

Sustainable agricultural development in China

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Valorisation

INTRODUCTION

China is a country with a vast population but with limited farmland. Therefore, for the Chinese government the goal of national food security, known as “taking control of our own bowl”, is very important. By now, the goals of food security and a strong increase in agricultural productivity and farmers’ income have been achieved. However, these achievements have come at a cost, economically, socially, and environmentally. “Which direction should Chinese agriculture take?” is a question receiving much attention from both the government and scientists, and different strategies have been proposed.

Farmers are the most important actors in agricultural development. However, in China, farmers’ voices are absent in the process of agricultural policy development, due to their historically weak and marginalized position in Chinese society. Much research has been done on the triple problem of agriculture, farmers and rural development (*三农问题 San Nong We Ti*), using sophisticated theories and methods, but “common sense” in terms of the lived experience of the farmers is lacking. However, agricultural policies that are not rooted in the rural realities and widely supported by farmers are unlikely to be effective.

The main aims of this dissertation were (1) to assess the Chinese governmental strategy for agricultural development and two major alternatives vis-a-vis the range of economic, social and environmental sustainability problems of Chinese agriculture; (2) to determine the perspectives of Chinese farmers on problems and possible solutions in agricultural development; and (3) to assess whether the assumptions underlying the three high-level strategies correspond with farmers’ perspectives and how this can be improved. These three main objectives have been achieved in this dissertation, which is novel in combining an integrated and farmer-oriented approach. It provides relevant scientific and social contributions by stressing the importance of considering small-holding farmers’ voices in the process of agricultural policy development. In addition, this dissertation provides recommendations for research and policy.

RELEVANCE

Most of the research on agricultural problems in China is conducted from narrow, monodisciplinary perspective focussing on isolated issues, such as agricultural income, social inequity, or agri-environmental pollution. There is a lack of an integrated view on agricultural problems considering all three (economic, social, and ecological) dimensions of sustainable agriculture. This dissertation aims to narrow this gap. We conducted an integrated assessment of agricultural development strategies based on the scientific literature (both Chinese and English), governmental reports and bulletins from different ministries, secondary data sources from the Chinese Statistical Bureau, and surveys and case studies of farmers' perspectives. As such, it adds an integrated perspective to Chinese agricultural research.

In regard to agricultural policy, we provide a historical overview to help readers understand the background of China's agricultural development. Especially, the various issues of the so-called Central Document No. 1 that related to the triple problem of "agriculture, peasants, and rural development" played an important role in directing the agricultural development in China. However, in the English scientific literature it is rarely mentioned, maybe because the No.1 documents are in Chinese and just three of them have been translated into English. We made a content analysis of these Central Documents No. 1 based on the three dimensions of sustainable agriculture. The analysis provides useful insights to researchers who are interested in the Central Documents No. 1, and fills a gap in the study of Chinese agricultural policy.

The most important contribution of this dissertation is the field research on farmers' perspectives on agricultural development. In China, 'farmers' (peasants) not just refers to a profession, but also to a social category (or even social rank). A farmer is someone to "be looked down upon", and has the image of "low-qualified, poor"; and it is common for "rural areas" to have the image of being "backward and outmoded". Even though farmers are the most important actors in agricultural development, their voices are ignored due to their marginalized position in Chinese society. Through our field research, we let small-holding farmers' voices and their stories be heard. The descriptions of farmer' perspectives (including their experiences, needs, options and preferences) concerning agricultural development provides insight into the meanings farmers in different rural contexts give to current and expected developments. . Finally, we also provide a novel approach by comparing the assumptions underlying agricultural policy proposals with the perspectives of farmers from three villages with very different farming systems and conditions. The results stress the importance of letting small-holding farmers be "insiders" in the process of policy making rather than "outsiders".

TARGET GROUPS AND ACTIVITIES

This dissertation provides an integrated study of agricultural problems, policies, and farmers' perspectives. It appeals both to policy makers and scholars to consider farmers' perspectives on agricultural problems and possible solutions, and to take the wide diversity of rural contexts in China into account.

Policy makers

The Chinese government emphasizes the goal of sustainable agricultural and rural development and incorporated this in China's Agenda 21. As farmers are the main decision makers in agriculture, we argue that only agricultural policy proposals that align with farmers' perspectives can be implemented successfully. High-level policy makers should therefore understand very well "the human foundation" of agricultural development in diverse rural areas. Farmers have an experiential understanding of agricultural problems and possible solutions and it will thus be beneficial for agricultural policy when "farmers' voices" are policy makers' first consideration .

China is a large country with a huge diversity of rural and agricultural contexts in which farmers are confronted with different problems. Even in a fairly homogeneous agricultural production area, we found a large diversity in farmers' perspectives and practices depending on their farm household type, age, and level of education. Strategies for sustainable development of agriculture in China should thus address a wide diversity of needs and goals as articulated by Chinese farmers from different rural contexts.

Typically, agricultural policies are developed by the government and experts in a top-down manner in China. The main approach of this dissertation – field research in villages and with in-depth interviews with local farmers – provides Chinese agricultural policy makers with another, new way to inform agricultural policy development: from the bottom up. This bottom-up approach can help agricultural policies to be more widely accepted and adopted by farmers.

Science Community

Knowledge influences how people understand the world around them. Knowledge is heterogeneous. Diversified knowledge can provide people with multiple perspectives on problems. Different types of knowledge are needed to solve the current range of agricultural problems.

According to our research, most farmers learned how to farm from older generations, and have a positive view of traditional agricultural knowledge. Yet they are not satisfied with their current knowledge and actively acquire new knowledge, e.g., from TV or

books, and try to combine this new 'scientific' knowledge with their traditional knowledge (indigenous knowledge). Although they think that the government should take the lead in promoting the acquisition of new knowledge, they do not think the current training courses are useful. They are nevertheless willing to participate, especially when the knowledge would be practically useful, transferred in an interactive way and be helpful to raise their income.

However, the current agricultural knowledge extension system is one-way, and top-down. Farmers are treated as passive followers, but based on their rich experiences, farmers have the wisdom to fulfill agricultural activities. Experts should therefore draw lessons from farmers' indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is one important part of the culture and tells people what happened and worked in the past, which provides people with experience to draw on. Sustainable agricultural needs heterogeneous knowledge: both indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge.

Small-holding farmers and farmers' organizations

The field research was conducted in three very different agricultural contexts in Shaanxi Province. To a large extent, these case studies are representative of agricultural systems that are wide-spread in China. Chinese farmers can learn from the similarities and the differences between agricultural problems in different rural contexts. In addition, the dissertation shows that farmers from different rural contexts developed their own strategies to cope with their agricultural problems. Farmers can draw some lessons from other rural areas which are also suitable for their own local areas.

Due to the household responsibility system in China, in which each rural resident has the right of use over a small piece of land, the farm size in Chinese agriculture is very small, and there are many farmers. These farmers are independent in their decision making, and only loosely organized, which makes it difficult to let their voices be heard by the high-level actors, such as government, policy makers, and scientists. Farmers' organizations could unite individual small-holding farmers and give them more influence. Currently, there are some farmers' organizations emerging in China. However, according to the interviewed farmers and studies by other researchers, the current farmers' organizations play only a limited role in organizing individual small-holding farmers.

Schedule and implementation

After her PhD study, the researcher will continue to work in the field of rural sociology at a Chinese University. In the first place, the findings of this PhD study will be incorporated in teaching. The researcher will communicate and discuss the findings with young bachelor and master students. Second, Chinese universities have responsibilities with

respect to public service. University faculty have the obligation to strengthen the connection with communities (villages) and local governments. Finally, we plan to publish some chapters of this dissertation to let more readers know about our research findings.