



Putting Down Roots and Self-Reinvention: Returning Youth Collaborating with Local Villagers in Ecological Agricultural Transformation

Company/Organization

Puhan New Youth Commune

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Abstract

Puhan New Youth Commune (hereinafter referred to as “Puhan”) was established through a collaboration between the New Youth Commune, which arrived in Qiyan Village in 2015, and the local Puhan Cooperative. With smallholder farmers as core stakeholders, Puhan aims to drive sustainable ecological agriculture development in Qiyan Village through organic production practices. In 2020, through an effective “Three Guarantees and One Risk-Sharing” cooperation model, Puhan managed to help their partner households to achieve a 30%-50% increase in their annual income, establishing a solid foundation of mutual trust. Meanwhile, Puhan has further boosted farmers’ incomes by extending the industrial chain and developing food processing. Additionally, Puhan also actively organizes study camps and other activities in Qiyan village to facilitate the exchange of practical experiences on rural development with returning youth.

Keywords

organic agriculture, ecological rural development, returning youth, community-supported agriculture

This repost was completed in 2023, with its “Results and Impacts” section subsequently updated in 2025 following a follow-up investigation. The Good Food Fund expresses gratitude to Mr. Hu Yachao, founder of the Puhan New Youth Commune, for contributing to this case analysis report by participating in interviews, providing supporting materials, and conducting reviews.

Case Introduction

Background

Puhan New Youth Commune (hereinafter referred to as “Puhan”) is located in Qiyan Village, at the border where Puzhou and Hanyang Town meet in Yuncheng City, Shanxi Province. It was originally established through collaboration between Puhan Cooperative in Shanxi and the New Youth Commune in Beijing.

Puhan has been engaged in public welfare activities in Zhaizi Village, located at the junction of Puzhou and Hanyang Town, since 1998. These activities include group purchasing of agricultural supplies, unified marketing of agricultural products, mutual aid activities for the elderly, and women's empowerment initiatives.

Around 2000, the traditional wheat and corn cultivation has been gradually transitioned into cash crops such as cotton and bamboo shoots. From 2008 to 2010, as the villagers switched to cultivating fruits, the village gradually became a trading hub for fresh fruits, leading to improved living standard for the villagers. However, the village's fruit business had raised ecological concerns, with the most pressing issue being the environmental impact of pesticide and fertilizer.

Even though villagers were aware of the environmental risks associated with pesticide use, to gain a competitive edge in the market and to sell fresh fruits at premium prices, the farmers were heavily reliant on fertilizers, pesticides and ripening agents. There was a prevailing segregation between fruits reserved for home consumption (pesticide-free), and fruits for sale (with pesticide). Although the villagers previously received training on enzyme fertilizer and grass mulching from Puhan, many were not putting these techniques into practice due to lack of follow-up from Puhan.

Since around 2000, the New Youth Commune has been implementing talent development programs related to returning youth in Beijing, during which it learned about the work of the Puhan Cooperative. To provide more young people aspiring to engage in rural development with better opportunities for learning and practice, the New Youth Commune entered Qiyan Village in 2015 and collaborated with the Puhan Cooperative to establish the current Puhan New Youth Commune.

Case story

Shift from public welfare projects to organic farming promotion

Judging from its fundamental organizational structure, Puhan comprises two entities: the “Shanxi Guangming Public Welfare Development Center” and the “Shanxi Laoshi Ecological Agriculture Development Co., Ltd.” At its inception in Qiyan Village, Puhan primarily focused on

cultivating young people with aspirations to return to their hometowns through public welfare projects. These initiatives were originally funded by “Partnerships for Community Development (PCD)” in Hong Kong. However, as time went on, team members gradually realized that relying solely on external funding was not a sustainable path. Puhan needed a self-sustaining development model to ensure its ongoing operations and create stable incomes for local villagers.

On the other hand, as team members settled down and started families in the local area, Puhan's focus gradually expanded from mere public welfare projects to various aspects of life, including food safety, children's education, healthcare, elderly care, and overall well-being. To safeguard the health of team members and their families, and to assist local villagers in developing agricultural production in a more ecological and sustainable manner, Puhan began to develop ecological agriculture in Qiyan Village in 2016.

The implementation of ecological agricultural ideas and concepts, however, proved to be a complex process. Initially, Puhan utilized a 15-mu (approx. 1 hectare) farmland that had been left unused without chemical fertilizers for a long period by the former Cooperative to launch a fermentation-bed pig farming project, aiming to drive the overall development of the village's livestock industry. The fermentation bed could decompose pig manure through microorganisms, reducing odors and pollution while keeping the pigsty clean. The project yielded remarkable results in its early stages, with healthy and odorless pigs. However, due to the lengthy eight-to-ten-month breeding cycle of fermentation-bed pig farming, sales faced difficulties, and ultimately, only two villagers participated. Given the limited promotion, the commune had no choice but to undertake the farming and sales themselves. Consequently, the project to promote fermentation-bed pig farming faltered.

Subsequently, Puhan shifted its approach once again, opting to develop fruit farming in accordance with ecological and organic cultivation methods. In 2017, Puhan members recommended approximately 20 well-connected farming households to Puhan, initiating a collaborative project. Considering the significant challenges of directly practicing high-standard organic agriculture, the commune requested that farmers

refrain from using herbicides, hormones, and fruit-enlarging agents during fruit cultivation, while still allowing the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides as usual. The commune took responsibility for purchasing and selling these agricultural products. That year, over 20 farming households signed up, contributing approximately 5 mu of orchards, with fruit yields reaching 1,500 kg per mu. Digesting such a volume of fruit posed a challenge for Puhan at that time, and they primarily relied on their members' personal networks, promoting the agricultural products through a combination of sales and giveaways. More challenging was the fact that these 20 farming households were scattered across different villages, dispersing the efforts of Puhan members and resulting in diminished returns for their efforts. Due to the stringent cultivation requirements and poor sales, the farmers withdrew from the cooperation the following year, once again interrupting Puhan's journey towards sustainable organic agriculture.

About Organic Agriculture

After years of discussion, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) defines the organic agriculture:

Organic agriculture is a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems, and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity, and cycles, and adapts itself to local conditions, rather than using inputs with adverse effects. Organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation, and technology to enable everyone to share the benefits of the environment, fair relationships and good livelihoods. The four fundamental principles of organic agriculture are health, ecology, care, and fairness.

(Source: "Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Network" WeChat Official Account)

The path of organic farming taking root in Qiyan Village

In 2018, Puhan found the only farming household willing to cooperate, who agreed to allocate 0.7

mu (70% of one mu, approx. 0.0467 hectare) of land for green apricot cultivation. The commune required the farmer to refrain from using hormonal drugs but allowed the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Ultimately, through joint efforts, the total apricot yield reached 1000kg, a normal output that at least did not reduce the farmer's production. To encourage the farmer to continue green cultivation, Puhan settled the payment at a price 50%-100% higher than the prevailing market price and dedicated itself to selling all the products, successfully. This ultimately brought the farmer an income approximately 30% higher than conventional farming. Driven by such financial benefits, this household chose to continue cooperating with Puhan in 2019, when both the yield and income successfully maintained at the 2018 levels.

In this way, by 2020, the green agricultural production methods gradually attracted more farmers in the village to cooperate with Puhan, which further required the cooperating farmers to refrain from using chemical fertilizers and pesticides during cultivation, thereby truly meeting the standards for organic agricultural products. Learning from the previous lesson of overly dispersed cooperating farmers, Puhan selected contiguous plots of land to facilitate stronger connections with farmers and enable unified management and support. To alleviate the concerns of cooperating farmers, Puhan proposed a "Three Guarantees and One Risk-Sharing" cooperation model and signed agreements with farmers, enabling them to implement the production standards set by the commune without worries.

"Three Guarantees and One Risk-Sharing" model is as follows: guaranteeing yield per mu (approx. 0.0667 hectare), guaranteeing unit price, guaranteeing total price, and assuming risks. Guaranteeing yield per mu: Given farmers'

concerns that organic production might lead to reduced yields per mu (approx. 0.0667 hectare), Puhan provided substantial support in agricultural supplies and conducted frequent field inspections and technical guidance to ensure that farmers' yields per mu (approx. 0.0667 hectare) met expectations, thereby bolstering their confidence. Guaranteeing unit price: The commune signed agreements with farmers to ensure that the unit price of their fruits was higher than the market price. Taking apricots as an example, their market price typically peaks in early May and then gradually declines. To secure farmers' incomes, the commune pre-determined the fruit prices for the following year, enabling farmers to sell their products at prices higher than the market rate without resorting to ripening agents. Guaranteeing total price: Even if the yield per mu (approx. 0.0667 hectare) fell short of expectations under special circumstances, the commune would make up the difference according to the contract when purchasing, ensuring that the total income remained unaffected. Effectively guaranteeing production income significantly helped farmers assume market risks, thereby enabling the continuation of ecological organic farming methods.

The “Three Guarantees and One Risk-Sharing” model from Puhan, reduced farmers’ risks significantly, and enhanced their willingness to implement organic production standards markedly. The joint efforts of both parties resulted in farmers’ incomes increasing by 30%-50% compared to conventional farming that year, prompting more farmers to join the cooperation. As the number of cooperating farmers grew, Puhan became more standardized and rigorous in its specific production guidelines. However, the “Three

About the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Alliance

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) refers to the collaboration between a group of consumers and individual or collective producers who, driven by similar or identical objectives, establish a stable, long-term contractual relationship to support local, organic, and healthy production. This healthy production method is organic farming. The essence lies in the mutual commitment and shared risks between producers and consumers. In such a relationship, the community supports ecological, healthy, and fair organic agriculture that is also localized and fresh.

The CSA Alliance for Social Ecology was advocated and established by Professor Wen Tiejun to promote a socialized and ecological agricultural industrial system. Since 2003, it has been training farmers in three-dimensional circular agriculture and ecological architecture. In 2009, it began constructing a nationwide CSA network and officially registered as a social organization in 2017. It has continuously held the largest annual national CSA conference each year and established direct connections with the International Network of Community Supported Agriculture (URGENCEI).

The alliance is committed to becoming a professional advocacy-oriented and multi-service social organization in the field of socialized ecological agriculture nationwide, connecting producers and consumers across the country who identify with and are willing to support the CSA model, and building a mutual aid network for social ecological agriculture. In 2017, it launched the “Seeds Galore” campaign. Its main work includes conducting relevant research, hosting the annual CSA conference, promoting the establishment of a participatory guarantee system, and organizing training and learning sessions.

(Source: WeChat Official Account of the “CSA Network for Social Ecology”)

Guarantees and One Risk-Sharing” model posed a substantial burden on the commune, with the funds allocated for the plan in 2020 entirely borrowed by Puhan from various sources. After witnessing the satisfactory income in 2020, farmers gradually built trust with Puhan and clarified their respective roles in the process. Therefore, since 2021, the “Three Guarantees and One Risk-Sharing” model has gradually been simplified to the “guaranteeing unit price.”

Developing diverse products and expanding sales channels

Between 2017 and 2020, Puhan selected six agricultural products (Chinese toon, apricots, peaches, sweet persimmons, dried persimmons, and Chinese prickly ash) from over 40 local agricultural and sideline products in Qiyan Village for development. Based on a thorough understanding of the growth characteristics of these agricultural products and experience in maturity control, packaging, and transportation, the commune crafted selling points highlighting the eco-friendly and vine-ripened qualities.

In 2019, in response to the call from the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Alliance for Social Ecology, Puhan established the Shanxi Jintu Gengyun Socialized Ecological Agriculture Production and Marketing Cooperative. The CSA Alliance supported Puhan operations through mutual aid sales. In addition to production techniques, many small farmers or farm owners also faced challenges in sales. With the alliance's support, members could assist each other in selling surplus agricultural products. With a large number of alliance members, thousands of products could be quickly absorbed through a small distribution, alleviating the pressure on farmers to face the market alone and forming a collective synergy. This model also successfully helped two farms within the province

(affectionately referred to as “farm friends” by the Puhan) resolve their sales issues for ecological agricultural products, further enhancing the commune's external influence and driving effect.

In 2020, while collaborating with more farmers in the village on organic farming, Puhan began exploring extending industrial chain into food processing. Initially, to continue generating income after the fresh fruit sales cycle ended, Puhan learned making dried fruits from short video platforms and processed small and less visually appealing fruits left after selling high-quality apricots into dried fruits, canned fruits, and jams. Despite initial modest production volumes, consumer feedback was positive, and the products gradually gained market acceptance. As production increased and sales platforms raised requirements for food circulation and production qualifications, self-processing could no longer meet demand. Consequently, Puhan sought cooperation with food processing factories. However, at that time, their production volume could not meet the minimum processing quantities required by many manufacturers. To address this issue, starting in 2021, Puhan systematically increased fresh fruit production and consciously reduced fresh fruit sales volumes in 2022, reserving more fruits for processing purposes and collaborating with large-scale processing factories to produce according to additive-free standards. Through continuous efforts, the products gradually met market demands. By 2022, the commune had successively developed dried apricots, Chinese toon sauce, and several other snack products, achieving initial success.

The first batch of customers for these processed products was primarily accumulated through customer referrals. These customers had previously purchased fresh agricultural products from Puhan for a long time and believed that the

current processed products were also genuinely additive-free. After tasting them, these customers found that the processed products from Puhan had superior taste compared to ordinary products on the market. Over the years, the products have gradually met organic and additive-free standards. Although costs and selling prices have increased, based on long-term trust and product experience, loyal customers continue to purchase repeatedly. Currently, although Puhan snacks are priced at 1.5 times that of ordinary additive-free products on the market, they still enjoy good sales.

In September 2022, after signing cooperation agreements with local farmers, Puhan allocated one-third of the total land area in Xiasi Village (a natural village under the jurisdiction of Qiyan Village) for the production of four agricultural products: Chinese toon, apricots, Chinese prickly ash, and sweet persimmons. While assisting cooperating farmers in ecological transformation, Puhan was also expanding its own scale and influence. In 2023, Puhan was able to complete fresh sales for half of the production volume from the aforementioned land plots. In addition to leveraging the influence and network of the CSA Alliance, Puhan also actively sought external resources, such as participating in relevant conferences and organic exhibitions. Over time, more and more people took the initiative to contact Puhan for collaborations. Furthermore, Puhan has also established a short video team to increase its sales through short videos, live streaming, and other means.

Promoting All-round Rural Development

While working with farmers to reach new markets for ecological agricultural products, Puhan is also exploring alternative methods to instill ecological concepts into rural development. They also actively promote waste classification and recycling through a series of educational activities in Qiyan

Village. In terms of waste recycling, Puhan guides villagers in turning kitchen waste into enzyme fertilizers; for public education, Puhan conducts educational activities among team members and the young villagers. By doing so, it strengthens the bonds between individuals and their family, hometown, and nature, while nurturing holistic development and instills the sense of ecological conservation in the next generation.

Although Puhan's attempts in waste classification and children's public welfare education achieved success, they encountered practical difficulties when implemented into practice. From the limited amount of kitchen waste from local community, it was difficult to generate a sufficient supply of enzyme fertilizers for agricultural use. On the other hand, Puhan was not equipped with the required qualification to conduct educational

activities independently, nor did it intend to "win over" students from well-established local kindergartens. Therefore, it mainly collaborates with local kindergartens to organize enrichment activities such as handicraft, food education, watercolor painting, traditional Chinese culture appreciation and hiking.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, more young villagers have returned to their hometown. In response to this new opportunity of rural development, Puhan has conducted a range of training activities targeting home-returning youngsters who lack practical experience in kickstarting their career in a rural setting. The training activities have also fostered communication, helping Puhan and the young villagers find common ground on rural development.

Addressing the Good Food Pledge



Healthy Eating:

Leveraging local organic farm products to create nutritious snacks and promote a healthy lifestyle.



Local and Seasonal:

Supporting local smallholder farmers in adopting ecological cultivation methods in local specialty agricultural products and promoting organic farming practices.

Results and Impacts

- By 2024, thanks to the joint efforts of the Puhan New Youth Commune and its partner farmers, 45 mu (approx. 3 hectare) of land in Qiyan Village have been converted to organic farming (including 20 mu (approx. 1.3333 hectare) of apricots, 10 mu (approx. 0.6667 hectare) of Chinese toon, 10 (approx.

0.6667 hectare) mu of peaches, and 5 mu (approx. 0.3333 hectare) of persimmons). The average fruit yield is approximately 1,250 kg per mu (approx. 0.0667 hectare).

- Farmers' annual incomes have increased significantly. Before collaborating with Puhan, farmers earned a gross income of around 4,000 yuan per mu from conventional crop cultivation. In 2020, under the “Three Guarantees and One Risk-Sharing” plan, the annual incomes of partner farmers rose by 30%-50%. Since then, their incomes have remained stable. By 2025, the yield of farmers partnering with Puhan was more than 50% higher than that of non-partner farmers.
- The development of a variety of processed products has further secured the sales channels for agricultural produce, and the profits have enabled Puhan to move beyond mere survival, gradually covering the basic salaries of its staff.

Future prospect

While experiencing rapid development, Puhan is confronting the challenge of a mismatch between production capacity and sales. Currently, the commune can produce up to 8,000 portions of fresh agricultural products, yet the actual sales volume for such products peaks at around 3,000 portions. This production-sales gap underscores deficiencies in warehousing, logistics, and sales promotion. Given the short seven-day shelf life of fresh products, the team must design strategies to extend both processing and sales cycles while actively addressing critical issues such as obtaining food circulation and processing licenses, expanding warehousing capacity, and upgrading equipment conditions.

In terms of extending the industrial chain, the development of specialty products like dried apricots, Chinese toon paste, and “yabing” (a Shanxi snack similar to thin, crispy crackers) is constrained by financial pressure. As the team expands, enhancing sales capabilities and broadening promotional channels have become increasingly vital. To tackle these challenges, it is essential to secure government policy support and for the team to optimize internal management and operational models.

Looking back to its original aspirations, Puhan hopes to become more deeply rooted in the local community, truly embedding the concept of ecological agriculture in people's minds. This way, farmers will consciously practice organic production and forge closer and more trusting relationships with consumers.

Discussion

Promoting the sustainable development of ecological agriculture goes beyond adopting new farming technologies or introducing eco-friendly products. It's a process of taking roots in the community. For the team members, this entails achieving self-sufficiency in unfamiliar surroundings, striking a balance between ecological agricultural concepts and the practical needs of local residents. It also involves driving the transformation of local agricultural practices while considering changes in daily lifestyles, ensuring that ecological principles are ingrained in the community and translated into conscious actions.

Taking roots in the community involves a process of self-reconstruction. Every Puhān member , while participating in the operations of the organization, continue to reflect on his or her relationship with the surrounding environment, admitting one's own limits whilst remaining open to positive transformations. Despite various practical challenges, Puhān spares no effort in developing and promoting ecological agricultural products.

Case Analysis

Dimensional analysis: levers of change employed in the case

Food production and supply	Production	By assisting farmers in transitioning to ecological farming practices, Puhan has gradually expanded its scale and increased the income of cooperating farmers. Through the “Three Guarantees and One Risk-Sharing” cooperation model, it manages to dispel farmers’ doubts and engage them in organic production. As more households joined the cooperative, Puhan continues to refine and standardize its operation guidelines to further ensure product quality.
	Conservation	Puhan exerts effort in standardizing the organic production process. It takes gradual steps to conserve the soil and raise the farmers’ awareness of environmental protection, from eliminating the usage of herbicides, hormones, and expanders, to avoiding pesticides and fertilizers.
	Livelihood	While increasing the income, in response to the call of CSA Alliance, Puhan founded the Shanxi Jintu Gengyun Socialized Ecological Agriculture Production and Marketing Cooperative, and also helps other production entities in Shanxi Province to sell ecological products.
	Living	Puhan carries out waste sorting activities in rural areas to improve the living environment and raise villagers' awareness of recycling. Public welfare education activities dedicated to children were conducted to promote children’s physical and mental health and instills the sense of ecological conservation in the next generation.
	Cultivate returning rural youth	Puhan Launched a study camp for returning rural youth, enabling more young people aspiring to engage in rural development to identify their own entry points for growth and enhance their ability to serve society.

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Food environment	Accessibility	While collaborating with farmers to cultivate organic crops, Puhan also engages in food processing to extend the industrial chain, enabling organic food to reach consumers in more diverse forms and scenarios. Through TikTok livestreams, Puhan showcase the ecological production process of organic agricultural products, enhancing consumer trust in product quality.
	Social norms	By adhering to organic and additive-free standards over the years, Puhan has earned long-term trust from consumers with high-quality products, fostering a virtuous cycle where loyal customers repeatedly make purchases to sustainably support ecological agriculture.

Addressing the pillars of sustainable development

PEOPLE Nourishing everyone for health and wellbeing	Puhan improves the local living environment through rural ecological transformation, and produces organic agricultural products and relevant ecological farming techniques, to meet consumer demand of healthy lifestyle.
PLANET Producing in harmony with nature	Puhan endeavors to minimize the use of pesticides and fertilizers in the cultivation process through promoting ecological organic farming technology to restore the local ecological environment.
PROSPERITY Inclusive, transformative and equitable recovery for the 2030 Agenda	Aligning ecological agricultural concepts with the practical needs of farmers, Puhan promotes ecological farming concept and helps to increase the income of participating households. Through various rural development activities, Puhan manages to improve the overall quality of life for local farmers.

