

Shi Yan and her Little Donkey Farm

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Last year, Renmin University PhD candidate Shi Yan bade farewell to her “petit bourgeois” life in Beijing and spent six months on a farm in Southwest Minnesota in the United States. There, she worked as a farmer and experienced first-hand the operation of American farms. Meanwhile, she was searching for an answer to a question that had long left her bewildered.

Where do vegetables come from?

The Little Donkey Farm is fenced in by barbed wire. It is an organic farm, so food safety is the top priority. You can hardly see any non-staff on the farm. Besides workers, there are only two big yellow dogs and some magpies flying around. Little Donkey Farm has two types of customers. One group has ordinary-shares. Every week, the farm delivers fresh and organic produce to their homes. The variety and quantity of the produce changes weekly depending on what is ripe for harvest, and shareholders cannot choose as freely as they do in a supermarket. The others have labor-shares. Each household has a 30-square-meter plot of land on the farm. Every weekend, they tend their land and harvest whatever is ready to pick. Both types of customers have to sign a 20-week contract with the farm before each planting season and pay in advance. The risks are shared by the farm and customers. Weekend is when the week’s farm work comes to fruition: produce is delivered to ordinary-share customers, while the labor-share holders come to work on the farm on Saturday and Sunday.ⁱ

To prepare the weekly delivery, staff pick up their pace starting on Wednesday. They spend two days inspecting the fields to determine the variety and quantity of the week's delivery. After lunch break on Friday, delivery prep begins. Melons and beans are picked first since they will stay fresh longer. Workers then divide the harvest into 33 shares. Because they need to supply a week's worth of vegetables to each household, quantity control and calculation is important. In the week the Sanlian reporter visited the farm, only 14 pounds of beans were picked, so each household only received a small portion. The reporter was concerned whether the farm could satisfy their customers, but the man in charge of weighing did not seem worried about it. Vegetables with green leaves have to be picked in the morning on delivery day so that when customers open the box, they will look fresh from the land.

6:30 a.m. It was still rather dark, but the day of the farm had already begun. Youmai (a green leaf-vegetable) was growing quite well, which made staff happy. An intern from Hong Kong said while busily tying bundles of youmai, "This is definitely worth eight yuan (\$1) in Hong Kong." Her comment stimulated a heated discussion, "Could we sell it to Hong Kong?" Cutting off the root, a woman peeled off some outer leaves and took a bite. She told this reporter that without pesticides, all vegetables could be eaten raw like this. Another green ("hollow heart" in Chinese) looked rather puny compared to the conventionally grown version available in supermarkets. Xiao Yao, the technical adviser, had to remind everybody to pick the bigger ones first. "Last year it was still a tree nursery. This is the first time this land has been used to grow vegetables, and we haven't built up the nutrients in the soil. It will be better next year." The farm uses organic fertilizer such as worm castings and sesame butter dregs. According to Xiao Yao, without the "extra boost," of chemical fertilizers, it's normal for the vegetables to be this size.

While the picking team was working, the other team laid the boxes in a row, each with the shareholder's name and address on it. They also put a "Little Donkey Community Supported Agriculture Farm Newsletter" inside. In addition to a list of the vegetables delivered this week, the newsletter also included recipes and tips on preserving vegetables. In its "News From the Field" column, customers could learn about what was happening on the farm where their vegetables grew. The food safety column in this week's newsletter sounded quite scary: an empty pesticide bag was found on the farm. Staff suspected some outsiders may have stealthily sprayed pesticide in the fields. Everybody was shocked and saddened, feeling this was a deliberately disrespectful act. Therefore, the farm earnestly requested visitors not to bring pesticides or any other chemicals to the field. There was some good news, too. A Harvard University student worked on the farm last week, before moving on to Hubei Province to continue her research. Three interns from Lingnan University in Hong Kong had learned new farming skills: their work scope had been extended from just weeding to tilling soil and feeding pigs.

There were 13 types of vegetables in this week's delivery, including youmai, summer squash and Chinese amaranth—making a full box. The delivery van set off at 7:30 a.m. as scheduled with shares for customers all over Beijing, from North Sixth Ring Road to South Third and then East

Fourth. Besides dropping off people's shares, the driver chatted with customers and wrote down their comments and suggestions, so that the farm can improve according to their needs. It took a full day to complete all of the deliveries.

The Joy of Planting

While colleagues are indulging themselves in the Stealing Vegetable game on the Internetⁱⁱ, Liu Lishan, who works for an international company, has a small vegetable garden of her own, for real. She was one of the first customers who signed the labor-share contracts with the Little Donkey Farm. She is a typical LOHASⁱⁱⁱ follower: wearing loose cotton and linen



clothes, an active participant in many environment events, a health expert in the office too. Although she only has a tiny piece of land of 30 square-meters, she tends it carefully: on the edge of the land she grows peanuts and sunflowers; on the south side she grows youmai and coriander; on the north she grows tomatoes and cucumber. Thus her garden is tall in the north and short in south so that all plants are exposed to maximum sunshine. She also grows garland chrysanthemum in the middle of the garden with beautiful yellow blossoms. Each garden is marked. The "owner" can choose a name for their plot, and put it on a wooden name plate with a Little Donkey logo. Liu hasn't come up with a name and design because of peer pressure. Her gardener neighbor, Teacher Lu, wrote two lines of verse on her plate, "In front of Phoenix Hill, our half mu has been watered; squash on the left, beans on the right, it is a little Paradise." This has raised the bar for Liu Lishan, so she has asked her graphic designer friend to design a plate for her.

"At first, I just thought it's a good model and wanted to show my support. I didn't expect it would bring me so much enjoyment," she said. After showing her garden to Sanlian, she couldn't wait to take off her shoes and work in the field bare-footed. She called it "connecting to the earth." Most labor share members only come on the weekend, but she was off at home on Friday afternoon and couldn't wait for another half day. Afternoon humidity and sunshine made her sweat, but she didn't mind at all. Squatting among the vegetables, weeding with a small spade, she spoke without looking up. "Many people spend thousands of yuan^{iv} on gym memberships, then stop going after a few visits. But here I labor for hours, sweating and breathing fresh air, and vegetables are living things, so you get hooked, and can't help but keep it up," she said.

The three gardens to the east of Teacher Lu's belong to three related families. So tending their gardens has become a family gathering. Arriving first were retirees Mr. and Mrs. Zhang. They got

up 5 a.m. Mr. Zhang had a good harvest this week. The cucumbers grew from the size of a pinkie finger to ripe. Beans, youmai and Chinese amaranth were also ready to pick. It did not take long for them to fill two big bags. With one crop harvested, the bare space in their garden could not be left alone. After a short discussion, they tilled the soil, applied fertilizer and planted celery and “silk gourd” They were proud of their achievements. Mrs. Zhang picked a bit of coriander and showed *Sanlian*, “Smell it yourself. [The coriander] we grow ourselves smells much better than what you can buy in the supermarket.”

Next arrived Ms. Li, who practices law, and her mother. Ms. Li first set up a folding chair. “I bought it for my father. He’s an old intellectual. He was sent back to his hometown in Hebei Province to work on a vegetable farm for ten years during the Culture Revolution.^v At the age of 80, he is still passionate about farming. He’s our chief director,” she said. It was too hot that day, so he couldn’t come to the farm himself, but he had assigned work to his daughter. “When he was here last time, he said that the racks for cucumbers and tomatoes were too thin to hold the vegetables. He told me to add more sticks to strengthen them,” she said. In addition to father’s supervision, Ms. Li herself put lots of effort into gardening too, although she had never farmed before. “It was so hot on Wednesday, I was afraid the newly planted lettuce wouldn’t survive the heat so I came to water it after work,” she added. However, when she arrived on Wednesday, farm staff was off work and she couldn’t find the watering cans. Now she’s going to buy a set of tools to keep in the car so she could come to work any time. Having finished working on her plot, she went on to help Mr. Zhang. She and Mrs. Zhang are cousins. They chatted cheerfully about childhood education while weeding.

Around noon, more people arrived, many with kids. Senior bridge engineer Mr. Gao led his seven-year-old grandson with one hand, and held a cage with a small chicken in it in the other. “Lawns in our residential complex are all sprayed with pesticides. We can’t release the chicken there, so we bring it here to eat worms,” he explained. Mr. Gao’s plot is one of the best of all. Asked for tips, he said, “If you mess with it, it will mess you back, but you won’t see it until harvest.” He applied his engineer’s dedication and focus on details to farming. He was so focused on the vegetables that he didn’t even notice his grandson whining about missing a TV show. His theory is that you need to release kids here as well as chickens. There is no need here to constantly keep an eye on kids as he does in the city. Teacher Lu’s four-year-old son was able to identify seven-spot and 28-spot ladybirds and tell which one is a beneficial insect and which one is pest. He also gave his kindergarten teacher the first cucumber he harvested as a gift. Three-year-old Chuchu could identify several herbs and vegetables. When adults took a break in the tent, she was busy harvesting and handing in what she gathered. Teacher Lu, who is a researcher in agricultural economics herself, is very optimistic about this model, calling it “multi-functional agriculture.” She commented, “This is both an educational and recreational activity. It is not very much fun for children to go to parks every week. This is more meaningful.”

The CSA Model

Talking about food safety, Shi Yan explained, “Farmers usually reserve a piece of land to grow

vegetables without chemical fertilizer or pesticide for themselves. But they would use lots of such chemicals in produce they sell. We can't put all blame on farmers." She feels this is a complicated issue involving the whole agriculture system. "There is almost nobody there to tell farmers how much they should dilute pesticides. Because they are not confident about the yield at the year end, they tend to apply lots of pesticide and chemical fertilizer to increase yield." According to Shi, academics have become aware of this problem. She told a story of "the rice-selling professor," which created a media fever a few years ago. Professor He from Chinese Agriculture University paid farmers in advance so that they could grow environment-friendly rice without worrying about the production costs. However, after the harvest, they couldn't sell the rice, and Professor He had to transport it to Beijing to sell. Shi Yan concluded that the key issue here is not whether a professor should or should not act as a rice salesperson, but the problem of marketing channels when in the transition from fossil fuel-based to ecological agriculture. The community-supported agriculture (CSA) model she studied in the United States was created because of increasing problems with food safety and deepening gap between people and land. Under the CSA model, consumers pay a set fee to the farmer before the planting season begins. In this way, consumers and farmers share the risks across the season. Farmers are required to farm in an ecologically sustainable way to ensure food safety. Because there is no intermediary, consumers are directly linked to farmers. Based on mutual trust, farmers earn more money and consumers get organic produce.

She told Sanlian, "Professors in my university saw this model in the States and were very interested.^{vi} We didn't have a clear goal when I was sent there. I just wanted to see what it was really like." In order to understand the spirit and lifestyle advocated by this model, a brief visit wasn't enough. In April 2008, Shi Yan went to a CSA farm in Minnesota as an intern and worked on the farm for six months. The farm she worked on, called Earthrise, had 16 acres of land and was run by two managers and three interns. As CSA farms don't use heavy machines, there is a lot of manual work. "In China's rural areas, you can take a break when you're tired. There's lots of freedom and flexibility. But on an American farm, it's a job, from early morning till evening. Even when it rained and we couldn't work in the fields, they called all the interns in and taught us how to make jam and pickles." Although majoring in agriculture economics, Shi Yan is a city girl and had never worked in fields before. The first week was very painful. "I even considered working every other day. But on second thought, since I travelled so far to the farm, I decided I'd better keep it up as others do."

She gradually got used to the new environment and started to think about this new way of consumption after work. She made a questionnaire to find out why people joined CSAs, their expectations, the distance between their homes and the farm, how much CSA vegetables they eat and how satisfied they are with the variety of the vegetables. When asked why they joined, most cited "local produce" and "want fresh vegetables." Organic food accounted for 75 to 99 percent of their meals for most respondents.

She also interviewed and visited other CSA, organic, tourism and conventional farms to study

their differences and think about how these models might be applied in China. “Most CSA farms are small family farms. Due to the labor-intensive nature of this type of farming, many hire additional farm laborers. This is similar to China, where each household has a limited amount of land, but they don’t have problem finding people to perform labor-intensive work.” The more significant conclusion from the trip was that all CSA farms she visited were doing very well, and able to support the families. After interviews with conventional farms, Shi Yan found empirical evidence to support the theories she learned, “Pesticides and chemical fertilizers they use are increasing every year.” The CSA model also poses a challenge to farmers. “Conventional farms are industrialized and grow very few kinds of crops. They are most concerned about economies of scale. Under a CSA model, farmers need to provide a variety of produce every week. It requires expertise of growing different vegetables. Farmers have to plan the timing of planting, harvest and re-planting very carefully.”

“When we talk about America, we tend to label their agriculture sector as high-tech, industrialized, and large scale. They have started to rethink this model. Why do we have to follow their old path?” She told Sanlian that one or two months before she returned, the initially ambiguous goal became clearer and clearer: to pilot a CSA farm in China.

The Chinese Version

Mr. Zhong Sheng is in the real estate business. He was excited when he read Shi Yan’s story in a magazine at the beginning of this year. “I wrote to Shi Yan’s supervisor, Professor Wen Tiejun, and asked if this type of farm was set up, could I become a member,” he recalled. Since his daughter Chuchu was born, he has paid more attention to food safety. The CSA model provides a stable and trustworthy source of food. “Professor Wen replied that it’s not easy to operate such a farm because customers need to pay in advance.”

Wen is also concerned about the barriers to the CSA model in China. Commitment between farmers and consumers and shared risk are essence of CSA. But the pre-pay model challenges root-deep consumption habits. How can you make consumers pay while vegetables are still seeds, when they are used to choosing grown vegetables and then buying them? They even have to bear risks such as natural disaster. These are the challenges Shi Yan need to address. “One CSA farm I visited in America is owned by a Jew. They have their own circle. The initial customers were their Jewish relatives and friends, based on which they slowly expanded their customer pool,” Shi recalls. Inspired by this example, she only distributed the advertisement by emails among teachers and friends. Zhong Sheng also enthusiastically helped with promotion: he printed many copies of the ad and posted them in each building in his residential complex. His wife spread the word in online forums. As most people heard about it through family and friends, the CSA farm won trust from its customers without much difficulty. Moreover, it is also a production-study research base for Renmin University’s Agriculture and Rural Development Institute. The management team is the Guoren Urban-Rural Mutual Co-op, which was founded by Professor Wen. He has been promoting ecological agriculture for many years. Shi Yan not only has a PhD^{vii}, but also studied overseas. All these helped to build trust from customers.

At the end of March, the Little Donkey Farm started to recruit members. Its cute name is a legacy itself: Professor Wen raised little donkeys when he established the James Yen Rural Reconstruction Institute in Dingzhou, Hebei Province to provide free education to farmers. When he relocated the base of Guoren co-op to Beijing, he wanted to bring the donkeys with him. “Little Donkey” is a symbol of the traditional agriculture and farming model.

In practice, difference again presents itself. Similar to the U.S. model, ordinary-share members can choose from full-portion and half-portion. A 20-week full-portion price is 2,500 yuan.^{viii} Customers can have a 500 yuan discount if they pick up their vegetables from the farm themselves. The difference is that Shi Yan added one more note: a minimum of 400 jin (pounds) of vegetables will be supplied. She explained, “In the States, I don’t remember having customers concerned about the weight. But many Chinese customers would ask how much one jin of vegetables would cost. So I had to add this note.” After some calculation, it costs around 5 yuan per jin, which is more expensive than ordinary vegetables in the market, but cheaper than organic ones.

Signing contracts was smoother than expected. Many customers understood and agreed with the idea, but had concerns regarding operation. However, to show support to young people’s ideals, they decided to be tolerant. “Of course there are risks. But it’s very unlikely that they won’t yield anything. No matter what, they will harvest something,” Zhong Sheng told himself when he was worried.

Twenty labor-shares were subscribed quickly. Professor Lu told me, “To show support for my own student, I signed up for a share and encouraged other teachers to join. When my husband told his colleagues about this project, they showed interest too. But when they came, no land was left.” Ordinary-share customers are concerned about food safety and how to promote this model. But labor-share customers have different purposes. Ms. Li told *Sanlian* that they signed up mainly for weekend recreation. Aside from its economic function, a CSA can also bring urban residents closer to the land and improve the relationship between them and farmers, while educating them about agriculture. This week, nearly all tomatoes grown by labor-share customers were sickly. Technician Xiao Yao told them that this was a common disease among tomatoes in North China. Mr. Gao and Zhong Sheng immediately had a discussion and concluded that cucumbers were safe but they had to be careful with tomatoes. Through their practice, they had a good harvest of cucumbers, which meant cucumbers are easy to grow. Tomatoes are more disease-prone, and need pesticides to grow well.^{ix}

On Friday afternoon, two farmers took the train to Beijing from Jiangxi Province, and went from the train station straight to the farm. They wanted to meet “farm manager” Shi Yan. It turned out that they had thousands of mu^x of hilly land in Yichun and wanted to do organic farming, but had met all sorts of problems. When they heard about this farm, they came right away to learn from Shi Yan. Whenever the farm is open to outsiders, Shi Yan receives several groups of visitors. She plans to build a classroom on the farm’s unusable land to introduce the CSA model

and practices, but there are lots of concerns and reservations in promoting the model. One of them is that ordinary farmers lack the capacity to communicate with customers. Also, all of Little Donkey Farm's shareholders are university-educated and at least of middle-income. Intern Yu Gui's plan to have a CSA farm in his (relatively poor) home province of Inner Mongolia may have to wait. "CSA has developed in the United States for 20 years, but the 2000 CSA farms are still a small minority," Shi Yan points out. She is cool-headed about replication of CSA farm. Still, she has a dream: "The best thing to do is to lobby the government to change its policy. Since the government subsidizes pesticides and chemical fertilizers, can they also subsidize farms during the three transition years to ecological agriculture?"

ⁱ In fact, labor share holders can visit the farm any day, and we found a retired executive happily weeding his patch on a Wednesday.

ⁱⁱ A game called "Happy Farm" is currently very popular among China's internet users. Players tend a virtual plot of land, and veggie theft is rampant.

ⁱⁱⁱ Short for "Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability," a marketing demographic term from the West that has caught on in China.

^{iv} USD \$1=7.2 yuan.

^v Being "sent down" to the countryside was subsequently portrayed as a form of humiliating internal exile, but for a surprising number of people it is now looked back on with some nostalgia as a time of re-connection to rural life.

^{vi} Since 2006, staff of People's University have been invited by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy on exchange visits ranging in length from a few days to the full growing season Shi Yan spent on an organic farm.

^{vii} This is inaccurate. Shi Yan began her PhD studies after returning to China in autumn 2008, so she is actually running the farm while studying for her doctorate!

^{viii} A little more than \$300.

^{ix} An editorial comment the CSA staff would disagree with. Nevertheless, pests and disease are a constant challenge for organic farmers.

^x 1 acre=6 mu.