

4.3 Siming Wang – China’s agricultural history studies in historical perspective

Room 202

Chair: Ted Collins

It is generally held that Chinese agriculture tended to decline or stagnate after the Song dynasty. The argument is that there has been no change of the agricultural implements since then. However, facts deny such simple conclusion. According to recent scholarship, as late as in 1820, China was still the biggest economy in the world, China’s GDP was nearly one third of the world total (32.4 per cent), and actually grew faster than Europe in the eighteenth century.

Such a rapid growth was brought mainly by the following reasons:

1) The rapid development of multiple cropping; 2) The fast expansion of high-yielding and cold resistant crops introduced from Americas; 3) The wide and heavy use of irrigation; 4) The further development of intensive farming

If, from the fifteenth century, China lagged behind the western world in modern science and industry, its relative advantage in agriculture was well maintained into the nineteenth century. Numerous facts reveal that Chinese farmers were sensitive enough to new and appropriate technology and they always made wise decisions according to the natural and economic environment in constant change.

It was a pity, however, that we ignored the historical experience we had after the establishment of the Peoples’ Republic of China and blindly imitated the former Soviet Union in agricultural modernisation, which actually delayed the process for decades. Communisation severely deflated farmers’ enthusiasm and resulted in a deep agricultural crisis, with millions of people dying of starvation. The practice of communisation over 20 years proved the failure of this system. If one takes grain productivity of 1952 as an index, no year exceeded that during the 26 years from 1952 to 1978. For the same reason, many technological inventions found it hard to prove their efficiency.

China finally realised the necessity to readjust its strategy and began its reform of agriculture in 1978. Though the restoration of family farms made mechanisation decline, agricultural production grew dramatically. From 1978 to 1984 the agricultural output kept up an annual growth of 11.85 per cent and grain yields of 4.1 per cent. Data prove that the family farm is not a barrier to agricultural growth. On the contrary it is well suited to the present economic conditions and has great vitality.

To conclude, the agricultural development of China since the sixteenth century shows that the key to agricultural growth is how to make good use of the comparative advantage by using the abundant resources to substitute for the scarce. The reason why China could have taken a lead in traditional agriculture is that Chinese farmers were capable of adjusting to the constant change of economic conditions. The failure of the communisation and mechanisation movement was simply due to the idealist political push regardless of reality.

Siming Wang was born in the city of Zhuzhou, Hunan Province, China on 18 November 1961. He got his PhD degree in agricultural history from Nanjing Agricultural University in 1995. In 1994, he obtained a grant from Smithsonian Institution to make a visiting research in the National Museum of American History. During the time of 1999 to 2000, he was supported by Ministry of Agriculture of P. R. China and Smithsonian Institution to conduct a visiting research at Stanford University and University of California at Davis.

His main research concentrates on Chinese agricultural history and the comparative studies of agricultural development. Until now he has published six books and dozens of research papers in the field of agricultural history. Right now, he works as professor and dean of College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanjing Agricultural University. He is also vice-chairman of China’s Association of Agricultural History Societies and President of the Museum of Chinese Agricultural Civilization.