisation is an economic process of capital accumulation in which surplus is appropriated from *san nong*. So long as a developing country seeks to accelerate industrialisation and urbanisation purely within a market system, it will end up with a large scale net outflow of resources from its rural areas resulting in contradictions in the dual urban-rural structure and the three-dimensional agrarian issues.





When new China was founded in 1949, the country's resources fell short of the needs of her large population. Farmers were dispersed and capital was scarce. Subsequent to the Korean War which broke out during the Cold War period in the 1950s, there was a strong need for China to industrialise. The implementation of a series of state policies such as rural collectivisation and state monopoly of the purchase and marketing of agricultural outputs were the objective conditions that resulted in the shaping and continuation of a dual urban-rural social structure. This, on the one hand, enabled the industrialising nation to appropriate surplus from the collectivised rural areas as a process of primitive accumulation of capital. On the other hand, when urban industries faced economic crises in the course of capital accumulation, the crises could be transferred to the rural collectives.

Between the 60s and 70s of the last century, young intellectuals of China went through three 'Down to the Countryside' movements<sup>11</sup>. Subsequent to the first 20 years of primitive accumulation of state capital, 20 million young people in the urban area were unemployed. They were sent to the countryside to join the 4 million production units of around 800,000 production brigades in the 90,000 communes. Apart from this, a similarly large number of rural secondary school students (not included in the 'youth returning to the countryside' in the government statistics on employment) were sent to join the

200 million farming households to live and work with them. As a continental agricultural country with an incredibly large population, China made use of such truly comparative advantages to achieve primitive accumulation of capital for industrialisation and yet remained the only developing country in the world that did not suffer from the aftermath of foreign debts. What was most admirable was that China had not sold or pawned the country's resources or sovereignty to foreign capital.

By the end of the 1970s, China was again faced with a cyclical economic crisis that took the form of a substantial rise in financial deficit. Unlike in the 1960s when Mao Zedong's charisma had been sufficient to send young people 'up to the mountain and down to the countryside', in the late 1970s the central government had to adopt financial austerity measures and retreat from the rural sector which was not economical. The result was the dismantling of people's communes.

In the meantime, similar to the circumstances in which the urban crisis was alleviated after land reform was completed in 1950, the 'all-round responsibility system'<sup>12</sup> was restored in the countryside and farmers revived the village community economy of smallholders.

However, this was only one of the many times when the government retreated from

11. This can be traced back to as far as the mid-1950s. To address the issue of urban youth/student unemployment and to intensify agricultural production, nearly 200,000 urban youths from all over the country joined rural brigades to clear land for farming. This was the first truly organised large scale mobilisation of urban youth to go to the countryside. In the latter days of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong told educated youths from the city to go to the rural areas to receive "reeducation" from poor and lower-middle farmers. Again, tens of millions of youths went to the countryside. In 1978, CPC's Central Committee's Working Conference on Dispatching Educated Youth from Across the Country to Go up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside decided to end the movement, after which the educated youths were resettled in cities where they found employment.

12. Also known as the household-based contract system, this was a common term that refers to the household contract responsibility system which allowed farming households to subcontract collective land and means of production. The contract permitted farmers to cultivate the land autonomously and to retain the income from the products after paying tax and fees to the state and to the collective. The farmers summed up this system as: "guarantee what is due to the state, ensure collective supply, what remains go to oneself". The advantage of the system was increasing farmer's initiatives because they were able to share in the fruits of their labour.

13. Translator's note: "Both ends of the production process" means supply of raw materials and marketing of products.

14. The three main deficits were: deficit in foreign currencies, bank deficits, and long term financial deficit.

the uneconomical rural sector completely. Since 1984 China had been dismantling collective units around the country. Government subsidy for rural areas fell from more than 10% of its financial expenditure to less than 3%. All the expenses on public services in health, education, culture and agricultural production, including expenses of state grassroots administrations, fell on the shoulders of farmers under the policy of *tan shui ru mu*, or 'introducing tax into land'. However this time the objective conditions were quite different: the tense relationship between the population and the land had become worse and the dual urban/rural structure was reinforced.

The major trend during this period of time, and which was contrary to the interests of the rural sector, was: after the urban economy of state capitalism achieved primitive accumulation of industrial capital, the state must carry out industrial capital adjustment and expansion. In line with the general law of capital movement, the interest groups representing urban industrial capital that dominated the mainstream discourse would demand corresponding policies of reform and opening up. Inside the country, industrial capital went further in demanding the appropriation of surplus values produced in the rural sector. Outside the country, as financial capitalism unified the markets of the two main camps when the Cold War ended, China's industrial capital made use of the opportunity to demand township and rural enterprise to put both ends

of the production process on the world market (*liang tau zai wai*)<sup>13</sup> to earn foreign exchange by export and to open coastal cities to attract foreign investment.

In 1993, China was again faced with a huge economic crisis of 'three deficits'<sup>14</sup>. The cost of the crisis was shifted to the countryside which instantly became the main disaster area. Not only did the price of agricultural products keep falling year after year, all sorts of unfair taxes and charges were imposed on farmers by local governments which were overstaffed and seriously short of financial resources. Farmers could hardly make ends meet. It was under these circumstances that some policy researchers put forward the question of the three-dimensional agrarian issues which was initially disregarded by the government.

As financial globalisation accelerated, capital poured in freely from core capitalist countries to marginal countries to take over land and cities for profit. After the Asian financial crisis in 1997, one after another marginal countries were confronted with financial crisis, but hidden repercussions were also spawned that in the end subdued the excess capital of core countries. In 2001, China was officially admitted into the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Since then foreign capital has been flooding into China and China has inevitably integrated with the global production system controlled by financial capital.

Since the period of reform and opening up, China's economy has transformed from a domestic-oriented capital accumulation and self-development model to an export-oriented economy overly dependent on foreign investment and foreign markets. During the stage of primitive accumulation of industrial capital, arms and heavy industry, which are capital intensive, were dominant. The more capital intensive an industry, the more it excludes labour. Because of this intrinsic law of economics, most of the rural workforce had been excluded from the social security system implemented in the city from the very beginning, and thus the urbanisation of China lagged far behind industrialisation. In subsequent major reforms, path dependence inevitably resulted in all levels of government choosing policies that in substance excluded rural areas. When the Asian financial crisis erupted in 1997, China, which was at a stage of industrial capital expansion, was confronted with an economic crisis of imported deflation. In the face of the collective demand of industrial capital, China fuelled its economic development by investing heavily in infrastructure for urbanisation.

In the 1980s, the disparity between urban areas and the countryside narrowed significantly as a result of policies that permitted industrialisation of rural areas and development of rural townships. This trend, however, was reversed in the 1990s. Throughout the 1990s, state policies

favoured the towns and cities. Not only did the urban-rural disparity widen, disparities between regions and between the rich and the poor also widened. The acceleration of the three big disparities inevitably resulted in a decline in internal demand and China's economy changed rapidly to one that was fuelled by external demand.

Since coastal regions were the centres of the export-oriented economy, the three main factors of mainland rural villages—capital, land, labour—were drawn in abundance into cities and the surplus value produced by the rural sector was appropriated by foreign capital dependent on cities.

Since the start of the period of reform and opening up, rural villages have continually been robbed of their organisations and lost all resistance to the expropriation by urban capital. Because this form of expropriation is like 'pinching off the tops of grasses', China's rural areas are left with hundreds of millions of elderly people, women and children whose parents are away in the cities. Agricultural production has inevitably turned to pesticides and chemical fertiliser because of the need to save labour. Faced with powerful capital, an agriculture characterised by smallholders dispersed around the country was relatively powerless. The opportunity cost for rural labour to join agricultural production was becoming higher. This was why in general the main workforce in

the countryside chose to leave their rural homes to work in the city.

The traditional cyclical economy of China was characterised by 'staples and pigs' farming in which hundreds of millions of farmers grew staple foods and reared livestock at the same time. It was semi-self-sufficient and semi-commodified to a very large extent and could therefore maintain a balance between household needs and external market risks. However, in recent years, subsequent to the eruption of a global crisis and severe price fluctuations for food and animal feed, the traditional stable household economy has by and large disintegrated. Household-based farming and animal husbandry are no longer worth the effort because of the huge market risks. Now, if the income of a farming household relies solely on agriculture, it is most likely the household will go bankrupt. Farmers work in the city for a living while the countryside is only a shelter for them. It is regrettable that the country owes the rural sector such an enormous debt. There is no suitable environment now for inhabitation in the countryside, whether in terms of the immense destruction of its ecological environment or the loss of the traditional rural village/community culture.

### 3. Looking at the rural society of China in a new light

China's over 6,000 years of agricultural practice was always ecological and

environmentally friendly. It emphasised resource conservation and safeguarding of the ecological environment. It was therefore sustainable. The contradiction between scarcity in natural resources and a large population had shaped the character of Chinese farmers who were extremely frugal, restrained in desire, hardworking and uncomplaining. For the same reason, traditional agricultural production in China was characterised by resource conservation and recycling, and the mode of cultivation was always thorough and meticulous.

In the last three decades, under the larger background of economic development as mentioned above, the Chinese government advocated agricultural modernisation with the aim of augmenting the income of farmers using limited resources. The result was an escalation of the use of chemicals in farming which has already exceeded the average global level and even the level of the developed countries. Agriculture has become an area in which cross-contamination is most severe, leading to acute double negative externalities as well as problems of unsafe food. Traditional agriculture was one with nature and would not result in pollution. Even though the income of farmers might be low, positive externalities were created. Modern agriculture may bring higher income to the individual, but it invariably leads to pollution. The cost is shouldered by the whole society and results in negative externalities.

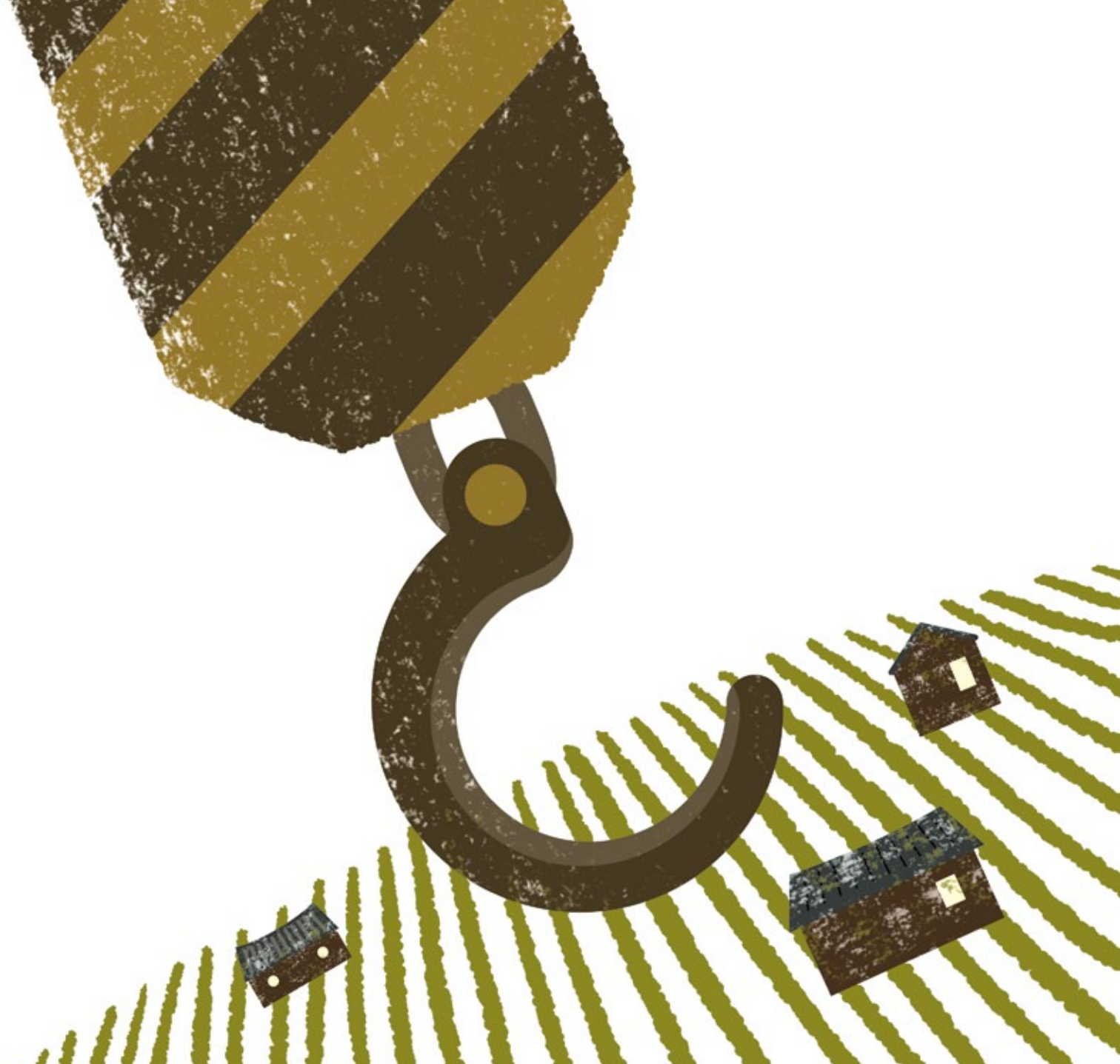
In the past, under the influence of the mainstream ideology of development, traditional agriculture was seen as a symbol of backwardness. It was even seen as the foundation of feudalism and authoritarianism. However, in the context of the modern ecological crisis, when traditional agriculture is compared with oil-based agriculture, one sees that the former brings positive externalities for society as a whole because of its ecological and cultural diversity. The positive externalities are a balanced ecology, beautiful scenery, safe food, and multiple functions in culture and education. In a market dominated by capital which has an advantaged position in standardisation, access to information and uniformity, an agriculture practiced by dispersed farming households is definitely in a disadvantaged position. In the meantime, most capital industrial enterprises bring negative externalities to the whole society when making profits for themselves.

Because of this, the government should tax capital and use the tax revenue to support rural regeneration. Only in this way will the government fulfill its responsibility towards the whole population.

Over the past few thousand years of Chinese history, apart from natural disasters and wars and destruction resulting from invasions by nomadic people from the north, as a society of smallholders, China was on the whole peaceful and stable.

The community life of smallholders was to a certain extent self-sufficient within a particular region. There was no need to invade or colonise other peoples for a living. They were conservative most of the time and preferred to maintain the status quo. It was under these circumstances that the Chinese people contributed to human history with innumerable splendid cultural achievements and inventions.

As mentioned earlier, China has achieved industrialisation under very unfavourable conditions, thanks to the unique role of smallholders and rural villages. In the various stages of industrialisation, China has been confronted with major economic crises resulting from suspension of foreign investment or capital shortage. The crises were ultimately resolved after the urban capital transferred the cost to rural villages/communities and national unrest was prevented. Rural villages and communities of smallholders have to have some sort of internal mechanisms or genes that help them to resolve external crises. We now live in a turbulent era of global capitalisation, and international financial capital keeps transferring its crises. Attention should be paid to the advantages of the villages/communities social system which has always been underestimated and even forsaken. We should look in a new light at the village/community of smallholders and the village/community rationality which is embedded in it.



China has a continental monsoon climate. Irrigation works are the lifelines of an agricultural society, relying in particular on the collaboration and coordination between villages in the upper and lower reaches, as well as participation of all members of the community. Because of this, historically Chinese villages had many forms of collaboration in which the village/community was a basic unit. Village rationality was a core mechanism of rural China and was different from the models typical of western theories. Village rationality, which was closely related with agricultural production and rural life, was manifested in arenas outside of individual households where all households must work together, such as public security, vigilance, and irrigation. In some areas where the natural conditions were harsh, mutual help in production was also an important substance of village rationality.

According to some studies, from the Qing Dynasty until the time of the Republic of China, on average 20% to 30% of the fields of village communities were communal. Moreover, where resources were scarce, the percentage of communal fields was higher. In some cases, the percentage was as high as 80%. This sort of cooperation, which emphasised helping each other through hardships, had an important role in maintaining the stability of the community and the larger society. In the course of rural industrialisation in the contemporary era, in particular the early period of industrialisation, there were many

examples where villages/communities maximised benefits for the whole village through internally consolidating the resources of the village/community.

In the 1980s when township and rural enterprises were flourishing, village collectives that were industrialised successfully mostly relied on mechanisms of village rationality that had been preserved in the people's communes prior to rural reform. The stage of capital accumulation was completed smoothly, after which they moved on to industrial production, enhancing employment opportunities for farmers while increasing their income.

In the experience of the New Rural Regeneration Movement, the most successful farmer cooperatives have been able to rebuild internal village rationality by building relationships of collective ownership and organising cultural and learning activities for community members. Such a mechanism, on the one hand, can internalise transaction costs in collaborations among community members. On the other hand, it can effectively resolve the risks brought by fluctuations of external markets. Because of this, it can be observed that some farmer cooperatives are able to manoeuvre in the market because they have a strong base. They are able to make use of market opportunities to try all sorts of projects, such as handicraft production, ecological agriculture, financial services, etc. If they

succeed, they gain from it. Even if they fail, they learn from the experience and wait for the next opportunity. Some farmer cooperatives, however, could not stand up again after they were confronted with risk and danger, and returned to a state of atomisation.

Looking at village life from a long-term perspective, there is no doubt that village rationality helps the community to gain from risks and offset the opportunity cost of agriculture in a market economy. While it increases the level of benefits for farmers, it also stabilises the larger society and contributes to initiatives to bring about new rural regeneration.

#### 4. Rural regeneration in the era of 'financialisation'

The crisis resulting from the financial implosion of centres of global capitalism in 2008 had a far-reaching impact. On the one hand, it accelerated the pace of developed capitalist countries in transferring the cost of the crisis to the whole world. On the other hand, it was a synchronous process of further capitalisation of global resources and 'financialisation' of social relationships.

The current global crisis is having a huge impact on human civilisation and the natural environment. In the face of such an all-encompassing crisis, it is of no avail to simply restructure the economy under the mainstream discourse. This will only

accelerate social unrest and even lead to social conflicts, such as ethnic and religious conflicts. The crisis is not only threatening our security as human beings, it is also deepening the ecological disaster which is already happening.

We are at a critical crossroads of history. Human beings should promote an ecological civilisation and a heterogeneous culture that is rooted in such a civilisation, and foster a sustainable development that is inclusive and just.

We must of course try to understand mainstream China: the country was invaded by imperialist powers in the 19th century. Hence, only the results of confrontational struggles were recorded. Struggles led by radical elites in a given period of time became the mainstream narrative in history and the story was ideologised—the victors were heroes and the defeated were villains. The historical course of the passive response to the assault by and the influence of Eurocentrism not only gained a highly politically correct status, it was also given substance and became a system of values and a set of criteria for critique and judgment.

Compared with mainstream history and its ideologised political correctness, the rural regeneration movement in modern China was a constructive reform which was part of the legacy of thousands of years of Chinese civilisation and history. It

was a continuation of the civil society of the past which had a much longer history. We should inherit the rural regeneration movement which was an undertaking with historical importance and increase our self-autonomy and self-consciousness. We should pay special attention to unearthing and sorting the history of civil society in which ordinary people have been participating extensively, and foster collaboration and exchange both within the country and abroad on this basis. This would help people, in the face of unprecedented turbulence brought by global capitalisation, to understand in peaceful ways the meaning of inclusion and sustainability implied in 3P and 3S and to more consciously safeguard the ecological civilisation which has heterogeneity as its substance.

In recent years, colleagues in intellectual circles from three areas across the Taiwan Strait and from abroad have joined together to provide guidance and training to young volunteers to take part in the experiment of rural regeneration which embodies reformist thought in its varied content and which has attracted tens of thousands of young people. Fortunately, it has been echoed by Chinese state policies. In the Fifth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of CPC held in October, 2005, 'constructing a new socialist countryside' was specified as a national strategy. In the 17th National Congress of CPC held in October, 2007, 'ecological civilisation'

was specifically emphasised as a guiding principle. The 18th National Congress of CPC in 2012 further resolved that the building of an ecological civilisation should be prioritised and be integrated into every aspect and all the processes of economic, political, cultural and social construction of the country in an effort to build a beautiful China and to realise sustainable development for the Chinese people. In the meantime, we are able to observe that the country's main policies are supported by trillions of renminbi of investment in *san nong* that have continued unabated for years before and after the global financial crisis erupted. To a certain extent, this investment has effectively alleviated the economic crisis resulting from domestic overproduction since 2008. If, in the future, China adopts the strategy of rural urbanisation under the pressure of surplus of capital, there will be a larger influx of capital into the countryside as the government invests in building infrastructure in rural areas. Under such circumstances, the net outflow of the 'three factors' (labour, land, capital) from the countryside, which has always been happening, would reverse. This would be a historical opportunity as well as a challenge for rural regeneration.

In our view, the so-called development in the current era of global capitalisation is nothing but a process of resource capitalisation. What the New Rural Regeneration Movement aims to do is, in these circumstances, to insist on the

15. The First South-South Forum was held in 2011 at the Lingnan University of Hong Kong with the theme of sustainable practice. A statement entitled *Ecological Civilisation and Human Security* was published as the common standpoint of people of the south. The Second South-South Forum, themed 'From Food Sovereignty to Food Security' was held in Zhongqing in Mainland China. Participants explored issues of sustainable practices and inclusive development.

philosophy and principle of 3P and 3S, and that is sovereignty in community resources, solidarity between people, and ecological security. In this way we hope to achieve economic and social sustainability. We hope that all working people will organise and make use of their local resources autonomously, and build their own localised economic foundations.

## Conclusion

In the last dozen years of the New Rural Regeneration Movement, volunteers from China and from abroad as well as university students who go to the countryside to support farmers have been helping people who remain in the rural areas and migrant workers in cities. They have also been engaging in organic agriculture with citizens' participation. Through diverse methods of social capital building, they have gained a certain amount of experience as well as explored ways of organising. During this period of time, we have mobilised 200,000 university students to go to rural areas to lend their support to farmers and have provided training to a few hundred young activists who stayed in the countryside for over a year. Adding to this list are a few dozen intellectuals specialising in rural regeneration who have a master or a doctoral degree. We have held hundreds of diverse and integrated training sessions and meetings for university students, farmers and citizens, organised many international exchange

programmes, hosted five nationwide conferences on CSA, and two relevant international conferences. Two sessions of the South-South Forum on sustainable development<sup>15</sup> in which participants from developing countries exchanged and shared their knowledge were also organised.

In the last decade, the New Rural Regeneration Movement has developed the most inclusive social network in contemporary China and has built participatory institutions which volunteers can freely join or quit. Tens of thousands of students, young people, urban dwellers and rural people have been mobilised to take part in the movement on their own initiative.

All these show that the New Rural Regeneration Movement is an alternative public democracy experiment. It is different to living under an elite dictatorship. It is not an NGO. There is no leader, no headquarters, no specialised fund raised. Compared with NGOs in modern western civil societies that have high institutional cost, the flat system of the New Rural Regeneration Movement is resource saving and environment-friendly.

Faced with a future full of risks, we should attach more importance to the positive role of village rationality shaped in the ecological civilisation of East Asian societies, and build multilateral

collaboration frameworks which have village/community as their basic unit. At the same time, in the gradual process of reform through the building of ecological agricultural mutual help networks, we should foster the development of CSA based on participatory and beneficial interactions between urban and rural areas, and take an important and constructive role in restoring various facets of the countryside such as the revival of the ecological environment in the broad sense.

The original meaning of rural regeneration is to revive rural civilisation as the foundation of ecological civilisation. In the first rural regeneration movement in the 1920s, our predecessors set themselves the aims of 'enlightening people's wisdom, developing people's capacity'. The New Rural Regeneration Movement advocated 3P and 3S which are principles that we have summed up from our experience. There are some common themes that emerge again and again in the two movements that are nearly 100 years apart. The themes can be summed up as '4 zi'. In the course of building its identity, rural Chinese civilisation must stand firm on this principle: first, we must follow a path that starts from the bottom and that stresses deep mobilisation of the grassroots people (*zi xia er shang* or from bottom to top); second, we must explore autonomous ways of developing social capital and conserving the resources and environment on which people

depend for their livelihood (*zi zhu fa zhan* or autonomous development); third, we must strengthen organisation related to the rights of the community to sustainable development by building systems and conditions for self-empowerment (*zi wo fu quan* or self-empowerment); fourth, we must develop self-management systems and rely on the wealth of people's power as a way to lower social costs (*zi zhi guan li* or self-governance and management).



## Sowing the seeds and letting them sprout....

**Sherman Tang**

Senior Programme Coordinator  
Partnerships for Community Development (PCD)

In the summer of 2004, I was travelling with my workmate, Shumeng, in the Tibetan grassland area in Ruergai. We were in the back of a big truck, holding on tightly to the rack behind the driving compartment as we drove along a bumpy track. I asked Shumeng if she was interested in doing something in the city to connect farmers with ordinary people like us who have no access to food producers.

At that time, Shumeng was living in Beijing. She was very concerned about the desertification of grasslands in northern China. She and her friends realised that erosion of the landscape and the environmental crisis were actually caused by the desertification of people's hearts. And for me, after living on a small outlying island in Hong Kong for 10 years, I had started to spend my weekends and leisure time in organic farming. This move grew from a desire to slow down my pace of life and to get to know the people who grew my vegetables.

Our conversations since then have given us a new understanding about food and lifestyle in search of autonomy, connection and happiness for all. We have started to explore the possibility of living a life that is more connected with the real process of food production, and to realise the value of harmony in rural-urban connections. The concept of 'Community Supported Agriculture' (CSA) was new to us back then, but

through research and learning we began to make many new friends among people who are concerned about issues of food safety, the environmental crisis, farmers' livelihoods, education and food culture. In Beijing, a few of our friends started to organise consumers within the NGO circle to support small producers in Hebei. We also started to conduct training sessions in organic farming among those who were interested in coming back to the land.

In February 2006, PCD started its CSA internship programme. The first batch of CSA interns worked closely with five hosting organisations to support six young people in promoting this new concept of CSA, placing them in a school, NGOs, a farmers' training centre and even a small restaurant. This small network of local groups and young people has since developed into a beautiful web involving food, ecology and revival of traditional community culture. Over 200 young people have now grown and engaged in this process, in family farms, demonstration farms, NGOs supporting fair trade for farmers or people with special needs, training institutes, restaurants with social missions, schools and parent groups, etc. Through these years, PCD has also supported veteran interns who continue to explore CSA and community development issues outside of their original hosting organisations. We provide thematic scholarships and network activities where veteran interns can exchange their experiences

in researching local seed varieties, farmer workshops, community farm fairs, consumer education and urban farming activities in school campuses and neighbourhoods. The veteran interns are encouraged to integrate into their local communities and to put their ideas into real action.

In cities like Beijing, Guangzhou, Nanning and Chengdu, farmer markets have sprouted and flourished. Increased awareness among urban communities has strengthened interest in workshops on sustainable living, home made food production and rural village visits organised to consolidate consumer support for smallholders. Along the way, we have also connected with inspiring experiences in Hong Kong and Taiwan, many of which are covered in this publication.

Over the years, PCD has continued to work with traditional communities and small producers conserving local seeds and crops in Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi and Sichuan. By reconnecting ecological agriculture with traditional culture, farmers are encouraged to localise their food production, in an era of globalisation in which farmers generally have little control over the market and means of production. Through building links with local consumers, producers can move towards a more self-reliant food

system in which indigenous collective mechanisms of managing communal resources and social affairs are restored and the producer-consumer relationship is healthier.

In recent years, we have also seen a new trend of young people returning to their rural homes and communities. This generation of new farmers has acquired an understanding of the value of agriculture as a way of living. They have built connections and networks in the cities while staying close to the culture and traditions of their homeland. PCD has partnered with these young returnees through learning, exchange and network support. They are practitioners of sustainable living, responding to the different dimensions of village life. They reconnect themselves with nature and are stewards of the land. They are proud of their efforts in exploring ways to revive village culture. They act as a bridge between people in the cities and in the countryside, patching up broken relationships with the earth's generosity, food production and people.

With all these developments as the backdrop, PCD in partnership with Kadoorie Farm & Botanical Garden (KFBG) organised the CSA Seminar in October 2012, bringing together 120 participants to discuss and share experiences. We published a follow-

up publication last year as an effort to synthesise the key outcomes and reflections from the meeting. This pioneer publication captures in-depth the experience of the CSA movement across Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. It also serves as a valuable resource to share the essence of the seminar with a much wider audience. With the same aspiration of sowing seeds for change, this English publication brings together the beautiful and inspiring stories from our Chinese collection. We hope that this encounter with you, and with many others who share the dream with us, will continue to help build a better society. In togetherness, this dynamic network will grow and manifest the spirit of kindness, contentment and resilience. That would be the greatest gift we can share with each other and with the next generation.







社區伙伴

**P**artnerships for  
**C**ommunity  
**D**evelopment

### Partnerships for Community Development (PCD)

Established in Hong Kong in May 2001, Partnerships for Community Development (PCD) is a community development NGO set up and funded by the Kadoorie Foundation (via a stream of funds allocated by the Hon. Mrs McAulay). The Foundation is a Hong Kong-based trust founded in 1970 by the late Sir Horace Kadoorie, who believed in the motto: "Help people to help themselves".

PCD believes that everyone, however deprived in materials terms, has the right and the ability to lead a dignified and sustainable life in harmony with others, with nature, and with the world at large. Individual well-being and living sustainably is crucial in maintaining a harmonious and sustainable community. PCD believes that the community has to work together to reflect on its relationship with nature and on its cultural traditions.

### Touching the Heart, Taking Root - CSA in Hong Kong, Taiwan & Mainland China

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