



The Secrets in Feeding China

Cai Yiping, Executive Director of Isis International, gives a glimpse of the distressed dragon during this food crisis. She leads us behind the skylines of Beijing and Shanghai to the countryside where the ironies of the unfinished revolution remain—marked on the fortunes and futures of women farmers.

In Chinese, there is an old saying “Min Yi Shi Wei Tian,” that literally means that the issue of food is as big as sky.

How would you describe China’s efforts in ensuring food security?

I just cannot emphasise enough how important food security is for China, a country with largest population in the world. In Chinese, there is an old saying “*Min Yi Shi Wei Tian*,” that literally means that the issue of food is as big as sky. Is there anything bigger than the sky in this world? None. So there is no other issue bigger than the food issue. That is why throughout Chinese history, how to produce enough food to feed its people has always been on the top of the political agenda. It matters to people’s livelihood, the state’s political stability, as well as the country’s economic growth, since agriculture provides the materials that the development of industrialisation demands.

In the Chinese social and political context, there are two objectives which need to be met to ensure food security: How to ensure

grain self-sufficiency; and how to create the incentives to produce and boost rural incomes despite all the risks and challenges China must face since it joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in November 2001, with the commitments that bound it to the harshest terms in WTO history.

Up to now, the majority of the poor population in China consists of farmers living in countryside, especially women and farmers living in the western inlands areas. China has to modernise the countryside. By modernise, I am not only referring to the improvement of productivity, but also the infrastructure, social security system that covers all, including women and girls and marginalised groups.

How have the food crisis and financial crisis affected China?

I think the food crisis and the financial crisis are new warnings for the Chinese on how to keep its agriculture and economy sustainable. If we want to feed China, we need to guarantee some amount of land for agriculture: 1.8 billion hectares of farmland. That’s the red line. The

subdivision where I used to live in in Beijing used to be a good land for growing watermelon. According to the 1996 State Council White Paper — “The Grain Issue in China,” China would have to make up for farm land lost to urbanisation by reclaiming 300,000 hectares of wasteland each year. Although we are within the safe zone, we are also in danger, given the challenges of the implementation of land use policies, especially with the new stimulus package for boosting China’s economy, which means that more farmlands will be converted into industrial zones.

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How would you describe China’s regard for the land?

Land in China is not just a source of food. There is a feeling of belonging. We have this saying that, no matter how high a tree can grow, the falling leaves will return to the root. There is a bond between your land and identity.

Since the financial crisis broke out and spread worldwide, it was estimated that about 20 million out of 130 million migrant workers—the farmers who came to cities looking for jobs, have lost their jobs. Many of them don’t know how to farm anymore when they go back to the rural areas, since they have been working in these cities for a long time.

Every year, you will see migrant workers going back home to spend the holidays. But after the Chinese new year, they go back to the city to look for a job. But because of the crisis, they are confronted by two questions: How can they find a job in the city and what will they do, should they decide to stay in the village?

What are the opportunities for China in this crisis?

I think there is an opportunity from the food crisis. China’s development has been based on export-orientation. But China cannot be the cheap labour or the sweatshop serving transnational companies forever. So this is a chance to adjust the industries. It is a chance to reconstruct the economy.

Then there are the returning migrant workers, men and women, who are typically better educated and more knowledgeable on laws and rights as well as skills on social mobilisation. They can be an engine for change. The returning migrant workers may also start their own businesses and similar ventures in the communities.

This crisis is also the chance to modernise the countryside, democratise the rural community and advance agriculture.

How would you describe the role of women in food security in China?

If you go to the countryside, it is not surprising to see that women outnumber the men. Once they get married and have children, they are usually left behind in



the village to take care of children, the elderly and the small farmland while the men go to cities to look for jobs. This “feminisation of agriculture” has been going on for 20 years.

Since agriculture is not a flourishing and profitable industry, people in agriculture usually have low technology and income. In many senses, agriculture remains devalued and women are discriminated. So being women in agriculture, they are doubly devalued.

Women in rural communities not only produce but they reproduce. They care for the children and the elderly. This and other roles in the households and communities have not been fully recognised by the policy makers, communities and even families. More resources should be allocated to women so that they can better practice their multiple roles and equally benefit from the economic growth and community development.

What are the prospects for women’s access to the land?

This is becoming an imperative issue because it affects so many women who have no secure access to tenurial rights to the land, especially with marriage and migration. Even when they are still members of the community, their right to their lands is not fully recognised. Now this issue is outstanding because a lot of lands now are sold to developers or the government and farmers are supposed to receive compensation. So there is a lot of money here. But it is not only an economic issue.

This is really a human rights issue because of gender discrimination. For example, even if women are not married, the presumption remains that they will get married anyway and move out of the village where they are registered. And when one gets married, the wife is supposed to move into her husband’s family and community, where she will gain rights to the land.

This heteronormativity is deeply rooted in the culture, reinforced by economic and political interests. They deprive the rights of marginalised group. Actually, it is the women’s family members—the father, brother and sister-in-laws, who refuse to give land rights to women because their own interests have been tied to this patriarchal family system. That is a part

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of the reasons why there is the son preference, gender-selective abortion and imbalance sex ratio at birth.

How ironic! All these discriminatory practices could even be done in the name of democracy. Because of women’s low status, they cannot speak for themselves. They are underrepresented in the village committee. Most of the time we see a war between women—daughters *vs.* daughters-in-law—and the dispute is meant to be reconciled and mediated within the community by applying the “majority rules” principle, where the patriarchal mindset is dominating.

But I believe that this chain can be broken at any part through education, awareness raising, enforcement of laws and the promotion of women’s participation. We have to claim that these are issues of gender discrimination and violation of women’s human rights. Changing the deep-rooted patriarchal culture is the biggest challenge that we have to face in China. It is an unfinished revolution. ■

