

GreenFootprint

THE GOOD EARTH

CSA FARM PROMOTES HARMONIOUS TIES BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE

By YANG GUANG, CHINA DAILY

India's Mahatma Gandhi once said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." And that, said Shi Yan, is the inspiration behind the 5.3-hectare Dondon Farm in Beijing's northwest — China's first Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm.

Shi, pursuing her doctorate studies at the School of Agriculture Economics and Rural Development, Renmin University of China, traces the beginnings of the CSA story to her half-year stint as a farmer in the United States.

In April 2008, on the advice of her research adviser and with the help of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Shi took up the opportunity to work as an intern on the Earthrise Farm in Minnesota to learn how a CSA farm is operated.

An urban girl from a well-off family in Hebei province, Shi calls her experience as one of a "foreigner sent to the countryside", a reference to the "re-education" of youth during the "cultural revolution" (1966-1976).

"I chose to study agricultural economics and rural development because I wanted to do something substantial and down-to-earth," Shi said, "but I had neither lived in the countryside nor had I done any farming."

In the beginning, Shi was indeed a little hesitant, especially when she learned that a team of five would have to manage all the work on the 5.3 hectares of land.

But the moment she landed at the farm in Minnesota on April 18, 2008, Shi made a promise to herself.

"From now on, I will discard my petty-bourgeois lifestyle and prepare to get my hands dirty."

And she did, throwing herself enthusiastically into all aspects of running a CSA farm — sowing seeds, watering, weeding and harvesting,

cleaning produce, and doing packaging and delivery.

Weeding, she recalled, was the most arduous of all these tasks. Crouching in the scorching sun and pulling out the endless weeds one by one, Shi said she sometimes felt "disheartened and discouraged".

When Shi returned to China in October 2008, she began to mull ways to adapt CSA to the Chinese situation.

"Land in China is managed on the basis of a household contract system. The produce from the land of one household can only support one or two families. Therefore, it would not do to experiment with CSA in individual households," Shi said.

"Besides, Chinese people don't tend to spend much on food consumption, but the low productivity of organic farming, especially in the beginning, typically leads to higher prices and could create sales problems."

She turned her attention to Dondon farm, a production, teaching and research base developed jointly by the Haidian district government, Renmin University and Beijing Hongda Borui Investment (Group) Co Ltd, that began operating in April 2008 but was floundering.

CSA first emerged in Germany, Switzerland and Japan in the early 1960s and took root in the United States in the 1980s.

Its defining characteristic is its cohesive community of consumers. Before each planting season, community members sign a contract with farmers, sharing benefits and risks with them, and paying in advance for



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Shi Yan tends crops in Beijing's Dondon Farm, China's first Community Supported Agricultural farm.

the produce of that season.

The advantages of CSA are manifold: Farmers are provided with adequate cash flow and relieved of sale pressures; community members are ensured healthy produce at a reasonable price; agriculture is sustained and the environment protected because little pollution is generated by organic food production.

Each farm has what are called "working share subscribers" and "non-working share subscribers".

Each working share subscriber is responsible for all the labor in his allocated 30-square-meter plot, for which he pays 1,000 yuan (\$146) in annual rent.

The seeds, organic fertilizers, farming tools, water and required technical support are all provided by the farm.

The non-working share subscribers enjoy a 20-week (between June and October) supply of organic vegetables of about 10 kilograms per week, for a capital input of 2,500 yuan (\$366). Whatever produce is left after meeting this is

made available to the working subscribers.

Lu Yarong, a working share subscriber, started farming in early May last year in her plot called *guanwo douyou* — literally "melon on the left and bean on the right" — and harvested the first batch of vegetables just two weeks later.

Lu, a lecturer in Agriculture Economics at Renmin University of China, pointed out that the CSA farm gives full play to the multiple functions of agriculture.

"It provides consumers with green and healthy vegetables and that's agriculture's economic function; it's a place for urban residents to relax and labor and that's agriculture's cultural function; it further offers children like my son the opportunity to get to know about farming and that's agriculture's educational function," Lu said.

Besides five managers and 12 farmers, Dondon Farm also has a dozen committed interns.

"The half-year intern program began in April. Some are college students interested in

agriculture, while some have resigned from their regular jobs to learn about organic agriculture," said Huang Zhiyou, executive manager of Dondon Farm.

Lei Peng, a 23-year-old post-graduate student, interns here during his summer vacation.

"I grew up in the countryside, so I have a strong emotional connection to the Earth and farming. What I've learned and done on the farm will help me in my further studies in Agriculture Economics," Lei said.

However, CSA in China is still at an experimental stage. Even at Dondon, there remain issues that require urgent attention.

Some people dismiss CSA, saying it is too small-scale to emerge as a viable alternative to mass food production.

But Shi and her fellow supporters point out that CSA gives growers security, ensures food safety and promotes fair trade between the two.

"Through CSA and Dondon Farm, we want to establish a harmonious relationship between man and man, and man and earth," she said.