



## **Shi Yan preparing vegetables with a French volunteer**

© Shared Harvest

# 5 Food, farmers and community: a case study of Shared Harvest CSA

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by Lila Buckley

*It was a cold and overcast winter day when I made the journey to Shared Harvest farm in Shunyi, a northeastern suburb of Beijing. Shi Yan, the director of Shared Harvest Farm, had instructed me to go to the village assembly hall, since it would be 'easier to find' than her home office. After a two-hour journey, I arrived at the small cement courtyard complex, and two middle-aged village officials invited me into their office to wait.*

*The unheated room was filled with silent closed-circuit television screens monitoring the sleepy village, and the officials sat smoking and sipping tea, seemingly pleased at my intrusion breaking up the monotony of their day. They told me that everyone in the village knew Dr Shi. 'She has a very important farm here,' explained one of the men.*

*'People visit from all over the world!' the other chimed in, recalling how their office had been visited by representatives from large companies, and 'even ambassadors from other countries' on their way to Shared Harvest Farm. They seemed to take pride in having the CSA project in their village.*

*When I told them that I was from a village in America, they wanted to know how theirs measured up. 'Is America divided into cities and countryside, like China?' asked one of the men. 'What are your villages like? Are they just like this, with only a few hundred households, or are they bigger?' Though I had taken only a brief journey from downtown Beijing, it was clear that I had entered another world, where officials and residents feel far removed from the realities of the capital.*

*Shi Yan arrived, dressed in long, flowing cotton robes reminiscent of Qing Dynasty peasant dress. She exchanged friendly greetings with the two village officials, and we walked a short distance down the road to her home office, where a group of half a dozen students and reporters were waiting for a tour. She took us into the clean, bright sitting room filled with modern furniture, dried-fruit snacks, and simple artwork. Upon seeing the office, someone in the group commented, 'This is the countryside, but it doesn't feel like it.'*



*Cheng Cunwang—Shi Yan's husband and Shared Harvest cofounder—responded, 'Just because you're in the country doesn't mean it has to look like it. You were expecting us to sleep on a kang<sup>1</sup>?' The visitors laughed and departed with their guide, leaving Shi Yan and her husband to get on with their work for the day. This included an interview with me, a meeting about plans to build and run an on-site farm restaurant in the coming year, and lunch with representatives of an agriculture NGO in Hong Kong.*

## 5.1 Background and characteristics of the case study area

Shared Harvest (*fenxiang shouhuo*) is a community-supported agriculture (CSA)<sup>2</sup> initiative established in Beijing in 2011 by Director Dr. Shi Yan and her husband Cheng Cunwang. The CSA, consisting of administrative staff and member farmers, sells a range of vegetables, grains and meat directly to urban consumers who purchase membership plans costing around 10,000 yuan (1,600 USD) per year. The majority of the production comes from two farms on the outskirts of Beijing: Shunyi Farm in Liu Zhuangzhu Village and Tongzhou Farm in Tongzhou Mafang Village.

These 'suburbs' of Beijing are a world away from the bustling economy and plentiful opportunities of the capital, and farmers here are increasingly squeezed out of farming and into factory jobs to make ends meet. Shared Harvest works to reverse this trend by bringing back 'Real Food, Real Farmers, and Real Community' to China, to quote the motto of Local Harvest ([www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org)), a US organisation seeking to connect farmers with consumers.

Inspired by this mission, the CSA also aims to bring more young people back to farming livelihoods. Indeed, 20 Shared Harvest staff (or 'new farmers,' as Shi Yan describes them), who are mostly young and college-educated, support all aspects of production and marketing. Some of the staff are from rural areas, and aspire to start CSAs in their own home towns. Shared Harvest's website explains that these staff have 'accumulated a rich store of technical knowledge' about applying aspects of sustainable agriculture such as biopesticides and organic soil treatment. In addition, staff gain experience in marketing approaches and the functions of a CSA, such as 'ensuring that each week's harvest can meet the needs of customers, and ensuring that customers receive the freshest possible vegetables.' Indeed, Shi Yan herself spent time working on a CSA in the US before setting up Shared Harvest.

Shared Harvest's goods come primarily from 20 additional 'member farmers' working either as labourers on the Shunyi Farm or on their own land in Tongzhou (the Shunyi Farm is run as a company, while Tongzhou Farm is run as a cooperative). There are also five villagers working full-time in delivery and sales. The total land area covered by these farms is over 100 mu (6.7 ha), with about 60 mu (4 ha) in Shunyi and about 40 mu (2.7 ha) in Tongzhou. This includes orchards, greenhouses for vegetable production, and areas for animal husbandry. The Shunyi Farm is the major production area, and Shared Harvest have signed a 17-year land use contract with the Shunyi government. There is also an independent but affiliated CSA based in Tianjin, with 70 mu (4.7 ha) of land.

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1. A *kang* is a traditional Chinese bed made of a wooden board raised above the ground, often with heating from a nearby stove vented underneath. *Kang* can still be found in villages throughout rural China.

2. Cheng Cunwang estimates that there are about 300 CSA farms in China, with a total of approximately 50,000–80,000 members.



**Chickens grazing outside the greenhouses © Shared Harvest**

As explained on their website, Shared Harvest is a programme of 'direct cooperation with family farmers'. In other words, staff consult with the farmers at every step of production—drafting planting plans, designing farming methods and standards, and developing marketing strategies. The approach is thus to utilise staff's technical knowledge while honouring and integrating the capability of the farmers. 'We are using our specialised knowledge,' the company brochure explains, 'to train farmers to supervise themselves, establish cooperative relations, and employ their diverse cultural knowledge.' In this way, Shared Harvest aims to promote 'the diversity of rural China's cultures of sustainability.'

Profits are shared among all CSA members. 'After guaranteeing ecological farming methods and meeting basic costs,' the Shared Harvest website explains, 'we return the majority of profits to the farmers and our core CSA members.' Shared Harvest's vision is that this collaboration between community-based local farmers and 'returned youth' (*fanxiang qingnian*) can ultimately help revive rural economies while providing healthy livelihood options for both urban youth and rural peasants.

Towards this end, some of the goods sold by Shared Harvest are purchased from other producers, as long as they meet their strict internal organic standards (see Section 5.2). 'We have very high standards for the products we sell. They have to be organic whenever possible, or at minimum absolutely no additives (*wu tianji*),' explains Shi Yan. So far, they have identified several products that meet these standards, including rice, wheat flour, pork, lard, chicken, eggs and peanut oil. But they have not yet found fish or beef that meet their requirements, so they simply don't sell these items. In the future, they hope to add processed

goods such as breads, noodles and steamed buns. During one interview, she shared some delicious dried persimmons and dates from two new producers they had recently approved.

As part of its goal of reviving rural communities, Shared Harvest also aims to educate urban residents about healthy eating and sustainable food systems. Their consumer base is comprised of over 500 members who invest upfront in the farm production each season, and in return receive weekly deliveries of goods to their homes throughout the year. In addition, there is a growing number of 'group buyers' (300 at the time of the research) who collectively order goods for weekly pickup at five locations throughout Beijing. While these buyers aren't members and don't invest in farm production, the quantity they are consuming makes up an increasingly significant portion of Shared Harvest's sales. The CSA has achieved rapid growth without the use of conventional advertising. Rather, their marketing has been exclusively through new media channels such as WeChat (an influential Chinese social media platform), blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and even Pinterest, as well as word of mouth. They currently conduct most of their outreach, sales and arrangement of deliveries through WeChat. In the summer of 2015 they launched a software application to promote sales of sustainably grown foods from CSAs throughout China as well as their own.

Shared Harvest's consumers are much more than just a source of revenue—they are an integral part of the operations and mission of the CSA. As the website explains: 'In becoming a Shared Harvest CSA member, you enter into a cooperative relationship with the producer in which you both share the risks inherent in the growing process.' The farmers base their planting and supplies procurement each season on the number of shares that have been purchased. 'Throughout the production process,' the site continues, 'all of the risks are jointly shared by both parties.' As Cheng Cunwang points out, 'the CSA model is a means of combatting risk. The biggest difference between this model and that of modern agriculture and its industrial supply chains is that the relationship between producers and consumers is one of fair trade.'

CSA member consumers are encouraged to visit the farm 'to observe or to work alongside the farmers whenever they please.' They also organise 'farm days' and other activities on-site, bringing Beijing urbanites to the farm to participate in farm activities for a day. These activities may include working on the farm, or direct education such as viewing a DVD on the problems of industrial agriculture in China, or discussing international initiatives and celebrity chefs such as the UK's Jamie Oliver.<sup>3</sup> In addition, they send out a weekly 'Shared Harvest Newsletter' with information about the farmers and the production process. Through this model, they aim to 'promote healthy, environmentally-friendly lifestyles' for urban residents and consumers of their products.

## 5.2 Ecological sustainability

Shared Harvest view sustainable agriculture as a tool for promoting healthier rural and urban communities. By 'sustainable agriculture' they mean that they use 'no pesticides, no [chemical] fertilisers, and no GM [genetically modified] species.' Their production methods aim 'to protect water, soil, air and biodiversity for the next generation'. Besides the ecological benefits, they also include social considerations, adopting a 'fair trade model to support local farmers and local economy' with the aim of building 'a community based on trust and

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3. [www.slowfood-beijing.org/events/be-farmer-for-one-day/](http://www.slowfood-beijing.org/events/be-farmer-for-one-day/) accessed 23/12/14.



a sharing relationship between citizens and farmers.' Shi Yan further explains, 'Farmers are the ultimate beneficiaries of organic production, because they aren't exposed to harmful chemicals.' They also benefit from the higher values, and thus higher earnings, of their organic products. And urban consumers benefit from the improved taste and health benefits of fresher, chemical-free local foods.

According to their website, each individual consumer-member represents a reduction of 50 kg of chemical fertilisers, 0.3 litres of pesticides and 0.6 m<sup>3</sup> of waste pollution. In addition, they calculate that 'for every ten customers involved, one acre of field can be changed to sustainable production; for every twenty customers involved, one new farmer will be able to make a livelihood from farming sustainably; for every 100 customers involved, five young people will be able to live in the countryside; and for every 1,000 customers involved, a rural community will [take] shape.'



**Sustainably produced vegetables © Shared Harvest**

Though Shared Harvest goods are not certified organic (see Box 1), they are produced using organic techniques, which are developed and monitored by the staff. Instead, they prefer to rely on close oversight of farming practices, supported by active communication with their consumers to ensure the marketability of their goods. In this context, 'organic' food is not the end goal, but rather a means to an end in promoting a sustainable food system. Part of this trust-based relationship is due to their strict, uncompromising standards for the goods that they sell. At a minimum, their goods must include 'absolutely no pesticides, no [chemical] fertilisers, and no GM species.' They are extremely rigorous in regularly testing their soil, water and end-products. They conduct on-site soil tests twice a year, and send samples of their vegetables to be tested by an independent company. They also publish the results on their website.

Shi Yan explained that in the most recent tests (conducted late last year), all of the vegetables were completely free of trace chemicals, showing that they met the strictest of organic standards. The lemons, apples and rice from two of the farming households, however, were found to contain traces of pesticides. 'We have had a lot of discussion among ourselves, and with the farmers, as to how this happened,' recalled Shi Yan. 'The farmers said that they did not use any pesticides, and we believe them. Actually, the level of pesticides found was so low that the food would still pass domestic organic standards.' They had used a testing company that followed European standards, which are more sensitive. They concluded that the contamination likely came from one of three avenues:

1) contamination from neighbouring farms, since those products were not grown in the contained environments of the greenhouses; 2) residual pesticides in the soil, since these farms only converted to organic methods one or two years ago (full organic conversion generally takes at least three years); or 3) there may have been traces of pesticides in the bags that they used to store and transport the goods, since those bags had also been used for conventionally grown items.

### Box 5.1. Beyond organic certification...

While sustainable agriculture is at the heart of this project, Shi Yan explains that organic certification is not necessarily required in China: 'The consumer's belief in you is more important than certification.' Organic products can sell at three to eight times the market prices of conventionally produced foods, and consumers are understandably reluctant to pay this premium when they cannot trust the authenticity of the products in a poorly regulated organic market. 'Instead,' explains Shi Yan, 'consumers want to be personally involved in the production process, to visit the farm and see for themselves how the food is produced—or at least hear about how it is produced from friends who have visited.' In addition, she adds, 'from the farmer's perspective, this direct link to the consumer through the CSA model is a form of income guarantee. They receive the investment up front, and don't have to worry about producing goods that may be challenging to market later in the season.'

Urban consumers are indeed willing to pay a premium for high-quality food from a trusted source. 'Perhaps more important—at least to me as consumer,' explains reporter Manuela Zoninsein, 'is that I am confident that what I'm getting is *actually* organically grown. This can't be overstated, because mislabelling is rampant.' She concludes that even though the food she buys from Shared Harvest is 'two to three times more expensive than what I would pay at the local market, it is absolutely worth the cost.'<sup>4</sup>

Shared Harvest staff work closely with farmers in developing their organic-production skills. Farming practices include the use of biopesticides such as *chucongju* (extracted from wild chamomile), *liansu* and *hasimumeijun*. They generally use fertilisers and biopesticides available in the Chinese market, following common practice for organic production in China. There aren't any sources of organic seeds in China, and for the most part farmers are forced to purchase conventional hybrid varieties. Shi Yan explained that on smallholder farms, it is not very practical to save seeds, because this requires farmers to let part of their field overgrow, which cuts down on production in an already limited area. Shared Harvest farmers do save some of their seeds for select plants, such as soy, vanilla and some kinds of beans.

Climate change mitigation is not an explicit goal of Shared Harvest agriculture practices, but Shi Yan emphasised that the farmers 'certainly do feel the effects of climate change on our farming practice.' They rely on greenhouses for temperature control and micro-climate regulation, since 'temperatures can fluctuate wildly and are increasingly unpredictable.' Despite these direct effects, however, Shi Yan does not see climate mitigation as a current priority of Chinese farmers. 'In general,' she says 'people are just trying to survive and make ends meet, through a better farming approach and stronger market connections. They aren't thinking beyond this to the global climate implications of their actions.'

4. <http://zesterdaily.com/world/skeptical-of-chinas-organic-farmers-csa-helps/>



Shared Harvest's experience so far suggests that productivity in organic farming is lower overall than for conventional farming. For example, as shown in Table 1 below, production rates for Shared Harvest's grains such as soy, corn and rice are comparable to, or only slightly lower than, conventional rates. However, vegetable production is much lower. 'A conventional vegetable farm in Shandong might produce 10,000 kg of vegetables per greenhouse,' says Shi Yan, 'where Shared Harvest only gets 4,000 kg.' Production costs are also two to three times higher for organic vegetable farming, primarily due to the much more intensive labour required.

**Table 5.1. Shared Harvest organic and conventional yields compared**

Crop	Shared Harvest production	Conventional production
Soy	2,550 (kg/ha)	3,000 (kg/ha)
Corn	4,500 (kg/ha)	5,250 (kg/ha)
Rice	10% lower than conventional	
Vegetables	4,000 kg/standard greenhouse	10,000 kg/standard greenhouse

Source: From interview with Shared Harvest director, based on 2014 production rates.

'However, these lower production rates and higher production costs exclude environmental costs,' explains Shi Yan. 'If you included environmental costs, our organic methods would cost *much, much* less than conventional agriculture—in some cases, our costs would actually even be negative.' For example, using soil as an indicator, 'Conventional agriculture destroys soil. But we are actually increasing the organic matter in our soil.' Based on their most recent testing, in just the last year, organic matter in Shared Harvest soil has increased from 1.5% to 2.5%.<sup>5</sup> 'These factors are not usually measured when we talk about the so-called higher costs and lower production rates of sustainable agriculture.'

### 5.3 Economic sustainability

Shi Yan describes Shared Harvest as a 'family business'. She and her husband established it using 80% of their own personal investment. The remaining 20% came from 12 people who contributed up-front investment paid back by five years of vegetable deliveries. The focus from the start was on developing a strong market for the vegetables—'because,' explains Shi Yan, 'If you want farmers to stay in their villages and grow organic food, you have to have a way for them to sell the goods.'

Cheng Cunwang agrees that the main challenge facing farmers practising sustainable methods is marketing, not production. 'China's farmers and cooperatives have no real problems with sustainable agricultural production using both traditional and modern technology. The main problem is the market, and the difficulty of communicating the ecological value of sustainable food products.' Indeed, Shi Yan argues that it is precisely

5. Organic matter is an important measure of soil quality and fertility. Less than 1.5% is considered low, and evidenced by a yellowish-grey soil colour; 1.5%–2.5% is considered moderate, and manifested by reddish-brown soil colour; above 2.5% is considered high, and seen in a 'very dark soil colour' indicating the highest fertility. See Pamela Anne Hazelton, 'Interpreting Soil Test Results: What Do All the Numbers Mean?' <http://tinyurl.com/om4pxdy>.

the way that Shared Harvest sells the goods—through the CSA model—that is promising an innovative solution to achieving ecological, economic and social sustainability for food production in China. ‘The philosophy for the CSA consumer is,’ explains Shi Yan, ‘that I invest first, then you produce.’

### 5.3.1 Consumer investment to promote stability

The income streams of the CSA are designed to match the specific patterns of agricultural production: the influx of funding from investor-consumers comes at the beginning of each season, when farmers’ capital needs are greatest. They are thus able to invest in seeds, fertilisers and equipment upfront, and then produce goods based on consumer demand. This ensures stable financial support for these farming livelihoods.

In 2014 the Shared Harvest farm had a total income of about 6 million yuan and a net profit of 10%, without *any* direct subsidies or government policy support. Staff are paid regular salaries based on profits, while farmers’ earnings as labourers on the Shared Harvest farm are based on their production. In Tongzhou, farmers work their own land and are paid for the goods they provide; annual profits from sales made by the village collective (*cun jiti*) are distributed among the farmers.

At Shunyi Farm, most of the farmers had previously been employed as labourers in industrial jobs because they did not see farming as a viable livelihood option. Most had to commute long distances to work, and their jobs were taxing to their health. These workers are labourers on Shared Harvest’s Shunyi Farm, on land rented from the Village Collective.<sup>6</sup> Their salaries with Shared Harvest are currently 2,000–2,500 yuan/month, or 20,000–30,000 yuan/year (or 310–390 USD/month, 3,100–4,700 USD/year). This is comparable to what they made previously, explains Shi Yan, ‘but they are now able to live at home, without long commutes—and the work is better for their health, and for the social cohesion of the village.’

At Tongzhou Farm, the social and economic benefits are even more striking. The producers are small-scale farmers working on their own land, who had been practising conventional agriculture prior to engaging with Shared Harvest. Shi Yan states that many of them were struggling and in fact ‘would have abandoned agriculture production for other livelihoods.’ They struggled to compete in Beijing’s increasingly cut-throat food market. Now, working with Shared Harvest, explains Shi Yan, they focus solely on production, and don’t have to worry about the market. These farmers have seen significant increases in income. The most technically skilled members of the farmer cooperative in Tongzhou are earning up to 60,000 yuan per year (5,000 per month), and between 30,000–40,000 yuan per year if they are less skilled. However, income levels vary depending on the profits of the CSA in a given year.

### 5.3.2 Innovative marketing

A key feature that distinguishes Shared Harvest’s economic model from other sustainable agriculture projects is its focus on innovative marketing tactics. Rather than relying on the farmers to find the market themselves, the CSA model allows farmers to focus exclusively on production, while the support staff develop the market channels and handle deliveries for them. As mentioned above, they have over 800 urban consumers including both local

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6. The farmland is rented for 1,500 yuan/year, with greenhouses available for an additional per-unit fee.

Chinese and expatriates, and this number is growing rapidly without any conventional advertising. The majority of their consumers invest in the CSA early in each growing season, and in turn receive weekly deliveries to their homes throughout the year.

Shared Harvest is also experimenting with a 'group-buying' approach, whereby groups such as school parents or company employees purchase items in bulk. This reduces handling and delivery costs, as well as enhancing the social integration of these 'food communities'. According to Shi Yan, 'Another advantage of group buying is that these six [group pickup] areas already have an existing sense of community. Many are schools where the parents already know each other to some degree. This makes them better able to organise themselves, promote the concept of local-food consumption, and bring in new buyers.'

Shi Yan explains that Shared Harvest's marketing approach would not have been possible without the recent development of social media in China. 'This new kind of market channel is showing up all around China' she says, 'and is made possible by new media channels like WeChat, which enables groups to organise and communicate rapidly.' Shared Harvest staff are young, cosmopolitan, and highly educated. They bring fresh ideas to the concept of 'rural markets' as well as rural-urban inequalities, and they attract like-minded urbanites seeking an alternative to urban lifestyles. Indeed, the majority of Shi Yan's time is spent receiving visitors to the Shared Harvest farm. 'There is a lot of interest in what we are doing here,' she observes, 'because it is a model that isn't seen elsewhere in China.' Even though they don't explicitly advertise the opportunity for farm visits, they have visitors nearly every day, year-round. They recently launched an app call Good Farm (*Hao Nongchang*) to connect CSAs, cooperatives, farmers markets and organic stores with consumers and restaurants throughout the country. Consumers can use this app to explore products offered by various CSAs. Once a person joins a CSA, they can also use the app to place their orders.

Though only four years old, Shared Harvest is already branching out into new ventures. They have begun to capitalise on the popularity mentioned above, charging 50 yuan for a visit, plus 50 yuan for a lunch of food grown on the farm and cooked in its small kitchen. They also offer ad-hoc classes on subjects such as making peach liquor, in which families can come to pick the peaches, eat the peaches, learn how to make the liquor, and then eat lunch on site. Shared Harvest opened an organic restaurant adjacent to their Shunyi Farm in July 2015, and this is being used for events and hosting visitors on a daily basis. Restaurant customers include individuals coming for a farm tour and lunch, groups reserving the dining room in advance, and participants in farm courses that include meals.

'Our philosophy for the restaurant is to introduce a different approach to eating in China: Eat local; eat in season,' explains Shi Yan. 'We want people to accept eating whatever is available: If we don't have any eggs today, you just don't eat eggs.' This approach is not only highly practical but results in foods that are fresher as well as healthier, consumed in their natural season. She explained that good storytelling is an important part of their marketing approach, getting consumers to shift the very core of their thinking about food production and consumption. For example, 'You might have a package of the best tea in the world, but that alone doesn't mean that I'm going to buy it. You have to draw out the story about this tea, about the farmers who grew it, the community it supports, the process of growing and harvesting it, and the wonderful flavours and benefits to my health. Then I won't be able to resist buying your product.'





### Harvesting vegetables © Shared Harvest

They have had marketing success in this way with the help of a few key charismatic individuals. 'We used to have a colleague,' Shi Yan recalls. 'His cooking was only average, but he was a great storyteller. He always said, 'Cooking is one of life's great pleasures.' He didn't see it as just a job or a chore. And guests loved his energy. He would really bring the dishes to life, emphasising for example the freshness of the ingredients and how they had just been picked that very morning. And he encouraged the social aspects of the meal, telling guests to "bring your friends and have a good time together!"'

This cook was also savvy about using new media channels to reach out to consumers. He sent out regular messages to his WeChat group, telling them about the harvests currently available, the new dishes being developed, etc. 'People really responded to his stories,' adds Shi Yan. 'We want diners to have this kind of experience at our restaurant too.'

As for future marketing plans, Shared Harvest is not focused on expanding their efforts, though their consumer base is growing rapidly through word-of-mouth. 'We don't want to be bigger,' says Shi Yan, 'We want to do better...I want to make something where nothing was before,' she says. Cheng Cunwang explains that they aspire to set a good example and inspire others, rather than to expand indefinitely. 'We hope that every city can have a CSA—not necessarily our own, not necessarily a Shared Harvest,' says Cheng Cunwang. 'We support any CSA effort, anywhere.'

For this reason, they are putting effort into training farm managers so that they can run their own independent agricultural operations. The first farmer-manager training was held on 8 June 2015, and they plan to hold other such trainings in the future that cover ecological agricultural practices, marketing and other essentials skills. They also have ideas for expanding into new complementary areas such as developing more formal outreach and education programmes for schools and visitors to the farm, and direct collaboration with schools on organic gardening and school food programmes.

## 5.4 Social sustainability

The core of Shared Harvest's efforts is a focus on the social aspect of farming as a threatened livelihood in China. 'At a minimum,' says Shi Yan, 'the market needs to be strong enough to reverse the trend of farmers leaving the land.' She explained that the biggest obstacle for smallholder farmers in China is the upfront investment inherent in food production.

The CSA model offers dramatic advantages in terms of livelihood and rural community. Seventy percent of produce consumed in Beijing now comes from other provinces where labour and land is cheaper. Much of this food is produced by large agribusinesses. Beijing-area farmers are finding it increasingly hard to compete with the low prices of this food, and many have been abandoning farming altogether. Shi Yan explains that when Shared Harvest was established, many of the farmers in Tongzhou were considering converting to grain production because they were finding it too difficult to turn a profit from vegetables. The farmers in Shunyi had in fact already abandoned farming and their own land, and were working in factory jobs. Shared Harvest has offered these farmers a viable livelihood option in sustainable agriculture. By eliminating the need for farmers to market their goods themselves, this lifts a tremendous burden from the already heavy workload of small-scale farmers, and may be a decisive factor in the viability of their lifestyle.

In the Shared Harvest philosophy, farmers are seen as central to the sustainability of the food system. 'As producers of food itself,' write CSA staff on their blog, 'farmers undoubtedly play the most important role in the food sector; at the same time, they hold wisdom about their land that is based in their own experience.'<sup>7</sup>

Shared Harvest's goal then, is to support this knowledge and way of life, 'to ensure that farmers maintain their dignity and livelihood while also gaining the support and understanding of consumers.' The entire business model of Shared Harvest is built on this basic foundation. 'If consumers are aware of where the food on their tables comes from; if they establish close relationships with farmers and offer words of encouragement,' they reason, then 'engaging in the work of agriculture will have more dignity and meaning for producers.'<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Shi Yan maintains, consumer attitudes really are changing. Ten or more years ago, consumers looking for better quality would simply buy only imported goods. Now, more and more are willing to buy local. 'They are realising that foods taste better when they are bought locally,' she says. 'I thought it would be hard to sell this idea in China, but actually people are realising this on their own, just through experiencing the quality of the goods we are selling.' Many consumer members are actually becoming active in this process, organising themselves to promote local-food consumption. Shared Harvest member farmers are living proof that such consumer attitudes and investments can make a difference.

In addition to the direct impacts on farmer/producers and their village communities, Shared Harvest supports an entirely new kind of 'farming' livelihood for the 20 'new-farmer' (*xin nongfu*) staff members who run the CSA. These are primarily college-educated youth in their twenties or early thirties, many of whom didn't even come from farming families. 'They have chosen this as a way of living a village life,' declares Shi Yan.

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7. [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_a569abc901012bq9.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_a569abc901012bq9.html).

8. Ibid.

## 5.5 Role of government

### 5.5.1 Local government

The government has not had any direct role in the founding or operations of Shared Harvest, which is an independent, private company. Prior to founding Shared Harvest, Shi Yan had established Little Donkey Farm, another CSA, using government investment and government land. In setting up Shared Harvest, she wanted to focus on the market and have more autonomy in the operations. She used her own personal savings, with additional investment from various individuals, and developed collaborations with individual farming households working on their own land.

However, they do benefit indirectly from government support and involvement in some areas. The government provides low-cost land for the company to rent in Shunyi, as well as subsidising certain inputs such as organic fertiliser. The Shunyi Village Committee also engages in distributing farm profits to the farmers. In addition, based on interviews and observations, village officials in Shunyi seem to enjoy the moral support derived through positive relationships with local government.

From my visit to the Committee office, it is clear that Shared Harvest also maintains generally good relations with the local government leaders, who see the CSA as positive since it brings in respected visitors, employs local villagers, and promotes sustainable development. 'The government is currently very concerned about the quality of food,' says Shi Yan. 'There is strict management of our products from a quality perspective, and there is support for some of our agriculture inputs, such as subsidies for our organic fertilisers from the village government. They also come to the farm on official visits, additionally promoting what we are doing.'

### 5.5.2 National government

Broadly speaking, the national government's major policies align well with the CSA model and the social, economic and ecologic objectives of Shared Harvest. Its 2015 Number-One Document<sup>9</sup> stresses the importance of farmers to China's development, arguing that 'better-off rural residents are a prerequisite for a prosperous China.'<sup>10</sup> Specifically, the current emphasis is on food security as a number-one priority—an issue central to most of Shared Harvest's consumer members.

Three of the government's five main areas highlighted for improvement are also direct goals of Shared Harvest: 1) integrated urban-rural development; 2) injecting new vitality into rural development; and 3) increasing farmers' incomes.<sup>11</sup> Chinese leadership is increasingly concerned about the migration of youth out of villages, and what this will mean for China's future food security. The government therefore aims to improve financing options for farmers, and to improve pricing mechanisms, as well as investing more in rural infrastructure such as power and water provision.

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9. The Number-One Document ([www.cctv.com/english/special/rural\\_development/Homepage/index.shtml](http://www.cctv.com/english/special/rural_development/Homepage/index.shtml)) outlines policy priorities for the year and is published annually every January; it has highlighted rural issues since 2003.

10. [http://english.agri.gov.cn/news/dqnf/201502/t20150203\\_24952.htm](http://english.agri.gov.cn/news/dqnf/201502/t20150203_24952.htm).

11. Ibid.



Although ecological sustainability receives less direct attention than in previous years, there is a focus on specific goals such as cleaning up land contaminated with heavy metals, reforming water resources management systems, and setting aside 'permanent farmland' that will not be available for industrial or urban development. The Ministry of Agriculture has estimated that approximately 3.33 million hectares of farmland is now too polluted for agricultural use, and the State Forest Administration has stated that 34,000 square kilometres of wetlands have disappeared over the last decade.<sup>12</sup>

In general, Shi Yan sees a shift in the high-level Chinese leadership's priorities relevant to Shared Harvest's efforts. 'Before, the government's focus was to produce more food,' Shi Yan says of government agricultural subsidies. 'Now, the focus is on protecting the environment.'

Implementation of these goals, however, remains a challenge. While high-level policy may align with Shared Harvest's mission, the current policy environment falls short on many specifics. Shi Yan explains that local governments are tasked with decreasing the use of chemical pesticides, but many do not really accept or acknowledge organic agriculture. In addition, there are a lot of problems in the organic market in China including corruption, cheating and poor market links. This means that most organic farmers have to worry not just about the issues of organic farming practices—which, as we have seen, are challenging enough—but about whether they will be able to find a market willing to pay the extra costs.

## 5.6 Motivation for Community Supported Agriculture

The inspiration behind Shared Harvest's philosophy and strategy comes from founders Dr. Shi Yan and her husband Cheng Cunwang, who have spent the past decade promoting sustainable agricultural development in China. They met as M.A. students at Renmin University, where both of them studied under Professor Wen Tiejun, a well-known advocate of rural reconstruction. Shi Yan wrote her PhD dissertation on Community Supported Agriculture in China at the Renmin University School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development.

Together with Cheng Cunwang, Dr. Shi has produced Chinese translations of three books related to sustainable agriculture and rural economics: *Farmers of Forty Centuries: Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea and Japan*; *Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture*; and *Slow Money*. In addition to her academic pursuits, she also spent six months working on CSA-linked farms in the US, and returned to Beijing in 2008 to help found and run Little Donkey Farm (one of China's earliest and most influential CSAs) along with Cheng Cunwang and about 15 other people, using government land, equipment and investments.

When asked about their motivations for starting a CSA, Cheng Cunwang recalls their graduate-school days: 'Our main subjects of study were ecological agriculture and food-safety issues, including chemical agriculture. During our research, we realised that many scholars had already contributed quite a few ideas about addressing agricultural problems—but these problems persisted nonetheless. So we decided that we needed to find solutions involving practical measures. Professor Wen found an opportunity to send Shi Yan to

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12. <http://chinawaterrisk.org/notices/2014-no-1-doc-arable-land-food-and-water/>.

Minnesota to study CSAs; when she returned, we began to set up a CSA in China, and that was (part of) the inspiration for Little Donkey Farm.'

Dr. Shi Yan is a strong character who has become something of a celebrity in food and agriculture circles. Cheng Cunwang tends to keep a lower profile, but his role has been equally important. He is now responsible for two offices in Beijing that handle the marketing and IT aspects of the business; these offices each have about ten employees. Shared Harvest's success has benefited from their combination of initiative, scholarly expertise, hands-on CSA experience abroad, and advantageous relationships with academics, farmers, consumers and officials in Beijing and the surrounding region.

Shi Yan's charisma has likely been crucial to Shared Harvest's financial success, but she insists that its operational success is thanks to farmers' and staff dedication to the larger mission of their work. 'You have to want to live this kind of life to do this kind of thing,' she explains. 'This is not just a business—it is a way of life. If you try to set up a CSA just to make money, you will be disappointed. It is a lot of hard work, and requires intense dedication. Agriculture is simply not a highly profitable sector. You have to want the life that comes with it—and then you can use this model to support that life, focusing on the things you can do that the big companies cannot. If not, you might as well work in textiles or something else.'

As discussed above, Shared Harvest's mission is to promote 'Real Foods, Real Farmers and Real Community' in China. This highlights the three problems that Cheng Cunwang and Shi Yan have identified with China's current food system and its increasing rural-urban divide: food commodity chains are getting longer, and the quality of food is decreasing; farmers are being pushed out of the agricultural sector by large agribusiness; and rural communities are suffering as farming livelihoods become less and less viable. Indeed, there have been countless food-safety scares in recent years throughout China, and the health of Chinese people today will inevitably be adversely affected by any decrease in the quality of the food they consume. As Cheng Cunwang points out, prevention through improved nutrition may be a more efficient and cost-effective solution: 'China is now spending huge amounts of money on medicine and insurance. Many (medical) problems are caused by food and agriculture. Why not take some of that money and invest it in sustainable agriculture?' Organic imports now far outnumber exports, as Chinese consumers turn abroad seeking sources of safe, trustworthy food. Shi Yan argues that the CSA model solves many of the problems of rural/urban food systems in China, and Shared Harvest farms provide a model for these solutions on a local level.

Through active communication with their urban consumers, Shared Harvest aims to build strong market ties for farmers while transforming urban consumption habits. This model has proven attractive; Shared Harvest's consumer base continues to expand rapidly even without the use of any conventional advertising strategies. Urban residents appreciate the close ties with farms. As reporter Manuela Zoninsein expressed it, 'I have the opportunity to support and build a relationship with local producers. I receive updates in Chinese and English on how things are going on the farm, and make regular trips to work and cook with the farmers and observe farming practices myself.'<sup>13</sup>

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13. <http://zesterdaily.com/world/skeptical-of-chinas-organic-farmers-csa-helps/>.



**Shi Yan weighing vegetables © Shared Harvest**

CSA members have opportunities to take part in many promotional events such as 'farm days'. 'It was the very first time in my life that I pulled fresh carrots and giant radishes out of the ground!' writes Beijing resident **TJ** in a blog post about his visit to the farm. 'How excited I was!!' <sup>14</sup>

This kind of contact can have a lasting impact far beyond the enjoyment and novelty of on-site experiences. The greater hope is that it will actually change the consumption habits of Chinese urbanites. As TJ further noted, 'I don't know if it was because of the fun I had at the farm or the freshness of the vegetables—but everything I cooked that night tasted so much better than the dishes made with store-bought veggies.... Once you go to farm-fresh veggies, you don't want to go back! Especially the carrots—oh, my, my!—they were so juicy, and packed with such flavours and sweetness that I hardly had to put any seasoning on them.'

## 5.7 Challenges faced

Shared Harvest has enjoyed a strong start; it has benefited from dynamic leadership, young farmers eager to try new approaches, high ecological standards for their goods, a rapidly growing and enthusiastic consumer base, and positive government involvement. In a few short years, it has been able to realise the production of high-quality, ecologically sound food, strengthened rural-urban market links, and improved livelihoods for lifelong farmers and 'new farmers' alike. However, these 'successes' have not been without challenges and setbacks.

14. [www.musichef.com/farm-trip-to-csa/](http://www.musichef.com/farm-trip-to-csa/)



### 5.7.1 Chemical contamination

One of the main challenges is technical barriers to achieving truly organic production in a country with increasingly contaminated soil and water. This was highlighted when the Shared harvest team discovered traces of chemicals in their most recent product testing (see Section 5.3). 'You can see that it is currently not really possible to truly achieve 100% organic production in China,' concludes Shi Yan. 'It is impossible to ever fully 100% control all the steps. There are so many inputs—water, land, seeds, tools, fertilisers, storage equipment, packaging, transport, etc.—from so many diverse sources. Controlling these even partially requires a huge amount of time and energy and research.' Instead, she says, Shared Harvest aims 'to completely eliminate chemical pesticides and fertilisers in our own fields. To achieve even this goal requires intensive collaboration with farmers and consumers.' 'Still,' she continues, 'it is important for us to understand, and to share with our consumers, the possible avenues for this kind of contamination, because it reflects the challenges of truly organic food production in China.'

In this, Shi Yan explains that some farmers have a hard time accepting a complete ban on agro-chemicals. 'Organic food takes good care of farmers because they don't have to use the chemicals,' she says. 'In principle, they may agree that limiting chemicals is good for their health and for the quality of the vegetables, but when it comes down to it, they think, "not using pesticides at all—that's just stupid!" They see chemicals as a useful tool that perhaps should be managed better, but not completely abandoned.'

### 5.7.2 Sceptical and poorly-informed consumers

Despite their strong and growing consumer base, Shared Harvest's message of supporting local-food production still only reaches a small niche group. 'Consumers are still sceptical of goods produced in China,' says Shi Yan. 'There's still much work to be done throughout the country to get consumers to trust the domestic market, to believe that good-quality food can be produced here, and to understand the importance and power of buying locally. By buying local, organic food, consumers can actually create the reality of more local, organic food, along with vibrant rural communities.'

She emphasises the importance of dedicated staff coupled with new social media tools in achieving the success that Shared Harvest has experienced so far. 'To succeed at this kind of project, you need to make full use of new media tools such as WeChat, as well as continually having activities and meetings to reach out to consumers.'

Education and outreach are an essential part of developing acceptance for organic CSAs in China. Consumers with disposable income in both developed and developing countries have a tremendous range of choices; thanks to international trade in food products, they are able to enjoy fresh produce out of season, and have been conditioned by supermarkets to expect it to be cosmetically perfect. As a result, a tremendous amount of perfectly good food that doesn't meet these standards is wasted.

On the other hand, CSA consumers receive a regular supply of fresh produce but can only select the types of foods they want to receive, not the individual specimens. Thus they may have to accept oddly shaped or otherwise imperfect produce that they may have rejected in the supermarket. Also, they are forced to eat in season. If there are no eggplants or oranges

at a particular time of year, then they have to go without, or buy them elsewhere. Accepting the value of irregular-looking and seasonal-only produce will take education and a shift in consumer perspective.

Educating consumers is a key aspect of CSAs, although not necessarily their main objective.

By giving members a chance to visit their farms and participate in activities, CSAs connect their members directly with the agricultural production process, and give them a new appreciation for what it means to grow, market and distribute food in a healthy manner. This is an aspect all too often lost in our modern food system.

### 5.7.3 Policy barriers to organic production

Even if Shared Harvest did decide to pursue organic certification, new requirements would make it cost-prohibitive. In 2013, the government issued new organic-certification standards requiring each crop to be certified separately. The costs of certification for Shared Harvest's products would therefore be over 150,000 yuan per year. Furthermore, explains Shi Yan, current standards and subsidies are geared towards industrial production. And there are currently no government-sponsored programmes to support Chinese farmers in learning best practices in organic farming, nor to purchase or implement new sustainable technologies.

The result is that few small-scale farmers are able to engage in sustainable agriculture livelihoods. Instead, larger companies operating larger-scale farms (over 7 ha) tend to dominate organic production. Despite this challenging policy environment, Chinese agriculture is likely to remain dominated by small and medium-sized farms of 3–4 ha.

'You need to be either very committed or very rich to succeed in sustainable farming,' says Shi Yan, admitting that 'all of Shared Harvest's success has been due to very committed people.' Shi Yan would like to see policies in place that support small-scale farmers in more tangible ways. She also suggests that agricultural policies need to shift from a myopic focus on food *production* to a more holistic focus on food *systems*.

Ultimately, overcoming these barriers is about changing mindsets and social norms. Both consumers and the government want controlled inflation and low food prices. However, as Cheng Cunwang points out, 'We need to teach consumers that low food prices are not conducive to the development of agriculture, and that sustainable agriculture is vital to protecting the environment and maintaining a healthy society.' The Chinese government has also expressed doubt that sustainable agriculture will ever be able to support China's large population. However, Cheng Cunwang maintains that, based on their own experience, technical improvements can bring the productivity of sustainable agricultural practices up to levels near those of conventional, large-scale agriculture. 'We want to convince the government that sustainable agriculture can bring benefits they hadn't imagined.'

## 5.8 Conclusions

This case study has attempted to understand Shared Harvest CSA in terms of its ecological, social and economic sustainability. Despite the inherent and considerable challenges of achieving organic food production in China, Shared Harvest seems to be succeeding, largely because of its holistic vision of sustainability as a socioeconomic and ecological system.

As a staff member on the Shared Harvest blog wrote, 'An old Chinese proverb has it that the common people value food as they value the heavens—above all else (*wangzhe yi min wei tian, er min yi shi wei tian*)'. However, Shared Harvest feels that this value has seriously diminished. 'So-called modern cultivation—which is industrialised and chemical-dependent—is gradually replacing China's centuries-old agrarian culture,' continues the writer. 'More and more, we do not recognise the importance of the Earth's life-sustaining resources: clean air, water, and soil... During this modernisation process, the farmers who provide our food do not make enough money to maintain a dignified livelihood.' For these reasons, concludes the writer, 'We cannot use a purely economic lens to evaluate our agricultural system; its significance vastly exceeds its strictly "economic" attributes, as it provides the very basis of healthy human existence.'<sup>15</sup>

Shi Yan also notes the increasing food-safety issues that inevitably arise from the lengthening of market chains for food commodities. 'We believe that there should be planning around what we eat,' she explains, 'not just on the goods in the field, but on the entire system that produces and delivers our foods.' Such planning would encompass the ecological health of farming practices, the economic profitability of food production, and the social viability of farming as a livelihood.

In the meantime, initiatives like Shared Harvest will continue to expand, spurred by passionate individuals and an increasing hunger in urban consumers for healthier, trustworthy food options. 'In the face of food safety problems, environmental pollution, and the decline of village life,' writes the Shared Harvest blogger, 'we cannot help but feel alarmed. However, we believe that through collective action and the sharing of knowledge we can change the present and work towards a better future.'<sup>16</sup>

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15. [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_a569abc901012bq9.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_a569abc901012bq9.html).

16. Ibid.