



PLOTS THICKEN

Mao Zedong's farm collectives are being reinvented on the mainland, and this time the environment is high on the agenda, writes Nancy Pellegrini

LIKE MANY RURAL communities, the southern Shandong village of Jiangzhuang is in trouble. The cost of living is outpacing farmers' meagre incomes, the social safety net is virtually non-existent and young people are leaving in droves. But villagers hope a new twist to an old institution – the co-operative – may boost their fortunes.

"If the countryside wants to be richer, we have to change our way of thinking," says farmer Ma Yichang, who now heads Jiangzhuang's co-operative.

Under a scheme initiated by a Beijing-based non-government organisation, the Liangshuming Rural Reconstruction Centre (LRRC), mainland farmers are reviving Mao Zedong's farm collectives – and turning them green. Through free classes, farmers such as Ma not only learn about market fundamentals but also the potential of co-operation and organic farming.

Farmers can't afford to take their produce directly to market, so they wait for local buyers to come to them, says Chang Zhuping, who helped set up LRRC's organic Green Union store that's due to open soon in Beijing. This puts the peasants in a weak bargaining position. "But if they cut out the middleman, they can double their profits," says Chang.

But to approach large buyers, farmers would have to sell in bulk. Hence the LRRC's scheme to organise the peasants into co-operatives, where they can pool their produce, share in the profits, and negotiate to buy better seeds, fertiliser and livestock at cheaper prices.

While some may shudder at the resurrection of a system associated with Mao's excesses, peasants recall his socialist rule with fond nostalgia.

"Before, people worked the same field and shared everything because everyone was equal. If you were strong, weak, it didn't matter," says an elderly farmer who

asked not to be named. "Now people have bad relationships, with strangers, even with their own families. Everyone's first thought is money."

Ma, 46, also misses the socialist benefits. "We love Mao," he says. "Back then, if you were poor, the government would help you. You didn't have to pay for health care or education. But now everyone is independent, so who takes care of whom?"

Still, it was not easy reviving the co-operatives, which had largely vanished as farmers focused on personal plots in the

decades of economic reform. The community spirit that once characterised village communities had also been greatly eroded. "Villagers only think about their work," Ma says. "You work on your farm, I work on mine, you do your business, I do mine."

Ma and LRRC volunteers started modestly: they organised classes in *yao gu*, a traditional drum dance, as an activity to bring the community together. The thrice-weekly sessions gave villagers a reason to socialise informally – and the volunteers to spread the word about the benefits of

sharing resources. Three weeks later, 80 people signed up with Ma to launch the village co-op in 2004, handling rice, rabbits and pigs. Now its roster lists 108 households in the village of 1,350 people.

Most are drawn by prospects of better earnings. Annual household incomes in Jiangzhuang, where farmers mostly grow rice and wheat, range between 1,200 yuan and 4,000 yuan. Yet putting a child through high school can cost upwards of 20,000 yuan. Family concerns are another factor. "I need to find a wife for my son," says a village matriarch surnamed Zou. "I need money for his house and wedding."

The co-operative doesn't entirely replicate past structures. "Back then you had to do everything the government told you," says Ma. "Anyone who wants to can join the co-op; they grow whatever they want, and they can leave whenever they want."

What has survived, however, is the emphasis on the common good. "If one person gets rich, the other people will get rich too," Ma says. "We're helping each other."

Still, new ideas are slow to take hold in the quagmire of village relationships. "I can't join the co-operative, I'm not rich enough," says a farmer named Zhou, even though he has no idea how much membership costs. Others remain suspicious of the scheme, questioning how the funds are allocated.

Members who invest a modest sum of 30 yuan are entitled to buy supplies at a discount from the co-op store. Those who take a 200-yuan stake will get a percentage of the co-op's profits – the more they in-

vest, the bigger the share. Investing in livestock is also cheaper because the co-op can buy in bulk. For example, rabbits usually sell for 120 yuan each, but co-op members can purchase them for as low as 80 yuan, says Ma.

Launched in 2004, the LRRC scheme is off to a good start, establishing seven co-ops in five provinces. Instead of actively recruiting members, the NGO sends volunteers, mostly university students, on one-year stints in the villages to spread the word.

In Jiangzhuang, *yao gu* classes, singing and kung fu contests helped break the ice. English lessons and computer training – on the village's sole antiquated machine – were also popular. But to help raise incomes, the LRRC realised farmers had to target a niche sector where they can command a premium – organic produce.

"The price of produce and livestock is so low, the farmers can't make enough money," says Chang. Green farming seemed ideal, he says, both for export and to meet the demand of the mainland's growing and increasingly health-conscious middle class.

Under mainland regulation, "green" food is divided into three categories. The least stringent is *wugonghai*, which contains limited amounts of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. "It's the maximum level of chemical residue you can have without causing long-term health or environmental damage," says Xiao Xingli, director of the Organic Food Development Centre.

Green food (*lüsi shipin*), is subjected to more rigorous testing. Besides the fin-

ished product, the regulatory agency checks whether organic manure or biological pesticides are used instead of chemicals in the growing process.

The strictest review is for organic food (*youji shipin*), which is grown or raised in an environment that has been contaminant-free for three years.

LRRC aims to establish a brand of organic produce that the public can trust, partly by building on the reputation of its founder, Wen Tiejun, the dean of agricultural economics and rural development at Renmin University.

However, Wen, who describes himself as a senior volunteer, views rural communities as the key to controlling quality of the produce. "Farmers live next door to another, their work adjoining; they can create their own monitoring system," says Wen.

Chang agrees. "In rural areas, relationships are a strong social force. The co-op knows that if one household doesn't do it, it ruins it for everyone," he says. "There's a lot of pressure."

So far, co-op members in Jiangzhuang are growing *wugonghai* rice and raising *lüsi shipin* rabbits (fed primarily on wild grass), but plan to make a transition to purely organic food.

Signs are that such ventures are starting to pay off. Each female rabbit, which typically gives birth to 70 to 80 offspring a year, can yield 600 yuan in profit annually. Families that raise 50 or more rabbits should be a lot closer to paying off high-school fees.

Ma says the co-ops' benefits aren't just monetary. "We have meetings every Friday to talk about government policies and farming techniques. People are learning about the economy and watching the news, they're not just thinking about their three meals a day."

Although in its second year, the co-op scheme is still misunderstood. "Some people still say, 'What are you doing here? You went to university, you can get a good job'," says Han Jingqi, a student volunteer who is studying labour relations at Chongqing People's Political Institute in Sichuan. "It makes us feel bad when they tell us to go home."

But fellow volunteer Liu Liang, a rural development student at the Guizhou Financial and Economic Institute, takes a more positive view. "We're helping to construct the new countryside."

Oddly, the co-op's *yao gu* classes may have had the biggest impact on the village so far. "Before this, life was boring," says Ma. "People had nothing to do but gossip and fight with each other. But now everyone is too busy to worry about that."

Ma says going organic will give his village a future. "Right now, we have so many young people leaving to go to the city. Some have wives and children here. When we're developed, they can all stay."

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Share share: activities down on the co-operative include *yao gu* classes (left); member Ma Yujun, (above) tends to her farm's rabbits. PHOTOS: NANCY PELLEGRINI