

A Report for Magnus the Good

**Memories of Agricultural Yilan: An Ethnographic Exploration of Yilan,
Taiwan**

Professor Hsiang-Lin Shih

Anthony (Sandy) Faure '20, Sofia Reed '20, & James Sandberg '20

Foreword

When a small group of St. Olaf students set out in the Fall of 2017 to learn about a farming community far removed from our homes, we did not realize how an entirely new world would open up before us and introduce us to entirely new ways of seeing modern society. Such is the nature of undergraduate exploration: with proper guidance, research, and preparation, going to a totally foreign place can open the mind and the heart in tandem.

A shared yearning for Chinese language development and a wish to broaden individual perspectives initially drove us to seek a research experience abroad. With each of us studying Mandarin Chinese and a Professor who was a Taiwan native, there seemed to be an obvious choice. Our interests in sustainability pointed us toward agricultural research, and personal professorial ties made Yilan a perfect locale for a project aiming to excavate agricultural stories and understand the deep effects of East Asia's rapid modernization. Yet the selection of Yilan was serendipitous in other ways; it shared several surprising metrics with Northfield, Minnesota, such as its touching distance to a major metropolis and heavily agricultural economic makeup. Yilan, as we would come to learn, faced distinct challenges which may never be faced by Northfield. As Taiwan's economy shifted from the 1970s on from an agricultural producer to a mainly industrial power, change was certain across the island. Yilan was in the floodplain; 2006 saw the opening of a major transport artery leading directly into Yilan county's heart, and for better or for worse its citizens have had to cope with the juggernaut of modernity.

Memories of Agricultural Yilan, Taiwan: An Excavation of Local Literature and Life Stories

For much of the world, modernity looks like paved roads, shopping malls, and flashing lights on skyscrapers. The industrial and social developments of the last two centuries have catapulted the citizens of many nations into an existence increasingly disconnected with the processes that contribute to their comfortable lifestyles, routines, and ultimately, survival. It is no new phenomenon that many people eat food each day and will never know where it came from, in what manner it was procured, or what was required to create it. Technology has afforded the planet this luxury and curse. Yet the implications of modernization become only more extreme as the fires of industry burn and corporate megafarms consume old homesteads. In the agricultural county of Yilan, Taiwan, urbanization has reared its head. Since the opening of the Hsuehshan Tunnel in 2006, Yilan has become more accessible to northern Taiwan's 7 million residents. Since then, the fabric of Yilan's society has shifted, and farmers have had to face new challenges, including encroachment onto formerly undisturbed land and destruction of irreplaceable land parcels. Yet the community has been robust and vocal in its calls for protection of farmers' rights, and the political situation facing locals remains in question. This exploration of Yilan excavates a microcosm of an occurrence facing citizens worldwide: the phenomenon of modernization has brought urbana to the hinterland. This report documents the situation of Yilan in the context of modernization and utilizes an interview approach to understand the social, agricultural, and political economy factors at play in Yilan's complex, interconnected community.

Yilan is a highly unique geographical area which is particularly well suited for rice cultivation. Locals often proclaim Yilan's "bag" shape. Indeed, Yilan is roughly triangular, and it is situated on extremely moist, fertile lowlands. It is surrounded by mountains which ensure year-round hydration

and a fresh water source for agriculture. Upon arrival in Yilan, the floral vibrance is striking. Its densely tropical hillsides surround acres of green pastures and rice paddies, and streams flow in abundance. Yilan looks and feels like a farming paradise. Now, Yilan holds a city center, complete with the accoutrements of suburban life. The bleed of prosperity from Taipei has shifted local lives within and outside of the urban center.

While all of Taiwan has undergone major change in the past decades, modern academia has placed less emphasis on domestic effects of its economic boom. The tunnel's opening in 2006 was a turning point for Yilan. With the increased traffic has come tourism, money, and McDonald's. New industries have emerged and thrived, like eco-tourism. The agriculturally rooted Yilan locals, in some cases, have made the best of their new situation and capitalized on urban interest in farming. What challenges Yilan, however, is not the development of new commercial clusters; it is the growing encroachment of private developers on farmland. Farmland is finite, and sustainability in Yilan is an acute concern due to its enclosed nature. There is no outward expansion and cultivation of new land; in Yilan, plots of land have been cultivated and have been for years. Taiwan's aging society has meant many older farmers have sold their land, either to fund their children's ventures in big cities or simply to furnish their retirements. This land is snatched up by developers seeking to build bed and breakfasts in the quaint townships of Yilan to draw customers from neighboring areas. This host of new issues challenges Yilan's regulations, stresses its historic residents, and ultimately creates a pressure between old and new ways of life.

Good Mountains, Good Water

A journey into the farmlands of Yilan will make anyone familiar with this phrase: “Yilan has good mountains and good water”. Yilan is indeed a veritable farming paradise. Thought to be one of the most vibrant farming communities in Taiwan, it has carried forward generations of land stewardship. Yilan farmers, both old and young, possess an attitude deeply rooted in environmentalism. A significant portion of farming in Yilan is done pesticide free and entirely organic, but farmers sacrifice significant advantages in making this decision. Pesticides can ward off many invaders which feed on the leaves and roots of crops. Farmers not using these chemicals must dedicate themselves to manually protecting them. The garden snails of Yilan are a case in point. Possessing voracious appetites for rice roots, snails can massively harm a farmer’s production output if not tended to. Pesticides can easily kill the snails, but also pollute the water which may flow downstream to other farms. Local organic rice growers have different methods for dealing with snails. Some farmers collect the snails and move them into irrigation canals adjacent to the fields. Others spread alternative foods for the snails and hope they select those rather than the tender roots. In most cases, naturally tending to the snail problem creates more labor for the farmer. Not using pesticides also means farmers must perform incessant weeding throughout the growing season. This labor, as our research team experienced, is arduous and intensive, especially in Taiwan’s oppressive heat. Yet a fundamental belief in the wholeness of the land motivates local farmers to these ends and beyond. Doing things the right way means doing things the old way, and this manifests itself in farmers who are truly invested in their plots of land outside of capital gains.

Yilan’s finite farmlands intensify the threats of urban sprawl. New developments near traditional farming areas permanently destroy farmlands. Yang Wenquan, a local farmer and former

leader of a political activism group, describes the process: “Once the land is flattened and paved over, it is basically impossible to ever return it [to farmland]”. For every new luxury home or bed and breakfast built on Yilan farmland, the total arable acreage decreases--permanently. A lack of local regulation has resulted in so-called “farmhouses” (a euphemism for luxury homes) dotting the landscape of Yilan.

Local zoning laws were drafted from Japanese colonial era laws, but the line-item limiting home construction to singular zones was lost in translation. Yilan, for much of its post-tunnel development period, lacked any ordinance preventing a developer from developing a certain parcel of land. Thus countryside home construction has often clashed with local ideals about the usage of the land. Farmers note how even if portions of a lot are left untouched, developers often place the home in the middle. This disrupts the continuity of the former rice paddy, and creates two small, less appealing lots which, for many reasons, often are not worth farming. Machinery assisting in the harvest may be too large and unwieldy for the tiny lots, or may not be allowed by the homeowner. Many farmers simply detest the sight of these gaudy, out of place homes, and would prefer not to work near them.

The farmhouse problem comes in tandem with other types of rural development. Joelle, an American who has developed a deep bond with Yilan and farms there, has seen her plot of land engulfed by several different projects. When she came to Yilan several years ago, the land was whole, and there were only traditional homes near the fields. Now, she endures a looming four-story home directly blocking sunlight on her field. A 7-11 convenience store is two blocks away, and she goes past it each day on the way to her field. This reality is more than inconvenient for farmers, and new developments have done more than just block sunlight. A farmer who went by the name Cha

detailed more of the unseen effects of Yilan's growth. "The farmland is not [the same as] the city, and infrastructure is not present here in the way it is there. There is no sewage system, and the runoff from these lots does not have a clear pathway in terms of where it goes. Often, farmlands with farmhouses next to them become contaminated". Cha's experiences describes that of many farmers in Yilan who have suddenly gained new neighbors. Just like pesticide runoff, urban sprawl affects the ability of farmers to verify the organic certification of their food. Sanitary concerns can affect a farmer's ability to sell the products of a harvest, and when the profits are already slim, can result in financial stress in an already underpaid vocation. Poor governance compounds these issues in a time which desperately calls for increased vigilance and local awareness. Yilan's finite amount of farmland means development carries with it, pound for pound, more consequences for the agricultural sector.

While there have been efforts among farmers to mobilize and enact policy change, results have not always been favorable. Some political activist movements have been met harshly by proponents of real estate development. Big money from Taipei has suppressive power, and also has the potential to sway township mayors. For the time being, farmers are waiting for the next political cycle in hopes of electing a candidate who prioritizes the usage of farmland for agriculture, not urbanization.

What our team found in Yilan was a situation reflective of a greater global trend: small agriculture is being threatened by the forces of urban growth and ultimately, modernization. Whether sustainable farming practices will be able to weather this storm must remain to be seen and is beyond the scope of our research. We notice that while farmer's desires have local clout, their township political situations may stifle activism and favor urban development which is backed by

capital. However, the livelihoods and dedication to sustainability which we encountered among Yilan's farmers was a testament to the power of ties to land and a common sense of stewardship. Yilan is but one piece of a larger puzzle: how will the world face globalization, and will humanity find a sustainable path for the future? We hope future research can further explore the economic, political, and sociological phenomena which are deeply rooted in this special place.

Acknowledgements

The members of the "Agricultural Yilan" team sincerely thanks the funds and donors which made our research possible. We thank the Fjelstad family, and the Magnus the Good Award, for funding this intensely interdisciplinary and humanitarian research. Further thanks go to Susan Carlson for her immense logistical assistance and to the many partners who helped us along the way in Northfield and Taiwan.

Interviews

Chen, Kai-Lih. Interview with Kai-Lih Chen, July 13, 2018.

Chen, Xianghao. Interview with Xianghao, June 27, 2018.

Chen, Yuxun. Interview with Yuxun, June 26, 2018.

Chen, Zhe'an. Interview with Chen Zhe'an, July 13, 2018.

Chevri-yay, Joelle. Interview with Joelle, June 27, 2018.

Jiang, Yonghe. Interview with Mayor Jiang, July 5, 2018.

Yang, Wenquan. Interview with Yang Wenquan, July 5, 2018.