

# Local, Organic Szechuan

China's urbanites are finding safer food with community supported agriculture.



Enlarged view of Szechuan pepper (*Zanthoxylum piperitum*)

FOTOLIA | BOONCHUAY1970

**T**WO THOUSAND KILOMETRES away from Shanghai, in China's western hinterland, lies the prosperous city of Chengdu, the capital of the Sichuan (formerly spelled Szechuan) province, with a population of 14 million.

The long and rich agricultural history of this province nurtured one of the most well-known Chinese cuisines: Sichuan food. Sichuan peppercorn and hot chili pepper are the two essences of this cuisine, creating the signature numb and hot taste. While millions from around the world enjoy the taste of Sichuan food, a growing number of Chinese people are increasingly suspicious of the food they are so proud of.

In the past few years, Chinese urban residents have become increasingly eager to understand more about their food – where it comes from and how it is produced. As a result, buying clubs have appeared in some cities to source food from trusted producers. Organic farms also have become popular to cater to the growing demands for safe food. Some people have even rented small garden plots on organic farms to grow their own food, at a price of about \$600 Canadian a year – an order of magnitude higher than renting a community garden plot in Canada. These trends are happening across all major cities in China.

You might not be surprised about this if you've been watching news reports about China in the past few years. Food safety scandals have been staple news stories in the Chinese media since 2008, when the notorious melamine-tainted baby formula sickened 40,000 and killed four infants. Instances such as hormone-tainted beansprouts, illicit use of "gutter oil" and exploding watermelons shattered people's trust in food from conventional supply chains. According to an online survey, food safety has surpassed environmental protection and anti-corruption as the top concern of more than 700 million Chinese internet users in the past few years. More than 75 percent of surveyed citizens worry about

accessing safe food on a daily basis. The food safety concern has gradually escalated to be regarded as a social crisis in China, driving people to spare no effort in the search for safe and healthy food.

The Gao family farm is located in Anlong village, 32 kilometers away from Chengdu city. In 2006, Partnerships for Community Development, a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Hong Kong, with the assistance of a local environmental NGO, the Chengdu Urban Rivers Association, introduced the community supported agriculture (CSA) model to Anlong village.

In the CSA model, a group of consumers purchase "shares" of a

farm's production prior to the growing season and become shareholders in the farm. The farmer commits to ecological farming and provides the shareholders with trustworthy food throughout the growing season, usually on a weekly basis. Both producers and their customers in this process share the risks of farming such as crop failure and the harvest.

With the help of Partnerships for Community Development and Chengdu Urban Rivers Association, the Gao family farm adopted the CSA model and has gradually expanded its customer base since 2007. In 2015, the farm was producing vegetables and rice for about 80 households on about 1.5 hectares of farmland. Having recognized the many problems in China's agriculture sector, the farm strives to promote local varieties of seeds and farm without synthetic pesticides, herbicides, fertilizer or hormones. Traditional sustainable farming approaches such as intercropping and crop rotation are used to control pests and maintain soil fertility. Fermented slurry in methane tanks, diluted urine and treated human waste from the village are used as organic fertilizer. Apart from attending lectures on ecological farming approaches offered by Partnerships for Community Development and Chengdu Urban Rivers Association, the Gao family also exchanges organic farming knowledge with other organic farmers.

When we visited the farm in the spring of 2012 on an academic trip, it was a welcoming and relaxing place full of volunteers. Confidence and satisfaction radiated from the faces of Mr. Gao and his mother Ms Li. They delivered 2.5 kg of vegetables to their customers twice a week, year-round, at a cost of 30 Chinese yuan (about five dollars Canadian) per box. Some of



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the farmland in the village was rented by companies such as Air China and China CITIC Bank for their employees. The Gao family also operated five guest rooms for visitors.

Although the farm is quite small, it has a grand vision. This vision reflects the traditional Chinese philosophy of “maintaining the harmony between humans and nature” (*tian ren he yi* in Chinese). Li explained to us her understandings of organic farming:

Three basic concepts are supporting my family to keep growing ecological vegetables: environmental protection, health and harmony. Ecological farming helped us to become friends with customers. Some of my shareholders told me that although we are different, we are working towards some common goals ... direct communication helps to foster the harmonious relationship among people.

When asked whether they want to expand in the future, Gao said,

It's problematic to ask whether we need to produce more because we are fundamentally providing a service to society. There are fewer and fewer farmers in China, let alone ecological farmers. The involvement of big capital won't solve the problem, because it's hard for big capital to consider the social benefit. They are profit-oriented. They are constrained by their stakeholders and can't always make decisions that are good for society. It's not good to be large scale. Small-scale farming is more stable and effective to solve the food safety and quality problems.

The Gao family farm is inspirational but not exceptional in China. By the end of 2015, there were about 500

CSA farms across China, most of them located on the outskirts of big cities. Some of the farms, such as the Little Donkey Farm in Beijing, have received wide media coverage. In the case of Little Donkey Farm, passionate young PhD students established it, they facilitated various family activities, and they challenged people's impression of farmers and agriculture, which are normally associated with poor education, backwardness and drudgery.

Chinese CSA farms are different from conventional farms in various ways. Besides adopting ecological farming approaches, CSA farms are mainly operated by well-educated entrepreneurs who are new to agriculture – in fact, sometimes referred to as “new farmers.” Peasant farmers are normally hired as farm labourers. Most of the farms are not organically certified, due to the high cost of organic certification in China.

Unlike their Western CSA counterparts, which are usually driven by strong social and environmental values, Chinese CSA farms are more of a pragmatic response to the increasing demand for trustworthy, high-quality food among the growing middle class. The lack of strong social and environmental values reduces the understanding of CSAs among some farmers, who view them merely as a food delivery business. In some cases, food delivery companies find the term “CSA” a convenient eye-catching concept to be used in their promotion.

In response to customer demand for

quality assurance, Chinese CSA farms often organize farmers, shareholders, researchers and activists together to form voluntary inspection groups. They also develop various other approaches to establish and maintain customer trust, such as offering third-party chemical residue test results for their produce, organizing farm activities, issuing newsletters, and even offering online access to surveillance cameras installed on the farm.

While most CSA farmers in Canada own their farmland, land for Chinese CSA farms is often leased from other farmers, and in some cases is accessed through relatives. Leasing land renders the property rights insecure for many CSA farms and consequently jeopardizes long-term investments to improve soil fertility. The frequent increases in rent also threaten the economic viability of CSA farms.

CSAs face various challenges, such as the overall denigration of agriculture in a rapidly modernizing society, the lack of understanding of production challenges among their customers, insecure land access, shortage of employees with ecological farming knowledge and difficulty accessing organic seeds.

Some interns we interviewed at CSA farms were forced to quit to pursue non-farming jobs in cities due to pressure from their families, who often considered farmers to be backward, shortsighted and conservative in Chinese society. There is no honour in farming. Many CSA farms also find it challenging to meet the demands of



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Steffanie Scott and food vendor at Beijing Farmers' Market

customers regarding the appearance and variety of vegetables in their shares, the delivery time, and various other requests.

But despite these obstacles, the development of alternative food initiatives has received tremendous support from NGOs and academia, such as China Renmin University, which organizes an annual national CSA symposium. At the symposium, farmers, market managers, researchers and activists enjoy opportunities to share thoughts and lessons learned. These diverse stakeholders intend to rebuild consumer trust, enhance agricultural sustainability, and facilitate farmer livelihoods. A national network of farmers, social organizations, activists and researchers is emerging.

CSA farms have grown in China, from

a dozen in 2010 to more than 500 in 2016. This offers a promising, though challenging, opportunity for many young people to make a living in the countryside, and fulfill their agrarian dreams. The past few years have also seen the rise of farmers' markets, buying clubs, farm-to-school programs, garden plot rentals, and many other alternative food initiatives. Although small and seemingly marginal, these initiatives are unveiling novel choices in modes of farming and food access – choices that give more emphasis to environmental and social wellbeing.

If you have a chance to visit China in future, be sure to spend a day checking out these ecological farms or the Beijing Farmers' Market. If you are in Chengdu, besides indulging in the spicy Sichuan food, visit Anlong

village and chat with the CSA farmers to gain a different perspective on China and its food systems. **AV**

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