

OVERSEEING A RURAL RENAISSANCE

A group of motivated young economists in China, led by Dr Huang Jikun and Dr Shang Linxiu, are tackling environmental issues as part of a broader rural development platform

BY GIO BRAIDOTTI

Agricultural economists Dr Huang Jikun and Dr Shang Linxiu head a unique research centre in China that is promoting sustainable and equitable agricultural and rural development. As director and deputy director respectively of the Centre for Chinese Agricultural Policy (CCAP), the two economists are overseeing research on a broad range of subjects affecting rural outcomes, including environmental and gender issues.

Established in 1995 in the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, CCAP moved to the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 2000 and is one of the first to be awarded the distinction of 'Innovative Research Group' by China's National Natural Science Foundation. Its research focus is on the analysis of policies related to food, agriculture, natural resources and environmental issues.

Over the years, CCAP has helped formulate practical and feasible policies for the development and modernisation of rural China in ways that engage environmental impacts, household food security, land tenure issues, forestry property rights and rural poverty.

Dr Huang obtained his PhD from the University of the Philippines, Los Baños, in 1990 and his expertise covers agricultural R&D policy, rural development, price and marketing policy, international trade, resource and environment economics, food security and poverty, and economic modelling.

Deputy director Dr Shang has a PhD in Agricultural Economics from the University of Reading, obtained in 1995. She is in charge of the Rural Development and Poverty Research Program, which covers policy relevant to land tenure and the effects of law reform on resource degradation and gender inequity.

"CCAP firmly believes that China can, through its own hard work, satisfy its growing demand for agricultural goods in

an increasingly efficient and sustainable way," Dr Huang says. "China must also effectively reduce poverty and realise a balanced rural and urban growth and development that benefits all. In addition to this, CCAP believes that the modernisation of agriculture will contribute to China's economic development."

CCAP has recruited a group of motivated and vibrant young economists dedicated to pursuing the centre's aims in a collaborative and integrated fashion. International collaborations are encouraged and CCAP actively participates in national and international forums.

Domestically, CCAP has been collaborating with more than 20 research institutes and universities on various research programs.

"The centre is unafraid to focus its efforts on difficult questions regarding the development of China's agricultural and rural sector," Dr Huang says. "To achieve this goal, CCAP has a number of unique characteristics that have evolved into its own research culture."

Apart from the novel administrative, management and personnel characteristics that set it apart from other research groups in China, CCAP also seeks to base its research and modelling activities on the latest theories and methods. Because all of CCAP's research is empirically based, the researchers have had a big impact in both academic and policy-consultancy circles. Many of CCAP's policy recommendations have been submitted to and approved for action by China's top governmental bodies.

While Dr Huang emphasises that all CCAP's work is expected to contribute to China's economic development, environmental and gender issues are

considered high research priorities.

"The Natural Resources and Environmental Policy Research Program is committed to carrying out economic analysis on China's major policy challenges regarding sustainable development so as to help improve the nation's policy-making process," he says.

Given the rate of reform in rural practices, especially with the implementation of a new land-contracting law in early 2003, Dr Shang has been particularly concerned by research findings indicating that women are likely to be



PHOTO: CCAP

Dr Huang Jikun, Centre for Chinese Agricultural Policy.

excluded. The work is part of a broader initiative to alleviate rural poverty and help vulnerable groups share in China's rapid economic development.

"Evidence shows that women are losing land during this process," Dr Shang says. "Given the importance of land as a resource for securing the livelihood of rural households, hidden problems under the new contractual land arrangement without gender sensitivity will result in significant social impacts if the problems are not properly addressed." ■