

PROGRESS CATCHING

UP CHANGING THE RURAL LANDSCAPE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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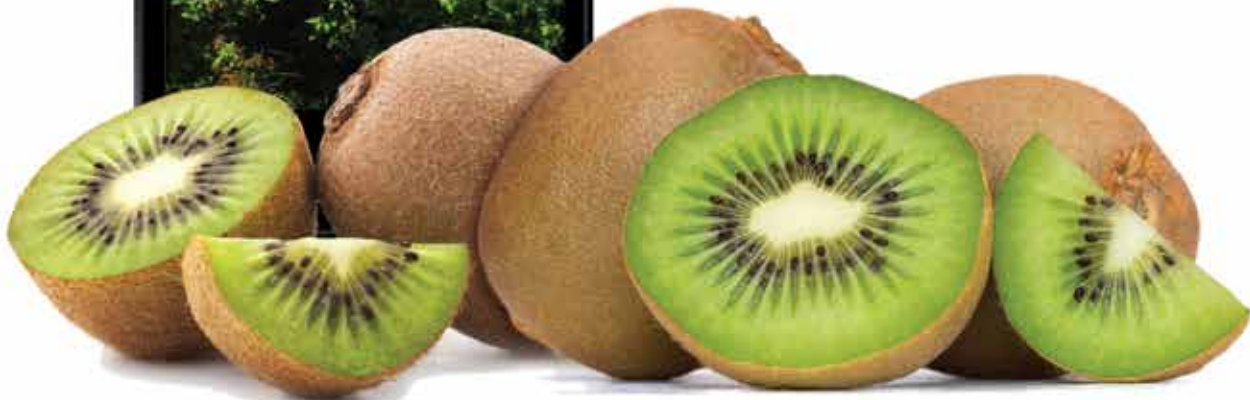


■ **Mr.** Yang from Gaoyu city stands in the middle of his crop and whips out his phone; the communication device quickly scans the farmland Yang is standing on and tells him that he has been using the wrong formula to fertilize his soil and therefore has been forced to use twice the necessary amount.

What sounds like a scene from a Star Trek episode (admit it, subconsciously you were waiting for Spock to appear out of nowhere) is now reality. In a move that sees China's "primitive" countryside benefitting from technological progress and catching up in the smart phone race, the Ministry of Agriculture for China has recently approved said app, developed by the Yangzhou Soil and Fertilizer Extension Service. Through analyzing the quality of the farmland the software can calculate the exact formula to achieve the best results with a minimal amount of fertilizer, naming the detailed percentages of nitrogen, phosphate and potash to be included in the mix.

The arrival of the mobile age in the Yangzhou countryside is welcomed by progressive farmers such as Yang. "It will help us not only reduce the costs, but also, according to their report, increase the yield," he told news outlet JS China.

The Yangzhou periphery is one of the region's kiwi production bases. A large gate marks the entrance to Yang's Kiwifruit Science Research Institute, founded in 1991.



The heir to the operation returned from university in New Zealand bringing with him a host of modern knowledge and international experience. As a biologist, fluent in the language of windbreaks and soil acidity, science is integral to kiwi growing. He is among the youngest present on site; the workers turning over dirt in the fields where the vines lay dormant are of an older generation.

Things are not stagnant in the kiwi world. The Yang company's research involves establishing better growing techniques, using experimental bases in different regions across China to determine which varieties are best suited to each environment, and cultivating new strains. The Yang kiwi empire has even expanded to include a worker's cooperative in Henan province. Xixia Yang's Lewanjia Kiwifruit Cooperative has grown to more than 200 households in the few years since its founding in 2008, and aims to help farmers apply new techniques and achieve better yields.

Even closer to home, about half an hour's drive from the city centre of Nanjing, sits a countryside jewel. Amid rubble and uncontrollable weed suddenly appears a gate the likes of which would have impressed the sun king, Louis XIV, himself. A venture inside is even more impressive; a European style villa sits at the top of a slope overlooking a horse range specked with a luxurious Baroque fountain. Next to the villa lies a swimming pool with spring water so clean you can drink it as the owner of the land, Wu Shuli, tells us. While the property belongs to the former soldier, given to him by the government in recognition of his march around China, the decadent villa cum ornaments do not.

They were built by a wealthy Taiwanese friend of Wu's on the condition that the horse range remain for Wu's son to practice. Said young boy is Wu Qun, today one of China's national equestrian champions. Meanwhile, the Taiwanese friend left after construction for his luxury retreat began in 2000 and was never to be seen again.

While it is the mega-rich that now enjoy constructing luxuriously classical Western architecture out in the countryside as a locale for respite from hectic city life, chances are these domiciles are but one of many. While in this particular case it is the rural population in form of Wu

and his son who were lucky enough to be on the receiving end of what is essentially an act of face, more often than not the splendid edifices sit unused somewhere in the countryside waiting to be marveled at from afar by unsuspecting passers-by.

What these three examples illustrate, is that progress catches up with all of us eventually; even the Chinese countryside, often described in a derogatory fashion as "lagging behind" (落后) by city dwellers, is not immune to modernization and change. Yet, amid a rush to introduce technological advancements and nouveau-riche luxury, something far more important might be lost. As it stands, many places of natural beauty for which China is famous, find themselves on the brink of extinction.

On a trip to Yunnan province, an unsuspecting group of travellers including myself suddenly found ourselves in Yunnan, a tiny county in one of the most Southern parts of the country. The area is famous for its rice terraces, for which it was crowned as a world heritage site only last year. However, it is exactly these rice terraces that face a dire future according to the head of one of the local villages.

Due to the extensive gap between the countryside and urban areas in China, starting from salaries and ending with living standards, and in a reversal of Mao's policies, there has been a considerable and steadily increasing rush from the countryside to the cities. Rural youth, eager for better prospects, are abandoning their birthplaces in favour of hubs such as Beijing, Shanghai or Nanjing; an exodus of knowledge.

As a result only the older generations of Chinese farmers understand the complex practices involved in manually shaping the hills creating the necessary level layers to grow rice, which otherwise could never have been grown in such hilly regions as southern Yunnan. With younger Chinese being entirely disinterested in learning the art of maintaining rice paddies, once the current generation of farmers dies out, so will this stunning piece of cultural heritage.


Jiangsu province is no different. The Duotian agricultural system in Xinghua city is unique to this area of China and is seen as living fossil of ancient farming practices

at home and abroad. It is a complex water system, on the surface of which rapeseed is grown. One can travel around the area by boat and enjoy the spectacular view of endless yellow fields growing out of the water. In one of the world's most traditional farming practices, generations of farmers have been keeping the mud islands within the large water system from eroding by regularly adding fresh mud. Yet, as in Yuanyang, the farmers' children would rather chase their dreams of big money in Nanjing, than commit to a lifetime of "lowly work".

Many scholars all over the country are now warning against the impending danger of losing these pieces of landscape art forever. "Agriculture is the foundation of social development. Traditional family farming practices should be repositioned at the centre of agricultural, environmental and social policies," said Li Wenhua, chairman of the GIAHS Steering Committee of the UN Food and Agricultural Organization, in a keynote speech on 8th April during the first conference of the East Asia Research Association for Agricultural Heritage Systems. Li further appealed to his audience for worldwide cooperation in an attempt to save these ancient Chinese landscaping practices.

To this end, Xinghua Duotian is currently lined up as contender for the title of Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS), in a bid to seek international support for the conservation and protection of this ancient farming practice.

Domestically, the government has also been eager to spring into action; in May 2013, a list of 19 sites, including the Xinghua Duotian agricultural system, were listed as Chinese Important Agricultural Heritage Systems. One can muse that the main reason for protecting areas such as Duotian probably lie more along the lines of the loss faced by the tourism industry in case of their disappearance, rather than the preservation of culture. Then again, any ulterior motives are welcome, if they help the cause.

What the current initiatives show clearly is a promising tendency and rise in awareness that with all modernization and improved living standards currently transforming the countryside, it is essential not to forget the basics on which all progress is built. 

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