

Securing the 'Rice Bowl'

Hongzhou Zhang

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China and Global Food Security

palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-981-13-0235-0 ISBN 978-981-13-0236-7 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0236-7>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018944432

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Cover Image: © MirageC / Getty Images
Cover design by Fatima Jamadar

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.
The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

This book is dedicated to my father

PREFACE

In December 1959, my father was born in Henan, China. Unfortunately, what awaited him was the country's worst ever famine, which started in the winter of 1959/60 and lasted until 1961. Henan, at the epicenter of the famine, was severely hit, and millions of lives were lost. Shortly after giving birth to my father, my grandma realized that it was impossible for her newborn (and only) son to survive the famine if they stayed in Henan. Hence, my grandma, along with her two children, one 5-year-old daughter and the infant boy, joined thousands of starving refugees fleeing Henan. I cannot imagine how dreadful the fleeing journey would have been for them, but I do know my grandma had made several unsuccessful attempts to commit suicide while fleeing Henan.

Fortunately, despite all the unimaginable difficulties, they survived the journey and eventually settled down in a small village in the central part of Shaanxi where the food situation was slightly better. However, as numerous studies have found, famines do not only claim lives but also have health and social impacts on the survivors for decades afterward. In my father's case, while the potential health effects of the famine, apart from reduced height, remain to be seen, the social impacts of that famine have been much more visible. After escaping to Shaanxi, although starvation was avoided, my grandma understood that her infant son would not live unless he was fed by a better-off local family. Consequently, she was forced to give away her only son to a couple in the village where she settled down. Since then, my father has had two families. Two decades later when my brother and I were born, my brother was given the family name of my father's adopted family, while I was named after his biological father to

preserve the family name. Ever since, I have had to repeatedly deal with uncomfortable questions such as whether I was adopted by my parents, or whether my brother and I are full siblings. My father's personal experience and its lingering impacts on my family have prompted me to acquire a keen interest in China's food problems.

At the national level, while the 1959–1961 famine has been rarely discussed in public domains and most of the younger generations of Chinese born after the late 1970s know nothing about it, its impact on China's overall development, agricultural policies in general and food policies in particular, cannot be overstated. As Professor Lillian Li describes: “No other civilization has had such a continuous tradition of thinking about famine, and no other nation's modern history has been so influenced by hunger and famine.” In December 2013, at the Central Rural Work Conference, Chinese President Xi Jinping said in the speech that “people of our generation more or less all have the experience of hunger or even starvation; during the *Three Years of Natural Disaster 1959–1961*, I was in school. Suffering from food shortages, I could only drink soup at night.” At this meeting, Xi declared: “the rice bowl of the Chinese people must be held firmly in our own hands. Our rice bowl should be filled primarily with Chinese cereals.” In fact, since 2012, “rice bowl” has become the popular catchphrase used by Xi Jinping to illustrate just how important food security is to China. Being the most populous country and deeply integrated into global economy and food system, the security of China's “rice bowl” has increasingly become a matter of international concern, particularly after the apocalyptic question “Who will feed China?”, raised by Lester Brown more than two decades ago.

As China's domestic food production falls short of the rapidly rising demand, China has emerged as the world's largest food importer, and its reliance on the global market will increase even further in the years to come. Parallel to the growing agricultural imports, China has been expanding its agricultural presence overseas. Around the globe, especially in Africa and Latin America, numerous reports accused China of engaging in a massive state-sponsored “land grab.” In addition to the outward direct investment, overseas Merger and Acquisition (M&A) by Chinese agribusinesses has also increased considerably, which has become a significant force in remaking the food landscape in the world. All these trends have promoted substantial research interests on China's food problems and its potential global implications.

The growing literature has well documented the multifaceted and complicated nature of China's overseas agricultural engagement, particularly in Africa and Latin America, which has contributed to the emergence of a much more nuanced and balanced account of its potential impacts on the host countries and global food security. In spite of the richness of the existing studies, several major interrelated issues have either been overlooked or insufficiently discussed. Firstly, the overwhelming majority of the current discussion has overlooked China's domestic efforts to ensure its food security and how these domestic efforts relate to the country's global agricultural engagement. Secondly, China's overseas agricultural engagement has been mostly studied in insolation with its overall food security strategy. Thirdly, the motives and patterns of China's overseas agricultural engagement have also been inadequately understood. Fourthly, given the fact that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become central to China's international engagement, how BRI is shaping and being shaped by China's global agricultural engagement is an important question that needs systematic analysis. Fifthly, the discussion of the potential deployment of food as a geopolitical instrument has been lacking. Finally, the bigger question of how China is reshaping the global food governance has been largely overlooked. With these questions in mind, this book intends to contribute to the existing studies on how China will feed itself, and its global implications. Rather than a micro-level analysis of the actual impact of China's outward agricultural engagement on a particular host country or region, this book sheds light on how China's efforts—both at home and abroad—to safeguard its food security at macro levels will affect global food systems.

This book could have never been completed without the generous help from my colleagues and friends as well as the support of my family. First of all, I am heartily thankful to Dr. Mingjiang Li, associate professor and coordinator of China Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His encouragement, guidance, and support from the initial stages to the final stage of this book project have been invaluable. I have also benefited enormously from discussions with and comments and suggestions from many distinguished scholars; in particular, Professor Yong Deng, Professor Kai He, Associate Professor Mingliang Zhang, Professor Daojiong Zha, Professor Guoqiang Cheng, Assistant Professor Shaohua Zhan, Dr. Hongyuan Yu, and Professor Paul Teng.

Other colleagues from RSIS, including Associate Professor Fengshi Wu, Dr. Xue Gong, Assistant Professor Hoo Tiang Boon, Dr. Lina Gong,

Ms. Irene Chan, Mr. James Char, and Mr. Zi Yang, provided essential support at different stages of this book project. Appreciation must also be expressed to Dr. Jiwei Qian from the East Asia Institute of Singapore for introducing me to the editor of Palgrave. I would also like to thank the team at Palgrave. Working with Jacob Dreyer, editor of Palgrave, and his colleagues, particularly the Editorial Assistant Anushangi Weerakoon has always been a great pleasure. My sincere thanks are also extended to Ms. Chan Boh Yee for her tremendous editing support.

I must express my gratitude to Jing, my wife, for her continued support and encouragement throughout the writing of this book.

Singapore
January 2018

Hongzhou Zhang

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