Learning by Doing:  
China’s Role in the Global Governance of Food Security

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Abstract

China, which faces severe resource and environmental constraints, has now reached a critical juncture in its capacity to maintain self-sufficiency in basic foods. Despite abundant grain reserves, an estimated 10 percent of the population is still undernourished. China’s food security concerns have a significant impact on the broader effort to eliminate world hunger and ensure a reliable supply and fair distribution of food on a global scale. In recent years, Beijing has encouraged the outsourcing of agricultural production overseas, expanded agricultural development projects, and increased its role in providing emergency food relief. Now an active, albeit reluctant, stakeholder in the global governance of food security, the question arises of how China’s emerging role is likely to shape the future direction of the international food regime. This paper outlines the major trends in food security governance at the global level, address the vexed question of what constitutes food security in the Chinese context, and assess the extent to which China’s current involvement in agricultural investments, food aid, and global policymaking is aligned with international norms and practices.
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The political challenge is straightforward: will the nations of the world cooperate to confront a crisis which is both self-evident and global in nature? Or will each nation or region or bloc see its special advantage as a weapon instead of as a contribution? Will we pool our strengths and progress together, or test our strengths and sink together?


Freedom from hunger is the most fundamental human right. Food security is the basis for economic development and social stability. It is also an important prerequisite for national independence and world peace.

Address by H.E. Hui Liangyu, Vice-Premier of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, World Food Summit, Rome, 16 November 2009.

On the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Vice-Premier Hui Liangyu gave an address at the World Food Summit in Rome in which he confidently announced that the Chinese people, who were once threatened by starvation, now lived in moderate prosperity. China had already met its targets for eradicating extreme poverty and hunger under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In his words, China had achieved nothing short of a miracle making “a great contribution to global food security, world peace and development.” Defining global responsibility in terms of national achievements is a recurrent theme in Chinese foreign policy discourse. As the world’s most populous nation, it is difficult to refute the logic that China can best serve the world by first serving the needs of its people. An inward looking global policy agenda, however, is difficult to sustain in the context of China’s rising international status and expanding investments overseas.

Addressing this new predicament is now a central feature of China’s involvement in the global governance of food security. Is China likely to strengthen its participation in the

1 I would like to thank the Research Center for Chinese Politics and Business, Indiana University, for supporting my fieldwork visit to Beijing in June 2012. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my research assistant Olivia Boyd.

2 Cited in Michael Wilson, “Dr Kissinger Urges Oil-Rich Nations to Save Third World,” Catholic Herald, 8 November 1974, archive.catholic herald.co.uk/article/8th-november-1974/1/dr-kissinger-urges-oil-rich-nations-to-save-third-.

broader effort to eliminate world hunger, or will an enduring commitment to national independence guide its approach?

Critically, ongoing crises in international food markets are occurring at a time when China’s continuing capacity to feed its growing population is under question. Despite abundant grain reserves, an estimated 10 per cent of the Chinese population is still undernourished, the rural labor force is declining, and agricultural productivity is increasingly vulnerable to climate change, natural disasters, and water shortages. No longer a traditional agrarian society, China has reached a critical juncture in its modernization drive, leading some analysts to predict that the centuries old norm of maintaining self-sufficiency in basic foods cannot prevail.

In recent years, Beijing has pursued a dual strategy of outsourcing agricultural production overseas while expanding agricultural assistance and emergency relief. For a brief period in 2005, China became the world’s third largest food donor, and later pledged US$70 million in grain aid to the drought stricken countries in the Horn of Africa, promoted in the official media as the largest contribution in the history of the People’s Republic.4 China’s new found status as a food donor coupled with its agricultural activities overseas raises an important question about its role in the global governance of food security.

To date, studies on China’s engagement in collective efforts to ensure a reliable supply and fair distribution of food across the globe have been largely one-dimensional. Scholars and policy analysts alike have tended to focus upon the way in which food security concerns at the domestic level are likely to affect world food markets. The broader question of how China is contributing to the global effort to combat world hunger has been largely overlooked. Our understanding of Chinese participation in the international food regime is

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partial at best. While an emerging literature exists on Chinese aid, especially in relation to investments and aid projects in Africa, few studies have investigated China’s contribution to international food aid.\(^5\)

This paper aims to address this lacuna by posing three fundamental questions: what is the relationship between China’s domestic food concerns and its international priorities? How does the Chinese approach towards food security differ from that of traditional donors? To what extent are Chinese values aligned with international norms and practices? A major challenge in assessing China’s contribution to global food security is that both Chinese policy and the governing norms and institutions at the global level are in a state of flux. I would argue, however, that it is precisely within this evolving realm of global governance where Chinese involvement is more visible, and arguably more likely to make a significant impact.

At a time of growing anxiety over China’s rising power and influence in the world, geopolitical factors are dominating debates over its role in global governance. Concerns are rising in Europe, the United States, and Australia that China may be seeking to undermine the current Western dominated international order by pursuing its own agenda that is counter to pre-existing liberal norms and practices.\(^6\) From a power-centric perspective, growing competition over food is just one more example of the struggle for supremacy in a world of scarcity. References to “food wars” and “food superpowers” have proliferated in both the Western and Chinese literature on global food security.\(^7\) The perennial question of whether


China can feed itself now coalesces with more recent concerns over “land grabbing” in Africa. Chinese scholars are more inclined to worry about the possible threat from toxic laden food imports, or the potential for grain wars with the United States. A major limitation with the realist worldview is that a monocausal explanation is inadequate for the purpose of assessing the complex motivations behind Chinese international behavior; it fails to engage with economic incentives, and ignores the potential for national and global interests to converge.

Alternative approaches that focus on international responsibility as the *sine qua non* of a rising power offer a more useful lens by highlighting both the cooperative and competitive elements of China’s emerging influence within the international system. International responsibility generally refers to enhanced participation in addressing global concerns—stakeholder participation and burden sharing in the delivery of global public goods. This, in turn, entails greater involvement in the negotiation of international norms, both in relation to traditional norms *vis-à-vis* the right to autonomous political status and evolving new norms such as the responsibility to protect, the non-use of military force to maintain border stability, and adherence to multilateral trade dispute mechanisms. While existing accounts of China’s international responsibility reveal complex patterns of engagement that vary across issue areas, a consensus appears to be emerging that China is an important, albeit reluctant, stakeholder in global governance, intent on biding its time for the

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purpose of focusing attention upon its domestic priorities. The concern emanating from liberal oriented scholars is that China needs to be a stronger rather than a weaker player on the international stage.

I argue in this paper that China’s involvement in the global governance of food security reveals as much about the changing dynamics of domestic food security concerns as it does about China’s international behavior. While some critics are eager to make a direct link between resource scarcity in China and high food prices on the international market, it is becoming more obvious over time that all states share responsibility for global food security regardless of domestic demand. The food crisis of 2007–08 revealed deep fissures in the international food regime. A critical point here is that emerging powers such as China, India, and Brazil hold the potential to overturn the inertia within the current regime and bring about reforms that are more in keeping with today’s world. A positive collective future lies in forging a new compact between traditional donors and their new counterparts from developing countries.

From this vantage point, China does need to be a stronger player in changing the rules of the game. The question is whether its current policies and practices are aligned with its declaratory reformist agenda. Similar to traditional donors, China pursues multiple objectives through its food aid activities. One important difference lies in the fact that it places a premium upon the idea of gaining experience before agreeing to a particular set of principles—learning by doing rather than learning by principle. Strong Chinese preferences for food sovereignty, recipient driven aid, and win–win cooperation present opportunities and challenges for the international food regime. They may help to facilitate consent, but it is

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difficult to see how such an approach can strengthen global governance in the absence of binding commitments.

In the following sections of this paper, I first address the current global food crisis followed by a discussion of the international food regime. Attention then turns to China and the complex question of whether it can feed its own population while simultaneously contributing to feeding the world. In the final section of the paper I examine China’s recent transition from food recipient to food donor considering both its emergency relief activities and agricultural development assistance, especially in Africa. The paper concludes with a discussion of China’s role in changing the rules and norms of international conduct.

From stability to crisis: Food as a source of insecurity in the twenty-first century

The global food crisis in 2007–08 marked a watershed in the history of the world food system. Following three decades of relatively cheap food and reliance upon imports as a guarantee of national security, high and volatile food prices, combined with tight supplies, triggered major shortfalls leading to a crisis in world food markets.\textsuperscript{10} The world food price index administered by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) rose 45 percent in just nine months. By March 2008, average wheat prices had risen 130 percent compared to the same month in 2007, soy prices were over 80 percent higher, and rice and maize prices rose 74 percent and 31 percent respectively.\textsuperscript{11} This shock to international food markets had a regressive impact on the world’s poor that spend a high percentage of their household income


\textsuperscript{11} Eric Halt-Giménez and Loren Peabody, “From Food Rebellions to Food Sovereignty: Urgent Call to Fix a Broken Food System,” \textit{Food First Backgrounder} (Oakland, CA: Institute for Food and Development Policy, May 2008).
on food. Statistics provided by the Global Hunger Index reveal an upward trend in the number of people facing chronic hunger, surpassing a threshold of one billion in 2009. The political ramifications were evident in the escalating food riots that took place across many countries. While high food prices were not the only causal factor behind the revolutions that swept North Africa and the Middle East in 2010, they did have a multiplier effect by further fueling grievances. In the case of Haiti, expensive food had an even more direct effect, leading to the dismissal of Prime Minister Jacques-Édouard Alexis.

At the time, a commonly held assumption was that higher food prices were largely a consequence of rising incomes in Asia and the transition to a high protein diet. The George W. Bush administration singled out higher demand from India and China as a key causal factor driving global food insecurity. However, subsequent studies have challenged this simple neo-Malthusian explanation of population size outstripping supply. A 2010 report published by the International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington, DC revealed that prior to the crisis, cereal imports were higher in Mexico, the European Union, the Middle East, and North Africa than in Asia. The two highest populated countries in the world—China and India—had sufficient stocks to absorb the spike in food prices. At the global level, the FAO reported record grain harvests in 2007, reinforcing a widely held view amongst agricultural experts that the world has enough food, but it is no longer affordable for a growing proportion of the world’s population. In the prescient words of the Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP), Josette Sheera, “there is food on the shelves, but people are priced out of the market.”

In essence, the first global food crisis of the twenty-first century was driven by multiple factors including rising energy prices and the consequent shift towards biofuel

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production, the global financial crisis and depreciation of the US dollar, “beggar thy neighbor” restrictions on exports, and natural disasters, especially prolonged drought in major exporting countries. As in the case of the global food crisis in the early 1970s, rising energy and food prices were closely interlinked. The rapid rise in biofuel production to reduce dependence on Arab oil stimulated financial speculation in grain markets that, in turn, led to a 30 percent increase in grain prices.\textsuperscript{15} It is estimated that approximately one-third of corn produced in the United States is now used to produce ethanol, and half of the vegetable oils in the European Union are used to produce biodiesel. Export restrictions by producers further exacerbated the crisis, especially in relation to escalating rice prices on account of the low level of international rice trade.\textsuperscript{16}

While price fluctuations are a common phenomenon in agricultural markets, many experts predict that we have entered a new era of food insecurity marked by persistent volatile food prices. Following a downward trend in late 2009, agricultural commodity prices rose again sharply in the second half of 2010 exacerbated by the Russian ban on exports and a severe drought in China’s northern provinces where an estimated 2.6 million people and 2.8 million livestock faced severe water shortages.\textsuperscript{17}

At the time of writing, the United States was experiencing its worst drought since 1956. As the world’s largest supplier of corn, wheat, and soybeans (constituting almost 50 percent of world exports), dramatic changes in agricultural production in the United States has a significant impact on international markets. All three commodities reached record high prices on the Chicago stock exchange in July 2012 (corn US$8.07 bushel, wheat $9.35

\textsuperscript{17} Howard Schneider, “China Drought Could Pressure Wheat Prices,” Washington Post, 8 February 2011.
bushel, and soybeans US$17.49). Now a net importer of soybeans, China is likely to be hardest hit by price inflation.

Low levels of investment in agricultural research and development, soil degradation, natural disasters, and climate change constitute longer-term drivers of food insecurity. Although their immediate effects on price volatility remain a matter of conjecture, these financial and ecological factors are likely to have a serious negative impact upon the capacity of the poorer regions of the world to maintain adequate food supplies, placing further pressure upon international humanitarian relief. Since 2000, emergency relief aid has accounted for an increasing proportion of overall food aid. And food still remains the largest component of humanitarian aid contributions under the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund.

In today’s world, the global food challenge entails stabilizing markets as well as ensuring adequate, safe, and reliable food to the world’s most vulnerable communities. High prices are likely to continue in the near future placing a spotlight on the need for a stronger regulatory framework to mitigate the negative effects. Markets matter because countries that fail to achieve food sufficiency have only two options: to rely upon food aid, or to buy food from the international market. If donors provide direct support to countries in need via cash transfers, they still have to purchase food on the commercial international market. Price volatility also affects the ability of international food agencies to deliver emergency relief.

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Consequently, there now exist strong economic and humanitarian imperatives for reforming the international food regime to align with contemporary realities. Following four decades of relative food stability, existing institutions are ill equipped to deal with the current crisis. Old legacies associated with the redistribution of grain surpluses to food deficient regions of the world continue to influence governing mechanisms. Moreover, the rigid policy divide between pro-trade protagonists and supporters of state regulation acts as a constraint upon collective action. Despite these problems, reforms are underway and their success will depend upon the potential to forge a new compact between traditional donors and new donors such as the People’s Republic of China.

**Redesigning food security governance**

Historically, the international food regime has its origins in the aftermath of the First World War when the United States initiated major food operations for the purpose of encouraging political stability. President Herbert Hoover played a major role in coordinating efforts across private and publicly funded agencies to ensure the disbursement of surplus cheap food to those most in need. Desperate food shortages in Europe after the Second World War meant that at least 25 percent of the total aid package of US$13.5 billion under the Marshall Plan was committed “to food, feed, and fertilizer.”

As the world’s largest food donor, the United States has played a leading role in shaping multilateral efforts to combat world hunger. American support was important in the establishment of the FAO in 1945, and the WFP created in 1963. In the case of the latter, food assistance activities had to conform to America’s Public Law 480, also known as the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act, enacted by Congress in 1954, that

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22 Ibid., p. 20.
provided the legal basis for distributing food surpluses to foreign countries.\textsuperscript{23} This legacy now continues under the guise of “food for peace” programmes that aim to enhance “the food security of the developing world through the use of agricultural commodities.”\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Old legacies, new norms}

The global food crisis in the early 1970s, caused by rising oil prices, crop failures, and the high costs of fertilizers, set a new precedent for multilateral cooperation. At the first World Food Conference in 1974, heads of states adopted the Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition which recognized the inalienable right of “every man, woman and child … to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop their physical and mental faculties.”\textsuperscript{25} The Conference also endorsed the establishment of the International Fund for Agricultural Development to enhance production in food-deficit countries, and the creation of a 36-member ministerial level World Food Council that was later disbanded in 1992.\textsuperscript{26}

Over the past four decades, the international food regime has evolved incrementally, driven by a constant struggle to balance the trade, humanitarian, and strategic interests of donors with the broader imperative of solving world hunger. Attempts to establish a mechanism for regulating international trade to deal with food surpluses have been constantly thwarted by exporter countries concerned about interference in trade relations; and efforts to

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 28.
set up international food reserves have been stymied by disagreements over the possible
distorting effects of large-scale buffer stocks on price movements. Despite the strong
reputation of the WFP as the only organization in the world capable of transporting large
quantities of emergency food across the globe, its international reserve set up in the 1970s
continues to suffer from the weaknesses of tied contributions and fluctuating commitments.27

That said, the normative boundaries of the food aid regime have shifted considerably
over the past half-century and more, especially in relation to decoupling food aid from
surpluses and addressing the longer-term drivers of hunger and malnutrition. Rather than
simply focusing upon short-term donor commitments aimed at directly feeding the world’s
hungry, new principles have surfaced that are more recipient driven. Avoiding the
disincentive effects of food aid upon agricultural development and recognizing the complex
structural drivers of malnutrition are now key principles underpinning collective efforts to
deal with hunger and chronic malnutrition.28

At the World Food Summit in 1996, food security was elevated onto the global
policymaking agenda for the first time. Commonly understood as existing “when all people at
all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet
their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life,” food security has now
inspired collective action across a diversity of international institutions.29 Yet, the legacy of
food as a tool of foreign policy remains, leading to protracted debates over what constitutes
responsible food aid. Is food aid contributing to underinvestment in the agricultural sector

Macmillan, 2007). The World Food crisis of 1973–74 helped to facilitate a broader consensus
over the need for an International Emergency Food Reserve administered by the WFP and
based upon minimum annual commitments of 500,000 tonnes *grain*.  
28 Raymond F. Hopkins, “Reform in the International Food Aid Regime: The Role of
Consultation on Trade and Food Security: Conceptualizing the Linkages, Rome, 11–12 July
and a decline in food production in developing countries? Should food be sourced from the host country or from a location closer to those most in need? How much supervision is required in the recipient country? These are all critical questions that have yet to be fully answered by the donor community.

From the US perspective, the Food for Peace Act effective in 2008 reaffirms the American commitment to food aid. Reflecting the vision advocated by the John F. Kennedy administration in the 1960s, the emphasis is less on distributing US surpluses, and more on the multilateral objective of sharing the burden of responsibility for world hunger and promoting equitable and sustainable development. The new legislation also endorses a normative position that food should be used for the purpose of “encouraging the development of private enterprise and democratic participation.” As of 2010, the United States had “food for peace” programmes in place in 53 countries, including North Korea. The recent decision to cut food aid to North Korea following its failed rocket launch in April 2012 has reignited debates over the politicization of emergency aid, especially in light of recent progress made by the WFP in gaining access to all parts of the food distribution chain, including in remote areas.

While the importance of access, monitoring, and transparency are now widely recognized as core imperatives promoting the effective delivery of emergency food aid, new donors such as China, Russia, and India have yet to be socialized into evolving international

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30 The Food for Peace Act stipulates that “it is the policy of the United States to use its abundant agricultural productivity to promote the foreign policy of the United States by enhancing the food security of the developing world through the use of agricultural commodities and local currencies accruing under this act to (1) combat world hunger and malnutrition and their causes; (2) promote broad-based, equitable, and sustainable development, including agricultural development; (3) expand international trade; (4) foster and encourage the development of private enterprise and democratic participation in developing countries; and (5) prevent conflicts.”
31 World Food Programme, “Korea, Democratic People’s Republic (DPRK),”
practice. The Chinese “no strings” attached approach is clearly at variance with the United Nations “no access, no food” principle intended to enforce stricter government compliance over reaching those most in need. A lack of agreement over how food should be distributed is also acting as a constraint on aid delivery. Under current US international food aid regulations, food must be shipped from the host country rather than sourced nearer the recipient state. The problems associated with this approach such as the high degree of waste, long lead times in deliveries, and possible distorting effects upon local markets are well-known. A new Senate proposal to create a permanent authority to supervise local procurement is a positive step in the direction of greater flexibility that, in turn, is likely to enhance aid effectiveness.32

**Institutional complexity**

Against the backdrop of policy debates over responsible food aid, the international food regime itself is in the process of transition. The sharp increase in food prices in 2007–08 led to a host of declaratory pledges to enhance capacity to address world hunger: at the Group of Eight (G8) Summit in 2009, leaders pledged US$22 billion over three years to support sustainable agricultural development (as of May 2011 only 22 percent of this commitment had been disbursed). The funding will be held in a multi-donor trust fund at the World Bank. The crisis also placed a spotlight on the need for reform of the FAO Committee on World Food Security (CFS) established in 1974 following the World Food Conference. Now encompassing a wider group of stakeholders, the current vision is to develop a global strategic framework for food security and nutrition and monitor actions towards reducing hunger. China has been elected onto the 12-member bureau of the CFS for 2012–2013. Two Chinese experts, Professor Tang Huajun, Vice-President of the Chinese Academy of

Agricultural Sciences, and Professor Zurong Cai, Nanjing Normal University, are members of the new High Level Panel of Experts established to inform the committee of emerging trends.

Reforms are also underway to improve United Nations (UN) systemwide coherence on food security. As set out in the UN Secretary General’s Zero Hunger Campaign launched at Rio+20, the five objectives of a coherent UN systemwide approach towards food and nutrition security include: (1) achieving 100 percent access to adequate food all year around, (2) ending malnutrition in pregnancy and early childhood, (3) making all food systems sustainable, (4) increasing growth in productivity and incomes of smallholders, especially women, and (5) achieving a zero rate of food waste.33

There is still a need to tackle major problems relating to international trade such as reducing competition between food and fuel, promoting open agricultural trade, and strengthening the regulation of food reserves in order to respond to emergencies. In these key areas, the Group of Twenty (G20) has taken a leading role. Under the auspices of this informal grouping of finance ministers and Central Bank governors, concrete initiatives are underway to reinforce transparency in agricultural markets though the establishment of an agricultural market information system; to promote the exemption of export restrictions on emergency aid; and to create a regional pilot programme for low-income and food deficit countries in West Africa in collaboration with the Economic Community of West African States.34

Given the disagreement amongst member countries over the possible distorting effects of large-scale buffer stocks on offsetting price movements, the regional reserve is

intended for emergency response purposes only, based upon market principles. While the operational arrangements have yet to be confirmed, a recent feasibility study proposed that the system should operate on a cost recovery basis with food procured from local and regional markets and distributed via national safety nets. Local food preferences, the market accessibility of food stocks, and a needs-based assessment linked to an early warning system are all factors now under consideration.

Regional initiatives, including ASEAN Plus Three (Association of Southeast Asian Nations Plus Japan, South Korea, and China) Emergency Rice Reserve (APTE RR) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Food Bank represent alternative experiments for sharing food in times of shortage and emergencies. In the case of the former, the agricultural ministers of the 13 member states recently signed an agreement to upgrade an earlier pilot project to a permanent mechanism for responding to price volatility and natural disasters in Asia. Given that two-thirds of the world’s rice is produced in East Asia and intra-regional rice trade only makes up 5 to 6 percent of the world market, there exists a strong incentive for these countries to use rice as the test case for strengthening regional cooperation. Under the agreement, member states will stockpile 787,000 tons of rice with the highest donation (300,000 tons) from China that currently holds around 42 percent of the world’s rice reserves. Contributions to a US$4 million endowment fund are divided according to financial capacity with China, Japan, and Korea contributing US$1 million each. Of interest to the focus of this paper is the fact that China is a strong supporter of food

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35 I am grateful to Anthea Webb, former Director of the World Food Programme in Beijing for clarifying this point.
37 Contributions from member states are given according to financial capacity as follows: Japan 250,000 tons, South Korea 150,000 tons, and ASEAN 87,000 tons.
sovereignty, firmly on the side of those advocating for the establishment of international strategic reserves.

The SAARC Food Bank (with a total reserve of 241,580 tons of wheat and rice) gained approval from the heads of states at the Summit Meeting in 2007. It aims to “strengthen regional self-reliance in food security to combat the adverse effects of natural and man made calamities.”39 But, as in the case of other international reserves, actual implementation has been slow. Operational guidelines for maintaining the quality of the reserve and the withdrawal of food grains are still under discussion.

It is within this evolving institutional context that China’s role in responding to the global challenge of food security is so critically important. Now a major player in informal institutional settings such as the G20, BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), and ASEAN Plus Three, Chinese influence is more visible, creating greater opportunities to shape the rules of international conduct. As a stakeholder in global governance, will China play a reforming role, or is it more likely to act as a constraint upon collective action to safeguard its own interests?

Can China feed itself and help to feed the world? Linking domestic concerns with international priorities

For many Chinese, the real economic miracle achieved over the past three decades of “opening and reform” is the fact that China has managed to feed 21 percent of the world’s population on only 9 percent of the world’s arable land. Critically important to political, social, and economic stability, 自给自足 (self-sufficiency) in food has been a central priority for Chinese officials and strategists for centuries. Dynasties have risen and fallen on the basis

of their capacity to ensure sufficient food for a growing population.\textsuperscript{40} In the words of the well-known military strategist, Cao Cao, in the era of the Three Kingdoms (220–280), “the sufficiency of food is the basis of state power.”\textsuperscript{41} Above all, as a predominantly agrarian society, “the fear of a land in perpetual hunger” is deeply ingrained in the cultural mindset.\textsuperscript{42}

In the contemporary era, concerns over the risk that food will be used as a foreign policy tool to undermine China’s modernization drive continue to influence how food security is both understood and acted upon. The experience of economic sanctions during the Cold War lives on in the memory of policymakers in Beijing, despite the fact that they allegedly had a minimal impact.\textsuperscript{43} In contrast to the Soviet Union, China was not the target of an explicit food embargo.\textsuperscript{44} More recently, as a reminder of the way in which geopolitical concerns are deeply enmeshed in the struggle to address world hunger, the debate over possible “grain wars” with the United States has led many Chinese commentators to argue that self-sufficiency should never be abandoned, and that “winning the food war, is more important than winning the oil war.”\textsuperscript{45}


\textsuperscript{42} I have borrowed this phrase from Professor Wen Tiejun, a leading agricultural expert, in Wen Tiejun, Lau Kinchi, Ceng Cunwang, He Huili, and Qiu Jiasheng, “Ecological Civilization, Indigenous Culture, and Rural Reconstruction in China,” \textit{Monthly Review} vol.63, issue 9, February: 29–35.

\textsuperscript{43} I am grateful to Professor Zha Daojiong for drawing my attention to this point at a workshop on food security at Peking University on 1 June 2012. For an extended discussion of the impact of trade embargoes upon China, see Yongzheng Yang, “Are Food Embargoes a Real Threat to China?” Asia Pacific School of Economics and Management Working Paper 99-2 (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 1999).


\textsuperscript{45} Bing Heng, “To Win the ‘Food War’ We Must Be Self-Sufficient in Fertiliser” [huafei zigei cai neng daying ‘liangshi zhanzheng’] 化肥自给才能打赢“粮食战争”, \textit{China Agricultural Resources} 9 (2008): 40.
In part, growing anxiety over food security has been stimulated by the international discourse on the threat emanating from China’s soaring demand for food triggering huge rises in world food prices. Although Lester Brown’s provocative 1995 report *Who Will Feed China? Wake-Up Call for a Small Planet* has been criticized on grounds of the validity of the data, at the time it struck a raw nerve amongst leaders in Beijing. The seductiveness of his thesis lives on today in the popular media with recent alarmist predictions that the United States as “the world’s breadbasket for more than half a century … will probably have to share [its] harvest with the Chinese, no matter how much that raises our prices.”

The Chinese interpretation of food security is also influenced by concerns over food safety. The melamine scandal of 2009, when it was discovered that a plastic, melamine, had been added to milk to increase its protein content causing six babies to die and over 300,000 people to become sick, has heightened public awareness over food contamination. Released in the aftermath of the scandal, the Chinese government’s “Food Safety Law” outlines a number of regulations, punishments, and procedures for dealing with food that has been tainted with heavy metals and other forms of environmental pollution. In some cases, agricultural produce grown in polluted water and soil has led to the rise of “cancer villages.” Urban areas are equally at risk. According to the grassroots website, Throw It Out


the Window, which independently collects information from the Chinese media on unsafe food, higher-income areas which are generally perceived to be more food secure such as Beijing, Guangdong, and Zhejiang, have the highest incidence of unsafe food.\textsuperscript{51}

For policymakers in Beijing, self-reliance remains the cornerstone of food security; relying on international markets is not seen to be a viable option.\textsuperscript{52} Given the current deadlock at the Doha round of World Trade Organization trade negotiations, and the distorting effects of heavily subsidized agriculture in Europe and the United States, there is limited support within China to move towards a market-based food economy. Price volatility in recent years has further strengthened the government’s resolve to support domestic production and maintain near self-sufficiency in basic foods—rice, wheat, and corn. Currently, China imports roughly 1 percent of its total grain demand, which amounts to 2 percent of global grain production. At the height of the food crisis in 2008, low levels of import-dependence meant that China was essentially shielded from the destabilizing effects of market fluctuations. In the words of the National Development and Reform Commission report on enhancing food security, “the world food market caught a cold, but China did not even sneeze.”\textsuperscript{53} A domestically driven agenda is also motivated by concerns that exposure to price volatility in international markets could lead to social unrest and political instability. Moreover, policymakers are sensitive to accusations that the Chinese food crisis poses a threat to global food security.\textsuperscript{54}

To meet the target of 95 percent self-sufficiency in grain consumption, China has the world’s largest grain reserves (70 percent composed of wheat or rice) located at the central,\

\textsuperscript{51} Throw It Out the Window, A Map Of China’s Food Safety Problem, 2012, www.zccw.info/.

\textsuperscript{52} National Development and Reform Commission, Enhancing China’s Food Security Must Be Built Upon Domestic Strategy [liangshi anquanxing qianghua lizu guonei zhanglue 粮食安全形强化立足国内略] (Beijing: National Development and Reform Commission, 2008).

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
provincial, and local levels. According to official estimates, in 2007 grain storage capacity reached between 150 and 200 million tonnes, or roughly 30 to 40 percent of total grain production for that year (501,500,000 tonnes). Currently China’s national grain reserves are estimated to be over 200 million tonnes. Importantly, management of the reserves is not simply by central fiat. Inter-provincial cooperation is a critical factor in ensuring a stable balance between demand and supply. For example, Guangdong Province has for many years imported rice from Southeast Asia. The 2008 crisis in Thailand led to a freeze on rice exports and the southern neighboring province of Guangxi stepped in to meet demand. To support a population of 150 million, in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the local government allocates 150 kilograms (kgs) of basic grains per person (150 kgs x 52 million) to be placed in reserves, which is equal to approximately 10 percent of overall production. Guangxi has also set up reserves in Henan Province. International emergency food aid is taken from China’s largest grain reserves in Heilongjiang, Henan, and Shandong.

Staying above the red line

At a superficial level, a national level analysis of food productivity based upon agricultural production and trade statistics reveals that China is food secure. Between 1978 and 2010, per

56 National Development and Reform Commission, Enhancing China’s Food Security.
58 Interview, Vice-Governor of Guangxi, Nanning, 6 June 2012.
capita grain supply increased by 409 kg of grain per capita per annum. The highest per capita production growth rates were in protein and fat-rich food groups, such as meat, dairy, oil, and fish (see Figure 1). For the past decade, grain imports have been kept at around 5 percent of total grain supply. But imports have sometimes fluctuated, as in the case of large-scale purchases of wheat in 2004 to supplement dwindling stocks. More recently, China has enjoyed eight consecutive years of bumper harvests of over 500 million tons of grain per year, largely on account of technological advances in high-yielding hybrid crop strains.

To maintain basic self-sufficiency, agricultural experts estimate that China will need a production capacity of around 500 million tonnes of grain increasing to a minimum of 580 million tonnes by 2020. Strategic crops are only intended to meet demand for the human population. Hence, China is not food secure if taking into account the needs of grain-fed livestock. Moreover, those crops that are no longer considered to be of strategic importance rely more on the international market. For example, in the case of soybeans, China is already a net importer. It imported 49.4 million tonnes of soybeans in 2010 alone. Reliance on the international market is likely to continue given that farmers living in the northeast of China are no longer willing to plant soybeans because they cannot compete with the low prices of imports.

64 Interview, He Wenping, Institute of West Asian and African Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 5 June 2012.
Taking a longer-term perspective, China is increasingly food insecure. National indicators that measure the key sources of agricultural production—land, water, and labor—suggest that the task of sustaining self-sufficiency in the future faces enormous challenges. For planning purposes, 1.8 million mu (120 million hectares) of arable land represents the critical “red line” below which producing enough food to meet the demands of a rising population will not be possible.\(^6\) China’s per capita arable land constitutes only 40 percent of the world average, and more worryingly it is in a rapid state of decline. Between 1996 and 2007 the total area of arable land declined almost 7 percent from 1.951 million mu (130

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million hectares) to 1.826 million mu (121.7 million hectares).\textsuperscript{66} Taking into account population growth of roughly 7.3 percent during the same time period, arable land per capita declined by approximately 14 percent.\textsuperscript{67} As a consequence of natural disasters, urbanization, severe ecological degradation, and environmental pollution, around two-thirds of available land in China is now classified as either barren or with low agricultural potential.\textsuperscript{68}

Water scarcity made worse by the effects of climate change, further constrains China’s capacity to increase agricultural productivity. Average per capita water resources in China are only 28 percent of the global average, and every year water supply to the agricultural sector falls short of roughly 20 million cubic meters.\textsuperscript{69} Moreover, in the north of China, where up to 43 percent of total grain is produced, rainfall has steadily declined and groundwater levels have fallen by between two and five meters over the past decade. The Chinese government predicts that water scarcity in the north will worsen in the future as the effects of climate change become more pronounced. According to the Ministry of Water Resources, in 2010, drought led to grain losses of around 16.8 billion kgs (equivalent to 3 percent of total annual grain output).\textsuperscript{70}

The so-called hollowing-out of the rural labor force is a third major concern in ensuring long-term food availability. Since “reform and opening,” over half of China’s rural labor force has migrated to urban areas in search of better employment. The rural labor force has aged more rapidly over time because the majority of migrant workers are young. In some regions, it has been reported that around 80 percent of farmers are between 50 to 70 years

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Government of the People’s Republic of China, \textit{Outline of China’s Medium- to Long-Term Food Security Plan (2008–2020)}.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} Drought ‘poses threat’ to grain security, \textit{China Daily}, 18 February 2011.
Lower returns on traditional crops combined with the increasing costs of diesel fuel, chemical fertilisers, and pesticides, means that small-holder Chinese farmers are increasingly turning to growing single crop rice or non-food cash crops. The rural exodus is no longer contained within Chinese borders. Across the globe, Chinese farmers are seeking new opportunities to improve their livelihoods in distant lands.

**Outsourcing the farm**

In response to the multiple challenges of declining arable land, ecological degradation, climate change, and demographic and social changes in rural China, the government is pursuing a new strategy of outsourcing agricultural production overseas. Within the broader framework of the “going out” strategy (走出去), initiated in the late 1990s to promote the internationalization of Chinese state-owned enterprises, investing in agriculture alongside energy resources acts as a hedge against future increases in commodity prices. Agricultural investments have risen sharply in recent years, but we still have limited understanding of the nature and scope of the commercial activities involved.

Globally, statistics on Chinese agricultural investments overseas are notoriously unreliable. Unconfirmed business reports estimate that around 40 agribusinesses are now involved in farming overseas, pursuing different business models in accordance with local regulations. For example, in Venezuela and Zimbabwe, the state-owned Heilongjiang Beidahuang Nongken Group provides labor and machinery in exchange for 20 percent of the harvest, while it leases land for soybean cultivation in Argentina and Brazil. Often planned investments do not eventuate on account of regulatory restrictions. In an effort to protect valuable resources, land-rich countries are increasingly tightening supervision over foreign

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investment: Brazil has introduced new rules prohibiting foreign companies from owning more than 5,000 hectares of farmland, and both New Zealand and Australia are currently reviewing their procedures for approving land sales.73

In the case of Africa, the new strategy of outsourcing the farm74 has reignited debates over China’s perceived neo-colonial ambition with many critics suggesting that it is now “grabbing land” to produce food to ship home; an accusation that is refuted by the Ministry of Agriculture in Beijing on the grounds that such a scheme would be “ridiculously expensive” to implement. Indeed, evidence, as yet, does not suggest that this is actually happening in practice. While Chinese corporations are producing food in neighboring countries for the domestic market, one example being the 400,000 hectare farm on the China–Russia border jointly owned by China’s Huaxin Group and Russia’s Armada software company, the situation is different on the African continent where commercial activities are aimed at producing food to meet local needs, or to sell on the international market.75 From a food security perspective, the logic underpinning the new strategy is more strategic. As one official from the Ministry of Agriculture aptly remarked: “if African states can grow more food themselves, they will be less reliant upon the international market, creating more space for China to import food.”76

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73 In March 2012, the New Zealand High Court intervened to overturn a decision by the Overseas Investment Office to sell 16 farms (8,000 hectares) in the North Island to China’s Shanghai Pengxin Group (Economic Observer, 14 March 2012), and at the time of writing a bid by the Zhongfu Shenghua Corporation to develop 14,000 hectares of land in the Kimberley in Western Australia to grow sugar cane for ethanol was arousing considerable public debate.


75 Cui Haipei, “Russia Land Lease Likely to Draw Foreign Investors,” Heilongjiang, China Daily, 16 March 2012.

76 Interview, Foreign Economic Division of the Sino-African and South–South Cooperation, Ministry of Agriculture, Beijing, 2 June 2012.
From recipient to stakeholder in global food aid

The shift towards agricultural production overseas is taking place at the same time as a renewed effort to promote agricultural assistance in developing countries. Commercially driven in part, Chinese agricultural assistance is also a reflection of a genuine commitment to correct the mistakes of the past and ensure that developing countries benefit from the transfer of funds and technological know-how. The Chinese approach is pioneering in many respects. This is not to suggest that it is without problems. As will become clear in the discussion that follows, officials and experts involved in implementing agricultural development projects are aware of the challenges involved. An important positive characteristic of Chinese development aid is the emphasis that is placed upon learning from experience.

In 2005, China officially made the transition from food recipient to food donor, thus paving the way for its integration into the international food regime. For a brief period, following a donation of 577,000 tonnes of grain to the WFP, China earned the prestigious title of the world’s third largest food donor. Four years later, it was also the first country to join the new strategic alliance for South–South Cooperation led by FAO, donating US$30 million to a trust fund to support agricultural productivity in developing countries in accordance with the MDGs. Over a five-year period (2008–2013), the Chinese government pledged to increase the number of agro-technological demonstration centers in developing countries to 30, dispatch 1,000 agricultural experts, and provide training opportunities for at least 3,000 agricultural experts within China.77

The historic transition from food recipient to food donor in 2005 was partly in response to international pressure. It was becoming more difficult to refuse requests from the WFP in light of the fact that many other developing countries, including India, Brazil, and

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77 Interview, Resident Representative, FAO, Beijing, 5 June 2012.
South Africa, were already making sizable donations.\textsuperscript{78} At the time, China was also enjoying a grain surplus. The upward trend in food availability meant that it did not face difficult trade-offs over domestic supply. Finally, the decline in agricultural investment from Western donors, especially in the wake of the global economic crisis, created a strategic opportunity for China to play a stronger role in global food security.

To date, China’s emergency food aid has been heavily weighted towards North Korea. Between 2000 and 2010, China provided a cumulative total of 2,467,782 metric tonnes of food aid, 98 percent of which was directed to North Korea, only very small amounts were given to other countries before 2000—Zimbabwe, Mongolia, and Mozambique received the largest deliveries in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{79} From a global perspective, China is now North Korea’s top food donor, providing around 37 percent of total aid (2000–2010) compared with 23 percent from the United States (see Figure 2). As discussed earlier, the sheer volume of Chinese food aid (without strings attached) has the potential to undermine international efforts to enforce stricter government compliance over granting access to those most in need.

On a more positive note, Chinese emergency aid traditionally has been provided on a bilateral basis, with limited triangular purchases that allow for grain to be purchased in third countries. This has now changed. Chinese agencies are working in partnership with the WFP, buying food locally and hiring local support to facilitate distribution. Such an approach has been used to provide food aid to Zimbabwe and Lesotho.\textsuperscript{80}


\textsuperscript{79} Statistical data on Chinese food aid is compiled from the International Food Aid Information System (INTERFAIS), World Food Programme.

\textsuperscript{80} Interview, He Wenping, Institute of West Asian and African Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 5 June 2012.
Figure 2: Total Emergency Food Aid to North Korea 2000–2010

Source: Compiled by the author from the International Food Aid Information System (INTERFAIS), World Food Programme, 2011.

Chinese agricultural assistance is more widely dispersed across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Over a ten-year period (2000–2010), the neighboring country of Nepal received the largest amount (4,198 metric tonnes) out of a cumulative total of 27,421 metric tonnes (see Figure 3). Administrative responsibility for implementing agricultural aid projects lies with the Ministry of Commerce in conjunction with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The key stated aims of Chinese agricultural projects are threefold: to reduce poverty; to increase agricultural productivity (yield per hectare); and to build capacity over time.
Figure 3: Chinese Agricultural Development Assistance 2000–2010 (in metric tonnes)

Source: Compiled by the author from the International Food Aid Information System (INTERFAIS), World Food Programme.

Note: Food aid deliveries are targeted to support agricultural, development, and nutritional projects. Grain can be sold on the open market, provided on a grant basis, or channeled through multilateral projects.

The Chinese approach towards agricultural development assistance is firmly based upon the idea of mutual reciprocity. In official reports, a strong emphasis is placed upon exporting the benefits of the Chinese development experience. Highlighting the critical importance of agricultural reform in the early stages of China’s “reform and opening,” Chinese officials stress the longer-term value of increasing productivity growth in
smallholder agriculture and meeting basic needs on the basis of limited foreign exchange. Creating larger economies of scale to improve efficiencies in agricultural production, and investing in complementary value-added industries related to agriculture are seen as critical components of a broader agricultural investment strategy.

In the academic discourse, the value of Chinese agricultural assistance has been cast in even broader terms with references to legitimacy concerns and image maintenance. Wang Rui argues that China has a “right to speak” (话语权) on matters relating to international food security because of its own miraculous achievement in feeding a huge population and demonstrated success in alleviating poverty writ large. Chinese scholars have also noted the importance of countering the negative image of a neo-colonial power plundering African resources. For Chinese investment and aid projects in Africa to work, it is deemed essential that the African people have greater trust in Chinese aid, Chinese companies, and Chinese products.

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The African showcase

Chinese agricultural assistance to Africa is seen as the showcase for demonstrating the value of the Chinese experience. In the words of Jia Qinglin in his address to the eighteenth session of the Assembly of African Union in January 2012, “we promote African development through China’s development.” From the Chinese government perspective, cooperation between the two sides in the agricultural sector is seen to be highly complementary. Simply put, “China’s agricultural development needs Africa’s resources and markets, and the revitalization of African agriculture needs the experience and technology in China.”

China’s involvement in agriculture in Africa dates back to the early 1960s when a small delegation of agricultural specialists visited Mali to assist in the production of sugarcane and tea. As of 2009, China had completed 215 agricultural aid projects (168 projects related to farming, animal husbandry, and fisheries, and 47 projects related to water use and water conservation). Aligned with the new China–Africa strategic partnership, support for agriculture has accelerated in recent years. At the Forum on China and African Cooperation Summit in November 2006, President Hu Jintao announced three key measures aimed at enhancing food security: establish ten agro-technological demonstration centers (now increased to 23); dispatch 100 agricultural experts to African countries; and train 1,500 African agricultural technicians and experts in China.

The approach towards enhancing food security in Africa is technologically oriented towards increasing productivity. Technological transfer is taking place in relation to irrigation farming, seed technology, and agricultural mechanization. China controls the second largest plant seed gene bank in the world and it is the largest producer of hybrid rice (produced by

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87 Shanghai City Agriculture Committee, “Short-Term Developments and Prospects in China-Africa Agricultural Cooperation.”
crossing two genetically different rice varieties leading to a 30 percent increase in yield compared with inbred varieties). Famously invented by Yuan Longping in the early 1960s, hybrid rice now constitutes over 50 percent of China’s total rice growing area (15 million hectares).\textsuperscript{89} It is in demand in African countries, as well as closer to home in countries such as Malaysia and Thailand that are increasingly reliant upon rice imports. Juncao 菌草 (mushroom grass), invented by Lin Zhangxi at Fujian Agricultural University, is also being introduced to African countries to reduce deforestation by planting mushrooms on elephant grass.\textsuperscript{90}

In the African context, as in other developing countries, China’s overriding aid philosophy is one of self-reliance “helping Africans to help themselves.” The oft-cited Chinese saying, 授人以魚不如授人以漁 (give someone a fish is not as good as giving someone a fishing rod) encapsulates one of the eight principles of Chinese economic aid and technical assistance announced in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{91} In the contemporary global context, it also provides a useful analogy for highlighting the relationship between aid and investment. China has learned the lesson that development aid is a means, and not simply an end in itself. Earlier Chinese agricultural projects failed on account of poor maintenance, and the lack of recurrent funding.\textsuperscript{92} More recently, the case of training farmers in Ethiopia to plant upland rice and millet revealed the critical importance of education. In contrast to China, illiteracy rates are high in many African rural areas thus frustrating efforts to transfer technological know-how.

\textsuperscript{89} Edilberto D. Redoña, “Rice Biotechnology for Developing Countries in Asia” (Science City of Muñoz: Philippine Rice Research Institute, Philippines, 2011).
\textsuperscript{91} Information Office of the State Council, The People’s Republic of China, \textit{China’s Foreign Aid White Paper}.
\textsuperscript{92} Interview, He Wenping.
In a self-proclaimed attempt to depoliticize aid, the Chinese government responds to requests from recipient governments and then makes decisions over the allocation of funding on the basis of whether Chinese technology and know-how suits local conditions rather than on the basis of political preferences. The “one China” policy is the only exception to the rule, although this is now less of an issue given that only four African states (Burkino Faso, Gambia, Saô Tomé and Príncipe and Swaziland) officially recognize Taiwan. In revealing preferences, Chinese officials do have a tendency to extol the virtues of authoritarian forms of governance. In the words of one official, “the fact that Eritrea is 70 percent self-sufficient in food production is a consequence of a strong single party state, it is much easier to work with strong governments such as Eritrea.”

Aid officials in Beijing now face a major problem of how to transfer projects upon completion to local partners. To date, Chinese agricultural aid has been exclusively conducted at the central government level. For very practical reasons, it is now recognized that “building relations with local partners” and “broadening horizons” to cooperate with other donors are essential means of ensuring the sustainability of Chinese development aid. The Tripartite Partnerships for Development in Africa between China, the United Kingdom, and Africa is a recent promising trend in this regard.

A second problem concerns how to leverage greater development benefits from Chinese commercial operations. Ironically, while the blurring of aid and commerce is generally seen as a major constraint on development effectiveness, for the Chinese government the problem is more that these two realms of investment remain overly distinct. In an effort to promote corporate social responsibility, government agencies such as the

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93 Interview, Ministry of Agriculture.
State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) are trying to encourage Chinese state-owned enterprises to invest some of their profits in agricultural assistance, as yet to no avail. An important motivation behind the creation of demonstration agricultural centers in Africa is to engage corporate involvement.

Third, China’s per capita grain consumption is only around 371 kgs, slightly higher than the world average of 352 kgs. The question asked by the Chinese public is why is the government sending food to Africa when its own people are still hungry? For the government, food aid to Africa requires public diplomacy targeting both domestic and international audiences. In this regard, China is little different from other bilateral donors balancing domestic public interests with foreign policy objectives.

*Changing the rules of the game: Learning by doing*

The above discussion has identified at least three key areas in which Chinese domestic food security concerns and international priorities converge. First, the traditional Chinese norm of self-sufficiency, once seen as being at odds with the market-oriented principles of economic development, now meshes more comfortably with the global policy agenda. In sharp contrast to its position taken at the World Food Conference in 1974 when it was the only country to express reservations over a resolution to establish a global food information and early warning system, China is now a strong advocate of strengthening the global governance of food security. At the World Food summit in 2009, Vice-Premier Hui Liangyu proposed the early establishment of a food security safeguard system encompassing early warning.

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emergency relief, macro-control, and regulatory functions. The Chinese government has also promoted “guided development” of the bio-fuel sector based upon the principle of “not competing for land with food” and ensuring that “energy security [does] not come at a cost to food security.” It has increased donations to the FAO, the WFP, and the International Agricultural Consultative Group, and now plays a stronger role in the CFS.

Second, Chinese support for recipient driven agricultural development assistance accords with global efforts to reduce the disincentive effects of aid interventions upon agricultural development. In many ways, China is reaping the rewards of being a latecomer in joining the donor community. Problems associated with Western-led official development assistance (ODA) to Africa, in particular, have been carefully studied. China has also gained useful experience as a recipient of ODA.

Third, the Chinese principle of “different methods for different conditions” is in keeping with the current development philosophy at the international level that seeks to avoid a “one size fits all” donor mentality. Another principle of “Guidance, Step-By-Step” (分类指导，循序渐进), which means taking account of local conditions and implementing pilot programmes, also reveals a preference for experimentation rather than the imposition of any particular model. Contrary to the expectations of some commentators, the Chinese government is not intent upon exporting its development model uniformly to developing

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97 Ibid.
countries. Rather the emphasis is more upon a careful consideration of what particular aspects of the Chinese experience may suit local conditions.\footnote{He Wenping, “The Balancing Act of China’s Africa Policy,” \textit{China Security} 3, no. 3 (2007): 23–40.}

In other ways, the Chinese approach towards enhancing food security at the global level is likely to lead to tensions amongst the donor community. Now at the vanguard of a reform oriented agenda, it is by no means clear that China will take a leadership role in fostering a new compact between traditional and new donors within the international food regime. Two particular problems stand out. First, the principle of “mutual benefits” sets China apart from other traditional donors that are more intent upon meeting their international obligations. For China, international responsibility is still double-faced. In promoting agricultural cooperation, the basic principle of “putting ourselves first, seeking win-win cooperation” (以我为主，合作共) prevails over all other priorities. What this means in practice is that increasing agricultural efficiency overseas must not come at a cost to Chinese farmers’ incomes and the protection of domestic industries.\footnote{Ministry of Agriculture, \textit{Five-Year Plan for the Development of International Agricultural Cooperation} (2011 to 2015).} Decoupling domestic interests from international aid may not be politically expedient in the short term, but it is difficult to see how China can truly become a stakeholder in global governance on the basis of a “China first” approach.

The second problem is that Chinese rhetorical support for the depoliticization of aid and adherence to the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs increasingly contradicts current practice. While some Chinese commentators have been quick to criticize the United States for linking its food aid with democracy promotion overseas, it is also the case that Chinese food aid is not devoid of politics; commercial and political interests intersect in ways that are difficult to disentangle. While the benefits of Chinese food aid can only be legitimately assessed on the part of the beneficiaries involved, the “non-interference”
principle is proving increasingly problematic in contexts where the Chinese presence is exposed to local conflicts and instability.¹⁰²

In the final analysis, China is in the process of changing the rules of the game. No longer on the sidelines, it is now a key player in negotiating the evolving norms of international conduct. In comparing China with other traditional donors a major difference lies in the fact that it places a premium upon the idea of gaining experience before endorsing a particular set of principles. In other words, the Chinese approach towards international cooperation is quintessentially pragmatic, based upon learning by doing rather than learning by principle. Strong Chinese preferences for food sovereignty, recipient driven aid, and win–win cooperation present opportunities and challenges for the international food regime. Over time they may help to facilitate consent, especially between traditional and new donors, but it is difficult to see how such an approach can strengthen the global governance of food security in the absence of binding commitments.

Conclusion

In returning to the bigger question posed at the beginning of this paper—is China likely to strengthen its participation in the broader effort to eliminate world hunger, or will an enduring commitment to national independence guide its approach—it is fair to say that China is now an active participant in the international food regime, but current practice is still heavily weighted towards domestic concerns. It would be easy to conclude that the Chinese approach towards food security is contradictory, caught between the legacies of the past and the hopes for the future. Rather, I would argue that what we are currently witnessing is a broadening of the Chinese conception of self-interest.

The suggestion that China’s quest to feed its huge population will lead to conflicts between states seems vastly overdrawn for at least three reasons. The first is that the powerful Chinese norm of self-sufficiency acts as a safeguard against price volatility and relieves the burden on international markets. Second, the international food regime looks different compared with its pre-2008 design, in that global food policy is now debated and acted upon in diverse institutional settings at global and regional levels. Third, China’s cooperative efforts towards combating world hunger can be demonstrated in practice. Above all, it has been successful in balancing its national interests with international responsibility, albeit in a way that leans towards China.

Certainly, tensions exist over China’s unyielding support for the principle of non-interference that delegitimizes the interest of participating states in each other’s internal affairs. In the future, the contradiction between investing in the resources of another state while proclaiming a politically neutral position over its future development trajectory will become more difficult to reconcile. One could also easily argue that China could be doing more commensurate with its growing power and influence in the world. On balance, however, humanity’s visceral need for food may well prove to be the one global challenge that motivates genuine Chinese leadership.