

YOUNG CHINESE FARMERS SOWING SEEDS FOR ORGANIC REVOLUTION¹

William Wan[©]

In Chongming Island, China, the small-scale farmer is a dying breed in China, made up mostly of the elderly left behind in the mass exodus of migrant workers to much higher-paying jobs in industrial cities. But on an island called Chongming, a two-hour drive east of Shanghai, a group of young urban professionals has begun to buck the trend. They are giving up high-paying salaries in the city and applying their business and Internet savvy to once-abandoned properties. They are trying to teach customers concepts such as eating local and sustainability. And they are spearheading a fledgling movement that has long existed in the Western world but is only beginning to emerge in modern China: green living. "What we are trying to create is like a dream for us," said Chen Shuaijun, a young banker who, with his wife, has rented eight acres on Chongming. "But it is simply bizarre to everyone else," he added, with a sigh.

Sipping coffee recently at a Shanghai Starbucks, dressed in polished black shoes and a crisply starched shirt, Chen, 30, fully embodied the success and wealth China's new generation has found in this industrial, corporate age. Farming runs in his family, Chen explained, going back at least seven generations, including his parents. Chen was the first in his family to go to college. He majored in computer science, got married and began climbing the ladder in Shanghai's banking industry. Then, one day last year, his wife, Shen Hui, pitched him a wild idea. Unlike Chen, she had grown up in the city and was tired of the smoggy air, the unnaturally green and almost tasteless grocery store broccoli and the fast-paced, high-pressure life in a cubicle. To her and a growing number of Chinese of her generation, the countryside represented a simpler paradise. But the biggest draw for her was food safety.

In recent years, China has seen an unending string of food scandals: melamine-injected milk, counterfeit baby formula, bacteria-infected vegetables, pollution-poisoned fish and even cooking oil recycled from sewage. Imagine, Shen told Chen, knowing exactly where your food came from and what went into it. Having spent his childhood lugging heavy buckets of water by shoulder to water his parents' fields, Chen thought he had a more realistic view of country life. But even to him, the idea held a certain appeal. Time and distance - along with several years as an office drone - lent the countryside a touch of nostalgia. Chen's neighbors ridiculed him to his face when the couple announced that they wanted to leave Shanghai and become organic farmers. Co-workers expressed shock. And Chen's parents, who had toiled on farms just so he could study and go to college, became enraged. "There were some angry phone calls," Chen admitted.

Not that it got any easier once he launched his farm. Chen and his wife till their rented land on the weekends. But most of the peasants he hired to tend it during the week had never even heard the term organic and derided the organic methods he developed after months of online research. His parents, who eventually agreed to work the farm, and the hired peasants have even come close to mutinying at times against Chen's strict rule against pesticides and fertilizers. Not using either has meant catching insects at times by hand, endless weeding in the fields and hauling in smelly, dirty "natural" fertilizers from nearby livestock. The family has lost their entire crop of corn three times to insects; only a handful of cucumbers survived the most recent season. And

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because the organic produce has more flaws, scars and uneven shapes than ordinary grocery-store vegetables, it's been hard to sell the little they've produced.

Varied Success

They are not alone in encountering problems. Lying in the mouth of the Yangtze River, Chongming Island has become a haven of sorts for China's new breed of eco-friendly hipster entrepreneurs, but often with varying degrees of success. Even when their methods are sound, the water and soil such farmers use often are not because of rampant pollution. This summer, the government reported 43 percent of state-monitored rivers are so polluted, they're unsuitable for human contact.

The industry the farmers are trying to nurture is also - like most markets in China - plagued with fakes. Regulation on organic goods remains weak. Competing agencies offer varying degrees of certification and some, farmers say, will certify even the most pesticide- or hormone-injected goods for the right price. As a result, many new farmers like Chen bypass the organic certification altogether and simply call their goods "natural."

There are also harsh economic realities. The idea of paying up to 10 times more for organic produce remains foreign, not to mention out of reach, for most in China. But the toughest part for many of China's newest farmers is dealing with the cultural backlash. Farming in China is loaded with historical baggage. For centuries, it was looked down on as the job of low-class peasants, and then, under Mao, it was abruptly elevated to the noblest of proletarian professions. Now, in the midst of China's unbridled industrialization and urbanization, farming is once again considered one of the worst possible jobs in the country. Despite the odds against them, almost a dozen new organic farms have popped up on the island in recent years. Many, however, have yet to turn a profit.

A few miles from Chen's farm, Han Guojie, 38, another new farmer, confessed, "We'll be losing money this year - a lot, in fact." Han gave up a high-paying job as a water quality engineer last year to start his farm. And he expects to be in the red for a while longer because the soil needs to recover from years of heavy chemicals and pesticides. A devout Buddhist who carries prayer beads wherever he goes, Han says the motivation for him and other new farmers transcends the material. "For years, humans have tried to conquer nature, but in doing so, they themselves became conquered. They lost their connection with the earth. They destroyed the land they were tilling," Han said. "In Buddhist belief, there are no pesticides, no bad insects, no good ones. There is only imbalance in the world. We must restore that balance."

Most young farmers on the island had similarly lofty motives. Jia Ruiming, a former schoolteacher, began his organic rice farm after seeing the poverty of China's rural farmers. Most are in their 60s or older and unable to compete in the state-regulated system that produces most of China's food. He hopes to teach the older farmers he's hired that organic rice can sell for many times more than regular rice and wants to show them how to market it in Shanghai.

There are signs the movement is catching on. Among China's new echelon of super-rich, organic food has become a luxury fad in high-end supermarkets in recent years - a status symbol like the latest Gucci purse. Some organic farmers, however, are leery of becoming the latest trend. "We want to create a new market, but this isn't just about pushing consumption," said Sun Yangchuan, an accounting executive who, in her spare time, spearheads a communal farm that relies on Shanghai residents who pay to be members and pitch in to produce each season's

crops. "This movement is about adopting a sustainable lifestyle, finding balance between rural and urban."

Joy Exceeds Pain

For Chen and wife Shen, finding that balance this first year on their farm has driven them to exhaustion at times. Shen, who began as the more idealistic of the two, has found herself physically unable to get up some weekends after hours of weeding. She admits that her original plan for them to one day quit their jobs and work full time in the country may not be the best idea. "It gets boring in the country, because there isn't that much to do," she said. But the joys have outweighed the pains, she adds. This summer, she harvested their first tomato of the season. And she described the pleasure of biting into the red fruit and realizing for the first time what a real, unadulterated tomato tasted like. "There's nothing like that," she said, "in the city."