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Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Melinda Herrold-Menzies has been engaged in research on communities, conservation, and development for over thirty years in places as different as the Central African Republic, southwestern China and the Russian Far East. She completed her Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley in Environmental Science, Policy and Management. She has taught in the Environmental Analysis Program at Pitzer College since 2003.

The Glorious Past and the Ecologically Modern:
A Guided Journey through Reconstructions of China in rural Shanxi

Melinda Herrold-Menzies

With just over a week in pre-Covid China, our interdisciplinary team of two professors of music (Dr. Hao Huang, Scripps, and Dr. Joti Rockwell, Pomona), a philosopher (Dr. Zhihe Wang, Visiting Scholar, Scripps), and a human ecologist (myself) undertook research at Yongji Puhun Farmers' Cooperative Association in Shanxi, China. Our project was to learn how "traditional" music and "folk" dance had been used to transform a loose configuration of farms into an integrated organic agricultural cooperative. This trip was second part of a multi-pronged case-study project looking at music, agriculture and sustainability in Indonesia and China. Although the presumed "folk" dancing to "traditional" music turned out to be contemporary dance to easy-listening Sino-pop, the goal to understand how shared musical experiences helped forge community bonds that facilitated the development of an integrated organic farm remained. In this article I will discuss what ended up being the two main research trajectories of our trip in Yuncheng, Shanxi and the rich range of potential research questions that students and faculty could pursue in this area in the future. I will not exhaustively discuss our preliminary findings here because there is much more research to be undertaken. The importance of this research trip was to build collaborative relationships with our colleagues in Shanxi so that we will be able to produce interdisciplinary research with multinational partners in the future.

Few research trips turn out as we plan. While our research team had intended to spend as much time as possible with the Farmers' Cooperative Association meeting with farmers and learning about the evolution of their organic enterprise, our hosts from the Association had their own mission to "enlighten" their foreign guests about China's glorious past and its modern, scientific, and ecological progress. Thus, our days became an immersive journey to an imagined (or reconstructed) world of Chinese imperial history, classic literature, archeological discoveries, engineering feats, and ancient musical traditions. During the afternoons and evenings, we were shown a vision of a modern rural China that is green, ecologically civilized and women oriented. Of course, we were not just passive recipients of the narratives shared with us, but I did find the narratives conveyed to be enormously interesting and worth further investigation.

Based upon the whirlwind journey of our research pod and the extra days of interviews I conducted after the rest of team traveled to Inner Mongolia, there are three broad research topics that could be explored from various disciplinary perspectives. These include the development, organization, and management of the organic agricultural enterprise of the Farmers' Cooperative Association and the role of women in moving the enterprise from conventional to organic production. I use the term "organic" for that is what the Farmers' Cooperative Association denotes as "ecological" (生态) farming. A second topic for research is the re-creation of historic, archeological, and literary sites for the re-enforcement of a certain Chinese history and Chinese identity. A third topic would be an examination of the development of Chinese domestic tourism, with the growth in agricultural tourism or in tourism to historic sites.

Much of the information I discuss below was provided to me during interviews with Association members or during guided tours. With regard to background reference materials, I have generally chosen articles authored or co-authored by Chinese scholars from English-language publications. This serves to make background literature more readily accessible to non-Chinese speakers or to those who are in the early stages of their language learning.

The Journey into a Reconstructed History

Our expedition in Shanxi began with unanticipated excursions. Our hosts from the Farmers' Cooperative Association guided our research team and later, just myself, through recently recreated cultural-historical landmarks of importance to the area of Shanxi where the organic farm was located, Yuncheng Prefectural City (运城市) in Yongji County (永济县). These were not sites that catered to international tourists, instead are reconstructed historical landmarks that focus on Chinese national identity, literary history, archeology, and Chinese engineering achievements, dating back to as early as the Northern and Southern Dynasties. The three recreated sites, Stork Tower (*guanque lou* 鹤雀楼), Pujin Ferry (*pujin du* 蒲津度), and Pujiu Temple (普救寺) are centered around the historical city of Puzhou (蒲州) on the Yellow River, a city that was once a key land crossing to the ancient Chinese capital of Chang'an (now Xi'an).

According to my guides, Stork Tower (*guanque lou* 鹤雀楼) was made famous in the poem "Ascending Stork Tower" (登鹤雀楼) by Tang dynasty poet Wang Zhihuan. It is often touted as one of the four great towers of ancient China, said to be of particular significance to Chinese visitors. My guides explained that the original Stork Tower was built in the 500s and probably destroyed in the 1200s. The local government began the reconstruction of the tower in 2000.

A centerpiece exhibition at Stork Tower is a reproduction of a set bronze chime bells (*bianzhong* 编钟) modeled after the 5th century BCE bronze bells excavated in 1978 in Hubei Province, where they are currently on display at the Provincial Museum in Wuhan (where I studied Chinese in 1993-95 and attended several *bianzhong* performances on the Museum's reproduction set). After we attended a performance on the *bianzhong* we were invited to examine the instruments ourselves. Professors Hao Huang and Joti Rockwell impressed the musicians with their musical theory questions and had the opportunity to try out playing the bells, as well as some stone chimes (*bianqing* 编磬) that were also on stage.

Another day was spent immersed in learning about imperial history and feats of Chinese engineering at the archeological museum of Pujin Ferry (*pujin du* 蒲津度). In the late 1980s a large iron ox was excavated in what is now believed to be the historic site of a well-known pontoon bridge that was anchored by large-scale iron oxen. The Tang Dynasty era site was recreated in the 2000s with a reconstruction of the pontoon bridge and the creation of underground grotto-like archeological exhibition.

Another whirlwind day included a tour of Tang Dynasty (618-907) Pujiu Temple (普救寺), which became famous when it was used as the setting for the Yuan Dynasty (1278-1368) era drama, *Romance of the Western Chamber* (西厢记). Pujiu Temple was first restored in 1986. In the 1990s the temple was open to tourists and has been regularly renovated. Temple areas are

described by their role in the play by Wang Shifu during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1386) (Tan, 2021). Part of the tourist experience was participating in reenactments of scenes from the drama where the promising young scholar falls in love with a minister's beautiful daughter whose parents do not approve of the marriage. As I was on my own by this time, my guides made extra efforts to narrate as many scenes from the story in as many reconstructed rooms as possible. Several guards at the site seemed delighted to be able to chime in with additional details and dramatic flourishes to explain the significance of this literary work in China for the pale foreigner who spoke Chinese. The site, though, is more than just the setting for the drama. It is also well-known for engineering and architectural features that generate unique echoes and distinctive frog-like sounds.

The Farmers' Cooperative Association

The original reason for coming to this part of China was to meet Ms. Zheng Bing and her colleagues at Yongji Puhuan Farmers' Cooperative Association, which had become an integrated organic farming enterprise, with handicrafts industries, that also provided community social services. Zheng Bing is credited with having created the Association in 2004. She shared with me her experiences as a teacher, her observations of farmers when she was working in a fertilizer store, and her general impressions of how life in her village in the late 1990s had been challenging, especially for young people. While men were working outside the village in construction or transport, women were left in the village to work in the fields, and young people were leaving the countryside in search of better economic opportunities. She shared the art and dance activities that she led as a way of connecting women who seemed isolated from one another. Once the idea for a Farmer's Cooperative Association came together, the women decided that the provision of community services was one their most important priorities, with elder care and early childhood education as their top two concerns. It was only later that they decided that food safety and the environment became an issue. In 2008, the community began to grow "organic" (*shengtai* 生态) agriculture.

We spent our afternoons and evenings on-site at the Farmers' Cooperative Association engaging in a variety of activities. We interviewed farmers, managers, bookkeepers, and truck drivers; discussed marketing and communications; picked nectarines; sampled Sichuan numbing spice; and learned how to make enzyme-based disinfectants from plant compost. We also met with seniors who demonstrated how they used organically grown plants to create dyes for their organically grown cotton. We observed them weaving this organic cotton into artisanal textiles for which they had orders from various parts of the country. The village leaders even showcased the musical talents of the village with a special performance of local musicians playing traditional musical instruments such as the *er hu* accompanied by a woman singing in the style of Chinese opera. Our research team also played music with an impressively talented village band and did aerobics with the women's daily "dancercise" troupe.

Other research excursions I had with Association members focused on ecological and agricultural issues including a field trip to a nearby wetland, a hike to a "thousand-year-old" tree, visits to inspect terraces and review agro-forestry plots, and interviews in the workshops of artisans who cultivated bamboo to make baskets that are marketed through the Association. Although I did not leave with a comprehensive view of how the many component parts of the

Association were linked, I came away with many follow-up questions. I was also able to spend evenings in the homes of cooperative members, chatting about their lives, livelihood concerns, farming goals, and environmental philosophies.

One of the newer initiatives that I was most intrigued with was in its early stages. The Association was developing a guest house to host urban tourists who would be interested in participating in the growing popularity of rural, agricultural tourism, referred to *nongjiale* (农家乐), literally “farmhouse joy.”

I was also struck by how similar this cooperative looked to pre-liberation collective farms with regard to the social safety-net structures. No one romantically reminisced about the days before de-collectivization, but it would be interesting to trace the intellectual origins of the community’s support for kindergartens, senior centers, senior employment, collective decision-making in the Association, and general risk-sharing.

Some Research Possibilities in a Post-Covid China

In general, the research possibilities around the organic enterprise are many, from the fields of environmental science and ecology (e.g., soil chemistry, entomology, biodiversity in intercropped systems) to the social sciences to the economics and accounting of the various components of the enterprise that come together. Since the 2000s there has been a growing market in China for “safe” food after several food safety scares. Canadian scholar Steffanie Scott, her research associates, and graduate students at the University of Waterloo have one of the more robust records of writing about this development of organic, ecological farming and markets for organic food (Scott, Si, Schumilas & Chen, 2018). Their works analyze successful bottom-up and top-down organic farm models, marketing strategies and networks, diverse land tenure patterns, and the role China’s government has played a role in promoting ecological/organic/sustainable agriculture and providing legislative and institutional support for cooperatives (Scott & Si, 2020; Scott et al, 2018; Chen, 2014) Additionally, work on specific organic cooperatives is also appearing (see Qiao et al., 2018). News sources also highlight the growth of organic agriculture in China (see Gao, 2015; Winglee, 2016).

While popular articles emphasize the leadership of women in organizing successful organic farms (see ChinaPictorial, 2014; Yu, 2015) and our interviewees often framed the Association’s work as empowering activities, I would suggest that the women’s activities still seemed successful within the traditional social constraints: making farmstead decisions and earning additional income while still conforming to gendered expectations. This is a hypothesis for further research. Are these female-led organic farms revolutionary enterprises overturning sexist stereotypes or do they fit in with current accepted roles for women staying close to the homestead and tending to the needs of the family. Dr. Li Zhang, a researcher at the University of California Irvine, is examining how women who have remained in villages during China’s economic expansion are finding their own ways to promote development through women-led farms (Zhang, 2019).

Another major topic would be the reconstruction of historic sites and Chinese identity. USC Professor of Art History, Dr. Sonya Lee, has just published a book about caves in China (Lee,

2022). While her book focuses on the sites, she also discusses the development of various forms of tourism around these sites and what these tourist sites are designed to achieve.

Related to this reconstruction of historic sites is the growth in domestic tourism in China, and rural tourism in particular. In China, domestic tourism is seen as an engine of economic growth with the central government's development and expansion of holiday seasons to promote domestic tourism (Wang, 1997; Shen, Wang, Ye & Liu, 2017). Rural tourism, particularly the growing *nongjiale* (农家乐) form of agricultural tourism (Gao, Huang, & Huang, 2009; Su, 2011; Awan, Saeed, & Zhuang, 2016; Cheng, Yang & Liu, 2020) is receiving increasing scholarly scrutiny. This *nongjiale* tourism, where urban dwellers descend upon rural areas to partake in a romantic experience of a mythic, carefree pastoral past is seen as both a driver of rural economic development as well as a source of displacement of rural landholders (Herrold-Menzies, under review).

Future Prospects

Although our research team did not have enough time to gain a more critical, in-depth perspective of the Farmers' Cooperative Association's history and operation, the possibilities for post-Covid research are many. Our hosts at the Puhuan Farmers' Cooperative Association are very supportive of foreign scholars and students of China who were interested in learning about Chinese history and the activities of the organic farming project. These projects could be embarked upon long after the EnviroLab Project has finished.

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