

Agricultural Renaissance

By ZHOU JIANXIONG

An old Chinese proverb says that “poverty gives rise to the desire for change,” and this may in part explain why 18 farmers from a rural village in east China’s Anhui Province made the bold decision in 1978 to fix farm output quotas per household, in the hope of increasing their own income. This decision, while running counter to the then prevailing state policy of collective production and a rigid equalitarian income distribution system, can be seen as a landmark in contemporary Chinese history. Not only has it given full play to the initiative of farmers, but it has also set off an upsurge of sweeping reform policies that have covered multiple spectrums of Chinese society and put the country onto a track of rapid economic and social development.

Agricultural production, rural development, and the interests of farmers, these are the focal issues to which the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) has attached great importance since the founding of New China in 1949. Thanks to various guiding principles and preferential policies set by the CPC, especially those adopted since the implementation of the reforms exactly three decades ago, the once poor and backward landscape of rural China is being transformed. Official statistics have put the average annual net income for farm households at 4,140 yuan (\$606), up from 134 yuan (\$19.62), and the number of farmers living below the poverty line at 14.79 million, down from 250 million. Meanwhile, the CPC leadership and the Central Government have mobilized billions of yuan and other resources to provide better education and medical services, and upgrade public facilities in the countryside. And with the farm production and rural economy growing for years on end, millions of Chinese farmers are now leading a lifestyle never dreamed of by their fathers.

Remarkable accomplishments aside, there remain some fundamental problems and challenges posing as immense barriers to faster agricultural development, further improvement in farmers’ livelihood and deeper reforms for the nation. For one thing, the overall cost of agricultural production has risen sharply due to higher means of production and growing labor and land costs. This will likely enhance the risk of decreasing farm production, or even adversely affect the entire agricultural sector, and reduce farmers’ income. Then, there is a widening disparity between the city and village in terms of income growth, level of social services, and overall development, and the country desperately needs an effective mechanism for coordinated urban and rural growth. More importantly, the vast yet underdeveloped rural areas have become a drag on China’s ongoing reforms, as inadequate agricultural and rural development will impact one of the key bases of the national economy. In turn, the relatively lower living standards of some 900 million farmers, the overriding majority of the Chinese population, will stand in contrast to the CPC’s lofty ideal of making a better life for each and every Chinese citizen and building up “a harmonious society.”

It is at this critical moment that the CPC recently held the Third Plenum of its 17th National Congress, where the leading body of the Party, taking cognizance of the urgent need to speed up reforms in rural China, has drawn up a package of strategies to further boost agricultural production and rural development, and proposed the ambitious target of doubling the average annual income for farmers by 2020.

Back in 1978, the CPC passed a resolution to initiate the country’s unprecedented reforms in the countryside at the Third Plenum of its 11th National Congress, which has brought about a world of development opportunities for China. Now, thirty years later, the Party had decided to pursue further reforms in rural China. Once again, this offers another historical opportunity for China’s rural areas, agricultural production, individual farmers, and the entire nation. ■