

# Chinese Sustainable Agriculture and the Rising Middle Class: Analysis from Participatory Research in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) at Little Donkey Farm

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## Abstract

The growth of China's middle class is driving an expansion of interest in 'green' and sustainable food, food that is perceived to be healthy, safe, and environmentally-friendly. Self-consciously 'sustainable' agriculture is a new phenomenon in China; but it has emerged from, and builds upon, an agrarian history that is markedly different from that of the West. In this paper, we address the relationship between the Chinese middle class, an overwhelmingly urban group, and Chinese sustainable agriculture, a largely urban-oriented enterprise, from the perspective of our work in establishing and operating Beijing's first Community Supported Agriculture farm. We find that, in light of the development pathways taken by sustainable and alternative agriculture(s) internationally, there is much hope for the future of sustainable agriculture in China; and we predict that its development will be swiftest in (peri-) urban contexts.

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## *Background and Framing*

In his classic 1911 book on agriculture in Japan, Korea, and China, *Farmers of Forty Centuries*, University of Wisconsin scholar F. H. King wrote admiringly of the intensive cultivation practices and agroecosystem economies that enabled Asian farmers to feed many more mouths per acre than was considered possible at home in the American heartland. China has a rich and well-documented history of diverse sustainable farming practices, “sustainable” in the sense of being maintainable, and maintained, over long periods of time. Examples include the productively biodiverse paddies of traditional rice-fish, rice-duck, and rice-fish-duck cultivation systems in Central and South China; mulberry dike-pond sericulture systems in the Pearl River Delta; and intensively-managed agroforestry systems in mountainous minority regions of Yunnan Province.

Chinese agriculture – and the fabric of China’s rural communities – has changed dramatically in the century since King’s visit. The nation has seen the fall of a dynasty; world war and civil war; “Liberation” in 1949; collectivization and the Great Leap Forward; the Cultural Revolution; and now more than three decades, post-Reform-and-Opening, of negotiation over the precise nature of the Chinese political system’s particular “Chinese characteristics.” The legacy of this recent history of revolution and reform remains legible in China’s rural landscapes today: land ownership technically resides with the collective (the town or village); land-use rights are contracted from the collective by individual households under the Household Responsibility System (HRS); and household landholdings are often comprised of small and scattered plots. Almost 60% of China’s population remains based in the countryside, with some scholars suggesting even higher figures to account for strong, on-going ties between rural-urban migrants and their home villages (He 2007).

The fundamental challenge confronting Chinese agriculture is how to effectively connect some 200 million smallholder farmers with large national and international markets as China becomes ever-more-integrated into the global economy. There are deeply entrenched problems of information and infrastructure in this regard: supply chains are often long and opaque, and prevailing market structures do not provide mechanisms through which quality attributes of agricultural products (such as appropriate application of pesticides during cultivation) can be recognized and rewarded. Difficult, mountainous geography in many parts of the country and the relatively slow pace of economic development in the interior ‘hinterlands’ have meant continued adherence to traditional intensive cultivation techniques, albeit coupled with increasing chemical

pesticide and fertilizer use and over-use. In areas where geography and investment allow, large-scale, corporate agricultural operations are proliferating. A consequence of the array of challenges facing China's rural farmers is widespread concern over food safety on the part of urban consumers. China's rural development is at a crucial pass; and it is against this larger development background that self-consciously 'sustainable' agriculture has begun to emerge.

On a macro scale, high-level support for sustainable agriculture initiatives has been growing since the early 1990s, with the establishment of the Green Food program, and later, national organic standards; and rural and environmental issues generally have received elevated attention under the current Hu-Wen administration (Sanders, 2006). In 2007, the pursuit of 'ecological civilization' – a term used in contradistinction to the concept of 'industrial civilization' to mean 'post-industrial society, economy, and culture' – was adopted as an official national development strategy (Wen 2009). The central government's 2007 "Document Number 1," the foremost policy document for that year, advocated the development of "multifunctional agriculture" as an important component of the overall ecological civilization strategy; in this context, "multifunctionality" is the notion that agriculture should serve significant social and environmental functions in addition to its productive function. In 2008, implementing "resource-conserving, environmentally-friendly agriculture" became one of China's long-term 2020 development goals.

There has been a veritable explosion in the amount of land under certified organic cultivation in China in recent years: between 2005 and 2006, this figure jumped from 298,990 hectares to 3,466,570 hectares, placing China second only to Australia in area under organic cultivation (Paull 2007). However, this large-scale investment in organic cultivation has been primarily oriented to lucrative export markets in Japan and the West. There has been a parallel emergence of individual, small-scale initiatives with values-driven commitments to broadly 'organic' or 'natural' cultivation methods. Our case study is at the heart of this young, coalescing movement orientated to locality and community, which we discuss below.

We use the term "sustainable agriculture" throughout this paper for its correspondence to international usage; however, we are substituting the term for a somewhat different Chinese phrase, "生态都市农业," or "ecological urban agriculture." This phrase, often used to denote the kinds of sustainable and alternative agricultural projects examined in this paper, references two concepts specific to the Chinese context. First is the idea of "ecological agriculture." "Chinese ecological agriculture," a set of

principles introduced by the state and refined by environmental scientists, agronomists, and agricultural economists in a series of papers beginning in the early 1980s, was positioned as the uniquely-Chinese response to a need for environmentally-sustainable production practices. Chinese ecological agriculture can be described as prioritizing issues of central concern to a developing nation, particularly food security, through a pragmatic approach to technologies like chemical fertilizer and genetically-modified seeds. In current Chinese usage, “ecological agriculture” is the rough equivalent to “sustainable agriculture” in English, connoting similar ideas of environmentally-friendly production practices with similar definitional fuzziness.

In China, “urban agriculture” refers to agriculture carried out within the broad economic scope of the city. The term encompasses heart-of-the-city gardening; but it more properly conjures images of agriculture rooted in the marginal and interstitial spaces of the suburbs and peri-urban farmland, where the city meets the countryside. “Urban agriculture” can refer to gardening on suburban plots by urban residents, as well as farming by peasants in suburban villages; but it is first and foremost understood to be agriculture in service to and supported by the city (Hao et al 2004, Zhang et al 2005).

Chinese ecological urban agriculture, then, is a liminal and “multifunctional” thing: between city and countryside; not ‘peasant’ but not strictly within or of the city; and in the tradition of reform-era pragmatism, inflected with an awareness of the many mouths to be fed on limited arable land. In this paper, we outline and analyse experience from one of the first Community Supported Agriculture initiatives in China, an initiative undertaken in the spirit of China’s long history of sustainable agriculture and located squarely within the discursive space of “ecological urban agriculture.” We address the sustainability of the Little Donkey Farm project – its long-term maintainability – not only from the standpoint of cultivation praxis and operation, but also in terms of the farm’s embeddedness within networks of stakeholders and institutions and its position, on the edge of the city, against a background of a rising Chinese middle class.

### *Little Donkey and the CSA Model*

Little Donkey Farm is located in the northwest corner of Beijing’s Haidian District at the foot of Fenhuangling Mountain. Founded in 2008, the farm is an agricultural project carried out on experimental production land jointly

established by the Renmin University School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development (which the authors are all affiliated with), the Renmin University Rural Reconstruction Center, and the Haidian District government. Little Donkey operates on 37 acres of farmland just outside of the suburban village of Houshajian. The farm's soil and water resources have been assessed by an independent professional organization and meet the necessary standards for organic production. The farm's land includes fields, pasture, and trees; farm operators have tried to ensure that the agroecosystem is ecologically-balanced and biodiverse, creating a materials cycle through integrated cultivation and husbandry.

The authors have all been involved in the farm's inception, organization, and operation. In 2008, Shi Yan, currently the farm's chief operator, travelled to Madison, Minnesota under the auspices of the Minneapolis-based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy to work as an intern at Earthrise Farm, a small organic CSA farm. Her experiences in the American Midwest informed decision-making about the organization and structure of the Little Donkey project upon her return to Beijing: the operating models she observed and participated in in Minnesota seemed practically and fruitfully translatable to suburban Beijing.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a term for farm operating models based on concepts of community and shared risk. In the basic CSA model, members pay for a share in a farm's produce before the growing season begins and then periodically receive fresh produce as the season progresses and crops are harvested. In this model, farmers are able to access operating capital up-front; CSA members help shoulder some of the risk inherent in agricultural production; and a notional community is constructed around the farm through membership. The term "Community Supported Agriculture" was coined by American organic farmer and food activist Robyn Van En, the founder, in 1986, of one of the first US farms to use this model. The earliest American CSA farms drew on European traditions of biodynamic farming in the legacy of Rudolph Steiner, and on CSA-like arrangements that had been operating in Switzerland and Germany since the early 1960s (McFadden 2004). A CSA-style direct purchasing system known as *teikei*, meaning "cooperation," was independently pioneered by a group of Japanese housewives in the mid-1960s.

Little Donkey Farm is the first farm in the greater Beijing area, and one of the first in mainland China, to use a CSA operating model. Cultivation at the farm follows a program of non-chemical agriculture designed to improve soil health and agroecosystem wellbeing. This program borrows

knowledge and techniques from traditional local farming practice; permaculture systems; the “Natural Farming” system developed by South Korean master farmer Cho Han Kyu; and Shi Yan’s experience with organic farming in the US. Little Donkey has not undergone organic certification, due in part to the expense and complexity of the process, but also in part to widespread mistrust of food labelling schemes among Chinese consumers. We use the term “organic” in describing the farm as shorthand for a larger set of values about the relationship between humans and the environment at the site of agricultural production.

We believe that a substitution of labor for capital, a substitution of hoes for pesticide and machinery, lies at the heart of organic cultivation; and that this substitution serves long-term soil quality and productivity. Specific measures used at Little Donkey to improve soil quality include applying organic fertilizers such as manure from farm animals; prohibiting the use of all chemical pesticides and herbicides; and composting. The farm employs a natural method for raising pigs which relies on native microorganisms in the soil to break down wastes. This method reduces pollution, conserves water, and strengthens the health and resilience of the animals. The farm also raises free-range chickens.

Little Donkey officially began the process of recruiting share members in April 2009. The farm’s enactment of ecological principles was the focus of promotional material designed to attract members. Promotional materials also emphasized the farm’s contributions in dimensions such as food safety, environmental education, and relaxation and leisure. Aside from promotion through web-based and conventional media channels, Little Donkey organized environmental and health education activities within the local community to spread awareness about the farm. These community-based activities assured the low cost of promotion while helping farm operators to gain the crucial trust and support of community members. Community residents were also invited to visit the farm in order to strengthen their trust in Little Donkey through on-the-ground observation.

Little Donkey administrators have created an agricultural calendar for the Beijing area so that prospective share members can understand the approximate timing of various crop harvests prior to enrolment. The cost of a share is determined using an anticipated harvest method, in keeping with the notion of risk-sharing between consumers and producers. The farm offers working share and regular share options. A ‘working share’ refers to the type in which a member household rents a 30 square-meter plot of farmland at Little Donkey; tools, seeds, water, organic fertilizer, and other material inputs, as well as technical assistance, are provided by the farm,

while the member household is responsible for all cultivation and harvesting. At present, the cost of a working share is 1,000 RMB (about 167 USD) each season. A ‘regular share’ refers to the type in which produce is provided to members according to the farm’s cultivation plan and supply schedule. Produce is supplied weekly throughout the season, with no fewer than three types of produce supplied each week. According to agreement, delivery amounts are separated into full shares of 400 jin (about 440 lbs) of produce, and half shares of 200 jin (about 220 lbs) of produce, costing 2,000 RMB and 1,000 RMB (334 USD and 167 USD) respectively. Members can request that shares be delivered, or they can pick up their share directly from the farm; the cost of delivery is 500 RMB (83 USD). In 2009, the farm recruited 17 working-share members and 37 regular-share members; in the 2010 season, there were 110 working-share members and 280 regular-share members. We anticipate even greater enrolment in the 2011 season.

Farm workers at Little Donkey include local peasants and interns. Daily cultivation management at Little Donkey is largely the responsibility of local peasants hired by the farm. Interns, often recent college graduates, apply for the year-long position on the farm to learn about sustainable agriculture and experience life in an ‘alternative’ community of like-minded people. Service management is primarily the responsibility of Little Donkey administrators and interns, and includes tasks such as delivering shares, writing regular newsletters, and communicating with members. The weekend is the most popular time for working-share members to work on their plots and for city residents to visit the farm. According to our calculations, Little Donkey has had over 10,000 visitors since its opening.

### *Beijing’s Rising Middle Class*

Little Donkey has been remarkably successful thus far: the farm has been running smoothly for more than two seasons; members are enthusiastic; participation is growing; and the project’s visibility, following a wave of media attention, has helped to raise the profile of sustainable farming in Beijing. “Little Donkey” has become a recognizable brand: we even learned of a farm using the Little Donkey logo and name in Inner Mongolia.

Viewed in context, the farm’s success is intimately connected to changes in Beijing’s socioeconomic landscape. With rising per-capita incomes, the relative percentage of income allocated by consumers to basic expenditures has decreased even as absolute per-capita expenditures have increased. Consumers have more money available to spend on food, expanded

discretionary income, and a growing awareness of health and environmental issues associated with food production. A project like Little Donkey Farm is made possible within the set of social and economic circumstances producing and produced by an expanding (urban) middle class.

The term “middle class,” as used in this paper, is not intended to mean the Marxist class concept based on implicitly conflictual relations within a system of ownership (Anagnost 2008). In keeping with prevalent contemporary Chinese usage, we employ this phrase to indicate the group of urban and rural residents whose income level, within a standard time period and locality, is comparable to the middle income level for all citizens (Wu and Yang 2006). In addition, the term indicates a group that shares similar self-evaluations, lifestyles, and value orientations. In China, this group is sometimes referred to as “the middle income group,” “mid-level owners/producers,” “middle-income people,” etc. The Chinese middle class is a comparatively wealthy social group with high levels of cultural attainment, a high quality of life, and fairly strong feelings of approval for mainstream values and the status quo (Chen and Yi 2004).

China’s middle class is growing. 2010 research from the China Academy of Social Science Sociology Research Center indicates that, at present, China’s middle class already comprises around 23% of the total population (Lu 2010). In large cities the percentage is even greater. Ma Lijuan writes that, although the formation period for China’s middle class has been brief, its membership of around 300 million people exceeds the population of the average developed Western country (Ma 2006). In the 1990s, most middle class people were distributed throughout municipalities like Beijing and Shanghai, developed coastal areas, and large cities with developed economies such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and a few other developed cities in the Yangtze and Peal River Deltas; today, the middle class is slowly expanding into smaller cities and towns.

Research characterizing the growing Chinese middle class has lagged behind the pace of change. A number of studies suggest that increasingly well-off consumers, while still price-sensitive, will demand higher quality food products as incomes increase (Veeck and Burns 2005, Gale and Huang 2007). In a climate of uncertainty around food safety, evidence also suggests that consumers are willing to pay a small premium for products meeting basic environmental standards (Wang et al 2008). The results of a recent survey we conducted on Beijing CSA members support these general premises, and sketch a picture of changing economic conditions, changing consumption values, and an increasing identification of environmental wellbeing with human health.

### *CSA Member Survey Results*

In September 2010, we distributed questionnaires to 200 members of Beijing CSA farms, including God's Grace Garden, Fangjia Farm, Derunwu, and Little Donkey Farm. 175 questionnaires were returned, of which 143 were useable.

79.72% of respondents were female, with 65.03% between the ages of 31 and 40 and 18.88% between the ages of 41 and 50. Almost 90% of respondents had obtained an undergraduate degree or higher: 46.15% of respondents had undergraduate degrees and 40.06% had master's degrees or higher. Compared with the general population of Beijing, this level of educational attainment is high: according to the 2010 Beijing Statistical Yearbook, 23.2% of Beijingers have undergraduate degrees and 5.5% have master's degrees or higher.

Middle- and upper-level incomes were most common among respondents, with 25.87% reporting a monthly salary of between 5,001 and 10,000 RMB (833.5–1,667 USD); 20.98% reporting between 10,001 and 15,000 RMB (1,667–2,500 USD); 16.78% reporting between 15,001 and 20,000 RMB (2,500–3,334 USD); and almost a third of respondents (47 people) reporting monthly salaries of greater than 20,000 RMB. A 2010 report by the Beijing University of Technology and the Social Sciences Academic Press found that the average monthly income of a middle-class Beijinger is 5,923 RMB, and a middle-class Beijing family earns an average of 10,007 RMB per month (Lu et al 2010).

The most important factor associated with respondent decisions to become CSA members was children: 69.23% of respondents' families included a child of 12 or younger. When indicating the main impetus behind their consumption of organic products, most respondents chose 'food safety' (131 people, more than 90% of respondents). 'Environmental protection' was the second-most-frequent choice (73 people, or 50% of respondents); and 'nutrition' and 'disease prevention' were indicated by 46 and 34 respondents respectively. 95% of respondents indicated that a desire for high-quality organic vegetables was the main reason they joined a CSA, reflecting the extent of consumer mistrust of conventional produce sales channels. 60% of respondents indicated that they hoped that agricultural production processes would not harm the environment; 41% of respondents indicated that they wanted to know where the food they ate was grown and by whom, and the same percentage indicated that they trusted the cultivation practices of CSA farm personnel.

Taken together, these results characterize Beijing CSA members as well-educated; concerned about the safety of their food and the effects of its production on the environment; and belonging to the middle class. These findings coincide with the results of studies that have analysed CSA membership abroad: CSA members tend to have high incomes and educational levels, and to be concerned about health and environmental issues (Schnell 2007).

### *Sustainability at Little Donkey*

As discussed above, production practices at Little Donkey Farm are directed at improving long-term soil fertility and the health and biodiversity of the farm agroecosystem. But the concept of sustainability extends beyond environmental health to the social and economic soils in which the farm itself is planted: it is important to address the farm's sustainability as an institution and as a set of values.

Little Donkey has reached a consumer base, middle class Beijingers, which we can anticipate to grow in size in the coming years. This is a group with the necessary income and access to information to act on food safety concerns by seeking out alternative channels of food supply like Little Donkey and other Beijing CSA farms. Little Donkey is financially sustainable because its members have bought into the CSA model of shared risk and reward.

The farm is recognized and supported by members of the local, district government and the city government; practically, this kind of official recognition is indispensable to the smooth functioning of an initiative like Little Donkey. Faculty and students at Renmin University, including the authors, have been involved in organizing and operating the farm; in addition, the farm receives support from Renmin University -affiliated rural-urban aid groups including the Liang Shuming Rural Reconstruction Center and Ground Green Union, both of which work to promote rural producer cooperatives. Little Donkey has also become a node in a wider network of NGOs, including locally-based environmental groups and larger domestic and international organizations like Friends of Nature, Greenpeace China, Jane Goodall China, and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. Little Donkey enjoys access to information and technical support, and a wealth of personal and relational resources, through these overlapping networks. The density and diversity of Little Donkey's institutional ties, and the promise of help from many directions, contribute to the project's robustness.

Perhaps most vitally, Little Donkey is reaching a wide range of people in the community that has come to recognize itself around the farm. Members have been inspired to spread the word about organic food and start group buying schemes and consumer cooperatives. Interns leave the program with a deep knowledge of agricultural practice; and former interns have gone on to pursue a range of other projects related to organic food. Younger students at Renmin have become interested in starting their own farms, and students at other Beijing universities have founded school gardens. Urbanites learn new skills from local suburban peasants, who become friends and comrades. The community that ‘supports’ Little Donkey is a community that perpetuates itself: information about the farm, about organic food, and about sustainable living is borne along relational ties, flowing outward to expand the network of people that know and trust the farm.

### *Conclusions*

We opened this paper with an impressionistic view of contemporary rural China. This is essential framing for a discussion of urban consumers and suburban farms: so much of Chinese agriculture is rural and ‘peasant,’ seemingly holding little in common with a university-supported project operated by young university graduates. The link, here, is that Little Donkey and other Beijing CSA farms are working to bridge the gap of knowledge and trust between urban consumers and their sources of food *in general*. This kind of work at the rural-urban border has significant implications for larger questions of sustainable rural development, a set of processes and choices which will require bridging work across the much greater gap between (urban) consumers and China’s rural peasant farmers.

To this extent, Little Donkey must be considered in larger perspective. The farm’s success and visibility have provided new ideas and vocabulary to farmers interested in ‘natural’ and ‘green’ cultivation, both in the greater Beijing area and across the country, and the farm has been a key influence in popularizing the CSA model in China. Since Little Donkey began in 2008, the number of small-scale, self-consciously sustainable farms operating in China has grown; but what remains a small, scattered minority of farmers has begun to articulate itself as a movement with a core of shared values. The farmers who count themselves as part of this movement are both rural and urban, ‘peasant’ and not. At the 2010 National Community Supported Agriculture Conference, held at Renmin University in November, delegates included new farmers with backgrounds in biology and software engineering, well-educated farmers who had been pursuing

organic cultivation on suburban land for years, and farmers from small rural villages who had started using CSA models to market their high-quality produce.

This diversity among participants in sustainable agriculture projects creates a space for optimism about the future of China's food system. CSA-style models, which 'leapfrog' the problems of certifying long, opaque supply chains, offer a viable option to small farmers with high-quality products to sell. Trust and information are mutually implicated, and as they are transmitted between the members of a CSA community, they serve to sustain and reproduce the values embodied by farms like Little Donkey. Little Donkey's success in engendering a functioning community between urban middle class consumers and suburban farmers speaks to the potential for success for similar sustainable agriculture initiatives, both in the Beijing area and within the economic fields of other cities with strong middle-class consumer bases. Truly rural, 'peasant' sustainable agriculture initiatives face a much higher threshold to success; and yet, the achievements of rural farmers across the national Chinese CSA movement demonstrate the possibility for CSA models to bridge the rural-urban divide, supporting sustainable farming practices through the construction of diverse, sustainable communities.

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