CHAPTER THREE

FEEDING CHINA

His Majesty went to the Temple of Agriculture and made offering. Then He changed clothes and went to the field. He ploughed four times. Then He asked Prince Zhuang Yung Lu, Prince Yi Yung Xiang and Prince Yu Guang Lu to plough five times. Then He asked the Ministers of Law, of Finance, of Ceremony, of War, of Punishment and of Works and the Directors of the Three Grand Courts to plough nine times.

The third month of the Yongzheng Emperor’s eleventh year or 1733

At the season for threshing rice, His Majesty went to thresh at the Sweetmeat crown fields. Then He took the rice and placed it in small ox carts and He had all His Holy Royal sons, His Holy royal daughters, His maids in waiting and His ladies pull them to the interior of the Palace enclosure. Then He took the (twice-threshed) rice stalks, made into large tiered umbrellas, and rice gruel to present to (the members of the) Royal Synod who were living in the crown temples every year without exception.

Book Ten: King Borommakot, 1733–1758

The significance of rice can be seen from the royal ploughing of the Qing emperors in China and the harvest ritual of the Ayutthaya monarchs in Siam, which Harvard sociologist Carle Zimmerman tried in the early 1930s: “the threshing is done by hand in a fashion which requires a great amount of human labor”. Rice worship was not by any means a royal monopoly in China and Siam. The common people, not just the celestial beings, pay their respect to and celebrate rice through rituals, a common practice among many peoples: “Rice rituals are widespread throughout rice-growing Asia, and villagers

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show honour to the rice spirits at certain stages of rice farming. Although the form of the ceremonies differs from place to place, attitudes toward and reverence for rice bear a very close resemblance."⁴ The Chinese seemed to have emphasised ploughing, as the Son of Heaven himself symbolically opened the season of cultivation, whereas the Siamese were more interested in the joy of harvest.⁵ A visible and interesting difference between the Chinese and the Siamese is that the Siamese treated the royal threshing as a family affair, including the King’s daughters and ladies, whereas no record is found of women participating in the Chinese ploughing ritual.

The Kangxi emperor had even set aside an allotment for rice cultivation in his beloved Garden of Eternal Spring in order to understand the pains of cultivation, the effect of weather on agriculture and the joy of harvest.⁶ Kangxi and his son Yongzheng tried to understand agrarian cycles and life. They requested reports of weather and grain prices from local officials; they often sent delegates to investigate the real situation, and occasionally even went to see for themselves. This hands-on management style has left behind a gold mine of information on everything from precipitation and prices to the frequency of ecological disasters during their reign. Chinese officials diligently reported rice prices; so did their counterparts in Siam, as we can see from the Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya. Chinese and Siamese monarchs were concerned with rice production and price fluctuation, as they well understood that rice dictated families’ survival, and by extension the longevity of their dynasty.

This chapter investigates how the Qing regime managed to find more rice to feed the increasing Chinese population from the early

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⁶ Feng Boqun and Qu Chunhai, Qinggong Dang’an Miwen (Beijing: Huawen chubanshe, 2008), pp. 52–53; and Zhang Jiuzhou, Qingdai Huangdi Quwen Yishi (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 2007), pp. 65–68.