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III. BALANCING CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Retelling the SameStory in aSW ChineseVillage: The implementation of environment and poverty programs with a common agricultural development plot

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“The climate here is very particular; it isn’t hospitable for growing rice or wheat. For as long as I’ve been around we’ve all grown corn; even when my mother was a young girl, they grew corn.” - Villager in Caoxiu Cun

Introduction

According to even the eldest farmers’ recollections, the agricultural fields that decorate the mountain slopes in Caoxiu Cun have always grown corn. For generations, farm work has revolved around the planting of corn in spring and its harvest in autumn; until recently, this crop has dictated the pattern of agrarian land use around this region of Southwest China. In Caoxiu Cun (cun = village), the newly adopted practice of planting magnolia trees and gooseberry vines that has emerged in the past decade tells a tale of two recent state projects that are seemingly new but actually familiar models.

State programs in the name of environmental protection and poverty alleviation in the recent decade have effected change in villages across the nation. In Caoxiu Cun, the displacement of corn is telling of these efforts. The changes visible on the ground do more than just describe the households that are changing their planting choices, they also reflect the politics of the central government in these social and environmental efforts.

In this article, I first present a recent history of peasant agriculture in Caoxiu Cun and then I follow with an account of two programs encouraging change in agricultural practices in this particular village. This account builds from data collected in an ethnographic study conducted in Caoxiu Cun from June through December of 2009. With this information, I discuss the role of these programs in altering the household and rural agriculture. I argue that programs targeting rural farmland apply a common strategy – devolution of responsibility onto households – to achieve improved efficiency and ultimately to direct the transformation of subsistence farmland to fields of cash crops, a trajectory that resonates with modern agricultural development.

Recent History of Peasant Agriculture in Caoxiu Cun

From the redistribution of feudal land to peasant households and then to its collectivization, the land rights of Chinese peasants shifted dramatically under the formidable leadership of Chairman Mao (1949-1976). But despite the tumultuous changes, the cultivation of farmland in Caoxiu Cun remained relatively stable. While villages across the country avidly planted grains and strove for preposterously high yields to meet national demands (Shapiro 2001), the cultivation of corn in Caoxiu Cun endured.

Corn was the staple food crop for collective consumption in this village until Deng Xiaoping (1978) opened China up to economic reform that catalyzed a change reaching out to even the rural landscapes of the nation. In local narratives told by Caoxiu elders, Deng is responsible for when and why life improved. Around the late 1970s and early 1980s,
land was reallocated to individual households, farmers began raising pigs, families could afford to eat rice, and a new variety of hybrid corn, suitable for feeding livestock, was introduced to the fields. Over the years, as households increased the number of pigs raised, a congruous increase in the cultivation of hybrid corn continued until households seeded most of their land with it. In the recent history of Caoxiu Cun, corn harvests shifted from feeding peasant mouths to feeding their livestock; with this transition people gradually phased out corn from their diets and gained enough access to cash to make rice-purchased-at-market the staple food. Hybrid corn has been fundamental to the household for supporting a livestock sector that in turn has proved important to the nutrition and economy of the household.

**Situating Forestry and Poverty Within the Farm**

This recent history of agriculture recounts an enduring story of corn cultivation fundamental to subsistence and market mechanisms of the households in Caoxiu Cun. In the past ten years, visible changes to cropland that correspond to a reduction in corn (and increase in planting of trees and vines) reflect the influential imprint of two interesting efforts in this village. The first is a massive state-sponsored conservation set-aside program to return cropland to forestland (Uchida et al. 2005); the second, a poverty alleviation program devoted to establishing a route for cash generation. In the following paragraphs, I provide more description of these programs and their implementation in Caoxiu Cun.

**Grain-for-Green (also known as the Sloping Land Conversion Program)**

Grain-for-Green was conceived after catastrophic floods hit China in the summer of 1998. Consistent with the beliefs that deforestation along the upper reaches of China’s major river systems is to blame for the downstream disasters, the program focuses predominantly on the conversion of marginal cropland in order to reforest China’s western provinces (Zhu et al. 2004). In 2003, implementation of the Grain-for-Green program reached Caoxiu Cun and all households became immediate participants. To encourage participation, the program subsizes farmers with cash subsidies (260 RMB/mu, approximately $37/ mu; 15 mu = 1 hectare), and free tree seedlings. The conditions of the subsidies, however, are dependent upon how the land is converted.

When Grain-for-Green was first introduced to Caoxiu, seedlings of kudingcha (*Ilex latifolia*), a bitter tea tree, were distributed free to participants, however, reported difficulty with successful planting of the species resulted in village-wide agreement to instead independently purchase and plant houpu (*Magnolia officinalis*). Houpu is a magnolia tree commonly cultivated for its medicinal bark (Figure 1). By definition of the State Forestry Administration, houpu stands qualify as ‘economic forest’. Yet, these plantings in Caoxiu were recognized as
‘ecological forest’ granting households an eight-year (for ecological) rather than five-year (for economic) subsidy period as stipulated by the program.

Aside from the value given by the government subsidy, houpu also sells well at market (though the bark is harvested only after 15 years of growth). In 2009, it was purchased by middlemen for 40 RMB/ jin ($5/lb.) and from experience the villagers have found the rate has stayed fairly stable, unlike that of the kudingcha tea leaves. It is for this reason that before Grain-for-Green began in Caoxiu, a handful of households already cultivated houpu. They used to plant houpu mainly on peripheral areas just outside their cropland; but now, rows and rows of this native species take up considerable tracts of cropland once reserved for corn (Figure 2). The immediate effects of this land conversion program were obvious – less corn, more trees. Every household participated in the land conversion that would ultimately grant them a seventy-five year lease to this newly forested land. Households converted substantial fractions of their cropland which has granted them more secure tenure over it.

**Poverty Alleviation**

In late summer 2009, Xicao was marked as a model site for poverty alleviation by the local government and county-level Bureau of Finance. The core component of the program – essentially the part that is expected to bring households out of poverty and to the fruition of wealth – invests in household cultivation of a fruiting cash crop, gooseberry (*Actinidia chinensis*). Prior to the introduction of this program, some households had already planted gooseberry vines after seeing the success of a neighboring village that planted the same variety of gooseberry (Figure 3). None, however, had risked supplanting all of their corn and cultivating that cropland with a new fruit commodity; at least not until the poverty alleviation program supported this household decision. By October 2009, every household was engaged in the planting of gooseberry seedlings on their recently harvested cornfields. The participation was immediate. Boxes of liquid fertilizer were distributed at first, then seedlings a couple of days later, and by the end of the week, the farmers had planted all the seedlings they had been allocated. During the first three years, the gooseberry vines can be intercropped among corn, but the program stipulates that after three years the land must be fully dedicated to planting only gooseberry vines. Corn must be abandoned, and livestock will have to (1) be raised from corn product purchased in town, and/or (2) decrease in number. Even the households of Village Group 3, that previously claimed the elevation and conditions of their cropland would not support the selected species of gooseberry, partook in the planting. This widespread involvement even amidst

*Figure 2.* Household farmland in June. Alternating rows of corn and potato (left) and rapeseed (right). Houpu occupies the peripheral farmland in the back near the edge of the private household forest.
skepticism might be explained by one villager. This villager explains that planting gooseberries is in fact illogical, that it is only a good crop if they are able to sell all of it. Since it isn’t something that can be stored for long periods of time it isn’t particularly useful for the household. But since they must plant to get the program subsidy, they all plant.

Retelling the Same Story of Agricultural Development

Employing a common strategy

To a large extent, the implementation of Grain-for-Green and poverty alleviation in Caoxiu Cun has worked to shape households in a fashion similar to the agricultural and land reforms beginning in 1978. To increase productivity and efficiency of the household, the reforms focused greatly on decentralization of property rights and guaranteeing land tenure.

By devolving responsibility for reforestation onto households, Grain-for-Green distinctly diverges from conventional efforts that tend to engage in community-level interactions for shared environmental stewardship. The shifting of ‘forestland’ onto farmland has made individual households accountable for the outcomes; further, the idea of an economic forest has made it advantageous to think of cropland-turned-forest in economically efficient terms. What is more, foresting the land extends forest leases to agricultural land, giving households more secure tenure on their farmland. The poverty alleviation program has furthered economic treatment of the agricultural sector by promoting full commodity production over household subsistence demands. Both programs have made cropland into a space that is economically productive – supporting monetary valuation of land productivity rather than the intended ecological health of the land or the security of the household. The magnolia trees and gooseberry vines of both programs are found encroaching the household agricultural sector, a sector that has been treated as something that can be made productive and efficient. By making the household dependent on the cultivation of houpu and gooseberries, these two programs have effectively devolved responsibility onto the household. With that, the successful cultivation of these cash crops appears more meaningful for agricultural development than for forest conservation or poverty alleviation.

Common with agricultural reform, the two programs have all of the characteristics of a government scheme that creates the modern, self-reliant individual (Triantafillou and Nielsen 2001). Moreover, it simultaneously drives peasants to self-manage China’s forests and poverty. Subsidies in agricultural development in the past decade have come to replace a long-held agricultural tax system to relieve the stress on household economy, and as

Figure 3. Gooseberry harvest in the neighboring village. Successful cultivation of gooseberries in this village pushed the efforts to introduce gooseberry vine plantations to Caoxiu Village.
seen with Grain-for-Green and poverty alleviation programs, subsidies are guiding a particular sort of land use. Making clearly economic contributions to direct the agricultural sector of households, the government demonstrates its conviction that agricultural development is core to social and economic development (Xu et al. 2004). However, this same application of agricultural development in Grain-for-Green represents cash crop cultivation rather than reforestation, and thus this environmental effort appears only to be a convenient disguise for development (Escobar 1995).

**Supporting the Subsistence base**

Although the shift to hybrid corn in Caoxiu Cun marks agricultural reform and reflects a change in China's political climate, the cultivation of corn, regardless of the variety, is representative of consistent subsistence practices. Though hybrid corn replaced the fundamental food product grown for household consumption in the 80s, it fostered another food product now central to these peasant households – pork. Pork is valuable because it not only offers a source of protein but, additionally, a source of cash cultivation of hybrid corn for raising livestock has contributed greatly to the mixed subsistence character of the household. It has done so by simultaneously engaging the household in the market sector and supporting a subsistence sector. With corn the household never renders itself completely vulnerable to risk. With the introduction of houpu through Grain-for-Green, and gooseberry through poverty alleviation, the displacement of corn has reflected a clear movement from subsistence practices towards market engagement. The role of subsidies has been to displace any perceived risk in supplanting corn with forestland or fruit production, in order to guide the household farm to more economical practices. But according to Netting (1989), the household may be the most environmentally efficient and considerate unit. Therefore, in the interest of environmental conservation we should, perhaps, support the subsistence sector and not allow the capitalist scheme to extend to all ends. This challenges whether agricultural development methods can effectively direct environmental or social efforts in the most beneficial direction. Maybe we should be looking to the subsistence sector, rather than the market, to address social concerns such as poverty and environmental concerns such of forest restoration.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have attempted to reveal how China’s modern approach to environmental and poverty programs resonate with simple agricultural development and how this strategy has implications for the household and the environment. Though this paper introduces more issues than can be expounded on in depth, I hope that it encourages some contemplation on the peasant household and its agency in influencing social, economic, agricultural, and environmental change, whatever label the program may have.

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