

GreenFootprint



Xia Xiukui, a senior student from China Agricultural University, works at an organic farm in north Beijing.

FENG YONGBIN / CHINA DAILY

STUDENT FINDS HIS ROOTS

MECHANICS MAJOR FINDS HIS CALLING ON THE FARM

By ZHOU WENTING, CHINA DAILY

Surrounded by neatly arranged greenhouses, Xia Xiukui's dormitory sits in the middle of an 80-hectare farm. The simple white cottage looks like a temporary shed. It is from here that Xia, a 22-year-old senior student from China Agricultural University, can see what's most enjoyable in life: A panoramic view of the orchards joined by a few vegetable gardens stretching out to the feet of tranquil mountains in the distance.

When he graduates with a degree in mechanics next year, Xia, unlike most of his classmates, hopes to become an organic farmer — and since September he has been working as an intern on an organic farm in Beijing's northeast suburbs.

"It's getting cold, so we are laying more quilts on the greenhouses, making them a warmer place for the crops," Xia said, busily spreading out a quilt. He continued tongue in cheek: "This is something I'm good at, you know, since I major in engineering mechanics."

Xia spends much of his time shuttling between the 31 greenhouses, checking the temperature and humidity

four times a day. He observes the crops' growth and spreads manure, which explains the grime under his nails.

Born into a farming family in a rural area of Neijiang, Sichuan province, Xia is very familiar with tilling the land.

But he had never thought he would become a farmer. Neither had his sister and parents.

His elder sister left school at 15 to work as a waitress in a local restaurant.

"I'm my parents' only hope to become somebody, living a decent life in the city with a stable job in a high-rise office building," Xia said.

Or so he used to think. Even though he had no clear idea about his future career choice,

he had been improving his resume with a few internships at big multinational companies during summer vacations.

His shift toward organic farming happened about two months ago when a friend brought him to the organic farm where he now works.

"I felt a sense of reality and comfort that has been away from me for a long time," he said, recalling his first impression of the farm. "Big companies brought me pride, but also depressing stress and fickleness. But farm work, which I have been familiar with since childhood, excites me."

Xia admits his concern for food safety was prompted by recent scandals such as the

contamination of milk formula in 2008.

"Growing up in a rural family, I always believe food is the top necessity," Xia said. "It's the right time to enter the right industry."

Not surprisingly, Xia's choice startled his parents, who used their savings to send him to college. "Hearing my decision, my father said on the other end of the line sarcastically, 'I spent my whole life on the farm just to ensure you follow in my footsteps?'" said the son, mocking his father's solemn tone.

It took nearly two months to convince his father that organic farming has a great future and is very different from his father's traditional farming practice.

Xia told his father that each time he cultivates the land with organic fertilizer, he feels really pleased, knowing that it won't contaminate the earth or harm the environment. "Such a simple act brings me a great sense of achievement," Xia said.

In comparison, chemical fertilizer might leave harmful residues on crops and damage the soil, requiring 30 years to recover, Xia continues.

Moreover, as living standards improve, the focus of agricul-

ture will shift from quantity to quality in China, he said.

In this way, Xia believes, organic farming is a business with great potential.

This has been reflected in the soaring turnover of the company that he is working for, from 500,000 yuan (\$75,000) in 2005 to 50 million yuan last year.

Finally, Xia's father yielded with reluctance.

Xia's current top priority is to fight for the opportunity to stay on the organic farm after the internship — a time when most of his classmates will be looking for glamorous and envied positions with car manufacturers.

"They produce cars, while I grow vegetables. To some extent, though, what I do is more closely related and beneficial to the society," Xia said.

Just last week Xia grew some strawberry seedlings in a planter. He said he would manage their growth until they ripen in the spring.

"I can't wait to become a full-time employee of the farm after graduation, creating reassuring food and a green environment," said Xia. "I expect to run one of my own with my friends some day."