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A SURVEY ON IMPLEMENTATIONS OF CHINESE NEW FARMERS' EDUCATION POLICIES: THE CASE OF HEBEI PROVINCE

Abstract

In order to realise the strategic aim of constructing new socialist rural communities in the 21st century, 'new farmers' education' has been placed on the Chinese government's agenda and will soon become a very important issue of Chinese adult education in both research and its practice. As an adult educational researcher I first collected a series of these kinds of policies from which to extract and interpret the practical plans and applications of the 'new farmers' education' in China. Then I collected the empirical data concerning the implementation of policies through field surveys and interviews in the countryside of the Hebei Province. Based on which, I mainly argue and summarise several aspects of such policy implementations such as the operations, characteristics and difficulties.

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RELEVAMIENTO SOBRE LAS IMPLEMENTACIONES DE NUEVAS POLÍTICAS EDUCATIVAS DE AGRICULTORES CHINOS: EL CASO DE LA PROVINCIA HEBEI

Resumen

Con el fin de lograr la meta estratégica de construir un nuevo campo socialista en el siglo XXI, 'la nueva educación de agricultores' se ha establecido en la agenda del gobierno chino, y pronto se transformará en un aspecto muy importante de la educación de personas adultas en China tanto en la investigación como en la práctica. Como investigadora en educación, primero recabé una serie de este tipo de políticas de las cuales extraer e interpretar los planes y aplicaciones prácticos de la 'nueva educación de agricultores' en China. Luego, recabé datos empíricos relativos a la implementación de políticas mediante estudios de campo y entrevistas en el campo de la Provincia de Hebei. Sobre esta base, principalmente expongo y resumo diversos aspectos de las implementaciones de políticas tales como sus operaciones, características, dificultades y problemas, entre otros.

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The policy essentials

In October 2005, the Fifth Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China was convened, and it was decided that in order to construct the new socialist countryside, 'China has to cultivate new farmers who have literacy, know how to use technology, and conduct business. That means the farmers have to improve their whole qualities and capacities' (CPC Central Committee, 2005, paragraph 14). The education of new farmers has been seen as an important basis of the construction of the new socialist countryside, and a necessary requirement for the harmonious development of both urban and rural areas, and as an important approach in increasing the income of farmers. Subsequently, in order to put the spirit of this session into practice, the party and government have drafted a series of relevant policies around the subject of new farmers' education. The documents signed jointly or singly by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee or the Chinese State Department include policies such as: the 'Decision of Rapidly Developing Vocational Education' in November 2005; the 'Outline of Action Programme of Scientific Quality for All Chinese Citizens' in March 2006; 'Several Notions of How to Resolve Problems of the Farmer-Turned Workers' in March 2006; and 'Several Notions of Developing Modern Agriculture and Improving Construction of the Socialist New Countryside' in January 2007, among others.

The document titled, 'Working Programme of the Actions of Farmers' Scientific Quality' was signed jointly by 14 ministries and commissions such as

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the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Labour and Social Security, Ministry of Education, etc., in June 2006, and ‘the Temporary Management Rules of Central Financial Subsidy of New Farmers’ Science and Technology Training’ was signed by the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Agriculture in December 2006. The documents above have since provided the basic operational framework for new farmers’ education. The following comprise the essentials of said policy.

First, the relevant departments should co-operate with each other in management. For example, the ministries and commissions should establish a special co-operative group for the actions of farmers’ scientific quality, and appoint their directors to be the leaders or members of the group. The group should convene one or two conferences every year to discuss or research the important problems of practical work, which would be very helpful to assign tasks and coordinate relationships between ministries and commissions (Ministry of Agriculture, China Association for Science and Technology, 2006, paragraph 8).

Second, educational institutes should be established and operational. For example, ‘institutes should continuously put their resources and functions into effect, such as adult literacy and technique schools in villages and towns, broadcast and television schools for agriculture, and other various institutes for the popularisation and training of agricultural techniques’ (Ministry of Agriculture, China Association for Science and Technology, 2006, paragraph 40).

Third, financial funding should be provided and guaranteed for the educational institutions. For example, ‘central finance would establish a special subsidy fund for the ‘programme of new farmers’ science and technology training’, which would be in co-operation with the ‘Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Finance’ (Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Agriculture, 2006, paragraph 1). Meanwhile, the document also provided strict management rules for the special fund, such as its object group, application, appropriation, management, supervision, etc.

Fourth, disadvantaged groups in the countryside should receive more attention, especially ‘village women, and the farmers in undeveloped areas, minority areas, poor areas, and the former revolutionary areas’ (State Department, 2006, paragraph 32).

Finally, practical skills should be the primary emphasis of farmers’ training. For example ‘the training of agricultural production skills should be widely developed, the training programme of new farmers’ science and technology should be expanded ... and the training programme of practical talented farmers in the new countryside should be organised and operated’ (State Department, 2007, paragraph 35).

Survey scope and research methods

In order to understand the real situations and implications of the implementation of the 'new farmers' education' policy, I led a special research group in conducting field work in eight counties and cities of Hebei Province, including Tang County, Wei County, Xingtang County, Longhua County, Xuanhua County, Changli County, Dingzhou City and Qian'an City. These eight counties and cities represent all of the undeveloped areas, developing areas, and developed areas of Hebei Province, ensuring strong diversity and full representation of participants in the research. Our research approach for data collection and analysis was positivist.

First of all, the research group developed five separate questionnaires for the five different groups who were related to the training programme, including a 'Survey on Status Quo of Farmers' Training in Hebei Province' (filled out by ordinary farmers), a 'Survey on Status Quo of Labour-transfer Training of Countryside in Hebei Province' (filled out by farmers who have been the learners of this training programme), a 'Survey on Status Quo of the New Farmers' Education in Hebei Province' (filled out by principals of the farmer education departments), a 'Survey on Status Quo of the Farmer Education Institutes in Hebei Province' (filled out by principals of farmer education institutes), and a 'Survey on Status Quo of Farmer Education Teachers in Hebei Province' (filled out by teachers of farmer education).

At the time of writing, 1,298 questionnaires had been completed under the instruction of researchers and 1,296 valid surveys had been returned, which accounts for a return and completion rate of 99.85 per cent. Of these, 489 were completed by ordinary farmers, 415 were completed by farmers who were learners as a consequence of countryside labour-transfer training, 66 were completed by farmers who were learners as a consequence of countryside labour-transfer training and had already been transferred to be enterprise workers, 228 were completed by the teachers in training institutes, 42 were completed by the leaders and workers of training institutes, and 56 were completed by the principals of party and administration offices directly attached to the counties. Additionally, our group organised eight group interviews with 116 participants, and collected archival data, including 65 items such as documents, teaching materials, etc. from the surveyed counties and cities.

After the completion of the field research work, we statistically analysed and then summarised the original empirical data for Hebei Province. Based on these analyses we could formulate a basic picture of the general status of the implementation of related policies for 'new farmers' education' in China. The major discoveries or consequences are as follows.

Policy implementation and subsequent effects

Since the launching of the programme for labour-transfer training in the countryside (also called the Sunshine Programme) it has been nearly three years since the new farmers' education policies were implemented in Hebei Province. From the start of the programme particular developing traces and periodic effects have been revealed. These will be discussed in the sections below.

Systems and activities of implementation

The management system

All the party and administration departments of the surveyed counties and cities undertook their own programmes of training in their own administrative scope. Meanwhile, they also co-operated with each other and established an integral and reasonable management system for new farmers' education, mainly taking charge of the organisation and management work for project planning, funds appropriation, resource integration, etc.

The teaching system

Under the lead of the management system, the eight counties and cities have also established teaching systems to operate the new farmers' education concretely. These have included centres for vocational education, centres for employment training, adult schools in villages and towns, broadcast and television schools of agriculture, offices for the popularisation of science and technology (which were attached to the departments separately), non-government training schools, and so on. Among these, the centres for vocational education have been strengthened and reinforced with regard to equipment, teachers, specialty courses, and so on. The teaching system has not only involved the institutions of traditional school education and public education, but also institutions of social and private education.

Funding contributions

In the 'Notification of How to Actualise the Sunshine Programme of Labour-Transfer Training of the Countryside in 2007,' which was jointly signed by the Department of Labour and Social Security, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Finance of Hebei Province, it was stated that 'As it is decided by the central-level and province-level financial departments, the standard of special subsidy fund in 2007 is that each learner of the Demonstrative Skill-training Programme should receive a 270 CNY (Chinese Yuan, the official base unit of currency) subsidy; each learner of the Carve-out Programme should receive 1,000 CNY; each learner of the Agricultural Science and Technology Training Programme should receive 150 CNY; each learner of Introductory Training Programme should receive not more than 5 CNY, which is mainly used for introductory training and propaganda for the Sunshine Programme'

(Department of Labour and Social Security in Hebei Province, 2007, paragraph 9). Compared to 2005 the subsidised funding in 2007 has increased by between 15.30 per cent and 66.67 per cent.

Those to be trained

Based on the view of social divisions and social roles, training objectives involve a large range of farmer groups such as pre-employment agricultural workers, city-bound rural workers, excellent farmers, farmer technicians, farming enterprisers, village women, ordinary farmers, village cadres, and so on. From another perspective this means training also involves all groups of adult farmers not less than 16 years of age.

The training for these eight counties and cities mainly includes: labour-transfer training, practical-skill training, science and technology training programmes, the 'bringing agricultural science and technology into farmers' families' policy, the 'Green certificate programme,' the 'Green the homestead and enrich the people programme,' 'One university student helps one village,' law-popularisation education, and spiritual-civilisation education. Generally speaking, the surveyed counties and cities have established a lifelong-education system for farmers which is mainly lead by local governments, undertaken by local educational departments, science and technology departments, and with the co-operation of the school education system and the social education system.

The effects of implementation

The effects of implementation are mainly reflected in the training of farmers, which we can see from the following survey results.

The proportion of trainees

There were 489 surveyed farmers in eight sample villages who were chosen from the eight surveyed counties and cities. Within this sample the proportion of trained farmers is 96.54 per cent. This shows how powerful the popularisation and implementation of the policies has been in the rural areas. On the other hand, it is also in accordance with the policies for the farmer groups' realistic living needs.

Attitude towards training

The sample consisted of 481 students who were chosen as having participated in or finished the labour-transfer training programme. According to the students' answers in the questionnaires, their attitude toward the training was as follows:

When answering the question 'How about the worthiness of your training?' 35.44 per cent of the students selected 'very worthy,' and 41.36 per cent of the students chose 'worthy,' for a total of 76.80 per cent of responses.

When answering the question ‘Do you feel satisfied with your training?’ 29.83 per cent of the students chose ‘very satisfied,’ 46.28 per cent of the students chose ‘ordinarily satisfied,’ and 19.61 per cent of the students chose ‘not bad,’ for a total of 95.72 per cent of the responses.

As can be seen from the data, most of the farmer-students responded with a positive attitude towards their training.

Gains after training

According to the survey results the students’ gains after the labour-transfer training were scored as follows: 53.22 per cent participants claimed to have learned new skills; 23.82 per cent had learned new knowledge; 12.85 per cent had improved their learning capacities; 7.69 per cent had received new information; 2.08 per cent had selected ‘other gains;’ and 0.34 per cent had selected ‘no gain.’ That is to say most of the respondents had gained something from their training. What’s more, in the question regarding ‘the degree of their gains,’ 27.41 per cent of the students responded ‘great;’ 42.96 per cent selected ‘a lot;’ 26.53 per cent selected ‘ordinary;’ and 3.02 per cent chose ‘not so much’. Thus it can be seen that the training has had very obvious effects on the improvement of the trainees’ knowledge, skills, capacities, attitude, and so on.

Change in economic incomes

Based on the survey results regarding income-increase status in 2006 as a result of the improvement in farmers’ agricultural skills, we found that 45.14 per cent of the respondents had increased their incomes by less than 500 CNY; 10.56 per cent of the respondents had increased their incomes by between 500 to 1,000 CNY; and 20.74 per cent of the respondents had increased their income by more than 1,000 CNY. More concretely, according to the analysis of the Tang County’s survey data, for the 47 farmers who participated in or completed the training programme, the average increase in income was 399.57 CNY; there were also seven untrained farmers, whose average income increase was 58.57 CNY. As a result of the provided training, the average increase in income for the trained farmers was 6.82 times greater than that of the untrained farmers, which means the training has had an obvious effect on the income-increase of farmers. On another level this also means that the training has helped convert the surplus labour forces of the countryside into useful human resources. In a word the policy implementations of the new farmers’ education have had obvious effects on the Hebei Province, and have already met the original intentions and anticipations of policy design.

New findings from the research

In the process of conducting this research we discovered new problems that were caused by the policy design when local realities were encountered.

Local features of farmers' education

The choice of educational aims

When answering the question 'What do you learn for?' 41.43 per cent of the respondents chose 'to improve planting skills;' 18.00 per cent of the respondents chose 'to learn how to work in cities and increase incomes there;' 21.29 per cent of the respondents chose 'to get the capacities of starting his or her own 'small business;'' 11.52 per cent of the respondents chose 'to learn literacy and knowledge;' 7.77 per cent chose 'to broaden perspectives.' As we can see, 80.72 per cent of the informants chose one of the first three answers, directly related to income increase. Therefore, farmers' educational aims were mainly economically and income driven. At the same time, however, we were delighted to find a considerable proportion of the other answers also included responses such as 'to learn culture,' 'to broaden perspectives' and so on, which constitutes a higher-level and less utilitarian motivation for learning.

The choice in length of educational programmes

Of the ordinary farmers surveyed, 78.67 per cent of the respondents had joined short-term training programmes of less than 30 days. Of those, 63.63 per cent of the respondents' training term was less than 19 days. As for the students in labour-transfer training programmes, 82.1 per cent of the students' training terms were longer than one week. Additionally, the other surveyed farmers mainly joined full-time training, night-school training, weekend-school training, collective training, and similar programmes with terms of less than one week. As revealed by the data, most of the participants were accustomed to participating in short-term training with terms of 7 to 20 days.

The choice of educational content

According to the survey results, the educational content of training programmes mainly involved literacy, policies, cultural knowledge, science and technology, agricultural skills, the knowledge and skills of how to work in cities, capacities to start a business, harvesting techniques, and legal knowledge. However, the major topic was agricultural skills, accounting for 60.82 per cent of all respondents.

The choice of educational places

According to the respondents' answers, the location of their training included home, farmland, adult schools in villages and towns, centres for vocational education of counties, agricultural broadcast and television schools of counties, the Internet, and so on. Of the respondents, 25.53 per cent participated in training at home, and 34.32 per cent participated on farmland.

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The choice of educational forms

When answering the question ‘What is your favourite training form?’ 41.34 per cent of the respondents selected ‘explanation combined with real planting activities;’ 20.90 per cent of the respondents selected ‘lecture;’ and 15.04 per cent of the respondents chose ‘television,’ for a sum of 77.28 per cent. The other response options included individual tutorship, broadcast, and Internet.

The choice of teachers

When answering the question ‘Who do you prefer for teachers?’ 24.25 per cent of the respondents answered ‘local technicians’ and 26.54 per cent responded ‘local able persons’ for a total of about 50 per cent. Beside this, 15.84 per cent chose ‘teachers at adult schools of villages and towns,’ 13.88 per cent chose ‘teachers at the centres for vocational education in counties,’ 7.12 per cent chose ‘university teachers,’ 3.82 per cent chose ‘university students’ and 3.33 per cent chose ‘students of the centres for vocational education in counties.’ As the data shows, local technicians and local able persons are the primary teachers of new farmers’ education. For example Mansa Village is a special village of red jujube planting in Xingtang County. It mainly employs technicians from the Forestry Bureau in Xingtang County as professional teachers to instruct planting and managing skills for red jujube to its villagers. So when answering the same question above in Mansa Village, 38.79 per cent of the villagers responded ‘the local technicians’ of the Forestry Bureau as their preferred teachers.

The choice of how to help the poor

When answering the question ‘What would be the most helpful way or thing in assisting the poor in their plight?’ 36.86 per cent of the respondents answered ‘technique,’ 22.68 per cent of respondents answered ‘loan cash,’ 18.57 per cent of respondents answered ‘training,’ 9.22 per cent of respondents answered ‘improve learning skills,’ 6.14 per cent of respondents answered ‘food supplies,’ 5.23 per cent of respondents answered ‘medical treatment’ and 1.31 per cent of respondents answered ‘clothing.’ As we can see, ‘technique,’ ‘training,’ and ‘learning skills’ accounted for 64.65 per cent of the selected answers, meaning they are already the main preference of assistance for most farmers.

Difficulties and problems

However, in the process of policy implementation we still face some unexpected troubles and problems, which we and others should pay more attention to.

Farmers’ low levels of literacy

The collected demographic information revealed that 77.63 per cent of the respondents were at an educational level of junior high school or lower. The farmers’ capacities for learning new knowledge and new skills and basic literacy

skills are so low that they pose a significant barrier in learning and are a restricting factor in the further development of farmers' education.

Lack of identification with training

In response to the question about poverty assistance, 35.35 per cent of the respondents chose material supports such as 'ready money,' 'food supplies,' 'clothing' and 'medical treatment.' Notably, of the respondents from the four undeveloped counties of Tang County, Wei County, Xingtang County and Longhua County, 46.77 per cent chose material supports. Compared to the eight surveyed counties and cities, this proportion is 30.40 per cent greater than average. Thus it can be seen that many of the farmers still did not identify closely with the training programmes. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, many farmers, especially in the poor area of Hebei Province, are at the level of existence need, they are still in more need than in the learning and education area. And according to the data from the collective interviews we also found that many farmers did not display positive attitudes about joining the training programmes.

The low return rate of training

The prime problem is the popularisation of the training programmes: 39.18 per cent of respondents still have not participated in agricultural skills training. Secondly, regarding the respondents who have participated, the development of their learned knowledge and skills is very limited due to the very short-term nature of their training programmes. The training also resulted in only a very small increase in their incomes. For example, only about half of participants were able to increase their income by between 10 to 500 CNY each year. There were still 52.94 per cent of participants who had been trained but did not see an income increase, or did not benefit in any real terms from their income increase due to rapid marketing developments and changes. Furthermore, 22.05 per cent of the respondents did not respond to the survey question regarding 'income-increase.'

The lack of training resources

In response to the question 'What is the most lacking resource in your training institute?' 36.02 per cent of the respondents chose 'equipment,' 20.99 per cent of respondents chose 'professional teachers,' 17.10 per cent of respondents chose 'teaching places,' 14.4 per cent of respondents chose 'training expenses,' and 13.32 per cent of respondents chose 'special managers.' In the collective interviews most of the farmer trainees, front-line managers, and teachers called for more financial support for the improvement of training and teaching effectiveness.

The lack of incentive mechanisms

According to the research results for the collective interviews, some of the educational institutes and their teachers have not played their roles or executed their functions as well as they should have. The main reasons for this are provided by the comments from many managers and trainers in the collective interviews. First, there are very few encouraging and inspiring measures to reward their education-related work. Second, the working achievements of farmers' education are still not related to the work-examination system of the party and administration in most of the surveyed counties and cities.

Conclusion

As a result of the implementation of the new farmers' education policies in Hebei Province, local farmers have improved their literacy and capacities through the process of training and learning. Consequently, the policy blueprint has been realised to some extent. Meanwhile the policies themselves have also been extended by local farmers and their education, and express many grass-roots features, preferences, difficulties and problems of new farmers' education. These cannot only be taken as useful experiences and references for the amendment of future policies and further detailing and popularising, but also to help foresee the developing orientation and focal tasks of new farmers' education in the future.

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