Field Crops Research 224 (2018) 22–27

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Field Crops Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/fcr

Integrating mechanization with agronomy and breeding to ensure food security in China

Min Huang*, Yingbin Zou

Southern Regional Collaborative Innovation Center for Grain and Oil Crops (CICGO), Hunan Agricultural University, Changsha, 410128, China

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Food security
Growth duration
Heterosis
Rice production
Seeding rate

ABSTRACT

Productivity of intensive rice cropping systems plays a pivotal role in national food security in China. By 2030, a 20% increase in rice yield will be required to meet the growing demand for food that will result from population growth. The success of China's super hybrid rice was expected to provide an opportunity to cope with the increased demand for rice. However, in China the planting area of super hybrid rice is less than 8% of the national total rice planting area and the planting area of hybrid rice has continued to decline since 1996. The decreased planting area of hybrid rice is related to the shift in rice establishment methods from manual transplanting to direct seeding and mechanical transplanting. These shifts can result in increased seeding rates and reduced morphological advantages of heterosis (e.g. reduced panicle size), both of which can influence cultivar choice by rice farmers, who will tend to favor cheaper inbred cultivars. The shifts in rice establishment methods can also eliminate or reduce the seedling nursey period and subsequently shorten the growth duration and negatively affect the yield. We anticipate that the above problems will be resolved by integrating mechanization (e.g. designing high-precision seed sowing machines) with agronomy (e.g. improving management practices for increasing seed vigor) and breeding (e.g. developing high-yielding cultivars with short growth durations). This strategy also has implications for production of other crops in intensive farming systems in China and for other developing countries with rice-based intensive cropping systems.

1. Challenges to rice production for ensuring food security in China

China has 22% of the world's population but only 7% of the world's arable land (Piao et al., 2010). In order to produce enough food, intensive cropping systems have been extensively developed in China. Considerable progress has been made by developing high-yielding crop cultivars and improving crop management practices. As a result, there has been remarkable growth in both crop production and national food security in China (Fan et al., 2012).

Rice is a staple food for more than 65% of the population in China. Double-season rice systems and single-season rice in rotation with other crops such as wheat and oilseed rape are the major intensive rice-based cropping systems in China. Over the last 60 years, the production of rice has more than tripled in China mainly due to increased grain yield rather than increased planting area (Fig. 1).

However, the population of China continues to grow, and thus domestic production of rice must increase in the next 13 years. It is projected that China needs to produce 41 million t (Mt) more rice by 2030, compared to the 207 Mt produced in 2017 (Fig. 1). Because the area of cropland will decrease with urban expansion (Bren d'Amour et al., 2017), future increases in rice production must come from greater yields. Though the rice planting area will be the same in 2030 as in 2017, an increase in rice yield of 1.36 t ha^{-1}, or 20%, is required in the next 13 years (Fig. 1). This increase is more than double that (0.60 t ha^{-1}) achieved in the last 13 years, presenting a challenge for national food security in China.

2. Constraints in increasing rice production in China

To meet the challenges of rice production in China, it is essential to breed rice cultivars with higher yield potential (Peng et al., 2008). The development of hybrid rice is a primary method for increasing the yield potential of rice (Yuan et al., 1994). Hybrid rice cultivars have a yield advantage of more than 10% over inbred cultivars (Cheng et al., 2007).

In 1998, Prof. Longping Yuan, known as the "father of hybrid rice", proposed a strategy for developing super hybrid rice using heterosis combined with the ideotype approach in order to further increase the yield potential of hybrid rice (Yuan, 2001). Over the past 20 years, significant progress has been made in breeding super hybrid rice

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: mhuang@hunau.edu.cn, jxhuangmin@163.com (M. Huang).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fcr.2018.05.001
Received 5 February 2018; Received in revised form 26 April 2018; Accepted 1 May 2018

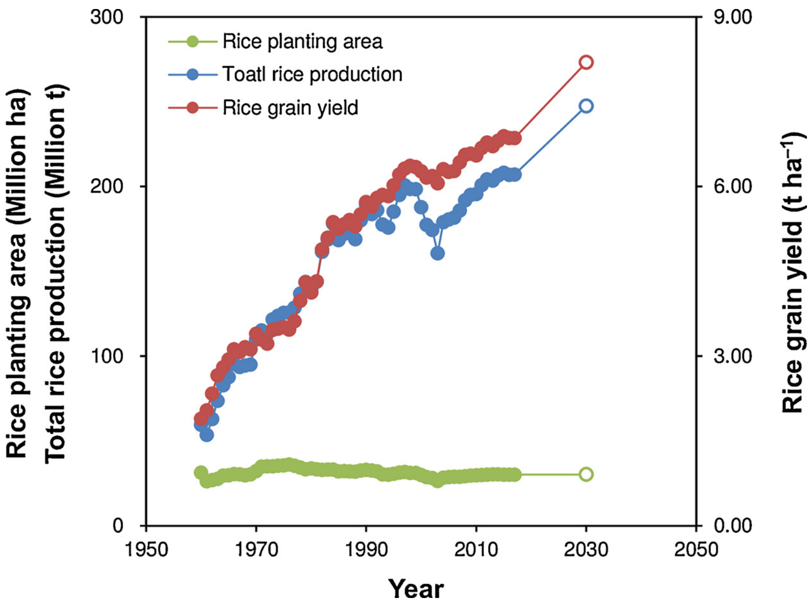

Fig. 1. Rice planting area, total rice production and rice grain yield in China. The data from 1960 to 2017 were collected from the World Rice Statistics Database (IRRI, 2018). The total rice production in 2030 was projected by Cheng et al. (2007). The rice grain yield in 2030 was calculated by keeping planting area the same as in 2017.

(Cheng et al., 2007; Peng et al., 2008; Wu, 2009; Yuan, 2017). Currently, 94 cultivars have been approved as super hybrid rice by the Ministry of Agriculture of China (China Rice Data Center, 2018). Super hybrid rice cultivars have increased rice yield potential by more than 10% compared with ordinary hybrid cultivars (Zhang et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2011a), and this increase is likely to grow with the development of new super hybrid rice cultivars (Huang et al., 2017a).

The success of super hybrid rice was predicted to allow China to deal with the challenge of increased rice demand. However, during the last 20 years, super hybrid rice cultivars were grown on a total area of only about 45 million ha (Mha), which is less than 8% of the total national rice planting area (Fig. 2A). Additionally, the planting area of hybrid rice has continued to decline since 1996 (Fig. 2B), and this decline has had an enormously negative effect on the hybrid rice seed industry. According to data released by the National Agricultural Technology Extension and Service Center of China, the amounts of unsold hybrid rice seeds reached as high as 80–120 million kg per year in the last 5 years, which accounts for 33–46% of the yearly total produced (Fig. 2C).

The declining area of hybrid rice planting in China is closely related to shifts in rice establishment methods induced by changes in socio-economic environments. Manual transplanting is the traditional rice establishment method in China. However, this method requires a large amount of man-power (about 400 man-hours ha^{-1}) and the operation is very laborious, involving working in a stooping posture and moving through a muddy field (Thomas, 2002). In recent years, urban expansion has led to a labor shortage and an increase in wages for agricultural production in China (Peng et al., 2009). As a consequence, direct seeding (manually broadcasting pre-germinated seeds onto saturated soil), a labor-saving technology, was quickly developed for rice production in China in the mid-1990s (Zhang and Zhu, 1996). It is estimated that the total area of direct-seeded rice in China in 2017 was about 4 Mha, corresponding to approximately 13% of the total rice planting area nationwide.

On the other hand, farmland rental has increased in China in recent years, and a new class of farmers who obtain farmland on lease for large-scale farming has emerged (Kung, 2002). The development of large-scale farming has promoted the adoption of mechanical transplanting techniques for rice production in China. A few farmers established rice with mechanical transplanting in the early 2000s, but the percentage of machine-transplanted rice planting area compared to the national total rice planting area reached about 10% in 2008 (Zhu and Chen, 2009), and increased to more than 20% in 2012 with a total of 436,000 rice transplanters (Zhang et al., 2012). Currently, the total number of rice transplanters has increased to over 680,000 units in China. It is estimated that the current percentage of machine-transplanted rice planting area in China exceeds 30%.

The shifts from manual transplanting to direct seeding and mechanical transplanting have led to large increases in rice seeding rates, namely increasing from 45–60 to 60–90 kg ha^{-1} for inbred cultivars and from less than 22.5 to 30–45 kg ha^{-1} for hybrid cultivars. The increased seeding rates have little negative impact on inbred rice production, because the inbred rice seeds can be reproduced by rice farmers themselves at low cost. However, hybrid rice production can be severely negatively affected by increased seeding rates, since the hybrid rice seeds are expensive. The highest seed price of hybrid rice in China exceeds 25 USD kg^{-1} (1 USD = 6.5 CNY) (Chen et al., 2015), which is about 1.2 times and 55% higher than that in the USA and international markets, respectively (Peng, 2016). To cut down on production costs, rice farmers choose inbred cultivars.

The increased seeding rates caused by the shifts in rice establishment methods can also result in changes in rice plant morphology. Under manual transplanting, hybrid rice cultivars generally have large panicle size and/or high tillering capacity due to the expression of heterosis (Peng et al., 1998; Peng et al., 2008; Yan, 1988). However, the morphological advantages of hybrid rice are always reduced or even eliminated under direct-seeded and machine-transplanted conditions. As compared with manual-transplanted hybrid rice, panicle number per hill and panicle size (spikelet number per panicle) are generally reduced in direct-seeded hybrid rice (Fig. 3A and B), while a reduction in panicle size is often observed in machine-transplanted hybrid rice. Thus, the heterosis of hybrid rice seems to be reduced with the shifts from manual transplanting to direct seeding and mechanical transplanting. This also influences the decision of rice farmers to favor cheaper inbred cultivars.

The shifts in rice establishment methods can also shorten the rice growth duration under intensive cropping conditions. For manual transplanting, subsequent crop seeds are always sown in reserved