

Making Sense of: Three Rural Issues (san nong wen ti)

Brief Definition:

The term **Three Rural Issues** (三农问题, **san nong wen ti**) is widely used in policy documents, academic papers and media articles to describe the three interrelated issues of agriculture, rural areas and farmers. These issues and their relationship to each other are a central focus of the Chinese government's work. The term was first used officially in 2003 by then Premier Zhu Rongji in his Government Working Report delivered at the People's Congress (Zhu, 2003). Entering the 14th five-year plan period (2021-2025), the Chinese government made the implementation of the rural vitalization strategy (RVS) the focus of its work on Three Rural Issues.

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Three Rural Issues refers to a wide range of issues related to agriculture, rural areas and farmers. The term is widely cited in government policy documents, academic papers and public media regarding agriculture, rural areas and farmers. In his report delivered at the 19th Party Congress, Chinese President Xi Jinping said: "Issues relating to agriculture, rural areas and farmers are fundamental to China as they directly concern our country's stability and our people's wellbeing. Addressing Three Rural Issues should have a central place on the work agenda of the Party, and we must prioritize the development of agriculture and rural areas" (Xi, 2017).

There are other terms derived from Three Rural Issues, e.g., "three rural policies" which refers to the policies relating to agriculture, rural areas and farmers. In 2019, the title of China's No.1 Document was "Opinions on Prioritizing Agricultural Development and Advancing 'Three Rural' Work" (State Council, 2019). Further similar terms are "three rural work", "three rural research", "three rural services" etc.

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History

The term Three Rural Issues was first used in 1996 by Wen Tiejun, an economist and rural development expert, and has been widely quoted by media and officials since then (Xiang, 2017). It was first used officially in 2003 by then Premier Zhu Rongji in his Government Working Report delivered at the People's Congress (Zhu, 2003). The report pointed out that the government had consistently given priority to solve the problems regarding the Three Rural Issues and to consolidate the position of agriculture as the foundation of the national economy. The report also outlined the specific measures that the government had taken to address Three Rural Issues which included advancing structural readjustment in agriculture, guiding farmers to grow crops and select crop varieties according to market demand, deepening the reform of the grain and cotton distribution systems to let market forces direct the buying and selling of grain and cotton as well as carrying out pilot reforms of taxes and administrative charges in rural areas to address the problem of excessive burden on farmers.

However, Three Rural Issues has been the work priority for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for a century. In his recent paper, Tang Renjian, Chinese Agriculture Minister, outlined the trajectory of the Party's work on Three Rural Issues (Tang, 2021). During the period of the New Democratic Revolution (before 1949), the CPC implemented the "land to the tiller" initiative, which was first proposed by Sun Yat-sen in 1924 (Jia and Liu, 2008), to help the poor peasant farmers gain the land for cultivation. By doing so, the CPC won the support of the vast majority of people and finally the victory of the Chinese revolution.

In the early stages of socialist China, "agriculture, rural areas and farmers" laid an important foundation for the establishment and development of a socialist country. Since the rural reform started in the late 1970s, the significant measures taken by the CPC and the government on Three Rural Issues included launching a household contract responsibility system, developing rural village and township industries, abolishing the restriction on labor flow from rural to urban areas which allowed millions of rural migrant workers (over 280 million in 2020) working in the cities as well as providing the labor force for the rapid urbanization and industries such as manufacture, construction and services.

Analysis

Entering the 14th five-year plan period (2021-2025), the Chinese government made the implementation of the rural vitalization strategy (RVS) the focus of its work on Three Rural Issues".

Rural Vitalization as the New Focus of the Three Rural Issues

In 2017, the Chinese government launched the "Rural Vitalization Strategy" (RVS) and regarded it as a national strategy (Xi, 2017). Aim of the strategy is to build rural areas with thriving businesses, pleasant living environments, good social etiquette and civility, effective governance and prosperity. Its key components are:

- Consolidate and improve the basic rural operation system as well as advance the reform of the rural land system
- Establish industrial, production and business operation systems for modern agriculture as well as improve the systems for supporting and protecting agriculture
- Develop appropriately scaled agricultural operations of various forms (including family farms, cooperatives, agricultural enterprises etc.)
- Promote the integrated development of the primary, secondary and tertiary industries in rural areas
- Train professional rural service personnel who have a good knowledge of agriculture, "love our rural areas" and care about rural people.

Following the No.1 Document in 2019 with the priorities rural and agriculture development, the 2021 No.1 Document further declared to make Three Rural Issues the top priority of its work, and rural revitalization a major task for realizing national rejuvenation (The State Council, 2021).

The Chinese government also released a series of policies supporting the implementation of the RVS. The following are some examples.

Land Consolidation and Development of Reasonable Large-scale Farms

Land consolidation and formation of reasonable large-scale farms are part of China's food security and rural vitalization strategies.

In November 2014, the central government published the "Opinions on Guiding the Orderly Circulation of Rural Land Management Rights to Development of Appropriate-scale Agricultural Operations" (The State Council, 2014). The document noted that land consolidation and appropriate-scale operation are the effective way to develop modern agriculture through optimizing the allocation of land resources and improving labor productivity, ensuring food security and the supply of major agricultural products as well as promoting the popularization and application of agricultural technologies, increasing agricultural efficiency and increasing farmers' incomes.

Supporting Smallholders

It recognised that smallholder farms will still exist in China for a long time to produce a large share of food and provide a safety-net for millions of rural people. Facilitating and enabling them to adopt improved practices for production, marketing and environment protection, and therefore gain better livelihood is an important part of China's agriculture modernization.

In February 2019, the "Guideline for promoting small household farmers' involvement in modern agricultural development" was released (The State Council, 2019). It aims to assist small household farmers to become involved in modern agriculture, speed up development of modern agriculture and rural areas as well as facilitate the strategy to revitalize rural areas.

Promote an integrated Urban-Rural Development

China will reduce the urban-rural gap in development and living standards. In May 2019, the Chinese government released the "Guidelines for Establishing the System Mechanism and Policy Framework for Integrated Urban-Rural Development" (The State Council, 2019). Measures include breaking down the barriers that restrict the free flow of resources – such as capital, talents and information – between urban and rural areas, improving rural public facilities and services, including education and health, expanding the channels to raise farmers' income as well as constantly narrowing the gap in living standards between urban and rural residents.

The No.1 Documents

The No.1 Document which is released by the central government at the beginning of every year is perhaps the most important policy document regarding the Three Rural Issues. It provides guidance on the works on Three Rural Issues by addressing the key issues in the current year. For example, the No.1 Document of 1982 dealt with the approval of the household contract responsibility system, that of 2004 with boosting farmers' incomes. The latest No.1 Document was released in February 2021. It outlined key measures for fully advancing rural vitalization, accelerating modernisation of agriculture and rural areas. Making effective transition from consolidating poverty alleviation outcomes to achieving rural vitalization, ensuring food security and ample supply of farm products (The State Council, 2021).

Looking Forward to the Next Five Years: The 14th Five-year Plan (2021-2025)

During the 14th Five-year Plan period, Three Rural Issues will be top priority in China and the rural revitalization strategy will be implemented. The agricultural and rural development agendas proposed in the 14th Five-year Plan include:

- Improve agricultural quality, efficiency and competitiveness

- Ensure national food security as well as improve the agricultural support and protection system
- Strictly protect the arable land as well as improve and upgrade land quality
- Push forward green transformation in agriculture, improve the green agriculture standard system and the certification system as well as control agricultural and rural pollution
- Advance agricultural supply-side reform and diversify the rural economy
- Carry out rural development initiatives
 - Strengthen the public service
 - Improve rural infrastructure such as water, electricity and roads
 - Improve the rural living environment
- Deepen rural reforms
 - Promote the urban-rural integrated development
 - Accelerate the formation of new agricultural business entities
 - Deepen the reform of the rural collective property rights system
 - Improve the rural financial service system and developing agricultural insurance.

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About the project

The Sino-German Agricultural Centre is a joint initiative of the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MARA). It was established in March 2015 as a central contact and information point and for coordinating bilateral cooperation between Germany and China in the agricultural and food sector. The DCZ brings together stakeholders from the public and private sector and the scientific community. It creates forums in which agricultural issues of common interest are addressed. The spectrum of the Sino-German cooperation in the agricultural sector is reflected in the three components of the DCZ: Agricultural Policy Dialogue, Agri-Food Business Dialogue and Scientific Dialogue.

Further information can be found on the project website: <https://dcz-china.org/en/the-project.html>.