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大食物观 *Da Shiwu Guan*

Making sense of China's "greater food" view

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DEFINITION

大食物观 *Da Shiwu Guan*: The “greater food” concept refers to a new view of the food supply, moving on from an emphasis on grain production to include food diversity, nutrition, and health. The concept emphasizes the need to ensure the effective supply of meat, dairy, vegetables, aquatic, and other diversified food products, while maintaining self-sufficiency in grain production.

Relevance

The term “greater food” has gained much attention in policy and science circles since it was mentioned by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the “Two Sessions”¹ in March 2022. At the congress, Xi urged policymakers to establish a “greater food” view of the food supply that, by providing more diversified and healthy diets, would better take into account changing lifestyles and “people’s need for a better life” (Xinhua 2022).

Since then, the term has been taken up by different national and international institutions, including the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences (CAAS), major Chinese agricultural universities, or the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). It has also figured prominently in

recent publications on how to improve China’s food supply.

History

The term “greater food” first appeared at the Central Rural Work Conference in December 2015. The conference called on policymakers to “establish a greater food view, take into account [the nation’s] entire land resources, and develop food resources in an all-around and multi-channel way to meet the increasingly diversified food consumption needs” of the Chinese people (Li and Huang, 2022).

The “greater food” concept also appeared in the 2016 No. 1 Document – China’s first policy document of the year that traditionally deals with agricultural and rural issues. According to the document, a “greater food” view was needed to optimize the structure of agricultural production, addressing imbalances in supply and demand (ibid).

Since then, the term has been used regularly to highlight the growing discrepancy

¹ The term refers to the yearly plenary meeting of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the

Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)—China’s top law makers and political advisors.

between a view of the food supply focused on grain production and a consumption pattern moving towards more diversified diets. By shifting the focus from “grain security” (粮食安全 *liangshi anquan*) to “food security” (食物安全 *shiwu anquan*), a “greater food” view would pay more attention to the nation’s grasslands, forests, and oceans and develop plants, animals, and microorganisms as new sources of food, Xi Jinping reiterated at the 2017 Central Rural Work Conference (ibid).

Following the renewed emphasis on the “greater food” concept at the 2022 Two Sessions, policy and science circles have been discussing how to implement the concept and what it will mean for China’s food security strategy. These discussions included, amongst others, a national expert consultation meeting held by the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in July 2022 as well as several seminars and workshops organized by the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences (CAAS 2022; Jiao et al. 2022). Two recent reports published in 2022, one by the Academy of Global Food Economics and Policy (AGFEP) at China Agricultural University and a joint report by CAAS and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs

(MARA), discuss how the “greater food” concept can be leveraged to optimize China’s food supply.

Analysis

From “grain security” to “food security”: a more holistic view of food supply

Ensuring food security has always been an important task for Chinese policymakers, but, historically, its focus has been on the production of staple grains. Indeed, the Chinese term for food security – *liangshi anquan* (粮食安全) – literally translates as “grain security”.

As China opened up in the late 1970s, the main goal of agricultural reform was to ensure that the nation could produce sufficient cereals to feed its population and leave behind the specter of recurring famines haunting China throughout its long history. Increasing grain yields became a top priority. In 1995, a White Paper on Food Security published by the State Council stated that China must maintain at least 95% self-sufficiency in the production of key grains (China State Council 1996) – a figure that, by and large, has remained the main

guideline for China's food security², while relatively looser goals apply to the production of other types of food. As a consequence, agricultural support policies such as farmer subsidies, minimum purchase prices, and stockpiling mechanisms have disproportionately focused on the production of staple grains.

However, rising living standards have led to a shift in diet away from cereals and towards more diversified foods based on animal proteins. According to the latest projections by MARA, within the next ten years, annual per capita consumption of poultry, beef, dairy, and aquatic products will increase to 18.6 kg, 7.5 kg, 63.2 kg, and 44.6 kg, respectively, accounting for average annual growth rates from 1.4% for meat to over 4% for dairy products. Meanwhile, the share of direct grain consumption will drop to 37%, with the remainder being used as animal feed or for industrial purposes (MARA 2022).

The growing importance of diversified food products is reflected in MARA's latest Five-Year Plan, released in December 2021. In

addition to the traditional emphasis on grain production, it sets high self-sufficiency targets for the production of poultry and eggs (100%), pork (95%), beef and mutton (85%), and dairy (70%) (MARA 2021). The new targets show that the government is paying more attention to the supply of animal protein. Yet, given the anticipated increase in demand and China's already strained agricultural resources, meeting these targets will not be easy.

Next to diversity, nutrition and health is another aspect largely absent from grain-centered views of the food supply. Since most Chinese now have enough calories and a variety of food, a balanced, healthy diet is becoming increasingly important. Nutrition-related diseases such as obesity and diabetes are skyrocketing as new consumption habits see the excessive intake of red meat, vegetable oils, and highly-processed foods. Meanwhile, awareness of the health benefits of eating whole-grain, unprocessed foods remains relatively weak (CAAS and MARA 2022).

² There have been subtle changes to the policy definition of self-sufficiency, especially concerning the types of grains included and the targets

set. In its latest iteration, the policy demands "absolute self-sufficiency" in the two key food staples rice and wheat and "basic self-sufficiency", understood to mean 80 percent, for wheat, rice, and corn combined.

Policy slogan or road map?

The “greater food” concept promotes a more holistic view of the food supply, expanding the narrow focus on grain yields to include diversity, health, and nutrition outcomes. However, there is no clear road map yet on how to translate the concept into practice. Numerous measures have been highlighted that could help establish a “greater food” view. These include, e.g.

- transitioning towards a *nutrition-oriented* agri-food system that ensures the balanced supply of nutrients rather than just calories (CAAS and MARA 2022);
- promoting the consumption of whole grains and white meat such as poultry and aquatic products, while reducing red meat consumption (ibid);
- redesigning direct subsidies and other support policies to promote the production of healthy, nutritious food (AGFEP 2022);

- reducing food loss and waste to ease pressure on strained agricultural resources (CAAS and MARA 2022);
- improving seed and breeding technology, including the anticipated commercialization of genetically modified soybean and corn to be used as animal feed (Liu 2022);
- using biotechnology to develop new sources of food, including the production of lab-grown meat or the use of microorganisms that convert carbon monoxide into protein for animal feed³ (Jiao et al.).

The “greater food” concept has the potential to radically reshape Beijing's view of the food supply, but, at its current stage, it is still more of a policy slogan than a coherent blueprint. A mix of approaches combining policy measures and technological progress will likely be necessary to establish a food security strategy that takes into account health and nutrition outcomes as well as high self-sufficiency goals.

³ In 2021, scientists from the Chinese Academy of Sciences attracted global attention when they announced an artificial method for converting

carbon monoxide into protein for animal feed (Reidy 2021).

A “greater food” view also raises the question how to balance the conflicting goals inherent in the concept. For example, to increase meat production, millions of tons of feed grain must be either produced domestically or imported from abroad. However, given limited land and water resources, producing more feed grain at home would directly conflict with China's ambition to maintain high levels of self-sufficiency in the production of staple grains such as wheat and rice. Expanding the resource base using biotechnology could be one solution, but none of these technological fixes is yet ready for commercial use.

Similarly, producing more meat domestically might further add to environmental pressures and risks thwarting the nation's emission reduction and sustainability goals for the agriculture sector. However, unlike in some European countries such as Germany, promoting a shift towards more plant-based diets is no policy option yet for Beijing.

These questions will need to be tackled heads-on if the “greater food” view is to become more than political rhetoric.

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