

Ou Ning
**The Agrarian
Mind**



Government food rations sent out by local officials to alleviate food shortages consisted largely of counterfeit products. Yuan Wei, *Untitled*, 2022, Shanghai.

Twenty-five million people recently went hungry in China's most economically developed city. No one could have imagined this happening in Shanghai, where per capita disposable income is the highest in the entire country. The reason wasn't insufficient food supply, but the city's lockdown, which started on March 28. More than preventing the spread of Omicron, China's zero-Covid strategy has been all about political display. Nongovernment elements in society are suppressed, while only the omnipresent government is allowed to act. Initially, residents confined to their homes scrambled to order food via mobile apps, while also relying on government rations. The problems began when market channels closed due to "uncontrollable" and "unsafe" deliveries, shifting food distribution entirely to the government's domain. Although the grid-management systems of Chinese cities penetrate the "capillaries" of every street and every community, it is obviously insufficient to rely on a limited number of grid managers and volunteers for large-scale food distribution. Mountains of donated food piled up without reaching residents. Under the power of the omnipresent government, residents couldn't save themselves, let alone react autonomously. At most, they could bang pots and pans from their windows in protest. With an abundance at the supply end, food was scarce at the distribution end. This is what a food crisis in an affluent society looks like.

In 1930, there was a "famine in a good year" in Japan as well. The Great Depression in the US weakened the international raw silk market, while a rich harvest caused a decline in domestic rice prices in Japan. Coupled with the Japanese government's deflationary policy, purchasing

power in rural areas dropped sharply, resulting in a large-scale famine now known as the Shōwa Food Crisis. If the famine in Japan was due to the collapse of an international market, impacting the country's export-oriented agriculture, then the food crisis in Shanghai today is the result of an internal policy that tries to separate China from the global community. Even though Omicron is no longer listed as a serious Covid variant in most countries, China continues its tight "circuit-breaker" policy on international flights, clinging to the strict zero-Covid strategy used in Wuhan in 2020 and shutting down Shanghai regardless of the damage to its economy and people. In Shanghai this spring, the most primitive form of politics was at stake: food distribution.

In essence, politics is the distribution of human survival resources. Why has land ownership become the basic yardstick for defining various political systems? Precisely because all the resources that humans depend on for living, producing, and harnessing food and energy are attached to the land. Politics itself originates in the need to control scarce resources, yet politics also relies on that scarcity. When a society develops to a certain level, new technologies liberate its productive forces, introducing a degree of abundance, thus reducing scarcity. This allows market circulation to be gradually decentralized, weakening the need for political controls on scarcity. In order to maintain power, governing forces will then need to produce scarcity. The food crisis in Shanghai is not the result of any shortage in production or supply; it is the result of a political intervention. If citizens resist, the situation risks turning into a political crisis. When food is abundant – when anyone with the means can eat at a restaurant or buy food from a supermarket – you have the freedom to cook an exotic recipe or read Isabelle Allende's book on food and sex, *Aphrodite*. But when there is no food to fill your stomach, even a common green onion exposes its cruel political nature.

Food is an absolute necessity for people, and food is power. This power runs through the entire process of food's production, distribution, and consumption. Shanghai is an abnormal example of panicked food rationing causing people to feel thrown back from the free market to a planned economy. But the free market is not a paradise where everyone can independently decide the terms of production and consumption, since the market also pursues scarcity. The needs of the market drive capital to demand that certain agricultural regions grow monoculture crops, depriving such regions of their food sovereignty and destroying their ecology. As a consumer, if you don't cultivate or

forage your own food or participate in any food production, the meals on your table will always be limited by market supply.

That's why Michael Pollan, despite the abundance of "organic" ingredients available from Whole Foods or small family farms, still prefers the wild boar he personally hunted, the chanterelles he foraged after a forest fire, and the abalone he caught along a Bay Area seashore.¹ Similarly, some Shanghai residents, when their fridges are empty, forage plants from nearby green areas to fill their stomachs. As urban dwellers, they must dream of having their own farmland and grain storage, like peasants in the countryside, so that they can secure "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear" during the lockdown period.²

To cope with food problems during the Covid pandemic, community refrigerators appeared in New York and other cities as a way to share food beyond government distribution and market trade. Also called "freedges," and placed in public spaces so that community member can take or leave food, these fridges function less like charity (which only gives) and more like mutual aid, emphasizing participation and sharing. They are close in spirit to the Cincinnati Time Store, founded by nineteenth-century anarchist Josiah Warren. The Time Store used "time currency" instead of dollars to measure labor hours and encourage mutual aid through the direct exchange of labor and food. It is only during a crisis that people remember the teachings of long-neglected agrarians and realize that food and agriculture are the foundation of human life. For this reason, some organizers also see the freedges as a form of education, viewing their long-term operation in the community as a process of engagement and empowerment.³

People in big cities like Shanghai and New York should always maintain an agrarian mind. They are part of dense nonagricultural populations that are completely dependent on external sources for food. Urban people usually work in offices and steer clear of farming, thinking they can buy good food by spending money. They have little interest in how food grows from the land, how it is harvested, how it enters the market, or how agriculture promotes sustainable development in the natural environment and in human society. Urban people love cooking and know how to eat healthily and safely, but they often don't realize how food can break through mental barriers, unite families and communities, and activate a sense of place. Living peacefully amidst abundant resources, one doesn't learn how to save and store food to protect from the possibility of shortages. Social unrest and political crisis caused by hunger may

even appear remote and irrelevant. But today, the Covid pandemic is awakening people to the reality around them.

Historically, China was always a predominantly agrarian country whose rulers regarded agriculture as the cornerstone of social stability. Many dynasties collapsed due to agricultural failures, famines, climate extremes, and epidemics, which triggered peasant uprisings. Confucian ideology learned this lesson and attached great importance to agriculture and food. The political power of China's rulers was rooted in agricultural settlements, and this power was bolstered by a strict hierarchical system of Confucian household registration and taxation. It was not until the successive failures of the Opium Wars and the first Sino-Japanese War that the Qing Dynasty began to develop industry by learning from the West. In the premodern world, agrarianism was popular in many countries and regions, but with the spread of industrialization and urbanization since Britain's Industrial Revolution, agrarian thinking has become increasingly marginalized.

After the Communist Party seized power in 1949, China's industrialization became even more fanatical. Rural grain was forcibly collected and exported to the Soviet Union in exchange for technical support for industrialization. The Great Leap Forward caused the Great Famine, which lasted from 1958 to 1962. The Household Responsibility System in 1978 and the end of the People's Communes in 1980 brought a brief period of vitality to agriculture, but subsequent urbanization transformed much farmland into industrial and real estate land, turning farmers into migrant workers bound for the city. Although the Communist Party understands that the Three Rural Issues are critical to its political power – hence policies like Building a New Socialist Countryside and Poverty Alleviation, which aim to heal the wounds caused by the urbanization of farmers – a huge gap remains between urban and rural areas. With China's grain reserves guaranteed through a combination of domestic industrial agriculture and international imports, no one in a city like Shanghai should go hungry under normal conditions. The present situation is actually a psychiatric illness of the political organism under the effects of Covid.

It was not actually the Confucians who first attached importance to agriculture in China. They were preceded by a little-known agrarian philosophy called Nongjia, which emerged from the Hundred Schools of Thought during the Warring States Period (475–221 BC). Nongjia philosophers did not leave any original texts, and their thoughts can only be glimpsed from biased comments written by the Confucian Ban Gu:

The first Nongjia may have been agriculture officials who grew different kinds of grain and encouraged people to till land and plant mulberry trees to produce enough food and clothing. Food is so important that it ranks first among the eight major areas of a state's policy, followed by property. The merit of early Nongjia was their emphasis on food production, which Confucius said should be a priority for any ruler. However, their vulgar successors, who believe that a saint-king in the Confucian sense would be useless, attempt to disrupt the social hierarchy by calling on rulers to plough alongside their people.⁴

This representative of Nongjia was Xu Xing, whose sporadic remarks were recorded in the chapter "Duke Wen of Teng" in *Mencius*. The biggest difference between Xu Xing's agrarianism and Confucianism is that he advocates that "a Sage should cultivate and eat together with the people," taking as a model the legendary Shennong, who first discovered herbs and taught Chinese people to cultivate. Xu Xing insisted that everyone, whether king or civilian, regardless of wealth, should cultivate and eat together – a notion of equality that David Graeber has identified with early anarchism.⁵ In order to refute Xu Xing, Mencius made his famous assertion that mental laborers govern, while manual laborers are governed.

Even in the premodern period, when agrarianism was popular, Xu Xing's thought was hard to accept for monarchs, let alone today's rulers. However, Nongjia's original intention was not to provide a grand political framework but rather a simple way of life with no need for a monarch. While Confucius praised Nongjia's emphasis on food production, he never agreed with the disintegration of political hierarchy. Confucius and Mencius are both worshipped by Chinese people across generations, but few know about Xu Xing. In Japan – also an agrarian country deeply influenced by Confucianism – another agrarian thinker named Andō Shōeki in the Edo period dared to accuse the Confucian saints of "not ploughing but being greedy." He read Chinese classics well, but gradually became a fanatical opponent of these classics. He regarded "mental laborers" as lazy parasites, and the books of the Confucian saints as the root of social conflict because they justified evil laws and promoted self-interest. After more than two thousand years, Shōeki's harsh criticism of the Confucian saints resonated with Xu Xing.

Shōeki was originally a doctor. In his time, Japan's population grew rapidly and rice farming was more widely adopted. However, due to the huge demand for soybeans in both Japan and

China, the Shogunate encouraged the northeast region where Shōeki lived to start burning wilderness to plant soybeans. Due to the poor fertility of the soil, the burned land needed to lie fallow, which attracted wild boars, who then ate all the surrounding crops, resulting in the Wild Boar Famine of 1749, when over three thousand people died. This made Shōeki so resentful of the Shogunate's greed and ignorance that he stopped his work as a healer and became a utopian dreamer who criticized the times and sought to improve society, developing his grand theory *Shizen shin'eidō*.

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The first page of the "Great Introduction" to *Shizen shin'eidō* (The True Way of Administering According to Nature) by Andō Shōeki, 1753. Photo by the General Library of the University of Tokyo.

As his philosophical foundation, Shōeki put forward the dialectic of the "Subtle Way of the Mutualization of Natures," which outlined the relationship between all things that are interdependent and mutually transforming.⁶ He then named the world dominated by politics and law the "World of Law", and the world where everything runs itself the "World of Self-Acting." Regarding the former as a thieving and violent world, Shōeki's ideal was to transform human society from the World of Law to the World of Self-Acting. To realize this ideal, Shōeki said that a "Right Man," a messiah-like figure, needed to educate the people in "Right Cultivation," i.e., direct participation in agricultural labor and farming management, according to the principles of the "Mutualization of Natures." Farming season should be arranged according to the "five permanent features of nature": occurrence, prosperity, harvest, storage, and achievement. To avoid disasters like the Wild Boar Famine, it is also necessary to respect the principle that species, land, and climate are interdependent.

Shōeki's World of Self-Acting is very close to the ideas of the eighteenth-century French

physiocrats, who believed that government policy should not interfere with natural economic laws, and that land is the source of all wealth. The World of Self-Acting and Right Cultivation are essentially the same as modern permaculture theory, which advocates maintaining a virtuous-circle ecosystem and realizing sustainable agricultural development through a minimum of human intervention and a maximum of natural processes. This principle is also applicable to the management of human society.

From eighteenth-century Japan, Shōeki foreshadowed many influential ideas that followed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His magnificent 101-volume book *Shizen shin'eidō* was accidentally discovered in an old bookstore in 1899 by Kano Kōkichi, who marveled that Shōeki "may be the only great thinker in Japan who we can boast about to the world." Due to Shōeki's concepts "figurehead monarch", "millions of people are one person", and "man and woman are one person," in 1908 the daily newspaper *Heimin Shinbun* – founded by Japanese socialist and anarchist Kōtoku Shūsui – said Shōeki was "an anarchist 150 years ago." Right Cultivation can be understood as similar to the Tolstoyan movement; it is also very close to Mao Zedong's anti-Confucianism. *Shizen shin'eidō* is a deep well of ideas that allows future generations to take what they need. Dialectics, materialism, Marxism, communism, anarchism, utopianism, agrarianism, deep ecology, anti-capitalism, anti-globalization – philosophies and movements of all kinds can find their own sources in it.

In America, Thomas Jefferson was an important voice for agrarianism. He once advocated that the US should take small farms as its economic base and let "the work-shops remain in Europe."⁷ Unfortunately, history did not follow his wishes. In 1930, "Twelve Southerners" published *I'll Take My Stand* to promote the agrarian tradition in the South, but they were criticized as conservatives praising the old days and ignoring progress.⁸ Even their spiritual leader, John Crowe Ransom, eventually stopped believing in the possibility or desirability of an agrarian restoration, declaring it a "fantasy."⁹ However, with the back-to-the-land movement in the 1960s and '70s, many hippies left cities to build their own houses, cultivate land for self-sufficiency, and establish intentional communities. By regarding themselves as part of nature rather than its conquerors, they demonstrated Andō Shōeki's *Shizen shin'eidō* on the scale of small communities.

By the 1990s, agrarianism no longer assumed the scale it had with the hippies, but people did begin "urban farming" and planting

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vegetables on their balconies. Teachers in schools also became interested in “agricultural literacy,” as seen in initiatives like Edible Schoolyards. “Locavores” became all the rage. More importantly, contemporary agrarian thinkers like Wendell Berry revived the forgotten ideas of Thomas Jefferson and the Twelve Southerners. Berry lives on a farm near the small Kentucky town of Port Royal, where he says to his visitors, “One of my ambitions, perhaps my governing ambition, was to belong fully to this place, to belong as the thrushes and the herons and the muskrats belonged, to be altogether at home here.”¹⁰ From this rooted place, he farms, writes, and participates in broader debates and protests on environmental, ecological, agricultural, and community issues. Only by becoming “altogether at home” can we understand the value of land, farm, and home itself.

Berry writes: “The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life.”¹¹ When reading this, I think of the people of Shanghai under lockdown and wish they could have their own plot of soil to farm in such a difficult time. Maybe the harvest won’t come in time to alleviate their immediate hunger, but at least the *Mycobacterium vaccae* in the soil will stimulate the serotonin in their brains to bring pleasure and fight depression.¹² As farmers say, farming is the hope!

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¹
Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (Penguin, 2006).

²
Quoted from US president Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech (State of the Union address, 1941).

³
“One Love Community Fridge works to empower and engage the community through education and by providing access to healthy fruits and vegetables.” *One Love Community Paper*, no.1 (Winter 2022).

⁴
Ban Gu, “Treatise on Literature,” in the *Book of Han*, Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 AD).

⁵
“In China, while many of the founders of the ‘hundred schools’ of philosophy that blossomed under the Warring States were wandering sages who spent their days moving from city to city trying to catch the ears of princes, others were leaders of social movements from the very start. Some of these movements didn’t even have leaders, like the School of the Tillers, an anarchist movement of peasant intellectuals who set out to create egalitarian communities in the cracks and fissures between states.” David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Melville House, 2012), 237.

⁶
All of Shōeki’s terms come from his book *Shizen shin’eidō*, which he originally wrote in variant Chinese. The manuscript is now in the collected works of the General Library of the University of Tokyo. The English translations here are quoted from Toshinobu Yasunaga, *Andō Shōeki: Social and Ecological Philosopher in Eighteenth-Century Japan* (Weather Hill, 1992).

⁷
Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Penguin, 1999), 18.

⁸
Twelve Southerners, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

⁹
John Crowe Ransom, “Art and the Human Economy,” *Kenyon Review*, no. 7 (1945): 686.

¹⁰
Quoted in Erik Reece, “Wendell Berry’s Wild Spirit,” *Garden and Gun*, August–September, 2011 <https://gardenandgun.com/feature/wendell-berrys-wild-spirit/>.

¹¹
Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (Counterpoint, 2015), 70.

¹²
According to research by Dorothy Matthews, Department of Biology, Sage Colleges, Troy, New York <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23454729/>.