



The peanut field

By Robert Watt

RETURNING TO THE COUNTRY

During the May Day holiday, I accompanied a Chinese colleague back to his village in Shandong province. It lies between the city of Linyi and the yellow sea and is called Tong Jia Ling. It has around 270 people who, like my colleague, have the family name of Tong. We arrive late morning on a beautiful sunny day. His parents are out, but the house is unlocked. "We only close the door" he says, "to stop cats coming in."

A home in the country

The home comprises of single-story buildings arranged around a square courtyard. The construction is smart brick around the doors and windows with pale mud panels filling in between them. The walls are at least 40cm thick and I can imagine how well they'd insulate the inside from the extremes of the seasons. There is a main building and a row of bedrooms once used by my colleague and his siblings, now used for storage. Opposite is the kitchen and in between, an enclosure for hens and a short open ditch used as a toilet.

Inside, the main house is refreshingly cool. The mud walls are whitewashed and the floor laid in a grey brick herringbone pattern. The room is simply furnished and is largely unchanged since his father built it in the 1980s. The only new additions being a large flat screen TV, tall fridge freezer and a portrait of Xi Jinping. At one end there is a small metal stove used for heating in winter. Tong explains that on cold nights they would huddle around it, roasting food on the hot surface, his bed would also be moved inside and he would fall asleep to the sound of talking.

We have a short rest, drink locally grown

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Rizhao tea and eat strawberries from a neighbour's garden before going out to explore the village.

Village views

Their home opens onto a narrow alley just off a main street flanked by similar designed homes. Their pale-yellow walls, decorated in faded red or blue slogans, glow under the heat of the sun. Some homes I notice are securely locked and I look through a hole in a wall of one to see the courtyard overgrown with coarse shrubs and saplings; evidence the owners have left for the city. Occasionally there would be a newer building, noticeable by the increased use of brick, higher walls and grander doors. In other areas they are older, mostly empty and dry stone construction in poor repair. In some cases, they have fallen to rubble and trees grow thick in the courtyards and under the collapsed roofs like a civilization lost to the jungle.

It is very peaceful, just the birds, the intermittent bark of a dog or cluck of a chicken. Occasionally we meet other residents, older people introduced as aunts or



by Paula Taylor

FARMING NOT A CAREER CHOICE

Farming in China means hard work and humble income.

Many parents who have a profession such as Teacher, Lawyer, Doctor etc. hope that their children will follow them in this line of work.

Company owners also likewise want their children to inherit the family business. There are some jobs that parents definitely do not want their children to follow them into, i.e. cleaning, sweeping the streets, rubbish collection etc. Whilst these jobs are essential, there is no-one that would wish this for their children. The majority of parents are struggling in order to give their children a better life.

England is an agricultural country and farming is an honourable profession. There are no poor farmers and it is held in high esteem. I marvel at the fact that we can go into shops and buy all manner of produce that has been grown. It would be good to take time occasionally to think about where the things we buy come from. After all a loaf of bread obviously didn't start life as a perfect loaf of bread, there was hard labour carried out by some farmer somewhere to produce the essential crops. I often think about this kind of thing because I really do not have green fingers. My latest, easiest to grow plant has just given up trying to exist under my care,

most of them do – it is just a matter of time. Each time I buy a new plant I try not to get too attached to it as I know I will be consigning its dry, shrivelled up remains to the dustbin. If I had to depend on myself to grow food crops, I would starve to death.

FARMING? NO THANKS!

Farming is not so highly esteemed as a job in China, city people have no desire to take up this kind of occupation, as it is a notoriously hard way of life for little reward. Farmers do not even want their children to do this kind of business and strive to save up every hard earned bit of money in order to send their children to university, so that they do not have to suffer the way their parents do.

Do the offspring of farmers want to farm? No they do not. Do they actually want to go to university which could be a way out of their countryside prison? No, not all of them. Unfortunately the drop-out rate at high school level for the children of farmers is extremely high. They also succumb to traditional outdated views to get married early and start a family. Many of them get married at the age of 17, which of course is far too young and leaves them ill-equipped to have the necessary skills to support a family, because to add to the problem, they are not educated to satisfy

China's demanding standards, the job market for city dwellers is already highly competitive, and they do not want to farm so their options are limited. They want to live in cities as although country life is markedly different from city life, they are surprisingly internet savvy and think they know what is going on. City life looks glamorous and fast paced, you can seemingly do anything. It goes without saying that of course there are more opportunities to find work in the city, but of course there are requirements. Having been seduced by the things they see on the

THEY ACTUALLY END UP WORSE OFF THAN THEIR PARENTS, BEING UNABLE/UNWILLING TO EFFICIENTLY FARM, SOME ARE ALREADY SADDLED WITH THE BURDEN OF RAISING A FAMILY WITH A LIMITED INCOME, AND THEY STILL HAVE THEIR HOPES AND DREAMS THAT WILL NEVER BE MATERIALISED.