Learning to Farm in China

在中国学农场 | *zài zhōngguó xué nóngchǎng*

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农民 (*nóngmín*) 'peasant' or 'farmer'. 农 (*nóng*) means 'agriculture' and 'peasant'; 民 (*mín*) means 'of the people' and 'folk'. These words flitted around my head as I thought about the next day's planned activities. Although I used to live in the Midwest, I was not knowledgeable in the world of agriculture. Due to my inexperience, I was extremely nervous about what awaited me. I had trouble sleeping, as I knew the next day entailed a two-hour drive on our tour bus to a local family's small plot of land where we'd learn to farm.

When Chengdu's morning sunlight invaded the hotel's cheap, translucent curtains, I awoke, dreading leaving the hotel. I reluctantly lazed myself out of my bed and moseyed down to the lobby to meet my tour group. I plopped myself onto one of the tour bus's forty tan leather seats (all equipped with outlets, which we could not use due to voltage differences) and carefully positioned my mom's woven purse from the 90's onto the empty seat next to me. I succumbed to residual sleep until I heard our tour guide shout, "Okay, everyone, get up. We're here."

I groggily blinked my eyes open and adjusted to the outside brightness. I stepped off the air-conditioned bus outside into the sweltering heat. Our tour guide herded us into a group. Most of us used half-broken fans with images of pandas plastered across the accordion flaps to provide ourselves with some relief from the miserable heat. Once our tour guide had formed us into a semicoherent circle, she explained that the most beautiful girls in China originate from Chengdu, flaunting long raven hair, white skin, and shimmering complexions—all made possible by the local climate's near-constant cloud cover and high humidity.

I expelled our tour guide's voice from my ears, and instead chose to glance around at my surroundings. Instead of resembling a stereotypical Midwestern farm, this farm had been absorbed by urban sprawl and incorporated into city life. Behind me, electric cars zipped and diesel taxis sputtered to and fro on the highway. Across the highway, towers of apartment complexes sat atop retail duplexes with tables overflowing with knick knacks, figurines, and jewelry glinting in the cloud-muted sunshine. Despite it being 9:00 am, waiters in restaurants bustled around a cart full of ceramic dish sets, meticulously arranging everything on outdoor tables with Lazy Susans. Aromas of indistinguishable foodstuffs elusively danced through the air, allowing me to catch a scent if I positioned my nose just so.

I turned my attention back to my tour guide, who seemed to be out of breath from her monologue. She beckoned for us to follow her on a trail, and we passed through what seemed to be a curated park with a wide recreational trail, black metal benches, and outdoor gym equipment scattered along the trail's edges. As we walked, a river surged by us, and I smacked away mosquitos emerging from the brownish-greenish mush on the river's banks. Grass neatly lined the concrete trail and thick trees shaded it. Some point along

the trail, the local farming family—including a grandmother, auntie, mother, and three children—joined us. Our tour guide chattered with the grandmother, who I can assume was the head of the household. They spoke so hurriedly and slurred their enunciations that I had difficulties following their conversation, despite catching a previously-learned vocabulary word here and there.

We turned a corner and saw the local family's field where yellow flowers crawled along power lines and rows of crops curved along the hillside. Instead of the acres of corn stalks decorating the landscape from Nebraska to Ohio, this family maintained a relatively small morsel of land next to the recreational trail. I wondered whether the farm produced a livelihood for the family, or whether the family maintained the land for self-fulfillment and sustenance rather than profit. I wish I had asked the family this question; however, that day I felt particularly shy and self-conscious of my Chinese, especially after overhearing them snicker about us "dumb Americans" and how we didn't understand Chinese.

I especially wanted to ask because we had previously visited a Tibetan farm in Qinghai. Given that the farm didn't meet the family's financial needs, this family maintained their farm because of the enjoyment they derived from keeping traditions alive. Thus, to provide for her family, the mother also worked as a nurse at the local hospital. Centralized agricultural industries trump traditional local agriculture in terms of affordability and ease of production, which forces Chinese farmers to find new jobs to support themselves.

In China, the government owns the legal rights to all the land. For example, if you own a home, you own the physical structure sitting atop the land, but the land itself belongs to the government. Looking at the urban sprawl around me—and the family's remaining farmland nestled in between constructions—I wondered whether the government had reassigned much of this family's land to urban development. I also questioned how this potential land change had affected the family's ability to put safe food on the table every night and earn an income.

We followed the family into the back section of the plot, where a small, isolated patch of corn (玉米 *yùmǐ*) awaited harvesting. Since the beginning of Chinese civilization, 玉 (*yù*, jade) has been a source of beauty and a physical representation of traditional Confucian virtues, especially benevolence and justice, as well as bringing good fortune. 米 (*mǐ*, rice) is the crop responsible for the beginning and sustenance of Chinese civilization and a staple of Chinese culinary traditions. Together, 玉米 ('jade rice') these characters, express the Chinese value placed upon corn or food that will bring prosperity and sustenance.

One of the children, a four-year-old girl with rainbow bubble braids, accompanied her mother and watched as we piled onto the field. I smiled at the toddler and tried asking her simple questions, such as, "What is your name?" "How old are you?" "Do you go to school?" She burrowed her face into her mother's shoulder, not particularly eager to answer any of my inquiries. Chinese culture places importance on collectivism and supporting one's family, and I wondered if this little girl would be obligated to support her family by farming or if she could choose an individual path of education. Regrettably, I did not ask the family these questions.

A startling *crrraaaack* interrupted my thoughts, and I glanced up to see the grandmother snapping a corn stalk while cradling a corn baby. She tossed the corn stalk to the side of the field, deposited the unhusked corn into a net-like trash bag, and brushed her hands off on her black maxi skirt. She waved us over, encouraging us to start harvesting the ripe corn.

I nimbly stepped around the small corn stalks to approach the mature ones. I ripped off the corn and threw it into the same bag the grandmother had used. When I bent down to snap the base of the stalk, the

surrounding cornstalks pricked my skin with bristly hairs. While the grandmother elegantly broke the stalk with a single swing of her arm, I had to wrestle the stem down to the ground and stomp on it to break it. I lurched the stalk up and pitched it over to the growing pile of removed stalks on the side of the plot. Once I had successfully conquered the stalk, one of my classmates used a hoe to excavate the remaining stub of stalk and its roots from the earth.

As I started to perfect my corn-harvesting technique, I happened across a slimy larva of some sort leeching onto a corn husk. I grimaced and marched over to the mother to make the bug someone else's problem. The mother reassured me that all the harvested corn goes through a decontamination process to banish any unwanted organisms from the corn. Unfortunately, my Chinese level wasn't high enough to understand the details of the decontamination process. She also told me that the corn is processed exclusively for pig feed. Since this family used chemicals to decontaminate the crops, I wondered how modern agricultural technology affects traditional Chinese farming values. Is traditional farming in China becoming obsolete with the adoption of modern technology and chemicals? Do Chinese consumers value "organic" produce similar to how American consumers do?

After clearing the stalks, long vines, tiny flowers, and sparse grasses were all that populated the soil. We used hoes to slice out lingering vines and weeds. The family told us the plot needed to be a blank slate for the potatoes we would plant later, but it was perfectly acceptable to leave roots of the weeds in the ground. Once most of the greenery had been removed, my classmates used the hoes to break up the clay soil.

At this point, the earth was very uneven, with random patches of weeds half concealed by upturned earth, and the unevenness of the soil threatened to twist your ankle if you weren't careful. I used a hoe (and my entire posterior chain and core) to create a shallow ditch. Although I tried my best to create a straight ditch, it ended up leaning and waving back and forth between the other ditches. As I dug, my classmates positioned sprouted potato butts in the ditch, sprinkled them with white pearls of fertilizer, and covered them in dried hay teeming with insects.

We stood back to appreciate the landscape, altered from six-foot-tall corn stalks to ground level rows of hay. The family summoned us to gather around the overflowing bags of corn, and we started shucking each corn baby, carefully peeling off each protective leaf and pulling out the corn silks. Our tour guide challenged us to a corn-shucking competition: whoever skinned ten corn babies first, won. Two unfortunate souls volunteered to be our tour guide's "competition;" however, they were mercilessly destroyed. By the time my classmates had stripped four corn babies, our tour guide had finished all ten. The family thanked us for saving them hours of manual labor in the hot Sichuan climate, and we retreated down the trail to board our bus and eat lunch.

The farmer nurtures the crops that nurture the people. This can be indirect, by the crops feeding animals, or directly, as raw produce ready for human consumption. This relationship is a reciprocal one; local farmers nurture us by their production of high quality produce, and we must nurture them in return with our support. Despite my initial hesitation to farm, my hands-on interactions with the dirt, insects, and crops helped me understand that food comes from the planet, not from a grocery store. As a city girl living in Boulder, I had lost sight of where my food came from, and wouldn't blink an eye perusing the different stations overflowing with regional food specialties at the Will Vill Dining Hall. Real people nurture our food, which in turn, nurtures us. Becoming more mindful—even slightly—of where our crops come from has the potential to benefit our interpersonal relationships, as well as our global relationship with our earth.