Community supported agriculture thriving in China

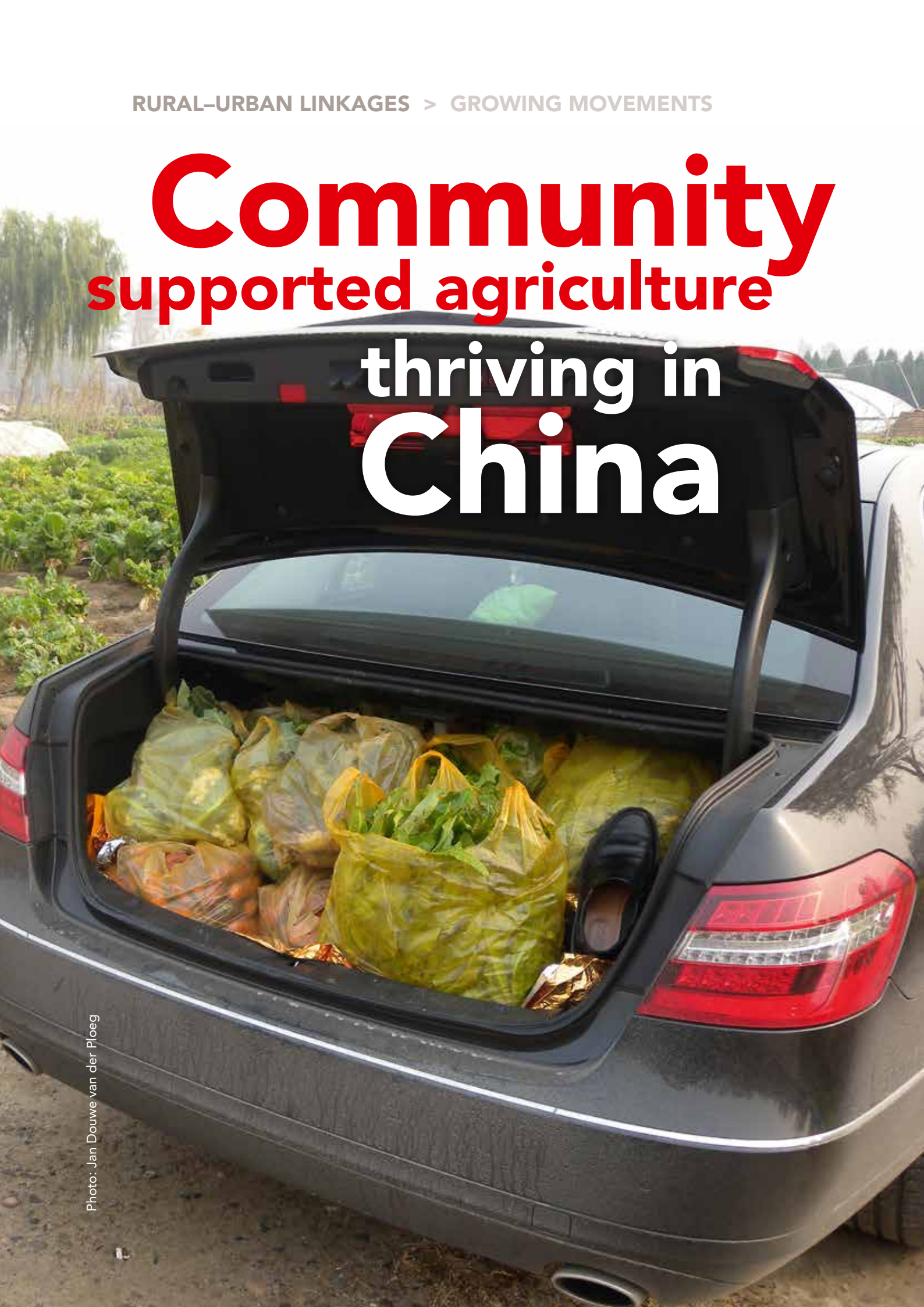

Photo: Jan Douwe van der Ploeg

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is one of the best examples of a successful, alternative food distribution system, providing real income to producers and affordable healthy food for consumers. Food continues to be grown in peri-urban areas and trust between producers and consumers is strengthened. And China has not been left behind by this global movement, over 500 CSAs with 75,000 consumers are now contributing to new food systems in more than a dozen cities across the country.

Judith Hitchman

Feeding the world's growing cities has become ever harder over the past 50 years. Migrants from the countryside used to have supplies sent from their families, or could buy from local farmers at street corner markets. But much of this has disappeared, replaced by industrialised agriculture, identical products, multinational corporations, and supermarkets. Add to this the burning need to tackle climate change and energy transition, we must do everything to preserve agricultural land, particularly that close to major cities. And with this, to develop alternative food systems that support sustainable production of safe, healthy food that is available to all. This is the context in which Community Supported Agriculture has emerged around the world: an alternative, locally based economic model of agriculture and food distribution, in which consumers pledge to support one or more local farms, and share the risks and benefits of food production.

Chinese consumers, particularly the new middle class, are hungry not only for new foods, but also for new food systems. In the wake of various large-scale food scandals, food safety is a major concern for both the government and consumers. Compounded by pollution, pesticides and chemical fertilizers, trust in industrial farming has been undermined. Many people are buying food labelled organic, and for about the last seven years, more people have joined CSA groups. While relatively new in China, there are already around 500 CSAs, with a membership of about 75,000 consumers and these figures are growing fast! The citizens and farmers involved in these initiatives have created a national network to share knowledge and other resources, and are also part of Urgenci, the global CSA network.

What is Community Supported Agriculture?

The CSA model was born in Japan, where in the 1970s, as a result of mercury contamination (the famous Minimata disaster), a group of Japanese housewives started sourcing their food directly from organic farmers. This was known as Teikei, and the network is still flourishing in Japan today. The movement went global, with Urgenci, a network of national networks, now bringing well over a million producers and consumers together. There are also many thousands of groups that are not part of networks, especially in the USA.

So how does it work? A key point is that the consumers commit to buying from producers on a regular basis and, at least for a whole growing season. This means that they share both the risks and benefits from the growing season. Payment is usually made in advance, but can vary, to allow those in difficult situations to still participate.

Distribution models vary between countries, and even from one CSA to another. In some cases, boxes are prepared on the farm, and there are a number of collection points in the city. In others, consumers are far more involved, assisting with planting, tending, harvesting, packing or distribution. There is a lot of good humour and exchange, and this is where community spirit is built. Many CSAs also have special festivals and newsletters to keep their consumers informed.

Shi Yan and her husband Cheng on Shared Harvest farm. Photo: Judith Hitchman

China's first In 2008, Shi Yan, a soft-spoken but determined graduate from Renmin University, Beijing, helped to set up one of China's first CSA farms called 'Little Donkey' (www.littledonkeyfarm.com). It was a joint initiative between her university, the district government, and the Renmin Rural Reconstruction Centre.

Shi Yan became the chief operator. She was inspired by her experience in 2008, working with Earthrise Farm, a small CSA in Minnesota, USA. "It changed my life," says Shi Yan. She arrived there thinking that she would study its business model, "but when living there, I realised that it's not just a model, it's a lifestyle, and although I was concerned about rural issues, I never thought about living in a village." But seven years ago she moved to the northwest corner of Beijing's Haidian district to manage the farm, going against the trend where young people are abandoning rural villages for jobs in the city.

Little Donkey bucked another trend in Chinese agriculture. Chinese farmers are now among the world's biggest users of chemical inputs, but cultivation at Little Donkey is chemical free. Although not certified organic because of the high certification costs, they do not use any chemical fertilizers or pesticides. They build soil health with knowledge and techniques from traditional practices, permaculture, and 'natural farming' principles of the South Korean farmer Han Kyu.

Little Donkey has 'working share' and 'regular share' members. Those with a working share rent 30 m^2 and are provided with all material inputs such as seeds and organic fertilizers, tools and technical assistance to grow their own vegetables. Those with a regular share sign up for a weekly supply of seasonal production, which they can either pick up or have delivered to their door. Most payments are made online. Little Donkey currently has around 700 members, most of them residents of Beijing city. The farm is also used for training and research and is a hub for community activities with the possibility to organise visits and demonstrations of ecological farming.

More than production and consumption Shi Yan recently moved on from Little Donkey and now works another farm, Shared Harvest, with her husband and his parents, where they rent land from the village authority. They employ 25 mostly young people who studied agriculture at university and are motivated to live a more communal, fulfilling life.

Shared Harvest includes 500 families, four groups of parents from local schools, and organic clubs and restaurants in Beijing. Another community building aspect is the 'Earth School', where children come to learn about ecological farming and the environment, how food is grown and what it looks like. Intent on nurturing the community, Shi Yan also set up a clothes exchange on her farm, and in November this year, the national network of about 500 groups will hold their annual conference in the area, including visits to her farm. This conference will also be back-to-back with the Urgenci International network conference, with more than 50 international participants. Shi Yan keeps a popular blog (blog.sina.com.cn/us-ashiyan) about all these initiatives.

'New farmers' Since 2008, more CSAs have popped up in China, so what makes them so popular? Besides consumers finding that CSA offers the alternative food system they are seeking, another big reason why it is taking off is because it provides an opportunity for educated youth, so called 'new peasants' or 'new farmers', to return to their roots. Young, qualified graduates who moved to the city to study, disillusioned by the bright lights, are increasingly choosing to return to their villages. Caring for elderly family members is another reason for many young Chinese to choose to return to their villages, as grandparents are often left alone when children and grandchildren all work in the cities. These 'new farmers' lead many of China's CSAs and this is also the case in the rest of the world. Often they even leave behind stable employment and a good salary in the cities.

Liu Yueming is one such new farmer. She moved to Beijing and qualified as a biologist, but after working there for some time, she decided to move back to her family farm in 2010. She explained that the move has allowed her to be closer to her grandparents, and also to be able to spend more time with her own son. Liu employs 15 people on her eight hectare farm, most from the local village. Half the land is rented from the

village authority on a 30 year lease, the rest is rented from different families in the village. She began working with 20 families, with just one rundown poly-tunnel, but with government support she now has seven more. Today, 400 nearby families choose between four different weekly vegetable boxes. Much of the communication between members and the farm is via Weibo, the Chinese version of Facebook.

Protected peri-urban land Like Liu Yueming, new farmers can usually rent additional land, either from other families or from the local authorities. In fact, with a shortage of people to work the land in the villages, CSA has been welcomed with open arms. Protected peri-urban land dedicated to agriculture is common across China, and supports the spread of CSA. It provides access to fresh organic food and a viable model for new farmers to return to the land.

Farmers' markets Most of Liu's produce is dedicated to feeding the local community, but she sells surplus at the Beijing Farmers' market, one of a dozen across China operating together with CSAs. Certification is not yet common, but the Chinese network is in the process of setting up a participatory guarantee system.

The legal situation of the farmers' markets is uncertain. Theoretically, markets require a permit, but at the same time, famers are allowed to sell their produce freely. Another issue, at least in Beijing, is that refrigerated trucks must be used to transport all food into the city, and farmers near Beijing now work together to transport their produce to the market in this way.

CSA members harvesting carrots on Little Donkey farm. Photo: Jan Douwe van der Ploeg

What does the future hold? It is impossible to know how CSA will evolve in China, but the government is looking closely at the model as a supplier of safe and healthy food to the cities. But they could also favour other forms of production, namely partnerships with private companies. However, the number of CSAs grows every year, proving that this food system, involving farmers, consumers and local authorities, is popular. Individuals such as Shi Yan have done have done much to show the power of Community Supported Agriculture.

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Rural–urban linkages and *Hukou* in China

China has the largest agricultural system in the world in terms of farm output and it includes a little more than 200 million smallholdings, representing at least 800 million people. On just 10% of all cultivated land in the world, these smallholders produce 20% of the world's total food supply. The average farm has only five *mu* of agricultural land, about one third of a hectare. However, China is self-sufficient in as far as the nutritional needs of its huge population are concerned. Over the last four decades total food production and productivity grew more than in any other country. Granaries, barter and multiple cropping are some of the underlying mechanisms, as well as a massive and richly chequered provisioning of food from farmers to cities through a widespread network of interconnected food markets.

The national *Hukou* household registration system provides rural Chinese the right to access land. This given also shapes rural-urban migration flows. In China, migration is not a one way move from the countryside to the cities, but is circular. Many young people leave the villages in order to work in urban industries. After marriage and the first child, women return to the village while men only come back in periods of land preparation and harvest. After many years, the men return to the rural areas permanently to invest their savings in the farm. Many social struggles in the countryside rest on the right to land embedded in Hukou and it has enabled a number of peasants to start their own community supported agriculture initiatives.

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