

“ They emerged from the long mountain tunnel into the land of chestnuts. A gush of breeze whispered in the air that was thick with the tweets of cicadas on the fruitful trees. Then, they heard the hustle and bustle down the mountains inside the village; the market was even busier than normal, though the people are as poor as usual. Without further lingering, the reporters walked passed, along with the loud singing voice of the children they were here to see.”

——*A Study in Luotian Leading Agriculture Industry*

## Things Before Modern Rural Vitalization



Newly harvested chestnuts. PHOTO/ VISUAL CHINA

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Students are visiting Qinghua University. PHOTO/ Xiaobo Jiang

## A miracle in Luotian chestnut industry

*“It’s a miracle that they made it—Welcome to Peking University.”*

Earlier this summer, with the word “miracle” highlighted, a school trip which organized by Luotian Dongan River Primary school hit the internet. More than ten news press reported the trip: funded entirely by school’s sales revenue of the chestnuts, the train traveled thousands of miles, across countless mountains and boundless sea, bringing the children to look

ahead into their future face to face.

Like many other professional or amateur chestnuts growers in Luotian, Dongan River Primary school possessed a mountain in the back which was bare in any other values except the densely populated chestnut trees. Unlike many other professional or amateur chestnuts growers, Dongan

River Primary school didn’t actually ‘sell’ the chestnuts; they specialized in finding people to “adopt” the chestnut trees: Three hundred yuan for a whole year’s chestnuts on your adopted tree. With chestnut adoption, they managed to raise enough money for both classroom fitting and the cross-province trip.

**“Luotian has great chestnuts with absolute first-class quality and quantity, yet we still ended up like this.”**

“It’s actually far more inconvenient than just collecting the chestnuts from the tree and throw them to a wholesaler.” Headmaster Jiang answered, with obvious bitterness and oblivious relief in his voice, being grateful that the school nevertheless managed to find a “long detour” from the market and reached a far more promising future than its counterparts. “But here in Luotian, the last was good for us is the only way left to choose.

We have great chestnuts - Luotian has great chestnuts with absolute first-class quality and quantity, yet we still ended up like this.



Children with adopted trees.

PHOTO/ Xiaobo Jiang

**“Is the success really a success, or just a light to lit the roadblock sign?”**

### **Dreadful status quo of Luotian chestnut industry**

As for Luotian, since centuries ago, it has been known as the land of chestnut. Chestnut trees grow naturally all around the mountains in more than 70 different kinds, while their fruits being distinctively large in size and full in taste.

According to Luotian chestnut industrialization report, since the government set the chestnut agriculture as the leading industry for the whole county in the 1980s, the chestnut plantation has grown stable to reach 1,000,000 arcs, producing more than 30,000,000-kilogram chestnuts each year. Furthermore, responding to the nation’s

call of ‘high-tech in low-tech agriculture’ in recent years, merely in the last decade, the cost of scientific research on chestnuts has exceeded 5,000,000 yuan. Up to now, the chestnut industry makes up 39.6% of the county's entire GDP.

Nevertheless, as exactly what Headmaster Jiang referred to, in the end, the county was still mostly known for its poverty rather than its chestnut, ranking the 15th poorest county in 2017.

“Is the success really a success, or just a light to lit the roadblock sign?” Wholesaler Ming shrugged. He has been in the chestnut business for more than 20 years, witnessing the rise and fall of the industry as well as Luotian. Concerning the success of Dongan River Primary school, he said it was clever. “If you

are part of us, you would tell immediately: we are not making money, thousands of hundreds of the farmers out there are not making money. It’s an abyss. No matter how much was invested, series of experts come back and forth, no one is making anything out of it.”

## SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

Being a typical Chinese county, Luotian's agriculture industry is mainly constituted by small farmers. Admiring the shining miles of crops and fully mechanized operation in irrigation, fertilizing and sunbathing, modern farming is also referred to as the "big agriculture" in Mandarin. On the contrary, the mode of cultivating performed by Luotian farmers, and most farmers elsewhere in China, is referred to as "small agriculture." Farming on the sparse lands in the gaps of mountains, it is unlikely for Chinese farmers to develop a "big agriculture" farming technique as the vast and sparsely populated Northwest America.

Like Headmaster Jiang, most people participating in agriculture industry here take charge of one piece of land individually, working for it throughout the year, packing the crops to sell to the wholesalers and in the end barely feeding their own families as the fruit of their labors. As the scope and the quality of farming improves, the agriculture industry fails to reward anyone, except the capitalists, within it. "You must be kidding. Those profitable ecolodges are never part of our life. Big companies invest in them and continue to purchase their notable fresh food supply from us,

with the same dismal price." Mr. Ming replied to my concerns.

Things happened in Luotian is not something hard to find in China. In Jiangsu Pizhou, ginkgo is both the landmark and the leading industry. But as the ginkgo yields increased by 140% by the past two years, individual real income is falling. "Three years ago, I grew rice for a living and for my life. Working like some cattle and living like a pig." In Tianjin, farmer Zhao introduced himself like this. "But I have made a move and am feeding on delivering the freshest vegetables to those health nuts in cities right now. They order vegetables from the internet and my cooperative members send the shopping baskets to them before 7 a.m." To the farmers, those who escaped thrived, and the future of Chinese traditional farming seems even dismal and hopeless in their eyes.



A farmer, picking chestnuts. PHOTO/ Unknown

*“Whether the chestnut industry of Luotian is developed?”*

*When we asked around about people's opinions on the controversial Luotian chestnut industry, the results diverged mostly in three aspects: farming, manufacturing, and marketing.*

**“Around 39% of the interviewee responded ‘mostly developed’”**

## An attempt to dig on underlying reasons

In cultivating stage, some argue that the last few decades, the lack of agriculture knowledge gives rise to the hybridization of different chestnut breeds, which confuses the buyers about the quality of Luotian chestnuts. Others argue that succulence of chestnuts makes storing and processing crucial to the overall quality. However, lagged processing machines yields a low rate of transforming raw chestnuts to market goods; insufficient icehouse even leads to vast waste of chestnuts. Finally, in the marketing stage, wholesalers suggest that scattered selling strategy deprives farmers of the

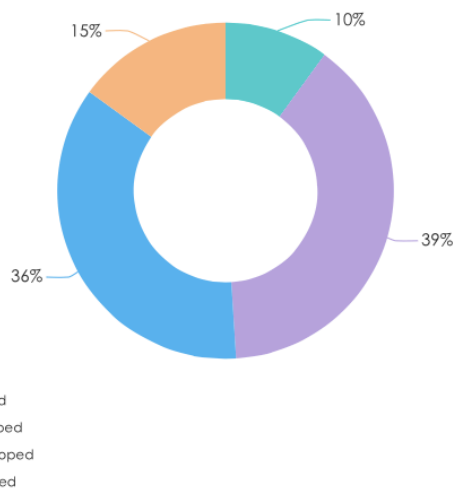
benefit of economics of scale: they prefer buying chestnuts from one supplier who could meet all demands, but farmers in Luotian sell their chestnuts independently, thus losing attractiveness and competitiveness among wholesalers.

It seems every person has a theory about why this is going on. Nevertheless, as we continue to ask how they have or have planned to adapt the situation or even alter it, everyone suddenly became silent and fail to answer the question in a puzzling face.

To be more specific and cautious about the finding, our group conducted a field research to interview the Luotian residents one by one. Until July 21st, we have visited 113 families and individuals in Luotian. Their words reveal the answer partially.

To the question “Whether the chestnut industry of Luotian is developed”, around 39% of the interviewee responded “mostly developed” and 10% of the interviewee responded “fully developed”. Meanwhile, when we were asking “Yes or No” about the status quo of devoting to chestnut industry, more than 60% of them selected “time-consuming”, “laborious”, “low profit”, and “other industries are more

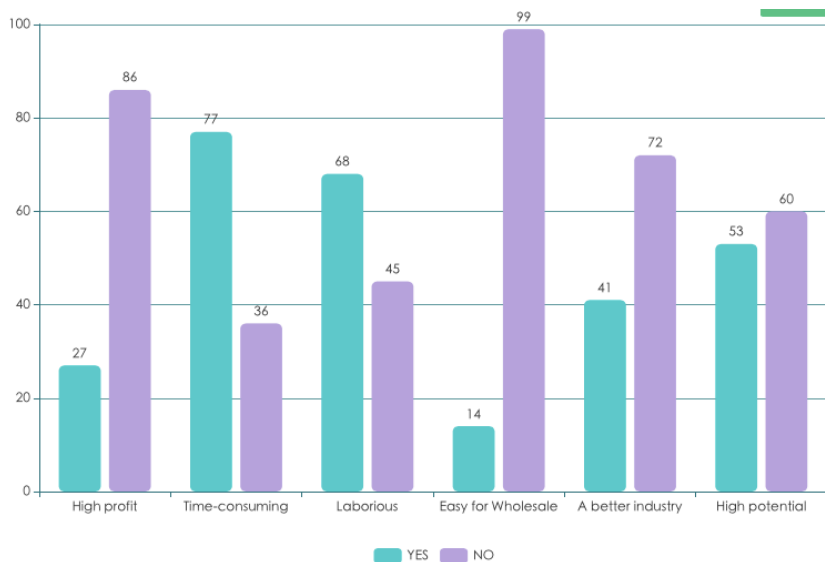
profitable”. On the contrary, less than 20% of farmers mentioned “easy for wholesale”, and below 5% of farmers selected “high potential.”



Whether the chestnut industry of Luotian is developed?

An irony manifests itself here: on one hand, most of the local residents perceive Luotian chestnut industry as developed, while on the other hand, seeing from their own perspective, they remark that the industry is laborious and profitless.

“Yes or No” Selection



From such self-contradictory opinions, we the traces of the small-scale peasant consciousness: a shared trait originates from small agriculture farmers that restrict development or innovation by narrow-mindedness, complacency, and conformism.

Nevertheless, it's just this time, such a problem is not just restricted to the farmers. People with such consciousness tend to focus on self-related pieces and become reluctant to take further risks after a small reward based on experience. That's

probably why people give such distinct answers when we asked actually the same question from two different sides. Sticking to tradition and giving up new modes of thinking, people noticed that there is a gap between the great quality and low market price; however, when people complained about that, they don't attempt to change it or adapt to it like what Dongan River Primary school did. In fact, they unconsciously looked down on them by referring to the word 'escape.'

## LOOKING AHEAD

A new era is coming. Known as a “giant agricultural country”, China is facing a crucial transition point. Though the urbanization rate in China is hitting 58.52% by the end of 2017, above 5.8 billion people still resided in the rural area. More striking data render that even though Chinese urbanization rate approaches the level of the developed country average, 2.25 billion people are still farmers. Farming is a way of living we won't walk past and farmers are a group of people we will never leave behind.

According to the government report in the early March, China is proposing to support rural vitalization with a new round of industry vitalization. 80,000,000 acres of new high standard agricultural fields are on their way. Nevertheless, as the nation is advocating relentlessly for the “rural vitalization”, the life of farmers is not getting better. A counter-acting force is balancing the relative poverty. It could be the lack of education in rural areas; it could be the broken industry chain, from the field to the market, from the first sector to the third sector; it could be the capital exploitation; it

could also be the small-scale peasant consciousness that hindering people within the industry to reflect on themselves and take risks to innovate as the world go along. These are the things that need to be figured out and to be settled before once again invest billions into the agriculture industry.

**“When we urged so eagerly  
for a battle,  
a triumph, a vitalization,  
we also need a moment  
to hold a second  
and seriously consider  
what is the real problem.  
Otherwise,  
we are just summoning  
another abyss.”**

