

A GLIMPSE INTO FARMERS' SEED AND TRADITIONAL CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Report of the Second Annual Meeting of Farmers' Seed Network (China)
11-13 January 2015



A. Background

Starting from 2015, the Farmers' Seed Network's annual workshop will kick off with a "barefoot workshop" at the community level, and each year the annual event will be held in turn in different provinces, in order to promote the exchange of knowledge among farmers as well as mutual understanding of each other's culture.



This year, the annual meeting was held in Guangxi Province on 11-13 January 2015 with barefoot workshops in two villages and a workshop in Nanning, the provincial capital of Guangxi. Participants included farmers, return-home-young farmers from Hebei, Henan, Jiangxi, Guangxi and Yunnan, as well as representatives from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Chinese Academy of Agricultural Science, Renmin University, Minzu University of China (the Central University of Nationalities), China Soybean Industry Association, Third World Network, Partnerships for Community Development, and other professional organizations.

B. 赤脚工作坊 (Barefoot Workshops)

Barefoot Workshops: about 60 participants joined the community-based field visits and discussed together the impact of climate change on biodiversity and traditional farming cultures. We hope the contrasting landscapes and social contexts of the two communities will generate different questions and help approach “biocultural heritage” from different perspectives. By doing so, the landscape will become our blackboard and we learn from nature, eco-system sand among farmers.



On 11 January 2015, the workshop participants visited both the Mashan Guzhai (ancient) village and Du'an Nonglv village, where the two communities also participate in the Guangxi Participatory Plant Breeding project.

1. 弄律社区 Nonglv community

On 11 January morning the participants travelled to visit the Du'an Nonglv community. Since 2008, Nonglv community has launched the traditional “rice - fish - duck” farming model, the use of traditional methods to grow rice with ducks and fish providing natural fertilizer and controlling pests and weeds. The community set up a cooperative and folk cultural team. The cooperative office walls clearly show the name of the community, the seed varieties planted each year, plant height, assessment and other information, as well as a calendar of events. There is also a popular science books area. The spirit of the whole community is very robust.





Wei Yugui, head of Nonglv community, welcomes the arrival of all participants!



Farmers share and exchange their seeds brought from their homeland, as if introducing their children, their faces full of pride.



The 77-year-old Naxi elder from Meiquan village, Lijiang, Yunnan Province also brought the Naxi culture to Guangxi; showcased Naxi calligraphy and wrote a Dongba couplet for the Nonglv community.



Nonglv cooperative's breeding plan is not only to conserve and protect seed varieties for selection and planting, but also to value urban consumers' feedbacks and plan next year's planting accordingly. During the tasting activities, Nonglv cooperative used the one dozen varieties they planted last year to cook fragrant rice for participants to evaluate – you can vote according to your own taste preferences, and the varieties with winning votes will be grown as a priority in the coming year.



Hospitable villagers singing and dancing to welcome everyone, their excellent performances impressed all of us.



The representatives of Stone Village from Lijiang, Yunnan Province performed a Naxi song for the hosting community.

2. 马山古寨社区 (Mashan Guzhai Community)

In the same afternoon, the participants visited the Guzhai community. The community leader, LI Rongyan said; “In the 1990s, the villagers began to grow hybrid maize to meet their own food needs and the market and replaced our own old varieties grown locally for generations. Although those hybrids normally have high yield, yet they need to rely on inputs of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, resulting in soil degradation and instability due to their less stress and drought tolerant characteristic. Farmers’ reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides was worsening, and the risk borne by them was also growing”.



In 2000, the community joined the Guangxi participatory plant breeding (PBB) project. The Women Group leader, Ms. Lu Rongyan first used folk songs, dance and other traditional cultural activities for gathering and mobilizing women farmers and villagers.

Meanwhile, there was collaboration with researchers from the Centre for Chinese Agricultural Policy (CCAP) and Guangxi Maize Research Institute (GMRI) on PPB activities for institutional and technical support for villagers and to get access to more external information and opportunities through this PPB project platform. The work was started with only nine elderly women farmers and now expanded to 63 people, mainly women.

After 15 years of continuous efforts, the community has gradually gotten rid of the limited hybrid variety and restored the traditional crop diversity. They have maintained 12 maize landraces and many more vegetable and other landraces. Since 2006 they started to do community based seed production of one popular PPB maize and sharing this with other communities. The community followed the Community-supported agriculture (CSA) approach and started to do ecological circular farming (including maize, pig, vegetable, biogas) and linked to urban consumers. As a result, the villagers have also improved their livelihood, and enhanced their independence and autonomy. They established and registered a farmer cooperative in 2012.



Lu Rongyan, the Guzhai community leader shares their experience.



The community has a traditional dance called “Da-Lang”, recognized as a China Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the children are the seeds of this national cultural heritage.



Li Ruizhen, from Stone Village of Yunnan performed a Naxi folk dance to thank the Guzhai community's warm reception.

C. 南宁研讨会 (Nanning Seminar)



After the community visits, 46 participants returned to Nanning city for the Farmers' Seed Network planning meeting on 12-13 January.



Professor Zhang Shihuang, a chief scientist leading the national maize program, from the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Science, said “our farmers have kept and selected many good and strong landraces which are our precious bio-heritage, selected by farmers and these survived all the natural disasters for generations. In doing so, farmers actually have done what the State and scientists should do but ignored in the past few decades. The participatory plant breeding program in SW China allow farmers collaborating with scientists to conserve and improve local varieties, which can adapt to harsh production environments in remote areas to meet the farmers’ needs in specific quality. Farmers contribute to the continued conservation of the old varieties with good genes, as well as participate in joint research exchanging knowledge, information and seeds with scientists and other communities. This process contribute to diversity and meet different needs”.



China Soybean Industry Association vice-president Liu Denggao shared the experience on how China’s soybean production has been undermined by massive imports of foreign genetically modified soybeans. This is having very serious impacts on domestic soybean varieties and farmers’ livelihoods.



Professor Xue Dayuan of the Minzu University of China (Central University of Nationalities) talked about international treaties and processes on biodiversity, traditional knowledge and access and benefit sharing in which the government of China is participating. He also shared policy related developments on these issues at the domestic level.



From Third World Network, Lim Li Ching shared the international developments on agro-ecology. She stressed that small farmers in many countries are returning to traditional seed varieties and improving them on-farm.



Lee Aruelo shared the Philippine instructive case on organic and no-GMO laws at the provincial and municipal level in her country. Yoke Ling introduced the China "Seed Law" revision progress and the challenges currently encountered with the inclusion of provisions that will not favour small farmers in saving, using and selling their seed varieties. The Farmer Seed Network managed to submitted suggestions to protect farmers' interest and biodiversity in 2014; one of the key suggestions was formally accepted.



A Hong Kong community partner (Partnerships for Community Development) had 13 cooperation experts, farmers and returning youth representatives who attended the Nanning workshop. Community Partnership Project Coordinator Angus Lam (林志光) introduced PCD's work and experience to promote ecological agriculture in Southwest China.



Representatives of farmers from the North and South of the country exchanged experiences, achievements and lessons learned in the past year to try to grow seeds from the 2014 seed exchange (during the planning meeting in Beijing in April 2014). After conducting group discussions, each group developed a work plan for the next year.



Yiching Song, a senior social scientist researcher from the Centre for Chinese Agricultural Policy of Chinese Academy of Science, concluded: "Our conceptual

change from ecological agriculture to bio-culture farming system is a significant transition as agriculture is not only farming technology, but a whole comprehensive system. China is an ancient country with a long and continuous agriculture history for centuries. Our spiritual world, culture, and traditions are all embedded in our long farming history and agricultural civilization, which is the starting of our human civilization and also the essential base for our sustainable development.”

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关于农民种子网络 (FARMERS’ SEED NETWORK)

The full name of the Farmers’ Seed Network is "National farmers’ in site breeding and seed-sharing Network," is started and coordinated by the Liang Shuming Rural Reconstruction Center, Center for Chinese Agricultural Policy and the Third World Network in December 2013. The network is designed to support farmers and their partner organizations to explore the potential of putting in place an effective mechanism for seed breeding and knowledge sharing, protecting the interests of farmers and maintaining seed sovereignty of China.



Report by Song Xin and Li Guanqi, 26 January 2015 (original in Chinese, English translation by Third World Network) and edited by Yiching Song