Migration to cities has increased rapidly since reforms took place in China. It has been estimated that over the past 30 years, more than 300 million people have successfully transferred their residence and have found a job in one of the rapidly growing cities of China; and it is expected that this trend will continue in the coming 15-20 years (Feng, 1996). Quite a number of migrants stay in the periurban areas and turn to urban agriculture for their livelihoods.

As the capital and one of the biggest cities in China, Beijing is one of the most favoured destinations for migrants. A one percent sampling population survey in 2005 found that there were nearly 3.6 million migrants in Beijing, 80,000 of whom were directly involved in agricultural activities, and up to 524,000 of whom were engaged in related activities. Research was undertaken in four villages in Chaoyang and Shunyi district as part of the RUAF Cities Farming for the Future programme. Chaoyang district is close to the built-up areas in Beijing, and has various types of land use. Shunyi district is located about 40 km away from the city centre. It is the area’s traditional bread basket, with relatively stable land use. The number of migrant farmers is higher in Chaoyang than in Shunyi.

**Livelihoods**

Migrant farmers encounter a number of difficulties after they arrive, for example in building a dwelling and in finding their place in the production chain. The first and most important problem they encounter is access to land. Farmland in Beijing is owned by village committees. The only way for a migrant farmer to get access to land is to rent it directly from the local village committee or through one of the local farmers. Since June 2004, the Beijing government has been promoting “the transfer of the contractual right of land” to make it easier for migrants to lease land. In reality, though, migrant farmers’ right to land is not clear, and most often control remains with the land owner. Also irregularities in contracts create problems. This limits the flexibility of migrant farmers in planning and thus in their development (competition capacity). Also, irrigation water is still provided by canals, which is not efficient and highly wasteful.

Access to financing is also difficult for migrant farmers. Most farmers rely on informal private loans, which have been affected by the reform of the rural banking system in China (which has further weakened the uncertain position of migrant farmers). Both in buying inputs and in selling their products, migrant farmers are almost always at a disadvantage, because of their lack of money and information. Initially, the city had a restrictive registration policy for migrants, but this situation has improved considerably. Other major problems migrant farmers (and other migrants) now face include the high cost of education and the relatively low quality of schools. The living conditions of migrant farmers are also poor. They usually build their humble dwellings beside the rented farmland or greenhouses. Their homes are small, usually only 20-40 square metres, and barely furnished. Kitchens and toilets are very simple and usually located outside. The homes have no heating devices, and many residents use firewood and coal (out of tradition or because of low costs).

The survey revealed that one of the reasons for these poor living conditions is that many migrant farmers initially do not see this “city lifestyle” as a long-term situation. But as their incomes improve, they start investing in their homes (for example, by adding LPG and electricity).

**Agricultural cooperatives**

Migrant farmers sell their grains, vegetables and fruits in the following ways: (A) door-to-door, which is the most popular way; (B) directly at wholesale markets; (C) to re-sellers or restaurants; (D) through farmers’ organisations; and (E) through agro-tourism arrangements (field picking). For instance, migrant farmers in Dongjiangying in Shunyi sell their grains directly to the nearby grain storehouse. In some cases, migrant farmers organise themselves in a cooperative, as in Xiaodian, in Chaoyang, where the migrant farmers jointly acquired access to farmland and distributed it among themselves. Such cooperatives also organise their production and seek marketing channels.
There is a noticeable trend among migrant farmers to develop and organise themselves from the first stage of selling their products directly to the consumers, through the next step of using intermediaries and finally to selling through cooperatives, thereby consistently increasing their profits and saving time. In this way migrant farmers are connected to the city and contribute to the building of communities.

Migrant farmers’ social network

Though they work and live in the city, migrant farmers do not have formal connections to the city. The ties with their home towns are quite close and most of the migrant farmers go back home one to two times each year, have regular contact with their relatives, and send home remittances. Because of the high education costs in the city, some children attend school at home and are taken care of by their grandparents.

The incomes of most migrant farmers are higher after migration to the city (increasing on average from 350 to 500 euros per person per year), but still lower than the average of local farmers (800 euro). The cost of living in the city is higher than in the rural areas, and in addition migrant farmers are responsible for houses and land both in their new city and in their home towns. The average “daily-life” expenditure per year is about 400 euros, which is substantially lower than the average expenditures on production (1,500 euros) and savings/remittances (1,000 euros).

Usually migrant farmers send a big part of their earnings back home (and are thus able to save very little for their own expenses in the city). The resulting lack of funds makes it difficult for them to buy inputs in the growing season. Migrant farmers have three main sources from which to borrow money:

- People living in Beijing who come from the same region. This is very common since migrant farmers’ social networks (as defined by Chinese rural tradition) are based on and strengthened by familial and local ties.
- Other migrant farmers. This is possible because the farmers live in close communities (and are often rather isolated from the local community).
- Local farmers. This is only an option if the borrower and lender know each other well and trust each other, i.e. after the migrant farmer has been in Beijing for several years (and is thus more integrated).

Migrant farmers have strong links to their home towns and only gradually develop connections to other migrants and to local communities in the new city. Some older migrant farmers go back home, but young people mentioned in the survey that they would like to continue farming in the city. Migrant farmers develop a relationship with local communities initially only through the market, as it is difficult to develop new social contacts. Although the migrants share some of the same needs as other residents, the sometimes hostile environment keeps them isolated from the local community. It can also be difficult to build relationships among each other, as they may quarrel over such things as the order of watering land. However, the farmers often sell products jointly and generally collaborate to a high degree.

BUILDING NEW COMMUNITIES

After coming to the city, migrant farmers face the challenge of building a new social network. They are often prepared to take up agriculture, while the local farmers increasingly find new jobs in the city. This relieves the tension between local and migrant farmers to some extent. Migrant farmers gradually adapt to the new city. Most of them come to Beijing through relatives or countrymen who have been in Beijing for a period of time. After arriving in the city, new migrant farmers need to build a network to protect themselves and strive to earn profits in an unknown environment. This includes uniting with other migrant farmers from different provinces, compromising to satisfy local stakeholders and strengthen their original networks.

Education is an important issue for migrants. Migrant farmers acquire a higher income in the city, but suffer from a lower quality of life. Some of them do not stay very long, but the children of those who do remain grow up in the city and their feeling of community and identity is based there. However, it is difficult for these children to get access to high-quality education. They risk disappointment in life and subsequent psychological problems or negative attitudes are relatively high for this group.

The role of urban agriculture

Since the mid-1980s, township and village enterprises have developed rapidly in Beijing, as local farmers in periurban Beijing turn more and more to non-agricultural activities. This leads in turn to a lack of agricultural labour and deterioration of urban farmland. Villages in periurban Beijing have therefore gradually imported migrant farmers from Hebei, Henan, Shandong provinces, etc., who are introduced to the area by their relatives and friends. At present Beijing periurban agriculture is undertaken mainly by migrant farmers. This benefits both migrants and the local population.

So gradually the living and production style and experiences of migrant farmers change, that is, from rural agriculture to urban agriculture. This not only improves their own incomes, but also guarantees productive use of periurban areas, supplies of niche products to the city market, the development of other land use functions (recreation and leisure), and the building of new communities. Developing multi-functional urban agriculture could be a way of developing periurban land, maintaining green spaces, developing recreation and providing education for children. If migrant farmers fulfill these needs through organising themselves in a cooperative, they will acquire a stronger position in bargaining with policy makers and integrating in the community.

Increasingly migrant farmers play valuable roles in the development of urban and periurban agriculture, and new migrant farmer communities continue to emerge. Under current government policy, it is possible for innovative migrant farmers, in cooperation with local existing farmers’ cooperatives, to develop the relatively weak ties among migrant farmers into strong cooperatives to strengthen the process of integration and as such facilitate the migration of more farmers to Beijing.

References

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