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Rice Farmers

A barefoot farmer guides an ox-drawn plow through a muddy rice field. The farmer shouts at the animal to turn when it reaches the end of the field, and the animal turns.

Another farmer watches his progress from a narrow bank of uncultivated land that divides the plots.

Blue-winged swallows weave in erratic patterns across the fields, their wings flashing in the late-day light.

The farmer working the plow says it will take him about three hours to plow the rice paddy. It's not very difficult work for me, he says, but it's hard for the animals...the plowing really tires them out.

The hard work for him and the other village farmers will start a few weeks later, when they transplant rice seedlings from an adjacent field to the one he's plowing now.

They replant the seedlings a few weeks after Qing Ming, the day the villagers visit the village cemetery to pay respects to their deceased ancestors. Celebrated on a day determined by the lunar calendar Qing Ming generally falls in early April.

Transplanting the seedlings is probably the most difficult work the farmers will do all year, he says. Your back and sides start to ache from bending so long over the plants.

The farmers also worry about the weather. A drought this spring has forced them to postpone planting the sugarcane crop. The ground hasn't been moist enough to plant the small pieces of cane that will grow into new plants.

Every day the farmers wake up looking and waiting for the rain but the rain doesn't come.

The farmer says he's not worried about the rice fields because the lowland fields are always moist. But if they can't plant the sugarcane by Qing Ming, the plants won't have enough time to grow properly.

These days the farmers work eight to 10 hours a day in the fields; other times of the year they can slow down a bit, but not now, he says.

The planting and the harvest times are the most demanding and the most critical for people who live off the land.

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The lowland fields stretch like a long riverbed with an endless view between the village houses on one side and the highland fields on the other.

The highland fields, says the farmer, are not as fertile as the lowland fields. The villagers are assigned plots in both the lowland and highland fields when the land is divided among families. The plots each family receives are determined by a lottery.

The government leases the land to the farmers, who plant rice twice a year on much of it. The farmers pay a portion of the harvested rice as a tax and sell a portion to the government at a below-market rate.

The rice that remains belongs to the farmers, and they can do with it as they please. Families generally consume most of this, but any rice that is left over can be sold in the local market for cash.

To earn cash the farmers rely on their sugarcane crop. The sugarcane grown in the village is sold to the government for cash and is the farmers' most profitable crop.

Sweet potatoes are fed to the animals, eaten by the villagers, or sold in the market.

A family of five that grows 2,000 jin of rice gives the government about 325 jin as a tax and sells it another 325 jin at a below-market rate. Each farmer must sell or give the government a total of about 130 jin of rice for each share of land he uses. Most village families earn between 800 and 1,000 yuan a year.

The farmers say overhead expenses eat away at their earnings, especially expensive items such as a water buffalo and a cart. A water buffalo costs about 1,500 yuan and the cart - used to transport produce, equipment and people - costs about 600 yuan.

For the villagers this is a substantial sum. The farmer says a water buffalo can work for about a decade before tiring. When the animal gets too old, the farmers sell it to a butcher for 800 or 900 yuan.

During the animal's lifetime the farmers must save a portion of their earnings to finance the purchase of a new animal when their current one gets too old to work.

The only tools the villagers need to cultivate the land are simple ones such as hoes and sickles. The farmers have relied on these tools for hundreds of years. There is no expensive farm machinery to invest in.

A woman stops by the side of the road and talks about the frustrations of earning a living as a farmer.

Expenses keep growing, she says. The farmers use fertilizer, cow manure, and human waste to fertilize their fields. Fertilizer can be bought in the Xiang store for about 120 yuan a year and lasts about a year, she says, but the price keeps rising.

The farmers also use insecticide to protect their crops from pests, she says. Farmers whose fields aren't close to other plots sometimes don't have to use insecticide, but most farmers use it and purchase it from the government.

If insects are going to be a problem in the area the government warns the farmers, she says.

Farming expenses keep rising and the government continues to raise the rice tax, she says. The government has been paying the farmers more for their sugarcane crop but the villagers' rising profits have been offset by the higher rice tax.

The villagers are getting angry but they have no place to air their grievances.

It's not a question of liking or disliking the work, says a 36-year-old farmer. I was born to do this work.

He stands beside a threshing machine under a blistering July sun as members of his family cut rice stalks behind him.

It will take four days to harvest the rice, he says. This time they will harvest about 1,500 kilograms, which is a moderately good harvest. The best crop would have been about 2,000 kilograms, he says.

If his family had more workers, they could produce more rice and earn more

money, he says.

He says he has four children and earns just enough to live on ¾ neither more nor less.

He woke up today at 4 a.m. and will likely work until about 8 or 9 p.m. It's the busiest time of year so he needs to work long hours. His only break will be to eat lunch at noon.

He says he wants his children to study hard in school so that someday they can leave the countryside and find better-paying jobs in the city.

Liang He Weng and his brother work steadily under the burning sun, feeding freshly cut rice plants into a foot-operated thresher.

Their sisters work nearby, harvesting a thickly woven field of rice with small machetes, their backs bent low to the ground, their faces expressionless.

Behind them the rice paddies fade into the horizon, dissolve into the blinding summer light.

In one swift motion the sisters slice the plants at the base and place them in a pile beside the threshing machine.

Up and down, up and down, cut and pile, cut and pile, their rhythm is steady, relentless.

The boys pick up the plants a bunch at a time and place them head first in the thresher, their fuzzy yellow heads shining in the sun. The archaic-looking machine shakes out the grain and collects it in a bag attached to the side.

The boys press a foot pedal and twist their torsos from side to side to help shake the grain out of the plant, moving like dancers in rhythm with the steady drone of the machine.

The brothers and sisters work non-stop, the girls slicing the plants and the boys threshing. They work silently, intent on their task, locked inside their closed-in worlds.

Liang He Weng wears a straw hat and a short jacket to protect his face and arms from the sun. The work doesn't seem to tire him. He seems aloof, almost forgetful, as he labors under the burning sun.

It's not a question of liking or not liking the work, he says, it's just that we need to make a living.

We would like to leave the village to work in the city, he says, but the money must be good enough. There's no need to leave the village if the money isn't good enough.

He thinks he could find a job in the city, but he doesn't know what kind of job it would be. It wouldn't be worth leaving his family and the security of the village for life in a strange new city if the pay is too low, he says.

In the village, a farmer is his own boss. If the money isn't good enough, I'd rather stay in the village where I'm free to work when I want to, he says.

Our parents would be content to have just enough food to eat, he says, but we young people want to make more money and have a better future.

If it were possible, he and his brother would prefer to work as businessmen in the city. Many of the village's young people feel the same way he does, he says. Some of the young people succeed in doing this, finding jobs and a place to live

outside, but others aren't so fortunate.

Some of the older people support their ambitions; others just want them to remain in the village and work the land just as they did.

Liang, who has 10 years of schooling, dropped out of school before the last stage of middle school because he didn't do well enough to continue. Of the eight children in his family, one brother and three married sisters live outside the village now, he says.

Like their brothers, the two sisters also have dreams of a better life somewhere else. No, I don't like the work, says the older sister, who is 24. The work is tiring. If I had a choice I wouldn't stay in the countryside ¾ but I don't have many choices.

She says she has 10 years of schooling and no skills other than farming. I was born in the countryside and so must remain here, she says.

Her younger sister is even less optimistic. I want to have a good life, she says, but I think it's impossible. I don't want to tell you my ideas because I don't think they will ever come true.