

**Alternative Food Networks and Rural Development Initiatives in
China: Characterization, Contestations and Interactions**

by

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Author's Declaration

This thesis consists of material all of which I authored or co-authored: see Statement of Contributions included in the thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Statement

I, as the first author of the four papers in this doctoral dissertation, hereby clarify the roles of authors in these papers.

Paper 1 is coauthored with Theresa Schumilas and Steffanie Scott. Theresa Schumilas and I did some of the fieldwork in China together. She also did some of the transcriptions of the interviews and provided comments and ideas that helped to refine the paper. Steffanie Scott coordinated some of the visits and interviews, participated in most of the interviews on which the study is based, and transcribed some of the interviews. She provided comments and suggestions for revising the paper, and proof-read the paper. Paper 2 is coauthored with Steffanie Scott and Theresa Schumilas. Steffanie Scott arranged the trips to China during which the data was collected, participated in the interviews, provided comments and suggestions to the paper, helped to revise the paper upon hearing from the reviewers, and proof-read the paper. Theresa Schumilas participated the interviews, transcribed some of the interviews that the paper cited. Paper 3 is coauthored with Steffanie Scott. Steffanie Scott arranged the trip to China during which the data was collected, participated in some of the interviews, provided comments and suggestions, proof-read the paper and helped to seek comments from others. Paper 4 is coauthored with Steffanie Scott, Steffanie Scott arranged the trip to China during which the data was collected, provided comments and suggestions, and proof-read the paper.


As the author of the thesis, Zhenzhong Si participated in the arrangement of the fieldtrips for data collection, did the interviews and visits, translated and transcribed the interviews, analyzed the data, conceived the ideas of the papers, wrote and revised the papers. Zhenzhong Si is the person who initiated, conceptualized and wrote these four papers. Zhenzhong Si is also responsible for the information revealed in the thesis.

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Abstract

Agri-food studies have examined the alternativeness, embeddedness and ‘transformative potential’ of various alternative food networks (AFNs) in developed market economies from sociological and geographical perspectives. Meanwhile, rural development studies have identified the critical roles of AFNs in the emergence of a new rural development paradigm. However, a puzzle that remains to be solved is to determine to what extent the alternative values and practices of AFNs will be transferred to developing nations where the sociopolitical context is rapidly changing and to determine how AFNs coevolve with rural development initiatives. To solve this puzzle, this dissertation probes into AFNs in China to examine their complicated relationship with grassroots rural development initiatives. Data for this analysis were collected from in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in various AFNs; visits to ecological farms and food companies; information obtained from attending organic expos, workshops, and academic conferences; observations of online blog posts and discussions; and secondary sources including news reports and media coverage. The dissertation employs two main analytical approaches—case studies and discourse analysis—to synthesize and interrogate the qualitative data. The key findings of the study are as follows. First, the alternativeness of AFNs in China is uneven and varies among different elements of alternativeness. The state is a key player in tempering the contested nature of AFNs. Second, the New Rural Reconstruction Movement as a critical grassroots rural development initiative not only adopts AFNs as critical tools for promoting its rural development agenda but also functions as a hub for the convergence of various alternative food initiatives in China. The dissertation concludes that the relationship between alternative food and rural development initiatives can be reciprocal, although the synergies between them face various challenges in the specific socio-political context of China. This study contributes to the literature by unveiling a set of AFNs that are introduced by, and co-evolved with,

rural development initiatives. It bridges the discussion on the convergence of AFNs and the scholarship of rural development paradigms.

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Dedication

To the best parents in the world, Aiqin Liu and Liuji Si.

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Alternative Food Networks and Rural Development Initiatives in China: Characterization, Contestations and Interactions

Introduction

Problem Context

The food system in China has experienced dramatic changes in the past two decades, with a rapid industrialization and capitalization of the agriculture sector, a supermarketization process that transformed the retailing chains and a significant increase of per-capita food intake and food waste (Garnet and Wilkes 2014). Although the degree of these three processes varies greatly in different regions, synergies among them reinforce their impacts on China's food system in general.

First, the agriculture sector in China has increasingly relied upon fossil fuels in forms of synthetic fertilizer and farming machines (Guo and Yang 2005). This dependence is being enhanced with the decrease of farm labour and the increase of farm size (Van den Berg *et al.* 2007). Second, the landscape of food production is increasingly consolidated with involvement of large private capital (Zhang and Donaldson 2008). Farm size has increased as migrating farmers lease their farmland to those staying or to food companies seeking economies of scale (Van den Berg *et al.* 2007). Small household farming, which has dominated the agriculture sector since the land reform begun in 1978, is increasingly commercialized, specialized and vertically integrated in various forms (see Zhang and Donaldson 2008 and Guo *et al.* 2007). Third, transformation of food retailing is embodied by the remarkable process of 'supermarketization' that has swept not only China but many other emerging economies (Reardon *et al.* 2005; Hu *et al.* 2004). In China, the annual growth rate of supermarket sales was estimated to be 30~40% in the late 1990s and 2000s. It has

captured a large proportion of the food retailing market share of traditional market venues like the petty-trader markets (often referred as wet markets) (Hu *et al.* 2004).

A direct outcome of this omnipresent transformation of the food system is the rise of certain types of food safety issues. Excessive chemical residues on fresh produce associated with the industrialized farming system, water pollution and heavy-metal pollution in soil associated with the uncontrolled industrial development in the countryside, abuse of artificial additives in processed food associated with the food processing industry, and risk associated with genetically modified crops are some of the most critical concerns of Chinese consumers (Garnet and Wilkes 2014). Food safety scandals have been constantly adding to the public anxiety about food in the past few years. Food safety has become a political issue that embodies the ultimate concern of maintaining the power of the Chinese party state and social stability (Yang 2013). Social networks, where the infiltration of state power is still limited, have functioned as convenient spaces for the playing out of civil society allegations. The power dynamics revolving around food safety issues is inevitably generating social and political tensions that are shaping the policy realm (see Pei *et al.* 2011). It increasingly requires the Chinese state to generate a comprehensive strategy to mitigate the social pressure that has been building in the cyber space and that may potentially transfer to the realistic space (Yang 2013).

Rural China is a component of this comprehensive strategy. The large number of dispersed small peasant farmers have been blamed for some serious food safety scandals (see Zhou and Jin 2009; Macleod 2007). Melamine, the chemical that tainted the milk in the 2008 milk scandal, is believed to have been illegally used by small dairy farmers. Peasants are also blamed for the excessive chemical residues on vegetables and hormones in meat. Chinese peasants, once characterized as “ignorant, poor, weak and selfish” (Day 2012, 2013a), are increasingly portrayed as unethical people who are not trustworthy. The worsening reputation of peasants further abated the compassion for them. This disparagement of Chinese peasants, and the rural as a whole, was reinforced by the widely-accepted claim by mainstream economists that

the Chinese countryside has not contributed enough to the development of the Chinese economy because its economic potential of consumption has not been well exploited (see Lin 2005; Day 2013a). This understanding of the limited role of the Chinese countryside in economic growth is largely accepted by the Chinese state.

The Chinese government has implemented various policies that aim to boost modernization in the countryside. Food has been an important component of these pro-modernization policies. The agri-industrial rural development model, thus, has been a favorable choice for the modernization process while alternative rural development strategies such as efforts of reviving traditional rural culture are largely overshadowed by the mainstream policies with strong agri-industrial orientations. Urbanization and industrialization have become the dominant forces reconfiguring rural space. While more than three decades of implementation of the “Reform and Opening” policy in China has profoundly transformed the countryside, it has also resulted in serious problems. The countryside suffers from the loss of farm labour, the stagnation of rural livelihoods, and the deterioration of rural culture (Wen and Lau 2008). However, state-led developmental approaches (the agri-industrial model) in order to revitalize the countryside as an integral part of the market economy has failed to address some of these social and cultural concerns (Pan and Du 2011a, b).

It is within this socioeconomic context that alternative rural development initiatives emerged in China as critical reflections on mainstream ‘modernization’. The most prominent initiative is the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM) that emerged in around 2003. It follows the values and sentiments of the Rural Reconstruction Movement (RRM) that took place in the 1920s and 1930s. ‘Civilian’ education (in contrast with ‘elite education’), cultural activities, and capacity building for self-organization were several key components of the RRM, which are revived in the NRRM. The major ideas of the NRRM include critiques of elite culture and knowledge and related theories (e.g., neoclassical economics), focusing on cultivating peasant status and subjectivity, connecting intellectuals with the rural masses, reconstituting rural-urban relations, experimenting with rural education reforms and

improving rural health care conditions, among others (Pan and Du 2011a, b). In addition, to their ambitious agendas, the NRRM creatively added another important layer, which is ecologicalization of agricultural production. This enables the critiques of peasants in generating food safety problems to be addressed.

Although food safety and food system transformations in China are not the only issues that the NRRM addresses, food is indeed a critical factor that has shaped the development of the NRRM. The synergies between the rural reconstruction initiatives and the growing public concerns of food safety after 2008 catalyzed ecological agriculture to become a prominent rural development instrument. Amid the broad context of food safety crisis, the NRRM plays various and vital roles in fostering the development of ecological farming and alternative food networks (AFNs)¹, especially community supported agriculture (CSA)² in China. They also interact proactively with other players such as environmental NGOs, government, public media and social activists to magnify the impacts of their efforts. In this sense, the ecological aspect of the new rural development approach later turned out to be an unexpected entry-point for the NRRM to step into the vortex center of the power dynamics revolving around food safety.

Now we have civil society, or grassroots power, as an important player in the competitive arena of rural development in China. The NRRM's principles, strategies and approaches all differ significantly from the state-led agri-industrial model of rural development. It falls rather into the 'rural development' model, which was theorized by geographer and sociologist Terry Marsden and several others (Marsden *et al.* 2002; Marsden 2008; Marsden and Sonnino 2008) as an agrarian-based rural development trajectory that discards the 'agro-industrial' and the 'post-productivist' understandings of the rural space. The 'rural development' model employs short food supply chains as effective tools to counter the large-scale industrialized food value chains and

¹ Alternative food networks, also referred to as short food supply chains or local food systems, include

² Community supported agriculture refers to a direct relationship between consumers and producers where a consumer pays a farmer in advance to become a member of the farm and the farmer commits to farm in an ecological way and deliver a food share to the consumer. Farmers and their customers share the risk and the harvest of the farming activity.

centers on agriculture production to achieve rural sustainability goals (Marsden *et al.* 2002; Marsden 2008). Despite the increasingly important roles civil society plays in China, the state still plays the leading role. Grassroots initiatives thus have to seek support from the masses on the one hand and an unconflictual or harmonious relationship with the state on the other.

Combining the development of AFNs and NRRM in China, here I propose the key puzzle to be solved in this dissertation—to determine to what extent the alternative values and practices of AFNs will be transferred to developing countries where the sociopolitical context is rapidly changing and to determine how AFNs coevolve with rural development initiatives. To solve this puzzle, I break it down into specific research questions. How are AFNs being adopted as powerful tools by the NRRM to achieve its goals? How does the NRRM shape the development of AFNs in China? And what is the complex role of the state in the synergies between the NRRM and AFNs in China? In order to answer these questions, it is important to clarify the current status of AFNs in China, as these are primary tools for the NRRM to achieve its influence. To understand the status of AFNs, one has to answer questions such as, what are the major types of AFNs in China? Who facilitated them? How are they different from AFNs in other countries? What are the challenges and opportunities for their further development? These questions are addressed in the first two papers (Paper 1 and Paper 2) of this dissertation. Following these questions, we can probe into the NRRM, the force behind-the-scenes for the development of AFNs, to see how AFNs are adopted as powerful tools to combat the mainstream modernity-oriented rural development and in turn, how the NRRM shapes the development of AFNs in China? These questions comprise the last two papers (Paper 3 and Paper 4) of this dissertation.

Further context for this research needs to be established with respect to two major fields: rural development studies and an overview of food safety issues and the emergence of alternative food networks in China.

Rural Development Studies

European countries in the postwar era witnessed an increasingly integrated and corporate agro-food chain that was not only creating “globally networked and urban centered” economic spaces detached from rural space but also marginalizing the farming sector in the economic complexes about food (Marsden *et al.* 1993). Farmers in this trend are continuously losing their share of the market value to the growing retailing giants and thus increasingly rely upon local and rural markets to sell their produce. However, this trend was altered in late 1990s when “the discourses of ‘national protection’, ‘maximized production’, and ‘mass consumption’ have been replaced by those of ‘market liberalization’, ‘environmental sustainability’ and ‘local differentiation’” (Marsden *et al.* 1993: 364). With the recognition of local diversity, both the global food regime and the local food practices are interpreted as fluid, contested and heterogeneous, rather than solid and homogenous spaces. Interactions between social groups and other actors, especially the articulation of their actions within the institutions of the state, opened a new analytical space. More emphasis has been put on analyzing how specific actors maintain their political legitimacy.

The increasing recognition and contestation of local agencies in the food system as well as the growing concern of environmental sustainability is reflected in the emergence of alternative food supply chains especially local food supply chains in Europe. Agriculture and land are repositioned at the central place of the rural space. A new policy structure has also been constituted to support the local specific and socially ecologically embedded food supply chains. Marsden *et al.* (2002) argued that this signifies the establishment of a new rural development model which is called the ‘rural development’ model (or the ‘rural development’ dynamic). It differs from the other two rural development models in various ways (see Table 1).

Table 1. The three competing rural development dynamics

The Agro-industrial	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Standardized products• Capital intensity
----------------------------	---

dynamic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimum (quantitative level) of production • Long/complex supply chains High levels of public funding • Continual development of ‘technological fixes’ Decreasing value of primary produce and production structures • Economies of scale Rural space as agricultural space Private-interest regulation (led by retailers)/public interest regulation: crisis management and nature management
The post-productivist dynamic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural space as consumption space The marginalization of agriculture: declining industry Agriculture’s share of national income falls from 2.9% in 1970 to 1.0% in 1998 Rural land as a development space Social exclusion • Public sector services The social economy and the use of natural as an attractor in the counter-urbanization process
The rural development dynamic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration Re-embedded food supply chains • New policy support structures • Associational designs and networks Revised combinations of nature/value/region and quality Rural development as counter movements Rural livelihoods/fields of activity/new institutional arrangements • Agro-ecological research and development Co-evolving supply chains Revised state/market/civil-society/nature relations • Evaluation paradigm for rural sustainability

Source: Adapted from Marsden (2008: 193)

Rural development studies from western Europe suggest that there has been a paradigm shift from the modernization productivist agri-industrial model to the ‘territorialized and ecologically-embedded’ rural development model in the 1990s (van der Ploeg *et al.* 2000; Pugliese 2001; Marsden *et al.* 2002; Goodman 2004). This shift embodies the reconstruction of existing social and environmental relations and as a result, the emergence of a new set of rural development practices, networks and theories. This includes a re-embedding of agriculture into local social and ecological relations, a re-localization of food supply chains, a re-valorization of resources, and a

re-conceptualization of ‘entrepreneurial farmers’ or, to use Van der Ploeg’s (2000) term, ‘repeasantization’. Thus, the entrenched traditional ‘bio-economy’ in the rural area that is productivity oriented is transforming to a new ‘eco-economy’ that is locally embedded and based on ecological principles (Horlings and Marsden 2011; Kitchen and Marsden 2009; Marsden 2002).

Food Safety and Alternative Food Networks

A premise for the interrogation of AFNs in China is that their emergence was largely driven by consumer demand for safe and healthy food. Food safety can be defined as “the assurance that food will not cause harm to the consumer when it is prepared and consumed according to its intended use” (Lam *et al.* 2013: 2048). Food safety is a global issue that affects people’s health in both developing and developed countries. There are diverse sources for food safety problems, including microbial agents, chemical contamination, toxic plants and animals, abuse of additives and use of illegal additives. Many of these food safety problems have been occurring recurrently in China in the past few decades. Yan (2012) describes the changes of food safety problems in China in different periods since the 1950s. He categorizes food poisoning cases in China into eight major types according to their causes (see Yan 2012: 708). He argues that in the 1950s, food poisoning cases in China were concentrated in public canteens. Consumption of diseased animals, spoiled foods, and accidental consumption of pesticides and chemicals (e.g., using pesticide containers to store food) appeared as major causes for food poisoning. Things changed in the 1980s when food poisoning cases in canteens and consumption of spoiled foods and diseased meat declined but new types of food poisoning cases appeared. These new cases were caused by restaurant owners, food processors and retailers deliberately adding toxic chemicals to food in order to enhance their profits. Since the 2000s, a new era of food safety problems in China has emerged in which the major food safety problems were

greatly diversified. These problems include food adulteration, toxic food additives, pesticides used as food preservatives, and fake foods (see Yan 2012).

Despite the long history of food safety problems in China, as Yan (2012) points out, food safety was not on the radar of most Chinese consumers until the turn of the 20th century when food safety scandals became widespread food scares. The number of reports about food safety scandals began to increase rapidly in the past 6 years. A statistic shows that in 2012, there were 6685 food safety incidents reported that were primarily caused by microbial agents (56.1%). Toxic animals or plants (i.e. products that are toxic in themselves) accounted for 14.8% of the incidents, and chemical contamination accounted for 5.9% (see Lam *et al.* 2013). Abuse of food additives and use of illegal food additives, chemical residues in fresh produce, and food adulteration as the major food safety scandals contribute greatly to the deterioration of public trust and the reputation of food regulatory institutions³.

As a result of the growing public concern of food safety problems, food safety, as a contested issue in China (Yang 2013), has become the dominant theme in food studies in recent years. Food safety scandals from melamine-tainted milk to recycled cooking oil from sewers became staple news for Chinese. These intensive scandals reinforced the public's perception of the low quality of food in the Chinese market. Food 'quality', despite its multifacetedness, is increasingly reduced to a simplified notion of 'safety and healthfulness' among Chinese consumers. The ecological and social implications of food production and consumption are overshadowed by the dominance of food safety concerns.

The economic, social and political implications of the food safety issue are enormous. Economically, public anxiety drove the rapid growth of food imports in China. Take the influential melamine-tainted milk scandal as an example, it took a fatal strike on and reshuffled China's milk industry. According to the National Food

³ On the classification of food safety problems in China, see also Forum on Health, Environment and Development (FORHEAD). 2014. *Food Safety in China: A Mapping of Problems, Governance and Research*. <<http://webarchive.ssrc.org/cehi/PDFs/Food-Safety-in-China-Web.pdf>> Accessed 5 November 2014.

Security Office⁴, the import of foreign brands of milk powder suddenly skyrocketed from approximately 126,000 tons to 597,000 tons in 2009. Foreign brands increased their market share to the extent that they now take up almost 90% of the high-end baby formula market. Although being hurt severely, major milk corporations took the opportunity to restore their domestic market power. Many small milk processing enterprises were consolidated into large corporations. The biggest social consequence of this scandal is the loss of trust in Chinese society. A loss of trust between consumers, food producers and processors also impaired the social integrity and morality in a broader sense. Lack of trust has transformed into a social norm that reshapes people's daily behaviors (e.g., Klein 2013). Politically, the dissemination of food safety information in the cyber space became a contested arena for power dynamics—the hegemony and counter-hegemony struggles between two major groups: the state and corporate elites as one group and citizen consumers and activists as the other group (see Yang 2013). The state has increasingly taken food safety scandals as threats to social stability. The crisis also accelerated the legislation and revision of food safety laws and bylaws⁵.

AFNs were introduced by the NRRM team and food activists to China to cope with the growing demand for safe and healthy food. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) was the earliest attempt by the NRRM to reconstruct food relations. The NRRM also established farmers' markets and consumer cooperatives (such as buying clubs) to diversify their experiments. It was estimated that by 2013, there were more than 100 CSA farms and 10~20 ecological farmers' markets across the country⁶. Although the number is small, they all happened in five years and are expanding rapidly. Working with food activists and non-governmental organizations, the NRRM was able to bring CSA farms, ecological farms and other AFNs together under one

⁴ Xinjing Newspaper. 2011. Imported baby formula takes 90% of the market after the melamine scandal. <http://finance.southcn.com/jrcj/content/2011-03/10/content_21031119.htm> Accessed 01 November, 2014. (in Chinese)

⁵ Some researchers believe it is the internal competition among regulatory agencies and uncoordinated institutional responsibilities in a fragmented authoritarian regime that prevented food administration agencies from successfully fulfilling their responsibilities (Chen 2009; Pei *et al.* 2011; Yan 2012).

⁶ See Paper 1 in this dissertation for a better sense of the scale of AFNs in China.

umbrella given their common alternative rural development agenda. The relationship between AFNs and the rural development movement are thus reciprocal: on the one hand, the NRRM has been using AFNs to tap into environmental and ecological agendas of the state and cope with societal demands for safe and healthy food; on the other hand, the NRRM has created a platform for the convergence and scaling up of locally-specific and fragmented AFNs.

Purpose and Objectives

In the analysis above, we identified a key puzzle to be solved. That is, to what extent the alternative values and practices of AFNs will be transferred to developing countries such as China where the sociopolitical context is rapidly changing, and how AFNs coevolve with rural development initiatives. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to characterize AFNs in China and examine the symbiotic relationship between AFNs and alternative rural development initiatives (the NRRM) in China.

The objectives of the research are the following:

1. To develop a typology of AFNs in China (identify major types of AFNs);
2. To characterize different types of AFNs in terms of their alternativeness within the sociopolitical and economic context in China;
3. To understand the origin of the NRRM, and the challenges and opportunities for advancing its rural development agenda.
4. To uncover the relationship between AFNs and the NRRM: the AFNs' role in the development of the NRRM on the one hand and the NRRM's role in shaping AFNs.

How the Manuscripts Address the Purpose and Objectives

The following four papers answered specific research questions and addressed corresponding research objectives (see Table 2).

Table 2. How the manuscripts addresses the purpose and objectives

Journals Submitted To	Research Questions	Research Objectives
(Paper 1)		
Characterizing Alternative Food Networks in China ⁷		
<i>Agriculture and Human Values</i>	How did AFNs emerge in China? What are the major types of AFNs in China? What are the characteristics of AFNs in China compared to their western counterparts?	To develop a typology of AFNs in China; Characterize different types of AFNs within the Chinese sociopolitical and economic contexts
(Paper 2)		
Farmers' Markets as Contested Spaces of Power, Ethical Values and Regulations: A Case Study of an Ecological Farmers' Market in Beijing, China		
<i>Geoforum</i>	What are the characteristics of farmers' markets in China? How does China's specific sociopolitical context shape the practices of the farmers' market?	To characterize AFNs in China through a case study of an ecological farmers' market
(Paper 3)		
Governmental versus Grassroots Agendas of Rural Development: Strategies, Challenges and Opportunities of the 'New Rural Reconstruction Movement' in China		
<i>Journal of Peasant Studies</i>	How does the NRRM as a compelling case of the 'rural development' model plays out its ambitious rural development goals in the sociopolitical context of China? How are AFNs being adopted as powerful tools by the NRRM to achieve its goals?	Understand the origin, challenges and opportunities of the NRRM; Unveil the relationship between AFNs and the NRRM
(Paper 4) The Convergence of Alternative Food Networks within 'Rural Development' Initiatives: A Case of the New Rural Reconstruction Movement in China		
<i>Local Environment</i>	How does the NRRM shape the development of AFNs	Unveil the relationship between AFNs and the

⁷ This paper has been published online by *Agriculture and Human Values*, see Si *et al.* (forthcoming).

The first two papers seek to understand the emergence and characteristics of AFNs in China, especially how the sociopolitical context shapes their characteristics. To achieve this goal, the first paper develops a typology of AFNs in China which has not been documented in the existing literature. Drawing on others' examination of the four major dimensions of the 'alternativeness' of AFNs, the paper then unpacks the 'alternativeness' into eight elements. I argue that these more specific elements provide a more useful framework to examine the diverse landscape of 'alternativeness' of AFNs. I use these elements to scrutinize the major types of AFNs in China. The paper concludes that AFNs in China display diverse landscape of 'alternativeness' with a strong emphasis on food healthfulness. It identifies a significant value division between activists who established the networks and their customers. The second paper takes the Beijing Country Fair farmers' market as an example to anatomize the nuances and contestations within AFNs in China. It highlights the role of the social political context in shaping the emergence, operation and characteristics of AFNs in China. It brings the state as a key player into the analysis of power dynamics. It identifies various tensions and conflicts that have not been previously documented in studies of farmers' markets.

The third paper switches the focus to the NRRM that has been playing an influential role in the development of AFNs in China. It argues that although the NRRM has played critical roles in the emergence and development of AFNs in China, little attention has been paid to the challenges and opportunities it faces, or to the strategies it used to cope with these challenges. In order to better understand the NRRM, the paper first depicts the values and practices of the NRRM through a historic perspective. It then interrogates the strategies the NRRM has been using to cope with state pressure and societal demands. Following that, it highlights the role of AFNs in the development of the NRRM. The paper provides nuanced empirical

information and a different angle to understand the complex forces underlying the development of AFNs in China.

The fourth paper interrogates the other side of the relationship between AFNs and the NRRM in China: how the NRRM shaped AFNs in China, especially how the NRRM opened a space for the convergence of fragmented AFNs in China and thus contributed to the consolidation of their power to achieve a wider impact. The paper first examines the current discussions of the rural development paradigms as well as the convergence and scaling up of AFNs. It argues that on the one hand, rural development studies have paid limited attention to the role of alternative rural development initiatives (falling into the ‘rural development’ paradigm) in the development of AFNs; on the other hand, existing studies of AFN convergence have not paid attention to the role of rural development initiatives. To fill this gap, this paper then elaborates on the involvements of the NRRM in the establishment of CSA farms, farmers’ markets and buying clubs. It then examined the major approaches that the NRRM team has been taking to scale up the fragmented AFNs in China. It concludes that the NRRM, in following the ‘rural development’ dynamics, functions as a hub for the convergence and scaling up of various alternative food initiatives.

Methodology

Data Collection

The research used multiple qualitative methods to collect and analyze information. The key approach was interviews. Other approaches included observation of ‘microblog’ and blog posts, alternative food venues and CSA symposiums. I also sourced secondary information from newsletters and informal publications, websites, media coverage, organic food expos as well as presentations from CSA conferences held in China.

According to Dunn (2010), an interview was defined by Maccoby in 1954 as “a face-to-face verbal interchange in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information or expressions of opinion or belief from another person or persons” (p. 101). Steward and Cash (2008: 4) defined it as “an interactional communication process between two parties, at least one of whom has a predetermined and serious purpose, that involves the asking and answering of questions”. Nowadays, face-to-face interviews have been complemented by telephone or online interviews (Dunn 2010). Among the three major forms of interviewing, depending on whether the interview question is pre-determined or not, semi-structured interviews are more flexible compared to structured interviews but more rigid compared to unstructured interviews (Dunn 2010). Generally speaking, interviewing is an excellent research method for gaining access to information about events, opinions, and experiences (Dunn 2010: 102).

The literature on interview methods explored one major theme: how an interview is different from ordinary conversation. Scholars have a consensus on the conclusion that an interview is not a conversation, but they tend to have different understandings of their relationships. Gorden (1969) concludes that interviews may include multiple functions of ordinary conversation but always maintain the central purpose of collecting information. Dingwall (1997: 59) also claims that an interview is not a

conversation, but his emphasis is that “it is a deliberately creates opportunity to talk about something that the interviewer is interested in and that may or may not be of interest to the respondent”. Steward and Cash (2008: 7-9), however, identify an interview as a relational form of communication that bestows five relational dimensions on the interview process: similarity, inclusion/involvement, affection, control, and trust. Longhurst (2010: 106) believes that an interview is more than just a “chat” because the researcher needs to arrange the whole interview process and be cognizant of ethical issues and power relations involved in qualitative research. These characterizations of the interview method reinforce the view that an interview is more than having a conversation with interviewees. During the interview process, we have some degrees of control over the conversation, to deal with the relations between ourselves and the participants, and to be aware of the power relations that can influence the interview throughout the process.

Besides the basic principles of interviewing, much of the literature discusses the various types of interviews. For example, Gorden (1969) differentiates scheduled interviews and non-scheduled interviews. Weiss (1994) claims that “the fixed-question-open-response approach”, or structured interview, “turns out to sacrifice as much in quality of information as it gains in systematization” (p. 13). This implies that during a structured interview, the interviewer will have limited power to encourage the respondents to reply at length. However, semi-structured interview, one of the three types of interview identified by Dunn (2010), is probably the most commonly used qualitative method (Kitchin and Tate 2000: 213). Semi-structured interviews need pre-scheduled questions, but these questions might not be strictly followed. This gives the interviewer more freedom and power to shift the direction of the conversation and thus the whole process is more responsive and flexible (Dunn 2010: 110). The main features of semi-structured interview are that it can be broadly used for a range of research; reasonably informal or conversational in nature; and flexible and can be used in conjunction with a variety of other methods (Longhurst 2010: 106). Based on these points, semi-structured interviews were selected as one of

the major methods for collecting information for my study of AFNs and rural development initiatives in China.

Interviewing was an effective research method for this study because it is an effective way to capture opinions of different groups of people. Moreover, it always generates valuable information which has strong personal characteristics. I selected this method based on four rationales. First, AFNs in China are nascent initiatives which have not been well documented. Therefore, information collected from existing literature is limited. Interviews worked well for this exploratory study. Second, by interviewing people with diverse backgrounds, it is easy to identify not only points of consensus but also disputes and contestations. This is critical for identifying the challenges that confront AFNs in China. Third, many of the subtleties within these emerging and rapidly evolving initiatives can emerge from the informants at any time. Compared to a questionnaire, interviews enabled me to manipulate my questions according to the responses of the informants and capture critical information. Fourth, interviews also gave me a certain extent of flexibility to extract information about issues that I was most interested in. In sum, interviews were an effective and appropriate method for conducting research about AFNs in China.

The interviews I conducted for this research were mainly semi-structured interviews. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer can easily ask unplanned questions as a response to the informant's answers. Some of the responses from the informant might even help to correct a false perception held by the researcher and disclose significant misunderstandings that have not been previously identified (Schoenberger 1991: 187). In order to interview people with various backgrounds, I, together with the research team, designed various types of questions for the corresponding interviewee. For example, when interviewing a manager of the Beijing Country Fair—the most prominent ecological farmers' market in China, we were very curious about how the market was initiated, the key rules for selecting vendors, who are the vendors, how it maintains its reputation, the motivations of their customers, their connections with other initiatives and with academics, their perceptions of

organic certification, the core values of the market, etc. But besides these questions we prepared, we also learned about the important role of microblogs (known as *weibo* in China) in promoting the initiative, how they had been funding their market, information about specific farmers, and the emerging group of ‘new peasants’. This important information underpins some key arguments in the first two papers.

The research is based on a broad research project about the ecological agriculture sector in China. The research team of three doctoral students and one faculty member collectively conducted more than 120 interviews over six months of fieldwork in 2011, 2012 and 2013 in 13 provinces and municipalities in China (see table 3), including Beijing, Liaoning, Shandong, Henan, Anhui, Jiangsu, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Chongqing, Guangxi, Fujian and Hainan. Interviewees were key players in the ecological agriculture sector with diverse backgrounds: employees and owners of organic and green food farms, representatives of organic certification bodies, government agencies, consumer associations, NGOs and community organizers, and researchers. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to five hours. All but five interviews were conducted in Chinese and notes were taken during interviews. Interview notes were later translated and transcribed into electronic documents. We identified most of the interviewees by snowball sampling. The rest of them were identified through personal and academic contacts, mass media, online social networks and national organic conferences and expos.

Table 3. Number of interviews conducted with different types of interviewees

Type of interviewee	Number of interviews*
Managers and workers on ecological farms	42
Managers of farmers’ markets	4
Representatives of buying clubs	3
People renting plots for recreational gardening	5
Governmental officials	20
Researchers	32
Organic certification agencies	11
Directors and employees of NGOs	10
Total	127

* Some interviews were conducted with the same person.

The second approach for information collection was observation. I observed posts from relevant microblog accounts, blogs and online forums. Microblogs have become a significant public space for information flow and exchange since 2011. They have played a critical role in the development of various alternative food initiatives in China. My observations of microblogs cover accounts of CSA farms (e.g., Little Donkey Farm, Big Buffalo Farm, Shared Harvest CSA, Emerald Harbor Farm, Tony's Farm), farmers' markets and their organizers and vendors (e.g., Beijing Country Fair, Beijing Community Farmers' Market, Shanghai Nonghao Farmers' Market, Tianjin Green Farmers' Market, Xi'an Farmers' Market), farmers' market vendors (e.g., Dreamland Farm, Bashangtian Organic Farm, Sunlin Farm, Dandelion Commune, Happy Urban Farmer), buying clubs (e.g., Green League, Shanghai Caituan, Chengdu Green Heartland, Citizen Group of Organic Food Investigation), influential academics and activists in rural development and agriculture (e.g., Li Changping, Jiang Gaoming, Qiu Jiansheng), alternative food stores (e.g., *Jishi* run by Beijing Country Fair, Ufood Organic), as well as related organizations and websites (National Urban-Rural Mutual Support CSA Alliance, Hanhaisha, Beijing Organic Assemble, EcoScan, Taobao Ecological Agriculture). When reading their posts, I paid special attention to their opinions and debates about local and seasonal food, trust and community building, self-identity, ecological farming methods, organic certification, healthy eating tips, etc. I archived important comments and posts for further reference.

Besides microblogs, my observations also included blogs and websites. For example, Shi Yan, the founder of the most influential CSA farm in China—Little Donkey Farm—and several other CSA farms in Beijing, has been an influential figure in the AFNs' community. Her posts on her blog cover various issues related to AFNs, especially about the values embedded within these networks in the west. Therefore, it provided valuable information to examine the food advocacy in China. The NRRM's projects have been widely covered by the mass media. The various websites therefore

provided valuable information for the examination of how the NRRM addressed its goals with diverse strategies and approaches. How the mass media phrased their activities is also an interesting thing to examine. Critiques of CSA farms and some of their ethical values could also be found from the online forum of Emerald Harbor Farm. It provides a contrast to represent the contested nature of the nascent initiatives in China.

The third approach for collecting information was field visits to farmers' markets in Beijing and Shanghai and various ecological farms, many of which were organic farms and CSA farms, in 9 provinces and municipalities including Beijing, Liaoning, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shanghai, Fujian, Sichuan, Chongqing and Guangxi. I visited Beijing Country Fair farmers' market on April 2, 2012 and March 9, 2013. These two visits gave me a clear sense of the venues and how vendors promote their products and communicate with customers. By talking with some vendors and customers, I collected information about the motivations of customers, the ethical values of vendors, and their perceptions of organic farming and certification. I also visited Shanghai Nonghao Farmers' Market on May 27, 2012. I talked to vendors about their ethical values in terms of ecological implications of their farming methods. I participated in their seminar discussion after the market where vendors shared their different perspectives and approaches of how to maintain soil fertility without chemical fertilizers. I collected valuable information about the different farming approaches, their understandings of principles of organic farming, and their perceptions of organic certification. Although some of the information was not directly referred to in the four papers, it contributed to the formation of my other arguments.

I visited the BioFach China organic expo held from May 22 to 24, 2012 in Shanghai. This expo was far more than an exhibition of organic brands and products. It included some seminars held by NGOs like the Green Ground in Beijing that involved participation from CSA farmers, farmers' markets organizers and buying clubs organizers. I participated in the discussion of these seminars and collected

useful information about the challenges and opportunities of AFNs. Another official conference was also held at this expo where large organic food companies, certification agencies and governmental officials sat together to discuss the development of the organic agriculture sector and policy changes. I viewed it as a sharp contrast (different values, approaches, focuses) with these AFNs seminars. Some of the interviews were conducted at the expo.

I also attended two important conferences held by the NRRM team. One was the 4th National CSA Symposium at Renmin University in Beijing on November 30 to December 1, 2012. This symposium has been held annually (except the first two symposiums which were both held in 2010) by the NRRM. The Rural Reconstruction Center, as the base for the NRRM, facilitated the annual gathering of ecological farmers (including CSA managers), which brought together NGOs, farmers' markets managers and volunteers, buying club organizers, academics, and other coordinators of the NRRM initiatives across the country. In the 4th symposium, held in Beijing in December 2012, I participated in the seminar sessions and roundtable discussions. The most updated information from various presenters, most of whom are organizers and managers of alternative food initiatives, provided a valuable complement to interview materials. Many of the presentations and speeches were later uploaded to a website called *wuguwang*⁸. These also helped me to clarify some of the missing points from my notes. The other conference was the International Conference on Sustainability and Rural Reconstruction held from December 8 to 10, 2012 at Southwest University in Chongqing, China. This was a conference on the alliance between the NRRM in China and rural reconstruction initiatives in many other countries. Academics and activists sat together to address challenges of environmental sustainability, social justice, equity, economic viability of small scale farmers, food sovereignty and food security. The entire conference was pitched with a strong anti-modernity sentiment and alternative developmental ideas, which is very rare in contemporary China. My attendance enabled me to better understand the NRRM's

⁸ See <http://www.wugu.com.cn/> (in Chinese)

alternative values and practices. It helped me to characterize it thoroughly and compare it with the state-led New Socialist Countryside Construction campaign from various dimensions.

Data Analysis

Case studies is a widely used research design method in both quantitative and qualitative research. Qualitative data collected through various methods in this research centered on information of specific cases, including CSA farms, farmers' markets, and buying clubs, and the NRRM as a broad social movement. I carefully examined these cases to reflect on the challenges and opportunities within AFNs and rural development initiatives in general. As Gerring (2004: 342) noted, case study method is "an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units". Yin (2003: xi) points out that the case study method is especially appropriate when the researcher seeks "a) to define research topics broadly and not narrowly, b) to cover contextual or complex multivariate conditions and not just isolated variables and c) to rely on multiple and not singular sources of evidence". It includes examinations of one or multiple cases. Case studies are depth-oriented, not breadth-oriented in terms of understanding specific phenomena. Major types of case study are theory testing and theory generating cases, and case studies across time and space (i.e., cross-sectional and longitudinal case studies, comparative analysis) (Baxter 2010). Case study method has been adopted by social science researchers to test, generate, and/or expand theory. When there is no clear proposition before conducting the research, a case study always generates new theories or expands existing theories to explain what has been observed. This is a highly inductive rather than a deductive process during which 'grounded theory' is an approach to code the data.

A key concern, and probably a major critique, of case studies as a research design method is its generalizability and transferability (see Flyvbjerg 2006), although an in-depth understanding of the case itself is valuable on its own. As Flyvbjerg (2006)

argues, the context-dependent feature of knowledge in humanity makes it impossible to construct epistemic theory (see also Flyvbjerg 2001). The case study method is a well-suited to get context-dependent knowledge because of its closeness to real life and its rich details. Hence, case studies are a valid and important methodology to generate meaningful understandings of human affairs. In justifying the importance of the nuanced view of reality, Flyvbjerg (2006: 223) also points out that “human behaviour cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rule-governed acts found at the lowest levels of learning process and in much theory”. Case studies provide the opportunity for researchers to achieve the highest levels in the learning process by getting close to the studied reality. As Hans Eysenck (1976: 9) puts it, “sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases—not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something!” (cited in Flyvbjerg 2006: 224)

The case study method is the best choice for the study of China’s AFNs and rural development initiatives for three main reasons. First, case studies with in-depth interviews enabled me to uncover the subtleties existing in the struggles of AFNs in the Chinese socio-political context. I would never be able to illustrate in detail how a farmers’ market works in China (i.e. the power struggles and distinctive values among different players) without the case analysis of the Beijing Country Fair. Second, the case study method helped me to reconsider some preconceived views and perceptions about the emerging ecological food sector in general. Having been ‘flooded’ by constant food safety scandals, I assumed, before doing the fieldwork, that AFNs in China were merely a response to food safety challenges. Without in-depth case studies, I would not be able to capture the strong ecological and social concerns of CSA farmers and farmers’ market managers. This led me to appreciate the value distinctions between AFN initiators and their customers. Third, as Baxter (2010) notes, instead of expecting a theory applies to all cases, social scientists believe it is more important to describe “why a theory does or does not apply in a particular case” (p. 94). Since AFN studies in the west have already developed a set of theories to

explain the phenomena, it is important to examine whether these understandings of AFNs based on the western cases will apply to Chinese AFNs. Another similar case relates to the ‘rural development’ paradigm observed in Europe, I also applied this to the NRRM case to justify its ‘rural development’ nature in various dimensions. Case studies made all these examinations feasible.

Besides using case study as a basic research design method, I also used discourse analysis to interrogate the perspectives and the value system of the NRRM. Waitt (2010: 217) defines discourse analysis as “a well-established interpretive approach in geography to identify the sets of ideas, or discourses, used to make sense of the world within particular social and temporal contexts.” Discourse analysis treats discourse as being grounded in social networks. Critical discourse analysis focuses on how social norms and political structures are reproduced in discourse (Fairclough 1995). Materials that are used in discourse analysis include “advertisements, brochures, maps, novels, statistics, memoranda, official reports, interview transcripts, paintings, sketches, postcards, photographs, and the spoken word” (Waitt 2010: 220). As Michel Foucault (1980) emphasizes, “discourses are always embedded within relations of power”. Therefore, “all knowledge is ‘power/knowledge’” (Robbins *et al.* 2010: 124). When conducting discourse analysis, a key requirement is to interrogate the social context and the power structure within which the discourse is produced (i.e. the ‘social production’ of the text).

Discourse analysis fits the objectives of this dissertation for the following reasons. First, semi-structured interviews as the key data collection method make discourse analysis relevant. A large proportion of the data collected regarding Chinese AFNs and rural development initiatives were from interviews. Interview transcripts reflect the nuanced perspectives of interviewees and required careful examination. Understanding others through their words was the main task for my data analysis. Therefore, the selection of words, the tone of expressions, and the rationales in the conversation were all important information. When reading the interview transcripts, I put myself in the position of the interviewee so as to understand why certain words

were selected and why the narratives were unfolded in certain ways. Second, the research objectives make discourse analysis a key analytical approach. One of the research objectives is to understand how the NRRM copes with pressures from the state. By examining the remarks of the key leader of the NRRM, I showed the political context that shaped how the remarks were phrased and how the NRRM maintained its non-confrontational stance to the state. The interrogation of the Beijing Country Fair farmers' market also involved an analysis of the announcement of the market and the advertisements designed by the market vendors.

With the examination of various discourses and specific cases, this dissertation synthesized data drawn from multiple sources of information to depict the characteristics of Chinese AFNs and its co-evolution with the NRRM. This analytical process encompasses both structured and inductive interpretations. During the qualitative analysis, I transcribed all the interviews from interview notes and recordings (only two interviews were recorded) and then categorized the notes into three major categories: AFNs in general, farmers' markets, and the NRRM. Each of the categories was used for one or more papers. When reading the notes, I paid special attention not only to the explanation of the emergence of these initiatives but also to the characteristics they claimed to have that distinguished them from conventional food venues. This pertains to my unpacking of 'alternativeness' and the examination of their alternativeness accordingly. For the interviews and other information collected about the farmers' market, I looked for narratives of tensions and conflicts. Specific quotes were saved in a separate file to support some of the arguments in the paper. Information on farmers' markets from interviews with stakeholders who were not involved in farmers' markets such as online reports were also collected to cross-verify the information from the interviews with farmers' market managers. When reading the materials about the NRRM, I picked quotations from the leaders of the movement in describing how they maintain their political legitimacy and social relevance. I also extracted information from their promotional documents to depict their multiple goals. Online reports about the NRRM, especially their project called

James Yen Rural Reconstruction Center were carefully collected and examined. The program book and paper collection from the CSA symposium were screened so that key papers about the NRRM's involvement in food were highlighted. I then organized the information in a logical way in the third and fourth paper. Despite the importance of having a structured analytical process, a lot of interpretations and conceptualizations presented in the dissertation came from inductive coding of the material. Indeed, the study as a whole was an exploratory process that involved no specific hypotheses. Instead of seeking to verify a theory or hypothesis, the dissertation sought to understand how the AFNs and the NRRM emerged and evolved and how their relationships are constructed within Chinese socio-political context. There has been relatively little documentation of these newly emerged initiatives. As a researcher, I focused on the descriptions of them and the explanations of how they work. This 'learning by doing' approach makes inductive interpretation of qualitative data an effective approach.

My shifting research focus explains how this exploratory process unfolded. The research started with an exploration of the ecological agriculture sector in China. During our interviews, I realized that a vibrant informal organic and ecological agriculture sector was emerging outside the formal, certified organic food sector. Some of the early interviewees were involved in CSA farming and ecological farmers' markets. They introduced our research team to more initiators of AFNs across the country. I became interested in the characteristics of these AFNs and how closely they reflected the values of their counterparts in the west. This led me to discover more nuanced tensions within these AFNs and how these tensions shaped their principles and ways of operating. This resulted in my first and second paper included in the thesis and also a coauthored paper that has been published in *Food Policy* (see Scott *et al.* 2014). I gradually realized that, in many cases, these various initiatives had a strong rural development intention in terms of fostering the well-being of small peasants in rural areas. Thus, a whole new horizon was unveiled when I discovered their connections with the NRRM. From there, I turned my

attention to the NRRM. As my research focus shifted towards this grassroots rural development initiative, I was overwhelmed by its rich historical connections, theoretical constructions, and rural development experiments. I found that it was far more than a campaign of ecological agriculture, although ecological agriculture was a key component of their initiatives. My understanding of the NRRM took a great leap during my second fieldwork trip when, in late 2012, I attended the 4th National CSA Symposium organized by the NRRM team in Beijing, and the International Conference on Rural Reconstruction and Food Sovereignty held in Chongqing. These two events exhibited a multifaceted and vibrant social movement. I started to collect more secondary data from other sources to complement my knowledge about this movement. It became clear to me that, as a social movement in China, the NRRM faced various challenges and I became interested in discovering how these challenges were mitigated or solved through various means. This resulted in my third and fourth paper included in the dissertation.

Limitations and Solutions

I was very fortunate to have conducted most of my fieldwork with my supervisor, Dr. Steffanie Scott, and her then doctoral student, Dr. Theresa Schumilas. On our way to farms and meetings, we had extensive discussions about the interviewees and cases we visited. In fact, these fascinating cases seemed to be all that we talked about. This ‘collision of thoughts’ motivated me to reflect on the data we collected and helped me generate new ideas. Being Chinese gave me significant insights in understanding the cultural contexts within which the AFN initiatives have been evolving. Although I tried my best to translate the interviews into English for my colleagues, I worried that my choice of words might distort the original meanings of the informants’ responses. But taking notes in Chinese made it possible for me to revise our interview transcripts later to produce a more precise translation.

There are clearly some limitations of the methods used for this study. One limitation to using interviews as the key method for data collection relates to

interviewees' intentional avoidance of politically sensitive topics. One of the key goals of the research was to understand the roles of the state in relation to AFN development. However, criticizing the state has always been risky in China. Thus, our informants might refrain from expressing their perspectives. This could result in a biased and incomplete perception of the reality on the part of the researcher. In one of our interviews with a buying club organizer, the interviewee was stopped for criticizing the government by his colleagues (a fellow buying club organizer) and the conversations switched to a different topic. In order to understand how the government has put pressure on the operation of farmers' markets, I explicitly asked our informants in several interviews and also emailed them afterwards, yet the responses were still obscure.

Another limitation of interviewing concerns the interviewees' tendency to 'report only the good but not the bad'. This can be a problem especially if the informants treated us (with the presence of Steffanie Scott and Theresa Schumilas) as quasi-journalists who would promote their initiatives.

A third limitation relates to the snowball/convenience sampling method that might bring us only one side of the story and lead to a biased selection of interviewees. This is because interviewees may only refer us to people with similar opinions and certain groups of people might be left out. In this sense, the study will tend to reflect perspectives of a certain group of people with similar interests.

A fourth limitation, which is related to the inductive analysis, is reflected in the possibility of over-interpretation. Thus, I was especially cautious about making generalized conclusions. In the analysis, I also emphasized the context-dependent nature of my findings.

To overcome these limitations, I jumped out of the 'Chinese perspective' to examine the cases with a general framework. I used multiple sources of data to triangulate observations and interpretations. I also drew on contacts from a variety of sources so that I didn't get responses from a group of people with similar ideas. Besides snowball sampling, I followed blogs of people who disagreed with (and

publicly criticized) our interviewees. News reports were also taken into consideration to make up for the potential 'biased' perceptions portrayed to us by some interviewees. I also integrated perspectives and issues from online forums and microblogs that were not captured in our interviews.

To strengthen the arguments of the thesis, more interviews with consumers would have been beneficial in the first two papers, although I compensated for this by reviewing consumer reports and other sources that reflects consumer perspectives. Quantitative data analysis regarding the perspectives of consumers and farmers would also be helpful to complement this kind of qualitative analysis.

Manuscripts of Four Papers

Paper 1 Characterizing Alternative Food Networks in China

Overview

Amid the many food safety scandals that have erupted in recent years, Chinese food activists and consumers are turning to the creation of alternative food networks (AFNs) to ensure better control over their food. These Chinese AFNs have not been documented in the growing literature on food studies. Based on in-depth interviews and case studies, this paper documents and develops a typology of AFNs in China, including community supported agriculture, farmers' markets, buying clubs, and recreational garden plot rentals. We unpacked the four standard dimensions of alternativeness of AFNs into eight elements and used these to examine the alternativeness of AFNs in China. We argue first that the landscape of alternativeness varies among different networks but the healthfulness of food is the most prominent element. Second, there is an inconsistency in values between AFN initiators and customers, which contributes to the uneven alternativeness of Chinese AFNs. Third, Chinese AFNs are strongly consumer driven, a factor that constrains their alternativeness at present. The inclusion of "real" peasants in the construction of AFNs in China is minimal. This paper adds to the existing literature on AFNs with an analysis of recent initiatives in China that have not been well documented before. By unpacking the dimensions of alternativeness into specific elements, this paper also provides an analytical framework for examining the alternativeness of AFNs especially nascent ones that have not developed a full spectrum of alternativeness.

Keywords

Alternative Food Networks, farmers' markets, CSAs, buying clubs, alternativeness, China

Introduction

Agro-food systems scholars have analyzed the rapid developments concerning the industrialization of agriculture, consolidation of food production and processing, supermarketization of food retailing, and changing patterns of food consumption. Among these profound transformations, the construction, implications and evolution of alternative food networks (AFNs), or alternative systems of food provision (Watts *et al.* 2005), have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention since the mid-1990s (e.g., Goodman 2003, 2004; Maye *et al.* 2007; Tregear 2011). AFNs are “rooted in particular places, [and] they aim to be economically viable for farmers and consumers, use ecologically sound production and distribution practices, and enhance social equity and democracy for all members of the community” (Feenstra 1997: 2). AFNs proliferate as reflexive responses to the industrialization of the food sector but also face “mainstreaming” challenges (see Goodman *et al.* 2012). Types of AFNs include community supported agriculture (CSA) (Feagan and Henderson 2009; Lang 2010), farmers’ markets (Kirwan 2004, 2006; Brown and Miller 2008; Smithers *et al.* 2008; Beckie *et al.* 2012), buying clubs (Little *et al.* 2010), public procurement programs (Allen and Guthman 2006; Kirwan and Foster 2007), community gardens, and more (see Goodman and Goodman 2008; Tregear 2011; Raynolds 2000). The main (and most well-known) AFN “civic organizations” and initiatives are those in the UK, other parts of Western Europe, and North America. In contrast, initiatives in emerging economies tend to be more recent and have received little recognition (but see Abrahams 2007; Rocha and Lessa 2009; Freidberg and Goldstein 2011; Shi *et al.* 2011a; Scott *et al.* 2014).

As the world’s second largest economy and largest developing country, China is experiencing rapid growth in food production and consumption as well as fundamental transformations in its food system. From a country that struggled with food sufficiency to a country immersed in food safety crises in recent years, China is gradually transforming its food system from a state-coordinated food-security

oriented system to a system with nascent but increasing civil society and private sector participation (Scott *et al.* 2014). Chinese food activists are adapting alternative food production and provisioning initiatives from North America and Europe, including organic production, CSAs, farmers' markets and buying clubs. Some other endogenous initiatives such as "weekend farming" are also thriving (Fei Liu 2012). However, although a small number of studies have addressed the organic and ecological agriculture sector in China (see Shi 2002; Thiers 2002, 2005; Ye *et al.* 2002; Shi and Gill 2005; Sanders 2000, 2006; Sheng *et al.* 2009; Qiao 2010), AFNs such as CSAs, farmers' markets and buying clubs (e.g., Shi *et al.* 2011a; Scott *et al.* 2014) have received less scholarly attention. There have also been few studies of AFNs in other developing countries. The absence of Chinese AFNs in agro-food literature is partly due to the fact that AFNs were conceptualized within a western context, but also because most of the alternative food initiatives in China have only emerged since 2008.

In response to these gaps in scholarship, this paper proposes the question—what are the characteristics of AFNs in China and how do they differ from AFNs in the west? To characterize AFNs in China, we first drew up a typology of them, which entails the various types of food initiatives in China that would usually be categorized as AFNs in the west. We then identified specific cases for interviews and field visits to learn about their emergence and operations. Within these empirical cases, we probed into their characteristics such as their key principles, inherent values and internal contradictions to examine their alternativeness. It is also the elements of alternativeness emphasized in these initiatives that distinguishes them from western ones.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, we provide a brief overview of general understandings of "alternativeness" in AFNs literature. Second, we explain the emergence of alternative food initiatives in China in relation to the heightened food safety anxiety. Third, we unpack "alternativeness" into different elements and examine these in relation to four types of alternative food distribution networks in

China. Finally, we analyze the situatedness of Chinese AFNs and then offer our conclusions.

This paper contributes to the AFN literature in at least three ways. First, it provides an important complement to current understandings of AFNs based on experiences in industrialized market economies, demonstrating a very different picture of consumer motivations for participating AFNs in China. Second, it enriches current understanding of “alternativeness” in AFNs by providing an overview of previous analyses and an unpacking of “alternativeness” into eight elements (ecological production, healthy food, small-scale production, ethical production, locally procured food, seasonal food, strengthening of social ties and personal connections, and also new forms of political association of AFNs). Third, this unpacking of the dimensions of alternativeness provides an analytical framework for characterizing nascent AFNs that have not developed a full spectrum of alternativeness.

Research Methods

The primary data collection method was semi-structured in-depth interviews with key players in the ecological agriculture sector. The research team collectively conducted more than 120 interviews over six months of fieldwork in 2011, 2012, and 2013. The field spanned 13 provinces and municipalities in China, including Beijing, Liaoning, Shandong, Henan, Anhui, Jiangsu, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Chongqing, Guangxi, Fujian, and Hainan. Interviewees had diverse backgrounds and included employees and owners of organic and “green food”⁹ farms, representatives of organic certification bodies, government agencies, consumer associations, NGOs and community organizers, and researchers. Of all the interviews, 42 were conducted with managers and workers on ecological farms including CSA farms. Four interviews were conducted with organizers of farmers’ markets. Representatives from the three

⁹ “Green food” is a food quality standard in China that is lower than the organic standard (see Scott *et al.* 2014).

most prominent buying clubs in China were interviewed. Five interviews were done regarding recreational rental farming. Twenty interviews were conducted with government officials. Thirty-two interviews were conducted with ecological and organic agriculture researchers in China. We also conducted 11 interviews with organic food certification agencies and 10 with directors and employees of NGOs. Most of the interviewees were identified through snowball sampling. The rest were identified through personal and academic contacts, mass media, online social networks, and national organic conferences and expos. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to five hours. All but five interviews were conducted in Chinese and were later translated and transcribed. In addition to interviews, we also drew on information from secondary sources including newsletters and informal publications, websites, microblog discussions, blogs, media coverage, organic food expos as well as an annual CSA conference held in China. We also visited farmers' markets in Beijing and Shanghai three times. For our qualitative data analysis, we looked for evidence of the key dimensions of alternativeness that have been identified in western AFNs. We also captured key issues identified by the interviewees that we were not necessarily expecting, such as disputes over the term "organic" at the Beijing Country Fair farmers' market.

Dimensions of Alternativeness within AFNs

Amongst the various facets of AFNs that captured the attention of agro-food scholars, an intriguing issue is the interrogation of 'alternativeness'. Indeed, the alternativeness of AFNs should not be taken for granted. Rather, its existence and characterization should be examined in specific socioeconomic and political contexts. Although AFNs are generally characterized as value-based initiatives, in contrast to the conventional and capitalist food production and provision system (Whatmore *et al.* 2003; Goodman and Goodman 2008), scholars argue that the binary of alternative/conventional is problematic and not always useful nor does it always reflect the complexity of

specific cases (e.g., Hinrichs 2000; Jarosz 2008; Wilson 2013). This dichotomy thus leads to a neglect of the heterogeneity of AFNs and blurs the nuance *within* ‘alternative’ initiatives. One possible scheme to solve this contradiction is to re-conceptualize these initiatives, such as through Wilson’s (2013) illustration of ‘autonomous food spaces’. According to Wilson (2013: 720), autonomous food spaces are “based on a desire to disengage from capitalist food systems to build new forms of social and economic relationships and identities”. However, this reconceptualization still runs the risk of over simplification. The political connotation of ‘autonomous’ overemphasizes the political facet of AFNs while overshadowing other dimensions of alternativeness. Jones *et al.* (2010) instead proposed a shift of focus from ‘alternativeness’ to ‘sustainability’. We argue that another possible way to approach the problematization of this dichotomy is to first acknowledge the heterogeneity of AFNs, and then further unpack the ‘alternativeness’ into various dimensions.

While the dichotomous characterization of food venues as ‘alternative’ and ‘conventional’ may seem too simplistic and problematic (as noted by Sonnino and Marsden 2006a), food initiatives such as CSAs, farmers’ markets and buying clubs still possess specific attributes, to various extents, that distinguish them from mainstream market venues and thus underpin their alternativeness. According to Whatmore *et al.* (2003: 389), these novel initiatives are generally conceptualized under the AFN’s umbrella based on three main dimensions of ‘alternativeness’ that they share in common:

1. “...their constitution as/of food markets that redistribute value through the network against the logic of bulk commodity production;
2. [they] reconvene ‘trust’ between food producers and consumers; and
3. [they] articulate new forms of political association and market governance.”

While these representations and appeals of AFNs in the economic, social and political spheres, correspondingly, characterize most of their fundamental features, we

would add a fourth dimension—ecological alternativeness (see Jones *et al.* 2010). Ecological alternativeness addresses the common feature of many AFNs in which they embrace ecological ways of food production and consumption. These four major dimensions of alternativeness constitute the fundamental AFN discourses, and underpin its friction with the hegemonic neoliberal industrial food provision and consumption.

The first dimension of alternativeness identified by Whatmore *et al.* (2003) concerns the redistribution of value to smallholders along the value chain. Alternative and local networks generally have goals that encompass improving economic viability of local farms by providing stable local markets and shortening value chains (Allen *et al.* 2003). The sentiment of going against “the logic of bulk commodity production” (Whatmore *et al.* 2003: 389) in AFNs is mirrored in the promotion of CSAs (short food supply chains), farmers’ markets, and small-scale independent farms. Although empirical studies reveal that AFNs do not always guarantee local and small producers more profit (Brown and Miller 2008; Goodman 2009), the alternativeness of value redistribution is such a strong emphasis amongst food activists that Allen (2010: 300) suggests that American agrarianism, which upholds “the moral and economic primacy of farming”, results in an emphasis on improving the viability of the family farm over social justice concerns.

The second dimension of alternativeness of AFNs is the ‘reconnection’ between producers and consumers. The alternative food discourse highlights local modes of production and distribution (Allen *et al.* 2003; Feagan 2007) and direct encounters that reconnect consumers and producers in new ways (Holloway *et al.* 2006; Wiskerke 2009). The ‘face-to-face’ interaction in AFNs conveys relationships that are more than impersonal commodity exchange but a connectivity that embodies personalized sentiment of ‘regard’ (Kirwan 2004). The sentiment-infused “social ties, personal connections, and community good will” define the social embeddedness of alternative food initiatives such as farmers’ markets and CSAs (Hinrichs 2000: 301). Correspondingly, ‘reconnection’ between producers and consumers, overlapping with

‘re-placing’ and ‘re-localization’, is interpreted by agro-food studies as one of the most prominent features of *alternative* food initiatives (Kirwan 2004; Watts *et al.* 2005; Wiskerke 2009). It indicates that ‘reciprocity’, rather than the dominance of either consumer or producer, defines the ‘reconnection’. Consequently, this understanding of ‘reconnection’ leads to the specific focus of ‘trust’ within the local agro-food networks literature (see Jarosz 2000). The political economy perspective of AFNs studies sees the local as a site of resistance and in emphasizing spatial relations, is concerned with the micro-politics of place and *the relations of trust* and reciprocity. ‘Reconnection’ and ‘trust’ are conceptualized as inherent components of alternativeness in the AFN discourse.

The third dimension of alternativeness covered in the AFNs literature is the seeking of new forms of food governance and political agendas, such as the thriving non-governmental food organizations and associations (e.g., Toronto Food Policy Council, American Community Gardening Association). Alternative food initiatives are believed to have the potential to alter the current institutional arrangements for food provisioning. Food politics is becoming an arena in which various players struggle to reconfigure food production, consumption, and regulation. Some researchers (Lyson 2004; Alkon 2008) pointed out that sustainable agriculture and consumption have the potential to ‘reinvigorate democracy’. Alkon’s (2008) study in California and Beckie *et al.*’s (2012) study in western Canada both noted that farmers’ markets provide spaces for networking and cooperation amongst food activists seeking policy changes. Scholars have also explored the possibility of new food policies such as inscribing institutional food procurement into public policy (Allen and Guthman 2006). The political alternativeness is critical in constructing the oppositional and social political transformative potential of AFNs, which is especially the case in North America (Goodman 2003).

Another prominent dimension of alternativeness highlighted in some of the AFN literature relates to the ecological nature of alternative food initiatives (Allen *et al.* 2003; Marsden and Smith 2005), particularly organic and other forms of ecological

production practices (see Scialabba and Müller-Lindenlauf 2010), and also the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions through ‘food miles’ and carbon footprints involved in long-distance food transport. In this way, nature, whose importance is continuously being ‘outflanked’ or reduced in the industrialized food system (Murdoch *et al.* 2000), has been extensively integrated in a more positive manner into AFNs. This ecological dimension is also associated with the promotion of eating local, seasonal and plant-based diets, as opposed to out-of-season and animal-based produce sourced from global food markets (see Feenstra 1997, Jarosz 2008).

Despite the diverse dimensions of alternativeness within AFNs, we argue that there has been insufficient consideration of the extent to which all of these dimensions apply across AFNs in different contexts. As Jarosz (2008: 242) noted, “AFNs are not static objects...they emerge from political, cultural and historical processes”. In specific political economies such as China, the ‘full spectrum’ of alternativeness in AFNs is not necessarily as present as they may be elsewhere. Rather, the manifestations of these elements, which comprise the dynamic landscape of AFNs, are context specific. Indeed, our research in China suggests that the manifestation of alternativeness of AFNs varies in different economic, social and political contexts. Because of the fewer chemical inputs in alternative food production (ecological and organic agriculture) and less processed food, there is a general assumption of the healthfulness of food in AFNs. Chinese consumers are seeking out organic and ecologically produced foods via alternative food procurement channels for health reasons, which are to reduce their exposure to agro-chemicals and to antibiotics in meat (see Shi *et al.* 2011a; Scott *et al.* 2014). However, discussions about alternativeness in AFNs literature paid much less attention to this element compared to others. This is a point that we seek to highlight in this paper.

Critical studies of AFNs in North America and Europe questioned the various dimensions of ‘alternativeness’ particularly regarding their social inclusion goals (Hinrichs and Kremer 2002; Guthman 2008a), social justice concerns (Hinrichs and Allen 2008; Allen 2010; DeLind 2011) and environmental outcomes (Hinrichs 2003;

Dupuis and Gillon 2009; Jones *et al.* 2010). Scholars argue, for example, that despite strategies being employed to ensure social inclusion, participants in AFNs tend to be affluent, white and well-educated (Allen 2008). In discussions of conventionalization of organic agriculture and ‘local trap’, scholars argue that the promises of environmental and ecological sustainability (Guthman 2004; DuPuis and Gillon 2009) and social justice (Born and Purcell 2006) in these systems deserve scrutiny. There is a tension with maintaining ecological integrity as well as economic and social justice principles (Watts *et al.* 2005). These critiques of ‘alternativeness’ further raise the issue that the current interrogations of alternativeness did not address well the variation of alternativeness in diverse social, political and economic contexts.

Therefore, to overcome the critiques of the binary view of ‘alternative’ versus ‘conventional’ in characterizing food systems, we argue that a further unpacking of existing dimensions of ‘alternativeness’ is necessary. It will not only address the concern of oversimplification in examining alternativeness but also will enable a more operable analytical framework for characterizing AFNs in diverse contexts. Based on the four major dimensions of alternativeness identified in the previous section, and taking our interview results into account, we further unpacked the dimensions of alternativeness embedded in AFNs into eight elements, which include healthy, ecological, local, seasonal, small-scale, socially just, strengthening social ties and personal connections as well as political. These elements are the projections of the four major dimensions on the attributes of food and various relations embedded within AFNs.

Drawing on Ho and Edmonds’s (2008) conceptualization of China’s ‘embedded activism’, we argue that the current AFNs in China are strongly situated in the country’s political economy. These emerging alternative food initiatives have a strongly shaped, and even selected, alternativeness that is embedded within, and is also a reflection of, local geographies. The landscape of AFNs in China displays a strong representation of alternativeness around food ‘healthfulness’ and nutrition, but

displays weak representations of social and political elements in terms of ‘reconnection’, ‘social justice’ and political implications.

Characterizing Alternative Food Networks in China

The food safety scare among the general public is the primary driver of the so-called ‘quality turn’ (Morris and Young 2000; Goodman 2003, 2004; Goodman *et al.* 2011; Murdoch and Miele 2004) in China¹⁰. The belief in food being sacred and central in traditional Chinese culture has been shattered by numerous food safety scandals in recent years (Xiu and Klein 2010; Pei *et al.* 2011; Yang 2013; Klein 2013); food is no longer an innocent and dignified sphere of people’s lives. However, rather than a “retreat of the state to baseline food safety regulation” as has happened in many advanced economies (Goodman *et al.* 2011: 88), the state in China has taken a more proactive role to promote quality food production and has issued a set of national quality food standards, for not only organic but also ‘green’ and ‘hazard-free’ food (see Scott *et al.* 2014). To cope with the widespread distrust of organic certification due to frequent reports on fraudulent organic products in markets (Yin and Zhou 2012), the state enacted a more stringent organic standard in 2012 (Scott *et al.* 2014).

Another important change that has profound implications for the emergence of AFNs is the growing purchasing power of the middle class (Shi *et al.* 2011a). According to Lu (2010), about 23% of the population (around 300 million people) in China belonged to the ‘middle class’ by the year 2010, and that proportion is still growing. A characterization of the shareholders in the most well-known CSA in China—the Little Donkey Farm in Beijing—reveals strong middle-class features (Shi *et al.* 2011b). Compared to poorer segments of the population, the middle class has a

¹⁰ We believe the ‘quality turn’ is a useful concept in understanding the transformation of China’s food system. However, it demonstrates very different connotations in the Chinese contexts. We understand the ‘quality turn’ in China as a competitive sphere dominated by consumers but also proactively shaped by a small number of food activists, who are mainly well-educated ecological food producers (typically of urban backgrounds), and organizers of consumer organizations and NGOs pushing forward public education about AFNs and about the food system.

stronger interest in quality food and multifunctional urban agriculture that integrates food production and recreational functions (Shi *et al.* 2011b).

The mounting food safety crisis and the growing middle class has propelled Chinese civil society to establish various alternative food ventures in Chinese cities since about 2008. There are also other motivations, besides having access to safe food, which are exemplified by specific AFNs. We identified four major types of AFNs in China: CSAs, ecological farmers' markets, buying clubs, and urban people engaging in self-provisioning through recreational 'rental farming'. Although occasional reports noted that there are now more than 100 CSA farms in China (see Gale 2011), there has been no accurate data about the exact number¹¹. Except for the recreational garden plot rentals, the emerging alternative food initiatives were introduced from North America and Europe. However, they are significantly different from their western origins in terms of the four dimensions of alternativeness that we identified previously. For instance, producer-consumer reconnection in Chinese AFNs is more narrowly built upon safety of food and not genuine mutual trust. In fact, our interviews reveal that many CSA members in China trust CSA managers but not the peasant farm workers who are the direct producers of their food. These peasants are always portrayed as 'selfish' and 'shortsighted'¹².

Based on the four major dimensions of alternativeness identified in the previous section and our analysis of Chinese AFNs, we further unpacked the four dimensions of alternativeness embedded in AFNs into eight elements (see Table 4). These elements pertain to either the features of food within these AFNs or the relationships among stakeholders (between producers and consumers, producers and nature, and among producers themselves). We also identified alternative food initiatives that reflect these elements, as well as the connections between these elements and consumer motivations. It underscores how the 'situated AFNs' in China reflect a very

¹¹ Indeed, the number, even if there is one, cannot be accurate given the rapidly changing landscape of AFNs in China. The blurry definition of AFNs also makes it hard to do a national count. For example, some self-claimed CSA farms do not have members prepay at all and are rather food delivery business.

¹² Interview with the founder of a CSA farm, Dec. 6, 2012 in Beijing.

different landscape of alternativeness from that in the West. Our unpacking of the alternativeness of AFNs allows us to scrutinize the initiatives in terms of these eight major elements. It should be noted that these elements are not mutually exclusive entities but intertwined characterizations of alternativeness.

Table 4. Unpacking the alternativeness of AFNs in China

Types of Alternativeness	Elements of Alternativeness	Representative AFN Initiatives in China				Consumer Motivations for Each Element
		CSAs	Farmers' Markets	Buying Clubs	Recreational garden plots rentals	
Food features	Healthy (free from chemical residues and more nutritious)	✓	✓	✓	✓	Strong
	Ecological	✓	✓			relatively weak
	Local	✓	✓	✓		relatively weak
	Seasonal	✓	✓			Weak
Relationships among stakeholders	Small-scale*		✓			Weak
	Social ties and personal connections	✓	✓	✓	✓	Weak
	Social justice*		✓	✓		Weak
	Political* ¹		✓			Weak

*these elements were rarely mentioned by our interviewees

¹ Political refers to the AFNs' alternativeness in "articulating new forms of political association and market governance" (see Whatmore *et al.* 2003: 389)

Our empirical cases of CSAs, farmers' markets, buying clubs, and recreational garden plot rentals demonstrate different elements of alternativeness from the perspectives of their organizers. In contrast to the diverse ethical values represented among the organizers, consumers tend to have a single focus on healthfulness of food. Although the ecological and health elements are intertwined, the main motivation of consumers seemed to be individualistic health concerns, rather than a broader environmental ethic. Although being a CSA shareholder demonstrates a certain ecological value, there is still a lack of ecological concerns among consumers in general, even when ecological alternativeness is a characteristic of the food sold in these ventures. Being local is another imperative feature of AFNs that shapes the alternative food movement in the West but is also noticeably weak among the motivations of Chinese consumers, although some CSAs, farmers' markets and buying clubs are promoting 'eating local' as a novel social custom. Other elements of alternativeness are still at the early stage of being communicated by food 'activists' to alternative food consumers. The following section examined the alternativeness of these four major types of alternative food distribution networks in China with specific cases.

Community Supported Agriculture Farms

A well-educated group of activists and farmer entrepreneurs are facilitating the adoption of alternative models of food distribution—CSAs—introduced from North America, while also integrating traditional practices of sustainable farming into these models. The first CSAs in China were CSA farms in Anlong Village in Chengdu, Sichuan province (established in 2006), and the Little Donkey Farm in Beijing (established in 2008). By 2011 the alternative food sector was said to include a network of over 100 ventures (Gale 2011) resembling Western CSA programs and home delivery/box schemes. Organic farming practices exemplify these newly emerging ecological farming models, although farm owners often choose not to be certified to organic standards, in part because consumers don't trust organic

certification (Yin and Zhou 2012). Many farms instead prefer to develop a loyal customer base through farmers' markets, word of mouth, and personal relations. Customers are invited to visit their farms and ask questions. This is sometimes referred as 'participatory certification' or 'ethical inspections'. This entails customers hearing farmers' promises and descriptions of their practices, inspecting the farming practices by themselves and then making decisions.

The introduction of CSAs and some ecological farms in China exemplify a nascent values-based movement to promote consumer-producer and urban-rural connections (see Paül and McKenzie 2013). A group of Chinese academic researchers have contributed to the development of CSAs in various ways, including as advocates for the establishment of organic farms and as consultants to local and central governments. Renmin University in Beijing, through the leadership of Professor Wen Tiejun¹³, has been particularly noteworthy in the promotion of CSAs, peasant cooperatives, and the social economy (Shi *et al.* 2011; Wen *et al.* 2012b; Pan and Du 2011a, b). NGOs, though few in number and confined to some extent in China, have also been an important catalyst (Ju 2009). The Hong Kong-based Partnerships for Community Development (PCD) is one of the most critical NGOs in supporting CSA development in China. It has worked with the Chengdu Urban Rivers Association (a local NGO) to help establish the CSAs in Anlong village, Sichuan province.

How about their alternativeness in terms of the eight elements that we identified previously? Our interviews with CSA farmers and interns on farms reveal that there is a strong understanding of the ecological alternativeness and its health implications. CSA farmers agree on avoiding the usage of synthetic fertilizers and chemicals and believe it substantially contributes to environmental sustainability. 'Eat local, eat seasonal' promoted by a small number of food activists is also a commonly known slogan that many CSA farms are trying to follow. 'Social ties and personal

¹³ In late 2012, Wen Tiejun facilitated the establishment of China Rural Construction Institute at Southwest University in Chongqing.

connections' among CSA farmers and between CSA farmers and their customers are also highly valued (see Table 4).

Despite a representation of these elements of alternativeness, our fieldwork shows that the degree of their alternativeness is open to question. As many of the CSA farms in China are founded with market-based entrepreneurship, *within* rather than *beyond* the neoliberal market logics, it is hard for them to escape from the circle of profit-seeking commodity production. Some of the elements of alternativeness thus could be subdued in order to cater to consumer needs. For example, although 'eating seasonal' has been widely praised by CSA farmers, we still observed an online debate on microblogs between some CSA farms on whether 'eating seasonal' is a valid value that they should stick to.

In addition, consumers participating in CSAs are mainly motivated by a desire to procure safe food (Ju 2009; Gale 2011). Therefore, neither community building via producer-consumer reconnection nor value redistribution to small producers is a key priority in CSA operations although they could still be a priority for some CSA operators¹⁴. Social justice as an element of alternativeness is not represented here. In fact, we observed a strong feature of 'elite capture' in the class and racial complexion of CSAs: the dominance of well-educated farm operators noticeably excludes real peasants in decision making¹⁵. Peasants who hold the original land-use rights on the farmland are often hired as farm workers but their opinions are not always welcome. CSA shareholders prefer to interact with farm managers (well-educated entrepreneurs called 'new peasants') than with real peasants (Liu, Fang 2012). Thus, small scale farmers are not empowered and nor is their social status boosted. Recognizing this problem, a small group of Chinese food activists initiated a new CSA in 2012 in Beijing—Shared Harvest Farm—to experiment with value redistribution through the model of working with, rather than hiring as labour, small peasants and 'sharing more harvest' with them.

¹⁴ Interview with a CSA farmer, December 6 2012. Beijing.

¹⁵ Interview with a CSA farmer and farm workers, April 1 2012, Beijing.

Moreover, as a result of enormous private capital penetration in organic agriculture in the last few years (Yuan 2011), many farms have been coopting the term ‘CSA’ and instrumentally using it as a marketing buzzword, with little attention paid to ecological sustainability or risk sharing. In fact, much of China’s organic production has been subsumed by large food companies and operated in the same way as a conventional food business¹⁶. The political element in terms of articulating “new forms of political association and market governance” is also minimal among CSA farmers in China¹⁷.

Farmers’ Markets

Another noteworthy form of AFNs are farmers’ markets¹⁸. In several large cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin, Xi’an and Chengdu, organic (sometimes called green or ecological) farmers’ markets have become a new alternative food venue that attracts large numbers of middle-class consumers. These organic farmers’ markets, most of which emerged between 2009 and 2010, aim to rebuild the trust between consumers/eaters and food producers and serve as a platform for education and advocacy.

The Beijing Country Fair is the most prominent example. The market was operated by 5 full-time employees and a group of volunteers. They sometimes also organized public talks for followers of their micro-blog, which numbered more than 93,000 in March 2014 and was growing rapidly. The inspiration of the major founder came from her experience in New York’s farmers’ markets (Shu 2012). To afford the fees associated with operating the market, the market received a small grant from an

¹⁶ Interview with a CSA farmer from Chongming Island, May 27 2012, Shanghai.

¹⁷ The Rural Reconstruction Center at Renmin University in Beijing has been holding nation-wide CSA symposiums since 2010. They grouped CSA farmers together in the 2012 symposium to establish a ‘National Ecological Agriculture Cooperation Network’ aiming at sharing information and knowledge. However, it is still not clear how this newly emerged initiative will be translated into a new form of political association and market governance.

¹⁸ Interview with a Country Fair organizer, April 3 2012 and December 6 2012 in Beijing. We identified about 20 organic or ecological farmers’ markets across the country. The frequency, popularity, reputation and acceptance of these markets differ greatly.

NGO to cover salaries for some staff and also earned some income from the ‘Country Fair Kitchen’ by selling food at the market prepared using the Country Fair produce.

In 2012, the market was held at least once a week at different locations in order to be accessible to people in various parts of the city. The time and location was publicized on the market’s micro-blog each week. More than 20 farms (out of the 30 participating NGOs, social enterprises and merchants) turned up regularly (Shu 2012). Goods sold at the market were mainly fresh and prepared foods (tofu, rice wine, baked goods, cheese), plus occasionally handicrafts such as soap. Although the prices there were several times higher than conventional food, products would often sell out early.

We examined the alternativeness of the farmers’ market according to the eight elements listed in Table 4. The market demonstrates all these elements. Many of these elements are manifested in the criteria for selecting vendors. Most farms selling goods at the Country Fair were not certified organic, but were screened through informal ‘inspections’ by the organizers based on the following criteria: they are small or medium scale, use no pesticides or chemical fertilizers, animals are not caged and no unnecessary antibiotics are used, and farmers are willing to work with others to develop the Country Fair¹⁹. This ‘gatekeeping’ helped the Country Fair to maintain a high reputation compared to certified organic food sold in supermarkets. In addition, the Country Fair organizers hope to introduce a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) for peer certification of these farmers, to take the onus off of organizers for doing the inspections. The PGS, adopted in a growing number of countries, uses participatory monitoring to maintain the organic status and reputation of the whole group (Nelson *et al.* 2010). It demonstrates a type of new association among various stakeholders involved. Two of the market managers that we interviewed also expressed their serious concerns about the industrialized food system and their wishes to restructure it. In addition, the market claims to be a “place to foster connections

¹⁹ Interview with one of the Country Fair organizers, April 3 2012 in Beijing.

between farmers and consumers”²⁰, where a social community is forged and developed. Thus, all elements of alternativeness are represented, although to different extents, in this farmers’ market.

However, it should be noted that many of these elements of ‘alternativeness’ are only perceived by the market’s major facilitators, not by its ordinary customers⁹. Rather, it is food safety concerns that attract most consumers here (Shu 2012). We observed that customers of the Country Fair who came from every corner of the city were generally white collar workers, expectant mothers and mothers of young children, and elderly people with poor health conditions. These groups are believed to have the strongest demand for healthy food²¹. Thus, the loyalty of consumers at these markets is typically based on their trust of the safety of the food, rather than a deeper interest in connecting with producers. The market manager expressed her concern about the discrete values between market managers and market customers:

For us (market managers), being ethical and giving attention to social justice are the most important criteria. After that we are concerned that the products are organic, local, and small-scale. But we also know we need to keep diversifying to make the market attractive to a broad group of consumers...the healthfulness of food is a window to attract consumers. Although I want to promote the values of farmers’ markets to ordinary customers, I don’t want to scare them away.

—Interview with one of the market managers, December 6, 2012 in Beijing

Despite its strong ethical positions, the Beijing Country Fair faces criticism from customers for being too ‘producer-centered’ and ‘disparaging consumers’ interests²² by emphasizing the central position of farmers within producer-consumer relations, giving farmers a role as educators of consumers, and addressing the issue of

²⁰ Introduction of Beijing Country Fair <http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_725ab7d40100xqdt.html> (accessed 02.09. 2013). (in Chinese)

²¹ Interview with a CSA farmer, December 6 2012. Beijing.

²² Interview with the founder of a buying club in Beijing, April 9 2012 in Beijing.

information asymmetry (consumers' lack of knowledge about food and farming practices). This poses a threat to the 'reconnection' between farmers and consumers. In practice, the overcrowded and busy market offers little time or space for direct communication, which then diminishes the scope for building mutual 'trust', and makes it merely a venue for direct-to-consumer marketing (see Zhang 2013).

The Country Fair also faces critiques from those who disagree with its adoption of the 'organic' language in its promotion. This touches upon a critical debate within organic food production in China: whether producers should get organic certification or not. In response to the critiques of using the 'organic' label with producers not certified, the organizer explained:

[In China] the term 'organic' has been 'polluted'. We want to bring back its true meanings. Many people believe that 'organic' is a result of certification and always want to compare to the standards [when judging whether a certain type of food is 'organic'], but we believe 'organic' is an idea which means farming sustainably and reducing the environmental cost.

This debate over certification reveals the complexities and competition surrounding AFN language in China, and deserves further analysis. The struggle over appropriating 'organic' language could severely affect its legitimacy in competing for alternative economic space²³. Consequently, it will affect the way that the alternativeness of the 'Country Fair', and many small-scale farms, is structured.

Buying Clubs

Buying clubs in China are another strong consumer initiative amidst the widespread food safety anxiety. The earliest buying club in China emerged around 2004 when a group of self-described nature lovers started to regularly purchase homegrown

²³ Interview with one small-scale ecological farmer, Jun 2 2012 in Fuzhou, Fujian province.

produce from nearby farmers in Liuzhou city, in Guangxi (Zhuang Nationality Autonomous Region) in southwest China. Later, housewives and a group of volunteers in Beijing and Shanghai facilitated their own buying clubs driven by strong concerns about food safety. Well-known buying clubs include *Ainonghui* (Care for Farming group) established in Liuzhou in 2004, Green League established in Beijing in 2010, Shanghai *Caituan* (Group Procurement of Vegetables) established in Shanghai in 2010, and Green Heartland established in Chengdu in 2010.

Green Heartland in Chengdu, Sichuan province is one of the most prominent cases. Its activities date back to 2007 when a group of urban residents got to know the first CSA farmers in China. A local NGO named Chengdu Urban Rivers Association, supported by a Hong Kong-based NGO, Partnerships for Community Development, introduced them to the farmers in Anlong village near Chengdu. They gradually formed a consumer group. Their activities went beyond group procurement of healthy food to also include organizing a periodic farmers' market within another local market, a 'Farmer's Friend Buffet', 'Mum's Kitchen', and other educational activities. They arrange for their members to visit farms, provide members with opportunities to experience farming and educate them with farming knowledge. It is not only a way of informal inspection (which they call 'conscience certification', to ensure that their suppliers are farming in a sustainable way), but also a process of building close relations. To promote local food in their farmers' market, they bring their farmer friends within Sichuan province together. At least 10% of their sales are donated to buy food for poor families in a local community in Chengdu. They also collect a small fund for their activities by selling homemade jam and soap²⁴.

When examining the alternativeness of buying clubs in China, we found that they are initiated entirely by informed middle-class consumers with a strong concern about healthy and safe food. Similar in profile to those who procure food via CSAs and farmers' markets, their major motivation is to have access to safe and healthy food, usually to foster their children's health. This is reflected in the unique group of

²⁴ Interview with founders of Green Heartland, April 30 2012 in Chengdu, Sichuan province.

people—housewives with children—who founded several major buying clubs in China²⁵. Their desire to purchase from local farmers and traditional farmers in remote areas so that these farmers can get a decent compensation for their products demonstrates a certain level of alternativeness in ‘local’ and ‘social justice’ elements²⁶. Activities organized by these buying clubs for their members also demonstrate a concern over ‘social ties and personal connections’. However, other elements were absent.

Compared to CSAs, the number of buying clubs in China is much smaller. Hence, despite the strong ethical values that Green Heart Land holds, it’s hard to judge whether more buying clubs emerging in the future would follow similar principles. In addition, it is a huge challenge for the small number of initiators to effectively communicate the original ethical values to their rapidly growing members whose primary motivation for joining the buying club is simply to have access to safe and healthy food. Nevertheless, as the network is intensifying and the situation is constantly changing, the alternativeness of these buying clubs might also change accordingly.

Recreational Garden Plot Rentals

Renting a plot (known as ‘rental farming’ or ‘weekend farming’) in peri-urban areas is a fourth type of alternative food initiative. In this type, consumers engage more directly in food production. Since 2009, many ecological farms (usually CSAs) in peri-urban areas have begun to rent out small plots (e.g., 30 m²) and provide farming advice to urbanites who opt to grow their own organic food (similar to community garden plots in North America). These urbanites usually proudly call themselves ‘weekend peasants’ or ‘mini landlords’. They visit their plots at least once every weekend. One explanation for this recent surge of urbanites renting vegetable plots in

²⁵ Two other prominent buying clubs in China, the Green League Mums’ Buying Club and the Shanghai *Caituan*, are formed entirely by housewives.

²⁶ Interview with the founder of Beijing Green League Mum’s buying club, April 9 2012 in Beijing.

peri-urban areas since 2008 is the popularity among Chinese white collar workers of Happy Farm, an online social network game for multiple players. It allows players to virtually grow and harvest their own crops on a plot, trade with others, and even steal from neighbours.

What is alternative about these plot rentals? A close examination of the experiences of these ‘mini landlords’ (Little Donkey Farm 2012) reveals that there are sophisticated physical, mental and philosophical values and demands that are inspiring these ‘weekend peasants’. These include food safety concerns (as a self salvation from the severe food safety crisis), affinity with nature, recreational demands (escaping busy city life), physical exercise, and emotional needs of seniors who live with their family in the city. With similar sentiments to the ‘back to the land’ movement in the West, seniors in urban families feel that renting a plot is a good way to relive their nostalgia about the old times, educate their children in the countryside, find a sense of belonging, communicate with friends, and rediscover their values. However, besides the healthfulness of food and building social ties with others (not necessarily farmers on the farm), other elements of alternativeness are largely absent here.

Compared to other types of AFNs, recreational renting of garden plots in China is an AFN that is more fully embedded within the Chinese social and political context. This context can be understood in terms of three different elements. First, the emergence of plot renting is a direct response to the severe food safety crisis in a social environment where there is an extreme lack of trust of food producers and processors. Responses from a diverse range of interviewees proved this point. Second, the form of plot renting that entails *renting* a *small* piece of land is also due to the collective but scattered land rights system. Renting is the only option for urbanites who want to farm but are not allowed to purchase the land from collective land owners. Under the ‘Household Responsibility System’ in China, farmland use right within an administrative village region is distributed among its collective village members. This imposes a great challenge for CSA operators to acquire large areas of

farmland. Accordingly, plots rented to urbanites have to be small. Third, the popularity of ‘rental farming’ among urbanites also reflects the social problems associated with rapid urbanization in China. Many renters are looking for a plot for their elderly parents who have been farmers for their whole lives but have to move to the city to live with their children, many of whom are the first ‘migrant worker’ generation in cities. Detachment from land leads to a period of ‘emotional vacancy’ for the elders trying to fit in to city life (Little Donkey Farm 2012). Renting a plot, albeit quite different from their former farming experiences, is one solution. This social context defines plot renting as a Chinese alternative food initiative, which also distinguishes it from western types of AFNs.

Alternativeness Embedded in the Chinese Political Economy

Our previous analysis concluded that AFNs are based upon four major dimensions of ‘alternativeness’: alternativeness of producer-consumer reconnection, value redistribution to smallholders, seeking ‘new forms of political association and market governance’, as well as reduced ecological impacts (see Whatmore *et al.* 2003). However, since Chinese AFNs are strongly consumer driven, we further unpack ‘alternativeness’ in terms of the features of food and the dynamic producer-consumer relations in these networks. These elements include alternativeness as being healthy, ecological, local, ethical, small-scale, seasonal, personally connected and political. They are represented by these AFNs and are perceived by consumers to different extents. Each of them is represented by a variety of alternative agro-food initiatives. Our case studies revealed that AFNs in China demonstrated uneven tendencies among these elements of alternativeness. Under the Chinese political economy in which there is “an apparently restrictive political environment in which rapid socio-economic and cultural changes are taking place” (Ho and Edmonds 2008: 2), many confrontational and transformative strategies embedded within AFNs are bent or adapted. Being similar to the case of environmentalism characterized by Ho and Edmonds (2008),

AFNs in China display a “fragmentary, highly localized and non-confrontational form” (p. 14). Farmers’ markets, buying clubs and NGOs are moving cautiously to “evade even the slightest hint at organized opposition against the central Party-state” (p. 3), in Ho and Edmonds’ words. Hence, the political alternativeness acknowledged by Whatmore *et al.* (2003) is not always apparent in the Chinese context. Chinese AFNs, which are closely related to the social, political and economic background, exhibit a very different landscape of alternativeness, as we have shown in the previous section. The context that characterizes AFNs in China can be understood from at least three aspects.

First, there is a narrow understanding of organic farming and a strong ‘technological managerialism’ (Goodman and Goodman 2008) related to the broader scientism and its manifestations in governmental policies regarding organic farming. In general, organic farming is understood by many consumers merely as a farming practice that provides safe, quality food. There is a widespread fear among Chinese governmental officials and researchers that if too widely adopted, organic agriculture could jeopardize national food security by reducing productivity (see Scott *et al.* 2014). Government policies to support the development of organic agriculture are mainly limited to technological aspects (e.g., subsidies for construction of greenhouses) to promote the scaling up of organic farms. The ecological consequences (use of plastics in greenhouses and use of energy for heating) and social consequences (exclusion of small-scale producers) of scaling up organic farms are generally ignored. The indifference towards ecological implications also exists among many organic consumers. Our interviews with CSA farmers in Beijing and Fuzhou (Fujian province) revealed that even CSA shareholders might not develop values of ‘ethical consumerism’. For example, a CSA farm in Fuzhou found it very hard to carry out an ‘organic food waste collecting’ project among their shareholders due to lack of environmental awareness²⁷. Although some attempts by food activists to

²⁷ Interview with a CSA farmer, June 2 2012 in Fuzhou, Fujian province. The farm tried to collect organic food waste from its shareholders in order to make compost but it got little response.

politicize food consumption (Wilkinson 2010) could also be found in China in the form of educating consumers about their ‘right to know’, and promoting the purchasing of organic and local food as means of ‘voting with your chopsticks’, it was usually criticized by opponents as promoting “idealistic and unrealistic” values to the public (Sun 2013). Maintaining a non-confrontational manner is a key priority for many AFN initiatives.

The second element that characterizes the landscape of AFNs in China is that food localization with a strong concern for the provenance of food, although promoted by CSAs, farmers’ markets and buying clubs, has not yet been widely embraced among ordinary consumers in China. China’s food system used to be very regional before the mass supermarketization process began in the 1990s (see Reardon *et al.* 2005). Many Chinese have recent memories of eating seasonal food (which means only cabbage, daikon radish and potatoes in northeast China). However, these conventions of food consumption have faded away in the last two decades. Being able to eat food from around the world at any time of the year is one of the many privileges of residents in large urban centers (see Garnett and Wilkes 2013). As many CSA farmers acknowledged, shareholders’ main complaints have been about the limited choice of produce. It has posed a key challenge for food advocacy in China, although CSA farms, even at their early stage of development, are trying their best to promote the ‘alternative’ practice of local and seasonal food. The alternative conceptualization of ‘local’ and ‘seasonal’ in the West, where AFNs are well-developed, is being integrated into the discourse of Chinese AFNs. This is bound to be a long and difficult process of building public awareness.

The third aspect of context within which Chinese AFNs have evolved is the lack of social justice concerns. Although farmers’ markets and buying clubs in China have a certain social justice awareness in the selection of farmers, this concern is largely limited to the farmers’ market and buying club managers. Consumers who are driving the development of AFNs in China show little interest or awareness of this value. Many of the ‘new peasants’ who founded the CSAs, the housewives operating the

buying clubs, the organizers who run the farmers' markets, and even the urbanites who rent the plots for farming, are 'well-educated' elites. The inclusion of 'real' peasants in the construction of AFNs in China is minimal, although there are a few exceptions. The central connotations of 'reconnection' implied by the current AFNs literature are more a romanticization than the reality of the ethical values within AFNs in China. Trust, in many circumstances, is not achieved substantially between producers and consumers in AFNs, and sometimes not even among producers. For example, our observations of online discussion reflected that some producers frequently accused others of cheating on ecological farming. Buying clubs and farmers' markets are merely direct procurement channels for many consumers.

However, we have seen a strong set of core values among the small number of managers and founders of these networks. Therefore, there is an obvious value inconsistency between those food activists who are the organizers of these AFNs and their customers. This inconsistency is largely due to the fact that most AFNs in China were introduced from the west, rather than being indigenous initiatives with a broad social base. This does not contradict with our characterization of AFNs as 'consumer driven' since the introduction of these initiatives to China was driven by consumer demands for safe food. The western origin of these initiatives renders the 'alternativeness' of them highly contingent and dynamic. On the one hand, the managers who started these initiatives have to cope with the food safety concerns of consumers by proving by all means that their food is safe and healthy; on the other hand, they are also trying to influence their customers to appreciate the multiple values that AFNs bring with them. The vigorous efforts of food activists in the AFNs domain include striving to increase communications between producers and consumers in farmers' markets (orally or in written flyers), organized 'talks' held after the farmers' markets, family experience opportunities on CSA farms, and educational activities among buying club members. Although very nascent and limited in scope, these endeavors enable environmental and social relations to be gradually woven into consumers' perceptions of food 'quality', which will lead to

higher demand for ‘quality’ food. In sum, the alternativeness of these nascent AFNs is evolving rapidly amidst the dynamic interactions between the managers (food activists) and the consumers. The landscape of alternativeness in Chinese AFNs will continue to be fluid as these networks develop and consolidate.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although China has been influential in the world’s food system, little has been written about its evolving food system, especially the very recent changes taking place in the sphere of civil society. This paper provides the first systematic characterization of AFNs in China, thereby providing a counter-balance to the current AFN literature that deals mainly with industrialized market economies. The four major types of AFNs in China that we identified—CSAs (including certified and uncertified organic farms), farmers’ markets, buying clubs, and recreational renting of garden plots—builds on the scholarship on AFNs by providing new observations that both confirm and oppose existing knowledge of AFNs.

We argue that the critiques of AFNs’ alternativeness can be overcome by further unpacking the major dimensions of alternativeness into more specific elements. By unpacking this alternativeness, we provide an analytical framework to scrutinize AFNs from the perspective of food features (e.g., healthy, local, seasonal) as well as relationships between consumers and producers, producers and nature, and among producers themselves (e.g., small-scale, social justice, ecological, social ties and personal connections, political). When we applied these elements to interrogating specific AFNs, we found a dynamic landscape of alternativeness within which each type of network demonstrates distinctive elements (see Table 4). Thus, it might be oversimplified to criticize an alternative food initiative for not being alternative in terms of one or more dimensions. Rather, a closer scrutiny of more specific elements is needed. The characterization of AFNs in this paper offers a framework, though it might not necessarily represent every dimension of alternativeness. This framework

will be especially relevant for examining nascent AFNs in developing countries given that much of their alternativeness is still in the early stage of formation.

Our analysis has revealed both similarities and differences between AFNs in China and the west. Chinese AFNs were found to resemble their counterparts in the west in two ways. First, like AFNs in the west, elitism is also evident in Chinese AFNs, although with different connotations. CSA operators and customers in China exhibit a strong middle-class feature. Like CSA farms in the west, many CSA operators are well-educated urban people. Second, like the existing literature, our analysis of the situatedness of Chinese AFNs also underscores the importance of the social, political and economic context in shaping the practices of AFNs. For example, the popularity of recreational garden plot rentals in China strongly reflects the broad socioeconomic conditions.

As for the differences between AFNs in China and the west, we have made three points. First, rather than being rooted in a fertile civil society context that has a rich discourse focused on issues of empowerment and community building (Schumilas *et al.* 2012), AFNs emerged in China within the context of widespread food safety scares. In the process of coping with consumer needs, food producers played a limited role in the emergence of AFNs in China. This ‘consumer driven’ feature leads to the second difference—our unpacking of alternativeness reveals that healthfulness of food, in terms of avoiding residues and being more nutritious, is the most important element of alternativeness that propels consumers’ participation in AFNs; however, other elements of alternativeness associated with AFNs in the west are not strongly evident. In particular, AFNs in China have not typically been established to oppose the globalized industrial food system. AFN customers’ primary interest in the ‘healthfulness of food’, amongst other elements of alternativeness, conveys ‘weaker alternative systems’, in Watts *et al.*’s (2005: 30) words, in contrast to ‘stronger’ systems that put more weight on the ‘networks’ of food circulation. Thus, Chinese AFNs face genuine threats of ‘incorporation and subordination’ within conventional food provision channels. Third, besides the different ‘alternitiveness’, Chinese AFNs

are also different from western ones in terms of other features. For example, with stronger interventions of the state, farmers' markets in China face legitimacy challenges. Peasant farmers were also marginalized in decision makings in CSA operations.

This paper also identified a potential value inconsistency between the managers of initiatives and their customers. Although the founders of CSA farms and farmers' markets have a strong desire to promote ecological, social justice and/or political values to their customers, they understand that participation of customers in these venues is mainly driven by food safety concerns. Therefore, food activists in China are trying to capture consumer interests while also promoting their own values. This inconsistency renders it difficult to form a strong solidarity between these two groups and impacts on the community building within these venues. However, it also opens space for deeper interactions between these activists and their customers. There is a wide space for imagination of the inherent values of AFNs in China in the future.

The 'consumer driven' feature also shapes the alternativeness significantly by pitching the core values of alternative food initiatives at meeting food safety requirements and detaching those more ideological ecological and social values. Therefore, the 'social-political transformative potential' of AFNs in China is limited. Consequently, what consumers are interested in matters the most. This also makes the further unpacking of alternativeness necessary given that the four major dimensions of alternativeness do not directly address specific consumer interests in food. However, this does not necessarily mean that there is no representation of ecological and social values among consumers. Urbanites who rent garden plots do have a strong inclination towards reconvening connections with the land and with others. And CSA participants also demonstrate a certain level of ecological awareness. Rather, these values are weak compared to the interest in healthfulness of food within these venues.

Despite the limited alternativeness in Chinese AFNs, cyber space—especially *weibo* (Chinese for a Twitter-like microblog) and blogs—is an emerging realm outside of alternative food venues that enhances producer-consumer connections.

Educational lectures about sustainable food behaviors are publicized online. Chinese ‘food activists’ are making full use of the internet to spread information about the ecological and social alternativeness of CSAs and farmers’ markets amongst their followers. Personal and social connections that embody ‘trust’ are gradually permeating the landscape of AFNs in China.

Being introduced from a western context rather than being endogenous initiatives, AFNs in China, especially CSAs and farmers’ markets, are experiencing a complex process of adaptation. This process, constantly shaped by multiple stakeholders, is reflected by the contested discourses, or the problematization of alternative values, within these AFNs. The embedded alternativeness that we analyzed in this paper is a result of this adaptation. Nevertheless, debates are ongoing, and the power dynamics within this adaption are changing rapidly. How Chinese AFNs will evolve in the coming years is yet to be unveiled.

Paper 2 Farmers' Markets as Contested Spaces: A Case Study of an Ecological Farmers' Market in Beijing, China

Overview

Analyses of practices and politics of farmers' markets in the west have uncovered various tensions and conflicts associated with the power structure, vendor relationships, the interpretation of 'local', consumer motivations and challenges from external forces. In emerging economies such as China, although wet markets—where food is resold by petty traders who have little ecological commitment—have been common for many years, there have only recently started to be farmers' markets, where food is sold directly by farmers and farm managers who have strong ecological commitments. These emerging economies have distinctive sociopolitical conditions from the west, and farmers' markets in such contexts have yet to be well documented. Drawing on diverse conceptualizations of farmers' markets as contested spaces in the west, this study interrogates the contestations within the Beijing Country Fair, a newly-emerged ecological farmers' market in China. Based on in-depth interviews with key players, we illustrate the contestations evident in the market and compare these with western experiences. This paper argues that although the state is not an influential player in farmers' markets in the west, it has significantly shaped the landscape of contestations within farmers' markets in China. By bringing the state as a key actor into the interrogation, this paper unveils a very different landscape of contestations in the relationships among key players in the Beijing Country Fair—market vendors, customers, market managers and the state. In offering a novel analysis of contestations that have not been observed in previous studies, this paper contributes to agrifood scholarship by shedding light on the role of the state in shaping the space of farmers' markets. It offers a unique example of farmers' markets in China whose contested nature reflects a distinctive sociopolitical context.

Keywords: contested space, farmers' market, ethical value, power, regulation, China

Introduction

In North America, UK, Australia and New Zealand, the last three decades or so have witnessed a dramatic growth of farmers' markets as a new direct-marketing venue for food (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000; Feagan *et al.* 2004; Feagan and Morris 2009; Brown and Miller 2008; Chalmers *et al.* 2009). Farmers' markets are defined as "specialist markets trading in 'locally produced' products, focusing largely on food... which is either locally grown or incorporates locally grown ingredients" (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000: 286). Geographers and sociologists have theorized farmers' markets as a part of 'alternative food networks' (AFNs) which sit "at the intersection of the local food system...and offers a strategic location for civic engagement with the food system" (Wittman *et al.* 2012: 37). Most farmers' markets set up specific requirements for participation to permit local farmers growing or raising food with sustainable methods for sale to local customers. It provides a shared space for addressing environmental concerns related to food production and consumption, re-establishing the consumer-producer relations as well as facilitating renewed urban-rural linkages, and constitutes a part of the 'social economy' (Hinrichs 2000; Beckie *et al.* 2012; Wittman *et al.* 2012). Farmers' markets also constitute the most visible form of local food movement and shortened food supply chains (Hinrichs 2000; Kirwan 2004; Feagan 2007). Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to interrogating the alterity (Whatmore *et al.* 2003; Goodman 2003; Allen *et al.* 2003; Kirwan 2004) and the embedded localism (Winter 2003) or revalorization of 'place' (Feagan 2007) of farmers' markets, alongside other AFNs, including Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), buying clubs, community gardens, etc (see Jarosz 2008).

Farmers' markets as *constructed* spaces (Smithers *et al.* 2008) implies that the diverse ethical values and beliefs of different actors in it, and the various forms of

construction and codification of these ethical values (Chalmers *et al.* 2009), will all somehow shape their operation and evolution. Therefore, rather than being *coherent* and *fixed* spaces, farmers' markets are indeed dynamic, fluid and *contested* spaces that also convey ideological collisions, discursive disputes, power struggles and 'class fragmentation and even exclusion' (Smithers *et al.* 2008: 341). Existing studies of farmers' markets in the west have uncovered various tensions and conflicts. These studies shed light on the interrogation of the farmers' market in China where nascent AFNs are shaped by the distinctive sociopolitical conditions. These tensions and conflicts, which reflect the contested nature of farmers' markets, render farmers' markets as incoherent spaces which might impair their 'alternativeness'. In this sense, these tensions are influential in determining the transformative potential of farmers' markets as a type of AFNs that challenge mainstream industrial food supply chains (see Levkoe 2011). Understanding the contested nature of farmers' markets enables us to identify potential strategies to address some of the challenges facing farmers' markets.

Although farmers' markets as contested spaces have been interrogated in different lenses, there have been very few studies examining cases in the global South such as China where farmers' markets are nascent initiatives. This paper thus asks the question—what do farmers' markets look like in China where there is a growing anxiety about food safety and strong state control over socioeconomic and political space? How do the contestations of farmers' markets in China accord with or differ from those of western farmers' markets? To answer this question, this paper uses the most prominent ecological farmers' market in China—the Beijing Country Fair—as a case to interrogate the tensions among key stakeholders within the market space. It articulates the nuances and tensions in this contested space of the farmers' market. These tensions and conflicts include (1) the information asymmetry between vendors and customers, (2) the dispute about the term 'organic', (3) the challenges from the state in terms of the registration of the market and finding venues, the restriction of selling processed and packaged food at the market, (4) the issue of 'faux-paysan', (5)

the down-playing of ‘local’, (6) challenges of communicating ethical values to customers while meeting diverse consumer needs, as well as (7) other dimensions such as the diverse farming approaches and the ‘old farmer’ challenge. Given that the AFN literature is largely established on western experiences, some of the tensions that we identify here have not been documented previously. This paper shows how the sociopolitical context of China poses various challenges for the emergence and establishment of a farmers’ market in Beijing. It demonstrates the significant role of the state, which has been largely ignored in the west, in configuring the landscape of contestations within farmers’ markets in China.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we examine the contested nature of farmers’ market spaces in general in reference to experiences in western countries. We then formulate a framework to depict the structure of contestations. Second, we introduce the Beijing Country Fair, the most influential ecological farmers’ market in China. Third, building on the structure of contestations, we apply the framework to examine the interactions, motivations and interests of various actors in the context of the Beijing Country Fair. In the end, we discuss the implications and significance of reading farmers’ markets as a contested space.

This paper is a part of a broader research project that seeks to depict the developmental status, organizational structure, and policies about the ecological agriculture sector in China. The research team interviewed more than 100 key stakeholders with various backgrounds, including academia, governmental organizations, NGOs, certification agencies, consumer organizations, farmers and entrepreneurs. The data in this paper were mainly collected from three in-depth interviews with major market managers, 26 interviews with various market vendors and other CSA farmers, and also two interviews with consumer organizations in 2012 and 2013. Some information was collected from our three visits to farmers’ markets in Beijing and Shanghai. We also drew useful information from observations of online posts and discussions, especially from the Country Fair’s *weibo* account and the discussions among its followers. Online reports and other secondary resources such as

presentations of key players at related conferences, online forum discussions and articles, and news reports from the mass media are also used to support the argument.

Understanding Farmers' Markets as Contested Spaces

In Holloway and Kneafsey's (2000: 291) words, the socially constructed space of farmers' markets is an "expression of...the negotiations within networks of producers, consumers and institutions". Therefore, the tensions and conflicts among the key actors in these networks render farmers' markets as contested spaces. These contestations demonstrated within farmers' markets in the west were examined from various dimensions.

Tensions within the alternative space created by farmers' markets are reflected in the unbalanced power structure among actors involved. This power imbalance might unintentionally enforce 'elitism and exclusion' (Chalmers *et al.* 2009: 324). For example, Hinrichs (2000) analyzed the social embeddedness of farmers' markets and CSAs and concluded that "tensions between embeddedness, on the one hand, and marketness and instrumentalism, on the other, suggest how power and privilege may sometimes rest more with educated, middle-class consumers than with farmers or less-advantaged consumers" (p. 295). She then concluded that poor consumers and farmers have to weigh the costs against assumed benefits from the direct social ties carefully before participating in the market (Hinrichs 2000). Swanson's (2001) interrogation of three locality-based policies illustrated that in the operation of such locality-based food programs, the power of elites might be reproduced and thus result in polarized social classes and social exclusion. Hinrichs (2003) also pointed out that local food networks such as farmers' markets are not free of social exclusion, and locality-based projects may show evidence of the "dark side of social capital" (Schulman and Anderson 1999).

The contested nature of farmers' markets is also mirrored by the dynamic relationships among different vendors. As Beckie *et al.* (2012) suggested with

farmers' markets in western Canada, although competition among vendors in farmers' markets has become a driving force pushing vendors to improve and innovate, it has also resulted in a loss of vendors who could not handle the competition. As peasant identity is critical in constituting a nostalgic and authentic environment, the inherent problem of 'faux-paysan' (fake farmers) (Tchoukaleyska 2013) can jeopardize the representation of farmers' markets as a nostalgic space. Tchoukaleyska's (2013) investigation of a farmers' market in France noted that farmers at the market are sometimes suspicious about others vendors not being 'authentic' farmer but 'reseller' of non-local produce. Smithers and Joseph's (2010) examination of farmers' markets in Canada also noted that distinguishing 'authentic' farmers from 'resellers' is a challenging task which may exclude some local producers from participation.

The contested nature of farmers' markets is also reflected by the interpretations of 'local' in 'local food systems'. The 'locality' of food sold in farmers' markets lays the foundation for the conceptualization of farmers' markets as 'oppositional' spaces. Its feature of resistance (or mostly, the 'respatialization' of food) has been interpreted as 'alternative', 'conservative', 'heterotopic', 'defensive' and 'protectionist' (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000; Winter 2003; Hinrichs *et al.* 2004; Tchoukaleyska 2013: 218). However, critical agrifood scholars argue that 'local' is an outcome of struggle, and a turn to local does not necessarily imply a transition towards sustainable social and environmental relations (Eaton 2008). This is mirrored by the critiques of the 'fetishized constructions of the local often present in alternative food politics' (Harris 2010: 355) and the call for a 'reflexive localism' (DuPuis and Goodman 2005). 'Defensive localism' (Winter 2003; DuPuis and Goodman 2005), alongside the theorization of farmers' markets as oppositional spaces, does not imply that consumer purchases at farmers' markets are necessarily intended to be oppositional or resistant (Feagan *et al.* 2004). In fact, researchers have noted the overemphasis of food 'locality' in constructing farmers' markets as alternative food procurement venues (see Chalmers *et al.* 2009: 323). The elements and concerns of local food systems were found to "vary in their meaning, their importance and the degree to which they

represent a set of absolute conditions for the participation of consumers, producers and institutional actors” (Smithers *et al.* 2008: 348). The delineation of ‘local’ and the designation of ‘authenticity’ of food in the market are also contested and fluid in terms of what should be termed as AFNs (Hinrichs 2003; DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Feagan 2007; Smithers and Joseph 2010; Wittman *et al.* 2012).

Tensions within the market space are also reflected by the varied motivations and values among key actors. Although farmers’ markets are arguably part of an entrepreneurial and consumerist culture, in this presumed space of consumption, there are indeed negotiations over ethical values going on amongst organizers, vendors and customers, such as supporting small farmers, protecting the environment, maintaining social justice and ensuring animal welfare (see Carey *et al.* 2011). Nevertheless, the motivations of customers vary, rendering a resistance to certain ethical values. The importance of face-to-face communication with vendors is also questionable. Miele (2006: 351) has challenged the hegemony of ‘reflexive consumption’ and noted that “the desire to buy organic and/or local and to have a face-to-face relationship with producers may be less important for many visitors to farmers’ markets than novelty and social atmosphere” (cited in Smithers and Joseph 2010: 243). Looking into the different groups of consumers, Connell *et al.* (2008) highlighted the contrast between regular and non-regular patrons of farmers’ markets. They conclude that the former are more concerned about organic certification, package recycling and shopping for seasonal and local food. Chalmers *et al.* (2009) argued that ‘curiosity’ is the factor that motivates many first-time visitors to attend new farmers’ markets. Thus, although farmers’ markets are conceived of as the most visible type of *local* food network, the importance of ‘local’ and the motivations of consumers in practice vary greatly.

In certain circumstances, the tensions embedded within farmers’ markets come from external forces. By treating the state as a key player *within* the space of farmers’ markets, we do not categorize the challenges from the state into ‘external’ challenges. The external forces that have been identified by scholars include mainly structural changes. For example, Alkon and Mares (2012) recognized the resistance and

constraints from neoliberalism when a farmers' market in Oakland sought to resolve the food insecurity of marginalized ethnic groups. Eaton (2008), in contrast, addressed how neoliberal schemes 'hollowed out' the ecological and social sustainability of local food projects. This pertains to the 'conventionalization thesis' (see Guthman 2004; Tomlinson 2008), which addresses the issue of being co-opted or assimilated by conventional food provisioning systems. In the case of farmers' markets in Canada, Beckie *et al.* (2012) highlight the competition for qualified vendors amongst different farmers' markets.

In summary, tensions that embody power, ethical and pragmatic conflicts among various actors exist both within and outside the market space in the west. These observations in the west provide an analytical framework for the study of contestations in farmers' markets in China. Nevertheless, these observations did not cover some unique tensions exemplified by farmers' markets in China with distinctive sociopolitical contexts. How do farmers' markets embedded within China's specific socioeconomic contexts accord with or differ from western ones? As Ho and Edmonds (2008) noted in their examination of environmentalism in the 'semi-authoritarian' context of China, there is a stronger authoritarian power but relatively weaker civil society autonomy. There is also a significant lack of trust (Scott *et al.* 2014; Sun *et al.* 2012) within Chinese society as it is transforming, according to Li (2009), from an 'acquaintance society' to a 'stranger society'²⁸ in the process of modernization. When these contextual features are translated into forces that shape the farmers' markets in China, unique tensions can be observed when examining the contested nature of farmers' markets. With these understandings in mind, in the next section, we examine China's food system transformations over the

²⁸ The 'acquaintance society' versus 'stranger society' paradigm offers an effective tool to amalgamate various transformations of Chinese society. 'Acquaintance society' (*shuren shehui*) was originally proposed by Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong in the 1940s (see Fei 1992) to characterize the traditional rural society of China where social networks and trust are formed by blood ties or geographical relations (people from a same region). It implies a close circle type of trust based on extents of acquaintance or *guanxi*. In contrast, 'stranger society' refers to a modern society where social networks mainly happen between strangers and trust is formed by formal contracts rather than acquaintance (Zhang 2005; Guo 2010).

past three decades or so, in order to map out the broad context within which AFNs such as farmers' markets emerged. We then carefully examine the various types of tensions expressed by the Beijing Country Fair from the dimensions established by farmers' market studies in the west.

Food System Transformations and the Emergence of Farmers' Markets in China

With the growing foreign direct investment in the food sector and the increasing integration into the global food market (Timmer 2008), the food system in China changed dramatically in the past two decades. Three prominent expressions of this change are the industrialization of the agriculture sector, the vertical integration of small farmers and the 'supermarketization' of food retailing. Although the degree of these three processes varies greatly in different regions, synergies among them reinforce their impacts on China's food system in general. First, the agriculture sector in China is increasingly relying upon fossil fuels in the form of synthetic fertilizer and farming machines (Guo and Yang 2005). This dependence is being enhanced with the decrease of farm labour and the increase of farm size (Van den Berg *et al.* 2007). Second, the landscape of food production is increasingly consolidated with involvement of large private capital (Zhang and Donaldson 2008). Farm size increases as migrating farmers rent their farmland to those staying on the land or food companies seeking to expand production (Van den Berg *et al.* 2007). Small-scale farming, which has been dominating the agriculture sector since the land reform began in 1978, is increasingly commercialized, specialized and vertically integrated in various forms (see Zhang and Donaldson 2008 and Guo *et al.* 2007). Third, the transformation of food retailing is embodied by the remarkable process of 'supermarketization' that swept not only China but many other emerging economies (Reardon *et al.* 2005; Hu *et al.* 2004). In China, the annual growth rate of supermarket sales in the late 1990s and 2000s was estimated at 30-40%. It has captured a large

proportion of the food retailing market share of traditional market venues like the petty-trader markets (often referred as wet market) (Hu *et al.* 2004).

But how do these transformations forge a solid base for the emergence of ecological farmers' markets like the Beijing Country Fair? We argue that the emergence of China's farmers' markets is a reaction to three major challenges that shattered the trust between consumers and producers. The first challenge comes from the industrialization of the agriculture sector. Overuse of chemical fertilizer, pesticide and herbicide generates new threats to the environment and also to human health. The second challenge relates to the supermarketization and other conventional food venues that disconnect and distance consumers from producers. Despite the growth of supermarkets, traditional petty-trader markets (wet markets) still dominate vegetable retail in China (Huang 2011). However, vendors at traditional food venues are mainly resellers who have little connection with food production or personal connection with their customers, which is the same situation with supermarket food retailing. The integration of household small-scale farming into the capitalized food system further distanced consumers from producers. Additionally, food safety scandals that have erupted in recent years fostered widespread food scares (see Pei *et al.* 2011; Yan 2012; Klein 2013; Yang 2013). These challenges jointly led to a strong distrust of food producers by Chinese consumers (Scott *et al.* 2014). It was under these conditions that ecological farmers' markets in China emerged as niche markets to cater to desperate urbanites seeking safe and quality food that they could trust. These farmers' markets intend to address the food safety challenges by reconvening the trust between consumers and producers.

However, it should be noted that farmers' markets in China were originally a social experiment transplanted from the west. The first and the most influential farmers' market—the Beijing Country Fair (“*Beijing Youji Nongfu Shiji*” in Chinese, which literally means Beijing Organic Farmers' Market)—was founded by a foreign couple (a Japanese and a Canadian) living in Beijing in 2010 who wanted to introduce the trendy western concept of farmers' market to China. Before the Beijing Country

Fair opened their *weibo* (microblog) account in April 2011, the early patrons of the market were mainly foreigners living in Beijing who were familiar with farmers' markets. It was designated to be not only an alternative shopping space but also an upscale exhibition of modern lifestyle which resembled the 'back to the land' movement in the west (Shu 2012a). The destiny of the market completely changed after it opened its *weibo* account. It was soon discovered by thousands of desperate consumers looking for healthy and safe food. Since then, the Fair has tapped into the demand for trustworthy food that drives its rapid expansion. The followers of its *weibo* account increased rapidly to more than 87,000 by November 2013.

Unanticipated outcomes of farmers' markets are enormous. These include the market's ability to relief urbanite's nostalgia about life in the countryside and meet their other emotional needs, its role in promoting ecological farming, and its implications for alternative food system governance in terms of innovations for participatory food quality supervision.

The Beijing Country Fair (Beijing Organic Farmers' Market)²⁹

According to the official introduction of the Beijing Country Fair³⁰, it offers a space where

consumers and organic farmers can communicate face-to-face at the market, and get to know how healthy, safe, environmentally friendly and delicious food comes to our dining-tables. Customers can also build relations with farmers at a deeper level by visiting their farms and learning about the production and environment of farm produce in person. Amid the societal context of lack of trust, the market hopes to rebuild trust with each other with these communications so that producers can get appropriate compensation while customers can have access to healthy and quality-guaranteed food at an appropriate price.

²⁹ Most information in this introduction, unless otherwise specified, is drawn from two interviews with the key market manager on April 3 and December 6, 2012 in Beijing.

³⁰ Introduction of Beijing Country Fair <http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_725ab7d40100xqdt.html> (accessed 15.05. 2013). (in Chinese)

By 2013, the Beijing Country Fair regularly had more than 20 farm vendors coming from local and occasionally faraway farms, 10 craftsmen who sold their handmade products and 10 other ‘social enterprises’, NGOs or businesses. Goods sold at the Beijing Country Fair were mainly fresh products like vegetables, eggs and chicken as well as baked goods, cheese, homemade tofu, jams, fermented rice wine and other handicrafts and artisanal foods. In 2013, the Beijing Country Fair was held one to three times a week in various venues around the city, including parking lots in residential neighborhoods, open areas within shopping centers and international schools. Times and locations were publicized on the microblog in advance. In 2012, each market attracted 1,000-3,000 customers and generated total sales of 150,000 - 250,000 CNY (approximately 25,000 - 41,600 USD) (Shu 2012a, b).

Many farmers’ markets in North America limit the vendors who want to participate in the market to those who ‘make, bake or grow’ (Wittman *et al.* 2012: 38). As a farmers’ market heavily influenced by foreign experiences, the Beijing Country Fair also has a set of criteria for farms that want to participate:

- no pesticides, synthetic chemical fertilizers, GM seeds used in production
- animals not in cages, no unnecessary (therapeutic) antibiotics or hormones
- independent small to medium size farms
- be open and transparent, willing to communicate with customers about the production methods (where seeds, fertilizer and feed come from, pest control methods, animal living space and stocking rates, use of greenhouses, etc.), help customers to get information and protect consumer rights
- maintain an appropriate scale, sustainable development and management
- be willing to work with others (sharing farming techniques and experiences with other farmers, solving problems with customers)
- for prepared foods: use no chemical additives, and be prepared in a traditional way

Although the Chinese name of the Beijing Country Fair is translated as ‘Beijing *Organic* Farmers’ Market’, only two of the vendors at the market were certified

organic producers: Green Yard Organic Dairy and Sunlin Ecological Farm producing chicken and eggs. Yet, lack of certification doesn't jeopardize the reputation of providing safe and quality food among customers as its reputation is built upon word-of-mouth, direct communication with farmers, and the 'gate keeping' farm visits by market managers and ordinary customers. As the Beijing Country Fair is gaining more attention not only in Beijing but also nationwide, a significant number of farmers and food companies (more than 300, according to the market manager in 2012) were on a waiting list to join, with the hopes of being admitted into this tightly regulated venue. However, most of them would not meet the market criteria. Of the approximately 200 vendors that Beijing Country Fair managers had visited, only about one-third qualified.

Food prices at the market are several times higher than in supermarkets and wet markets, but this doesn't deter the enthusiastic customers. The tremendous success of the Beijing Country Fair is a testament to the demand for quality food amidst the food safety crisis. The high price and customers' demand for safe food are also mirrored by the characteristics of customers, who are mainly white collar workers, expectant mothers and mothers of young children, and elderly people in poor health. The average income of customers is said to be 7,000-10,000 CNY (about 1,120-1,600 USD) per month, which is above average in Beijing.

The Beijing Country Fair is a place where the relations among vendors, customers and volunteers are based on mutual respect. In order to maintain the Fair's reputation of selling quality food, vendors are carefully screened and the market does not charge a fee to vendors³¹. A few full-time workers who run the market get paid from the earnings from the 'market kitchen' where they sell their homemade food, as well as from fundraising from private foundations and from fees collected from business partners such as a wine vendor who promoted his products at the market. Volunteers, many of whom were originally customers, contribute to the market in

³¹ The market managers believe that customers trust their screening procedures because they don't do it out of personal gain. If they charge an entrance fee, their relations with the market vendors would become interest-based and would thus threaten their reputation among the vendors and the customers.

various ways. Customers help vendors to unload and pack up, and even to sell their products. They also share information online about strategies to get the best quality products. Tips and recipes about home cooking are popular posts on the microblog.

The Beijing Country Fair as a Contested Space

The reciprocal relationships in the market do not eliminate the embedded tensions. To understand the contestations within it, we examine the tensions between key stakeholders of the market which include market managers, vendors, customers and the state. These tensions that reflect the contested nature of the market include power struggles between the vendors and customers, ethical value negotiations between organizers and consumers, the threat of legitimacy from the state, arguments about ‘organic’ discourse between the state and market organizers, and disputes over farming practices among vendors.

Table 5 illustrates the analytical framework through which, in the following section, we examine the contested spaces of the Beijing Country Fair. In our analysis, we compare each of these tensions and conflicts with western experiences. Except for the ‘challenges from external forces,’ which is not observed in the case study, the Beijing Country Fair demonstrates all other dimensions of contestations albeit with different connotations (Table 5).

Table 5. Reading farmers’ markets as contested spaces

Dimensions of Contestations	Actors Involved	Tensions and Conflicts	Comparison with the West
Power structure	Vendors and customers	Information asymmetry	Different
	Market managers and the state	Adoption of the ‘organic’ term	Different
	Market managers, vendors and the state	Registration and legitimacy; finding venues; perceived threats to social stability; selling processed	Different

		and packaged food	
Vendor relationships	‘New peasants’ (vendors) and customers	Authentic peasant farmers being subdued; the issue of ‘faux-paysan’	Similar
Disputes around ‘local’	Market managers and vendors	Downplaying of ‘local’	Different
Consumer motivations	Market managers, customers, vendors	Challenges of communicating environmental and social values; maintaining environmental and social goals while meeting diverse consumer needs	Different
Challenges from external forces	N/A	N/A	N/A

Amidst the challenge of food safety crises, the Beijing Country Fair as a nascent grassroots initiative faces numerous challenges from both within and outside the market. But tensions are expressions of interactions between players. The Beijing Country Fair is no different than other farmers’ markets in the west in terms of being an arena for a network of a variety of actors, relations and institutions. These key actors include market vendors, customers, market managers and the state. Other players such as academia, NGOs and social organizers also have roles in configuring the market as a contested space. However, in order to limit our analysis to identifying key challenges, this paper only depicts the contested nature of the Beijing Country Fair in terms of the relationships between four major actors (as shown in Table 5). We examine these tensions in the following sections, using data collected from in-depth interviews with market managers, vendors, customers, and from secondary sources.

Contestations about the Power Structure

Information Asymmetry

The unbalanced power structure is also observed in the Beijing Country Fair. However, rather than elite customers having more power, as noted by Hinrichs (2000), the contestation of power in the Country Fair revolves around the dominant position of market vendors in the relations between producers and consumers. The Country Fair as a space of exchange depends upon a variety of ways to ensure trust. Nevertheless, ‘information asymmetry’—wherein customers have much less direct knowledge and information about the production and the quality of the produce in the market compared to market vendors—still generates the risk of distrust. First-time market customers are always skeptical of the quality of food that the vendors and organizers provide. In response, vendors take a strong stance in educating customers about the quality of food and their farming practices. However, this reinforces the vendors’ advantage of having more information which leads to power imbalance. One of the market organizers observed that “the Country Fair is not only a marketplace, but a platform for education and advocacy”. This contrasts strongly with a more critical sentiment that the Beijing Country Fair gives too much power to producers in determining what can be sold in the market (e.g., certain type of fresh produce and products) while customers have limited power to decide what they get³².

Disputes about ‘Organic’

The contestations about the power structure involve a key stakeholder—the state. This has rarely been the case in the west. When taking the state into consideration, the landscape of contestations within farmers’ markets can be totally different. This is represented by the controversial issue relates to the term ‘organic’ which appears in the Chinese name of the Beijing Country Fair: *Beijing Youji Nongfu Shiji* (Beijing Organic Farmers’ Market). Of all the vendors at the Beijing Country Fair, only two farms are certified organic (one is an organic dairy producer called Green Yard, the other is Sunlin Ecological Farm that sells eggs). Green Yard gets many subsidies from

³² Interview with Green League founder in Beijing on April 9 2012.

the local government. The market managers were keen to have certified organic food sellers at the market to demonstrate that they are not anti-certification.

A straightforward explanation for the vendors not having organic certification is that certification in China is very costly and is unaffordable for many small farms. This situation became even more aggravated when a more stringent national organic certification standard was enacted on July 1, 2012³³. A close examination reveals that the understanding of ‘organic’ (following organic principles) at the market contrasts sharply with the ‘organic’ discourse (meeting certification requirements) in the state’s certification scheme. However, the market is still called ‘Beijing *Organic* Farmers’ Market’ in Chinese, which makes it highly controversial. Critics of the use of ‘organic’ in the Chinese name of the market claim that this causes confusion and is in fact illegal.

Dr. Shi Yan, the pioneer of CSA expansion in China and a well-known ‘new farmer’ selling at the Beijing Country Fair, suggests that,

*Organic agriculture is a production system within which the soil, ecosystem and humans can be sustainable simultaneously...whether it is organic depends on various factors. But the most important thing is the transparency of information: as long as customers know the farming practices and the information is transparent and symmetrical (between consumers and producers), whatever it is called doesn't really matter.*³⁴

One market manager clearly acknowledged this problem in the interview:
In the beginning we did not call ourselves an organic farmers market, because we worried it would alienate some people, and that it wasn't really true. Now we call ourselves organic and we have had some officials tell us that technically we can't

³³ This new organic certification standard requires a higher frequency of tests of environmental conditions and chemical residues in crops, which has resulted in a sharp increase in the cost of certification.

³⁴ Beijing News. 2013. Disputes about the Organic Farmers’ Market. <<http://finance.people.com.cn/money/n/2013/0105/c218900-20095097.html>> (accessed 14.05. 2013). (in Chinese)

use the term. So we debate the use of this term...Beijing Country Fair was a name that stuck.

—interview with one market manager, December 6, 2012.

In another interview, this manager described this dispute in a different way: Organic agriculture and organic certified products are two different concepts. You cannot say that a farmer who follows the standards of organic farming is not organic just because he/she doesn't get certified. Most of our vendors have met organic standards. They just didn't get the certification... people without an ID are still people. But we do know that if we don't have the 'ID', many of our rights are hard to protect.³⁵

It is illegal to use the term 'organic' in the name of the Country Fair but it also depends on how you understand the term. My understanding is that 'organic' is our goal but not the current status... However, we will gradually change the term in our media coverage. We also want to provide a 'commitment letter' to our customers. We want the customers to know that the integrity of farming is our utmost concern. If we take out the term, we might lose customers but the final success belongs to us... We are not against the government (in terms of the different interpretation of the term 'organic'). We don't want to cause any trouble to our vendors. The government's standards are also reasonable. In the future, if we can meet that standard, we will integrate into that system.

—interview with one of the market managers, March 9, 2013.

These responses to the critique of using the term 'organic' in the Chinese name of the market indicate that the market adopted the term to reflect the high and safe quality of the food. Their alternative understanding of 'organic' is thus positioning themselves in confrontation with the certification regime. In these circumstances, the market has introduced what they call the 'networking certification' (*qinggan renzheng*), a substitution for the expensive organic certification scheme. The

³⁵ China Broadcasting Network. 2012. Consumers endorse Beijing Organic Farmers' Market though not certified. <http://finance.cnr.cn/gs/201208/t20120805_510478935_3.shtml> (accessed 15.05.2013) (in Chinese)

‘networking certification’ is based on the interactions between consumers and producers in which information and knowledge is shared to the fullest extent. The market has also been trying to introduce an adapted Participatory Guarantee System (PGS)³⁶ which enables various actors to participate in the monitoring and inspections of market vendors. These actors include customers, other producers, market managers, organic agricultural specialists and the mass media. It is a way to alleviate the burden having of the limited number of market managers conduct quality assurance screening.

Although the Beijing Country Fair is aware of the possible clash with the state’s regulation about the use of the term organic³⁷, and the organizers are intending to change it in the future, this experimental grassroots initiatives of establishing ‘trust’—inviting customers to visit farms, telling them about the farming practices—does provide an alternative to the third-party certification scheme of quality assurance. However, the struggle around the discourse of ‘organic’ has the potential to jeopardize the market’s official legitimacy.

Legitimacy and Operational Regulations

The state’s role in shaping the landscape of contestations within farmers’ markets in China is also demonstrated by the several other challenges from the state confronting the Beijing Country Fair. These challenges relate to legitimacy and operational regulations, which have not been documented by observations of the western markets. Specifically, this more direct encounter with the state generates a lot of problems which marks the farmers’ market as a space of contested practices. Tension in this encounter revolves around issues of registering the market as a not-for-profit entity, finding appropriate venues for the market, avoiding suspicions of social unrest, and selling processed and packaged food.

³⁶ IFOAM. Participatory Guarantee System (PGS).

<<http://www.ifoam.org/en/value-chain/participatory-guarantee-systems-pgs>> (accessed 10.07. 2013)

³⁷ Other famers’ markets in China do not call themselves ‘organic’ and thus don’t have this problem.

The first prominent challenge for the market managers is that, as a grassroots organization, the Beijing Country Fair is not officially registered. This impairs their legitimacy to operate a market (Chang 2012). In China, the current policies that regulate social organizations require NGOs to find a supervisory entity (usually a government department) before registering with the Civil Affairs Department of the local government (Ho and Edmonds 2008). Although there is a recent trend to loosen this requirement, things have not changed substantially. It has proven to be a major challenge for NGOs who want more freedom in organizing activities as they have to get approval from the local authority. Local authorities will intervene in NGOs' activities to prevent troubles that they perceive might emerge. The Beijing Country Fair does not have a legal status yet, which hinders its capacity to expand its influence. For example, when the market organizers wanted to visit some farms, organizations or enterprises in Taiwan, they were asked to provide an official introduction letter which they did not have the legal status to offer³⁸. This unregistered status also prevents them from having loyal and fully-involved staff³⁹.

The difficulty in finding venues is the second operational challenge. This is mainly because of the large size of gathering (usually 1,000-3,000 people) that the market attracts to public spaces, which can be perceived by the government as a potential threat to social stability. In our interviews, the market managers expressed their concern about the risk of the market being called off or banned. This had happened on at least one occasion. It is also a huge challenge to deal with different government departments who can all intervene in the operation of the market.

We are cautiously balancing the influence of the Country Fair and the risk of attracting too much attention of the government: we try to avoid interacting directly with the administrative agencies at the lowest government level: police stations, the administrative department of industry and commerce and the city

³⁸ Interview with a market manager in Beijing, China on December 6 2012.

³⁹ Being un-registered renders the market an informal economic organization that makes them less attractive for potential job seekers.

administration department. Our principle is to be very cautious when operating the Country Fair, but to keep a high-profile when promoting it in the media.

—interview with one market manager, Mar 9, 2013

To cope with the potential risk posed by the local authority, the Beijing Country Fair managers tend to work with event organizers to determine venues or directly work with shopping malls or international schools that may benefit from hosting the market. (The market attracts more-than-normal customer flow for these malls and gives publicity to them). This allows the market organizer to avoid the energy spent dealing with different government departments for necessary permits and also enables it to function as a business partner, which is less politically sensitive.

A third challenge from the state is the regulation about selling processed and packaged foods. According to the food quality governance regulations in China, producers are not allowed to produce processed and packaged foods without a production permit. In addition, their products should acquire a ‘Quality Safe’ (QS) permission and have the ‘QS’ logo on their package before entering the market (see Wang and Desmeules 2013). This creates a barrier for artisanal food sellers at the market. For example, a farmer who sells home-ground flour has to sell it loose because he is not allowed to package the flour into pre-weighed bags. A farmer at the Shanghai *Nonghao* Farmers’ Market had his packaged flour and rice confiscated because of this.

Contestations about Vendor Relationships

The contestation associated with ‘faux-paysan’ (Tchoukaleyska 2013) is also observed in the Beijing Country Fair. It displays the specific social context of China. Photographs showing farming scenes, naming products as ‘earthy’ (*tu*) and ‘traditional’, describing products as ‘tasting like the food in your childhood’, compose images of the ‘old times’ for customers at the Beijing Country Fair. This vivid portrayal of the ‘old times’ denotes the Country Fair as a nostalgic space that draws customers from across the city to the market and thousands of followers to their *weibo*

account. However, these “socio-politically conservative notions of place and identity” (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000: 294) formed between market vendors and customers is highly contested given that very few vendors in the market are actually Chinese peasant farmers. The so-called ‘land contracted management’ right was, since the late 1970s, endowed to peasants whose ‘*hukou*’ (Chinese term for identification) was officially registered with a specific collective village. Traditional Chinese peasants have been perceived by the state and the general public as a social group with low *suzhi* (Chinese term for population quality)⁴⁰ and thus a group that needs to be ‘civilized’ (Murphy 2004). The negative connotations associated with ‘peasants’ are also reflected by social activist James Yen’s well-known labeling of Chinese peasants—‘ignorant, poor, weak, and selfish’ (see Shi 2012). Peasants in contemporary China are more integrated into the wave of urbanization in various forms, such as working in cities as migrant workers and shifting from subsistence farming to commercial farming (Hu *et al.* 2010; Huang 2011; Zhang and Donaldson 2008, 2010). However, most of them still possess the ‘land contracted management’ right in their rural hometown. The land is treated more as a ‘social insurance against adversity’ and a security for their eventual return than a simple ‘source of livelihood’ (Fan 2008: 94). Maintaining a close connection to their farmland is still highly valued by the majority of migrants who migrate circularly (Fan 2008).

In contrast to these traditional peasants, most of the farmers’ market vendors are well-educated urbanites, and thus ‘outsiders’, who rent land in the countryside to pursue their ‘agrarian dreams’ as depicted in media reports⁴¹. They are self-titled as ‘new peasants’ to distinguish themselves from traditional Chinese peasants. More accurately, they are agricultural entrepreneurs with strong ethical values. A typical ‘farmer’ at the Beijing Country Fair is a well educated, middle class person, with a

⁴⁰ According to Murphy (2004: 2), the discourse *Suzhi* is an all-embracing term that refers to “the innate and nurtured physical, intellectual and ideological characteristics of a person”.

⁴¹ Agrarian dreams is translated as ‘*Nong Chang Meng*’ or ‘*Tian Yuan Meng*’ in the Chinese media reports, such as Wang (2013) and the TV series of CCTV-7 called ‘Agrarian Dreams of the Urbanites’ broadcasted in November 2013. It is associated with the so-called ‘New Peasant Movement’ where urbanites rent land and start farms in the countryside.

college or university degree. Some of them quit their jobs to start farms to pursue their ‘agrarian dreams’. They are thus different from traditional Chinese peasant farmers who generally have less education, learn farming from their parents and work on the farm from the outset. Country Fair vendors are thus not socially embedded within rural society, which means they can leave the countryside and the farm when they choose to do so.

But where are the peasants? Our visits to some of the Beijing Country Fair farms revealed that peasants were usually hired as farm workers while the ‘farmers’ with whom customers would have direct contact are farm operators. These so-called ‘new peasants’ usually also do farm work but real peasants are contracted workers who are only paid a modest salary and do not share in the profit of the farm. Our investigations found that although they have a certain degree of autonomy in farming practices, the farm workers do not have a voice in making managerial decisions. For the farm workers, the only difference between working on an ecological farm and working on an agribusiness company farm is the differences of farming methods. These farm workers are the faces behind the market whose work is largely unknown to the customers. Thus, they are in part subordinated. This is quite a contrast to one of the original goals of farmers’ markets—fostering social justice by supporting small farmers and ecological ways of production.

Contestations about ‘Local’

Unlike farmers’ markets in the west where the connotations of ‘local’ generate tremendous debates, contestations with ‘local’ have entirely different connotations in Chinese farmers’ markets. In contrast to the notion that ‘local is of high quality’ in the west (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000: 292; also see Goodman 2010), it is curious to see how ‘local’ is underplayed amongst Country Fair vendors in promoting the quality of food to their customers. Customers of the Country Fair are fed a lot of messages about how healthy and safe the food is, but this information places almost no emphasis on the food being ‘local’. One of the reasons for this is that vendors perceive customers

to be seeking safe and healthy food, but not ‘quality’ food in a more comprehensive sense which embodies local, seasonal and other features. This perception also pertains to the direct incentive for the founding of ecological farms: a reaction to the increasing demand for safe food amidst the food safety crisis. Another reason for the intentional down-playing of ‘local’ might relate to the appreciation of imported food in the Chinese food market. Food that is not domestically produced is always regarded as high-quality or even as a luxury product sold in high-end supermarket or specialty food stores. This makes the celebration of ‘local’ even more challenging.

The down-playing of ‘local’ is also reflected in farms from far-away provinces being permitted to participate in the market occasionally. For example in mid-October 2012, the Country Fair introduced crabs raised in Hubei province, more than 1300 km from Beijing, to their customers. However, this long distance sourcing was underpinned by a social justice rationale: to support the livelihood of crab farmers in that area when the price of their quality crabs was squeezed by traders. At the Shanghai *Nonghao* Farmers’ Market⁴², another influential farmers’ market in China, we again observed that the ‘local’ provenance of food is less important compared to the ‘safety’ and ‘healthfulness’ of food in screening the vendors. When a farmer from Fujian province wanted to join the market, the organizer told him that although their top concern was the production process of the food, they did prioritize local farms. ‘Local’ is endorsed as a ‘bonus’, but not a prerequisite.

Thus, the space of localism displayed in farmers’ markets is nested within a range of social conditions. Together with the value contradictions between market managers and customers, it presents a remarkable challenge to the Beijing Country Fair managers in terms of achieving multiple goals, including supplying local products, meeting customer demands, and contributing to social justice for peasant farmers. Balancing the multiple goals also shapes the spatial relations embedded in the operation of the market. Farmers’ markets, in this sense, are not fixed spaces of

⁴² We visited the Shanghai *Nonghao* Farmers’ Market on May 27, 2012.

consumption within a specific foodshed, but rather dynamic spaces with changing spatial relations.

Contestations about Consumer Motivations

As in the west, customers of the Country Fair also demonstrate diverse motivations for participating. However, since having access to safe and healthy food is the dominant motivation, there is somewhat less variation in motives for Country Fair customers. The tension exists instead between market managers and customers. This is directly associated with the ethical foundations of this alternative venue: values underpinning the production and consumption of food. These values mainly embody protecting the environment through food choices that support small scale farms, social justice and ethical consumerism. Although these are generally identified as common values embedded in farmers' markets in the west, interviews with the managers of the Beijing Country Fair revealed significant differences in China.

The Beijing Country Fair as a contested space of ethical values is characterized by two kinds of tensions around value systems: on the one hand, the market manager struggles to convey ethical values to customers who have very different motivations; on the other hand, the market manager finds it hard to maintain the market as an ethical space, or a place to support ethical food production and consumption, and to oppose the forces that are encroaching on the space and shifting it toward a solely commercial entity.

It is not surprising to see the difference in ethics between the market founders and customers at the Beijing Country Fair given that the market founders all have certain connections with and influences from the west. This has enabled them to transplant in China the farmers' market as an alternative venue along with a certain set of ethical values including social justice and sustainability concerns. When asked what is the most important characteristic that distinguishes the market from other food venues, the manager, who has an educational background in the US and experience working for an alternative think tank, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP),

immediately identified ‘social justice and ethical consumerism’ rather than ‘food quality and healthfulness’. In emphasizing the meaning of organic agriculture that the market is promoting, the manager said “organic agriculture is mainly about the environment, not safe food.”⁴³ These western associations with farmers’ markets contrast sharply with the interests of customers who purchase food at the market out of ‘food safety’ concerns⁴⁴. This contradiction in ethical value systems leads to a certain degree of compromise: in promoting the market to the public, the market managers downplay aspects they consider important and instead highlight the ‘food quality’ associated with healthfulness and safety. Thus, the environmental and social concerns of market organizers are intentionally watered down in communicating with customers. This watering down of environmental ethics and other compromises reduced the Beijing Country Fair and pushes it towards merely being a place for procuring safe and healthy food.

For customers, food safety is the biggest motivation – I’d say for 98% of our customers that is the key reason they buy at the market. This is our window into the customer right now. Right now they don’t realize what else this is about – justice, fairness, ecology... for us, being ethical and giving attention to social justice are the most important criteria. After that we are concerned about the products being organic... But we also know we need to keep diversifying to make the market attractive to a broad group of customers. We don’t want to scare them away...we are in a position of making many tradeoffs between different criteria in order to bring the consumer choices and make the market a vibrant place.

—interview with a market manager, December 6 2012.

Another source of tension around value systems exists between the market manager, producers who want to enter the market and business partners who have profit motivations. The market has received more than 300 applications from various farms who want to join the market, but two thirds of those farms could not meet the

⁴³ Interview with one market manager in Beijing, China on April 3 2012.

⁴⁴ Another major motivation is the taste of food. Customers generally conclude that food sold at the Beijing Country Fair has a much better taste compared to that in supermarkets.(see Lian, 2012)

basic criteria. They are either not following the organic or ecological production practices, or are commercial farms that are expanding marketing channels⁴⁵. Although the market tried to cooperate with a business partner to open a permanent food store, the attempt failed in the end mainly because the partner wanted to turn a fast profit and not take the responsibility for conducting farm inspections.

Other Contestations: Farming Practices and the ‘Old Farmer’ Paradox

Even if there were no power struggles, ethical value clashes, or regulatory disputes, the Beijing Country Fair would not be an entirely harmonious space. Farmers at the market, who all practise ecological agriculture following organic agriculture rules and principles, still have diverse perspectives on farming techniques and approaches. From our interviews, the two most prominent debates amongst the Beijing Country Fair farmers relate to the use of greenhouses and pest and weed control methods. Some farms strictly follow the rule of growing only seasonal vegetables, while other farms use greenhouses to extend their growing system. Farmers also invest very different amounts of labour for pest and weed control. Some even believe pests and weeds should be allowed to flourish, which is a major ecological farming trend called ‘natural farming’ or ‘permaculture’. Even among farmers who are more proactive in pest control, there is disagreement about the right approach to maintain soil fertility.

Another contested issue is the so-called ‘old farmer’ challenge. Despite the market’s strong inclination to support ‘old farmers’ who have been farming for all their lives, the market managers found it very hard to educate them about ecological farming ideas. One market manager said, “common wisdom suggests that they have been farming for decades so that they should know best about sustainable ways of farming, but in practice, they don’t know”. This is also the reason why customers at the market, who are looking for a ‘modern’ style of farmer, do not trust peasant farmers, but trust the well-educated ‘new peasants’ instead.

⁴⁵ Interview with one market manager in Beijing, China on December 6, 2012.

Discussions and Conclusions

Agrifood studies have conceptualized farmers' markets as dynamic, fluid and contested spaces within which interactions among various actors generate tensions and conflicts. Understanding the tensions and conflicts within farmers' markets enables us to identify potential strategies to address some of the challenges. Drawing on the notion that farmers' markets are social constructions of key actors, this paper sought to examine the conflicts and tensions among four major players of farmers' markets: the market managers, market vendors, customers and the state. The paper used the major dimensions of contestations observed in the west as an analytical framework to interrogate the Beijing Country Fair in China and compare it with farmers' markets in the west (see Table 5). These dimensions included power structure, vendor relationships, disputes around 'local', consumer motivations, and challenges from structural forces. This analytical framework enabled us to anatomize the Beijing Country Fair in various ways to capture the nuances behind its alternative characteristic.

By examining their interrelations, we sketched out the major tensions and challenges that the Beijing Country Fair faces, and depicted its contested nature from multiple dimensions. These dimensions of contestations include (1) the information asymmetry between vendors and customers, (2) the dispute about the term 'organic', (3) the challenges from the state in terms of the registration of the market and finding venues, the restriction of selling processed and packaged food at the market, (4) the issue of 'faux-paysan', (5) the down-playing of 'local', (6) challenges of communicating ethical values to customers while meeting diverse consumer needs, as well as (7) other dimensions such as the diverse farming approaches and the 'old farmer' challenge.

Although some contestations within the Beijing Country Fair resemble those observed in the west, there are still contestations that have not been previously documented, especially those related to the state. Being nascent initiatives, farmers'

markets in China are subject to monitoring and regulations of the state. Therefore, the unbalanced power structure might not only exist between ‘educated and middle-class’ consumers and producers (Hinrichs 2000). Power struggles also emerge between the state and market managers. The social-political construction of specialty and quality food sold in the market can thus face significant interventions from state authorities. Moreover, the possibility of customers being unsatisfied with vendors also deserves academic attention. There are also contestations that have very different connotations from those in the west. For example, the ‘local’ is significantly downplayed in the Beijing Country Fair. In contrast to vendors criticizing others for being resellers rather than authentic farmers, as has been observed in the west, most vendors at the Beijing Country Fair are actually white-collar entrepreneurs who do not have a genuine social connection with the countryside. The tension over ethical values between market managers and customers has also not been widely discussed in studies of western farmers’ markets.

Thus, this paper contributes to the current literature on AFNs by examining the contestations within an ecological farmers’ market in China where alternative food initiatives have not been well documented. It highlights a different landscape of contestations within farmers’ markets in China from that in the west. Unlike the western experiences where the role of the state is minimal in farmers’ market operations, the state in China is a key player that significantly shapes the landscape of contestations within farmers’ markets. Our interrogations of the Beijing Country Fair revealed that bringing the state into the characterization of farmers’ markets can be an effective approach to uncover locally specific contestations.

Even though we framed farmers’ markets as spaces of contestations, the illustration and evidence of it is still highly dependent upon specific sociopolitical conditions. This is partly due to the fact that power structures and institutional settings vary significantly under different circumstances, which consequently affects the configurations of farmers’ markets. There is no surprise that farmers’ markets in other Chinese cities face very different challenges. However, the tensions within the Beijing

Country Fair still reflect the economic, social and political context of China in general.

This specificity of facts and perspectives that define farmers' markets as contested spaces prevents the possibility of generating a universal approach to reconcile the fractured space of markets. Nevertheless, exploring potential mechanism that can mitigate or eliminate some of the contestations within the space of farmers' markets is still a fascinating topic for further research. The complicated tensions and conflicts unveiled in this paper do not represent the entire picture. We acknowledge that the Beijing Country Fair as a contested space has more facets than what have been documented in this paper. For example, we did not include differences in values among consumers; nor did we take into account other actors such as academia and NGOs. This also demands further studies. In the process of collecting information for this study, we observed that the internet (cyberspace) has been functioning as a communication channel through which various actors participating in the market are engaging in a more equal, meaningful and reciprocal relationship. Given the constraints of communicating through physical space in real life, cyberspace may become a venue where the various tensions could be addressed. The online and real space of the Beijing Country Fair and other farmers' markets across China are still developing rapidly and are worthy of further research.

Paper 3 Governmental versus Grassroots Agendas of Rural Development: Strategies, Challenges and Opportunities of the ‘New Rural Reconstruction Movement’ in China

Overview

The recent emergence and proliferation of alternative food networks (AFNs) in China is in part attributed to the ‘New Rural Reconstruction Movement’ (NRRM). The values and strategies of the NRRM differ significantly from the state-led campaign of ‘new socialist countryside construction’ (NSCC), although they both centre on rural development. However, how the NRRM constructs and maintains its niche in a complicated sociopolitical context is largely undocumented. Based on in-depth interviews with key players in the NRRM and analysis of information from secondary sources, this paper characterizes the NRRM and examines the challenges and opportunities facing this movement from both state and society. We show first, how the NRRM is coping with state pressure by adopting mainstream discourses in promoting their activities and by seeking a harmonious relationship with the state; and second, how the NRRM adopts AFNs as powerful tools to concretize its once romantic and idealistic values, to reconnect it with the demands of society, and to build momentum for alternative rural development initiatives. The NRRM case in China indicates that when questioning orthodoxies, civil society initiatives can be successful by taking a more non-confrontational stance and advocating an amelioration rather than a reform of the current developmental regime.

Key Words: New Rural Reconstruction Movement, New Socialist Countryside Construction, social movements, Alternative Food Networks, rural development, China

Introduction

While many are praising the significant economic achievement of modern China, its countryside still faces numerous challenges. These challenges include the poverty of peasants, the insecurity of peasants' rights, the poor condition of rural infrastructure, the low viability of the agriculture sector, the disparity between cities and the countryside and other associated social economic problems (Yeh *et al.* 2013). In 1996, Wen Tiejun, an agronomist based at Renmin University, conceptualized these problems as '*sannong wenti*', which means the problems of 'agriculture (*nongye*), villages (*nongcun*) and farmers (*nongmin*)' (see Ahlers and Schubert 2009; Day 2008; 2013a, 2013b)⁴⁶. Since Wen proposed this term, *sannong* has entered the policy circle and became a term that encapsulates the complex socioeconomic challenges that China's countryside has been facing. 'The peasant' has been brought back to the center of the realms of politics, economy and development in China (see Day 2008, 2013a).

The 'New Rural Reconstruction Movement' (*xin xiangcun jianshe yundong*, NRRM) was initiated by academics and social activists in the early 2000s to tackle the *sannong* challenges. A successor to the original 'rural reconstruction movement' (RRM) in the 1920s and 1930s, the NRRM has been led by concerned academic researchers (professional intellectuals, see Hao 2006) and NGO leaders focusing on rural China. NRRM leaders suggest that the crisis in rural China cannot be treated merely as an economic or agriculture production issue but rather is a social and cultural issue that requires the reconstruction of social life by means of cultural and cooperative reorganization (Day 2008, 2013a). Thus, the NRRM boldly aims to rebuild collective social relations in rural China for farmers to defend themselves against globalization, marketization and capitalist-consumerist values (Day 2008, 2013a, 2013b; Jacka 2013). In 2003, Wen facilitated the foundation of 'James Yen Rural Reconstruction College', a key symbol of the revitalization of the RRM. The

⁴⁶ *Sannong wenti* was also phrased as 'the rural problem in three dimensions: village communities, agriculture and the peasantry' (Pan and Du 2011a, 454).

initiative was later joined by other activities such as the establishment of ‘Beijing Liang Shuming Rural Reconstruction Center’ and the Little Donkey Farm. Besides Wen Tiejun, He Xuefeng was another influential scholar who has carried out rural reconstruction experiments in Hubei province (Pan 2012; Thøgersen 2009; Day 2013b).

Among the variety of work that the NRRM has been doing, ecological agriculture is one important component that has attracted much public attention. The synergies between the rural reconstruction initiatives and the growing public concerns regarding food safety after 2008 placed ecological agriculture in the spotlight as a prominent rural development instrument. Within the broad context of food safety crisis, the NRRM activists played various vital roles in fostering the development of ecological farming and alternative food networks, the most prominent of these being community supported agriculture (CSA) farms (see Si *et al.* forthcoming; Schumilas 2014).

Meanwhile, since 2005, China has witnessed a massive state-led campaign for rural development—‘new socialist countryside construction’ (*shehui zhuyi xin nongcun jianshe*, NSCC) which exemplifies a significantly different set of logic from the NRRM. The NSCC campaign also sets the *sannong* challenges as a clear target. Its ultimate goals are to build a countryside with ‘well-developed production (*shengchan fazhan*), ample livelihood (*shenghuo kuanyu*), civilized lifestyle (*xiangfeng wenming*), clean and tidy villages (*cunrong zhengjie*), and to introduce democratic administration (*guanli minzhu*)’ (Central Committee of the CCP 2005; also see Thøgersen 2009). This has been the principal goal guiding rural policies in China in the 21st century and has generated tremendous impacts on rural development.

Existing literature about the NRRM, although very limited, has provided both empirical and theoretical examinations of the movement. However, little attention has been paid to the synergies and interactions between the grassroots NRRM and the state-led NSCC. The most recent food safety crisis, which has profound implications for the development of the NRRM, has also not been captured in these analyses. We argue that the NRRM, positioned in the middle of the state-society dichotomy, has to

negotiate not only with the state's authority but also society's expectations. This paper thus examines the NRRM in the broad sociopolitical context of China within which it strives to make impacts. By examining the NRRM's interactions with both the state and society, this paper provides a detailed analysis of how a social movement survives within a complicated sociopolitical context. It contributes to rural development studies by providing a unique case of an alternative rural development initiative and by highlighting the significance of sociopolitical contexts in shaping rural development strategies and practices.

The paper is structured as follows. It begins with a brief review of the historical and sociopolitical background of the emergence of the NRRM. We then differentiate the NRRM from the state-led NSCC in terms of eight interrelated dimensions. Following this, the paper illustrates, with specific cases, the major challenges for the NRRM presented by both the state and society. Next, we examine how the NRRM copes with the challenges it faces from the state by integrating mainstream developmental discourses in the promotion of their activities to seek a harmonious relationship with the state. We then investigate how AFNs such as CSA farms and farmers' markets became powerful tools for the NRRM to concretize the movement's idealistic values, to reconnect them with the demands of society, and to build momentum for alternative rural development initiatives. This is followed by an analysis of policy implications of the NRRM before we conclude the paper by identifying emerging opportunities for the NRRM with both the state and society.

This paper is part of a broader research project looking at the ecological agriculture sector and alternative food networks in China. The research team conducted more than 120 interviews and meetings in 11 provinces of China with various stakeholders in the ecological agriculture sector. A significant portion of the interviewees were either directly involved in the NRRM or inspired by it. The qualitative analysis in this paper is based on some of the in-depth interviews conducted during this project, as well as public reports, academic and non-academic publications in both English and Chinese, information collected from the 4th National

CSA Symposium in which we participated in November 2012, and information from the International Conference on Sustainability and Rural Reconstruction held in Chongqing, China, in December 2012.

Limited Studies of the New Rural Reconstruction Movement

Despite the significance of the NRRM in rural development in China, there is limited literature in English documenting its origin, strategies, practices, challenges and opportunities. Renard and Guo (2013) examined an NRRM project in South China and concluded that social activities such as basketball games can foster the social base for collective action that contributes to the diffusion of organic farming. Thøgersen (2009) did a more careful historical review of the RRM in the 1920s and examined several recent rural reconstruction cases. He demonstrated how the state works with local elites and social activists to successfully implement rural reconstruction projects. However, the term ‘rural reconstruction’ was not used by Thøgersen distinctly from the NSCC. Rather, the author indiscriminately referred to the state’s NSCC initiatives under the ‘rural reconstruction’ umbrella. Day (2008, 2013a, 2013b) positioned China’s rural crisis in a global context and provided a detailed narrative of the historical thread and the evolution of thought in the movement. In examining the NRRM’s interpretation of rural self-governance (*zizhi*) from a historical perspective, Day (2013b) concluded that the NRRM has been advocating an integrated approach for peasant organization that goes beyond political and economic spheres. Day (2013b) argued that a revived rural culture should be the basis for organizing the peasantry. From a feminist perspective, Jacka (2013) critiqued the NRRM for eliding gender inequalities in rural society despite its proposition of social justice. Yan and Chen (2013) examined the debates about farmers’ cooperatives in the 1930s’ RRM and the contemporary NRRM and pointed out that the intellectual perspectives in the 1930s still shed light on the contemporary movement.

NRRM intellectuals themselves have also contributed analyses of the NRRM

within the Chinese sociopolitical and historic context. Pan and Du (2011a) articulated the historical and ideological origins of the RRM and briefly explained its inherent contradictions. Wen and Lau (2008) and Wen *et al.* (2012b) criticized the privatization of land for inducing environmental degradation and modernization and globalization for eliminating diverse rural culture. They argued that switching from modernization-based development approaches to alternative rural development approaches (rural reconstruction) is the solution to rural problems. Papers from a special issue of *Chinese Anthropology and Sociology* in 2007 have detailed some early experiments of the NRRM in China (Day and Hale 2007; Wen 2007; He X. 2007; Tan 2007; He Huili 2007; Qiu 2007). He Xuefeng (2007), another influential rural reconstruction practitioner, examined the challenges confronting rural China and criticized both the mainstream and Wen Tiejun's approaches for lacking concern for the interests of peasants. He argued that peasants do not suffer from a shortage of food and clothing but suffer from a loss of spiritual and social meaning in their lives due to the dominant consumerism. Therefore, he believed that rural reconstruction work should focus on people's daily lives as well as rural culture. Tan Tongxue (2007) examined the problem of 'rural graying' and emphasized the importance of villagers' subjectivity⁴⁷ in rural reconstruction. He Huili (2007) and Qiu Jiansheng (2007) instead took a more empirical perspective to document the NRRM projects in Lankao County, Henan province and Zhaicheng, Shandong province respectively. Their case studies highlighted some important experiences for the NRRM.

These studies examined the NRRM through both empirical cases and theoretical reflections and thus provided valuable information for the understanding of grassroots rural development initiatives in China. However, these studies did not situate the NRRM within the current social and political conditions by linking it with the state-led NSCC and the recent food safety crisis simultaneously. There is also a lack

⁴⁷ Reconstructing the subjectivity of Chinese peasants has been a critical element in the NRRM. It refers to the NRRM's belief that peasants should not be the passive recipient of social transformations but should and can be the subject that proactively participates in and creates social transformations (see Pan and Du 2011a; He *et al.* 2014).

of comparative analysis between the grassroots NRRM and the state-led NSCC. Therefore, current studies of the NRRM did not provide much help in understanding either the synergies and interactions between the state-led and the grassroots initiatives or how the NRRM strives to meet society's demands. To fill this literature gap, this paper places the NRRM in the broad socio-political context of China where it strives to make an impact. It examines the challenges and opportunities for the NRRM by comparing it with the NSCC and linking it with the food safety crisis.

The Origins and Practices of the New Rural Reconstruction Movement

Since the late 19th century, China has experienced various shifts in development thought. The 'radical versus conservative' paradigm, although being criticized for its dichotomy, offers an analytical framework to characterize these far-reaching shifts (see Yu 2006). Radicalism is characterized in China by the tendency to totally repudiate traditional developmental ideas and to fully embrace western thoughts instead. In contrast, conservatism calls for a revitalization of tradition and traditional thoughts. The historical period around the 'May Fourth Movement' in 1919 marked the first culmination of 'radical' thoughts in the 20th century, followed by a decline of radicalism and a rise of conservatism (Xu 2000). The rise of conservatism was fostered by the rigorous reality of the devastated rural economy and culture after WWI. According to Wen (2009), in the 1920s there was a rapid industrialization period in China that was built upon the exploitation of the rural economy. The migration of peasants to cities and the capitalization of the agriculture sector resulted in the decomposition of the subsistence rural economy and the decline of rural society. It is within this complex 'radical-conservative' struggle that the RRM emerged (see Yan and Chen 2013). This movement, led by social activists such as Liang Shuming, Yan Yangchu (known as 'James Yen') and Lu Zuofu, expanded to more than 600 organizations in the 1920s and 1930s (Pan and Du 2011a). It aimed to revitalize the rural economy and rural culture through various means (see Pan 2012).

The revitalization efforts were represented by rural reconstruction experiments, led by social activists, that focused on various aspects of rural life, including building autonomous institutions, job training, civilian education, traditional culture education and public health improvement. These experiments flourished across the country in the 1920s and 1930s and constituted a remarkable social movement in the history of China's rural development (Pan and Du 2011a; Pan 2012; Yan and Chen 2013)⁴⁸.

However, this far-reaching movement was generally perceived as a movement of 'amelioration', in contrast with the more radical movement of 'revolution' (Guo 2009; Liu 2008; Yan and Chen 2013). The perceptions were that the Rural Reconstruction Movement (RRM), although widely embraced, did not seek a systematic transformation of the fundamental orders and institutions and thus had a limited capacity in solving the profound social and economic problems that confronted rural China at that time (Pan 2012; Day 2008; Yan and Chen 2013). Its prosperity was soon halted by the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War in the late 1930s, when the attention of the state and civil society shifted from internal treatment of the destitute countryside towards the external threat of sovereignty (Day 2013b; Yan and Chen 2013).

More than 60 years later, rural China faced severe challenges again after decades of rapid urbanization and industrialization, which hollowed the countryside by constantly extracting key human and natural resources and capitals (e.g., rural residents have been migrating to cities and supporting the rapid growth of the industrial sector. see Shi 2012; Yeh *et al.* 2013). This challenging condition prompted responses from both the state and civil society to launch a new round of rural development initiatives. In the early 2000s, the threatened livelihoods of peasants dependent upon agriculture as well as the politically-sensitive income disparity and social gap between cities and the countryside attracted the attention of the central government owing to a well-known open letter written by a local official, Li Changping, to Premier Zhu Rongji (Day 2008). '*Sannong wenti*', as expressed in Li

⁴⁸ For a detailed historical narrative of the RRM, see Pan (2012).

Changping's letter, soon became a key focus of a new set of national policies marked by the abolishment of agricultural tax and the introduction of agriculture subsidies. In the fifth plenary session of the Sixteenth Party Congress in October 2005, the central committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopted the term 'building a new socialist countryside' (*jianshe shehui zhuyi xinnongcun*) in the guiding document for the 11th National Five Year Plan (2006-2010) (see van der Ploeg *et al.* 2013). Since then, 'new socialist countryside construction' (NSCC) serves as an all-embracing term that embodies various state efforts in developing the countryside, with agriculture modernization as the top priority. These efforts cover the modernization of the agriculture sector; protection of grain price; improvement of education, medical care, and transportation infrastructure; and the beautification of the countryside as well as enhancement of villagers' self-management capability (Central Committee of the CCP 2005).

Paralleling the state's NSCC agenda, the legacy of the RRM was 'salvaged'⁴⁹ by a group of intellectuals led by renowned agricultural economist, Wen Tiejun, who proposed and popularized the *sannong* issue. These left-leaning scholar-activists reintroduced to the public the RRM legacy, and were referred to as the 'New Rural Reconstruction Movement' (Pan and Du 2011a; Pan 2012; Day 2008, 2013a, 2013b; Jacka 2013; Yan and Chen 2013; Yeh *et al.* 2013). The NRRM's work across the country touches upon various issues including ecological agriculture, civilian⁵⁰ education (*pingmin jiaoyu*), farmers' cooperative facilitation, civil rights protection of migrant workers, rural sustainable development in general, and so on (see Table 6).

⁴⁹ China Fortune (Xu 2011) called Wen Tiejun's team 'a group of people salvaging the dreams'. Wen has been working at various governmental departments/think tanks regarding China's rural development and agricultural sector and is widely regarded as an official economist and the spokesman for farmers in China.

⁵⁰ 'Civilian education' (or mass education) promoted by the NRRM is in contrast with the official educational system which is referred to as 'elite education', an 'appendage' of politics that aims to train people to become elites, leave the countryside, and serve the dominance hierarchy. Rather, 'civilian education' teaches villagers who are lack of educational opportunities to be literate and obtain livelihood strategies, knowledge and techniques that they can use in the countryside (see an un-authored paper on the website of Sichuan James Yen Research Association: http://www.jamesyan.net/show_hdr.php?xname=LTUAM41&dname=CLT0V91&xpos=81 Accessed 18 September 2014).

Mainly engendered from grassroots forces, the NRRM's sentiments resemble the ideas put forward by the RRM in the 1920s. These ideas include critiques of elite culture and knowledge, focusing on peasant status and subjectivity, connecting elite intellectuals with the rural masses, reconstituting rural-urban relations, experiments with the rural education reforms and improving rural health care conditions, etc. (Pan and Du 2011a). In response to more contemporary concerns, mitigating ecological crisis has been added as an important task for the NRRM to address (Pan and Du 2011a). Day (2008: 50) noted that 'as a critique of developmentalism and the economic mode of analysis', the NRRM 'turns to culture and cooperative relations as vital to the reorganization of rural social life'. It is a response to the dominant neoliberal logics of marketization, seeking alternative modes to revive the rural economy, culture, society and peasants' subjectivity (Pan and Du 2011a; Yeh *et al.* 2013). From a developmental perspective, it represents civil society's attempts to seek a self-organizational approach to rural development.

Table 6. The NRRM projects and experiments

(adapted from the promotional video of the NRRM, acquired at the 4th National CSA Symposium)

Categories	Projects	Objectives	Year initiated
Research	Rural Reconstruction Centre of China	People's livelihood centered, collaboration and cooperation, multicultural base	2005
	Rural Research by College Students to Support Rural People	Serving the peasants and Striving for dreams	2001
Integrated Experimental Zones	Zhaicheng county, Dingzhou, Hebei Province	Economic, Cultural, Education and Medical Treatment Integrated Community Development Project	2003
	Lankao, Henan Province	Farmers collaboration and rural-urban cooperation experiment, multi-stakeholder involvement: intellectuals,	2003

	college students, grassroots, local government and urbanites	
	Shunping, Hebei Province	2004
	Puhan community, Yongji, Shanxi Province	Integrated Community Construction for Sustainable Rural Development
	Wujin, Jiangsu Province	Experiment ecological civilization , rural culture in new countryside construction
	Gangli, Yushi County, Henan Province	2011
Farmers' Cooperatives	Nanmazhuang, Lankao, Henan Province	The first ecological village in Central China
	Nantang, Fuyang, Anhui Province	2003
	Sancha, Fangxian County, Shiyan, Hubei Province	2003
	Jiangzhuang, Yutai County, Shandong Province	2004
	Shangping, Yong'an, Fujian Province	2005
Civilian Education (Community Colleges)	James Yen Rural Reconstruction College in Dingzhou, Hebei	Ecological agriculture and environmentally-friendly countryside, the first free civilian education school in the countryside in 21 st Century, promoting local rural knowledge and scientific development
	Shiwu Community College, Danzhou City, Hainan Province	The first rural community college in China, exploring a potential path for rural adult education
	Fuqian Rural Reconstruction Center, Anxi County, Fujian Province	Promoting sustainable and integrated rural community development, cooperative economy and sustainable agriculture
	Peitian Community College, Liancheng County, Fujian	Protecting traditional villages and preserving rural culture

	Province		
	Tingtang Community College, Putian, Fujian Province		2011
	Dahu Community College, Nanchang, Jiangxi Province		2012
	Jiaocun County Rural Experiment, Lingbao, Henan	Promoting traditional moralities	2012
CSA Farms	Beijing Little Donkey Farm	An integrated platform for farming, citizen education, research, CSA promotion and personnel training	2008
	Big Buffalo Farm	Promoting traditional farming knowledge, CSA model, Participatory Guarantee System ⁵¹ , harmonious urban-rural development ; rebuilding the trust between urban and rural communities	2011
	Little Donkey Liulin Community Farm, Beijing	Creating an agricultural community shared mutually by urbanites and farmers in suburban area	2012
	Guxiang Farm, Fuzhou, Fujian Province	Awakening people's love about their hometown	2012
Migrant Worker Centers	Beijing Migrant Workers' Home	Improving living conditions of migrant workers, defending migrant workers' rights (New Migrant Worker Arts Group, Cultural Festival)	2002
	Green Ground Migrant Workers' Home, Xiamen, Fujian Province	Education and development of migrant workers in emerging industries	2007
Other initiatives	Ecological Architecture Studio	Intellectuals working with peasants to promote ecological architecture in rural area and earthquake-stricken area	2004
	China Office of Global Peace	Promoting women's rights and grassroots women	2005

⁵¹ According to IFOAM, Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are “locally focused quality assurance systems... that certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange”. For more detail please refer to: <http://www.ifoam.org/fr/value-chain/participatory-guarantee-systems-pgs> Accessed Sept. 16 2014.

Women	communication	
Beijing Green Ground Union	The first farmers' green food production association in China	2006
Beijing Green Ground Cooperative	The first consumer cooperative in China: healthy consumption and fair trade	2006
Aoxiang Society of Beijing Forestry University	Campus farming, sustainable campus experiment (National College Students Campus Farming Symposium)	2008
Chongqing Green Ground Dapinghuo Community Restaurant	Rallying with local small farmers with the power of consumption: environmental-friendly farms, healthy life and community	2012

Table 6 demonstrates that most of the projects of the NRRM were launched after 2003. The establishment in 2003 of the James Yen Rural Reconstruction College in Dingzhou, Hebei Province was emblematic of the revival of the RRM from the 1930s. Dingzhou (previously called Dingxian), where James Yen's rural reconstruction efforts took place from 1926 to 1937, was regarded as one of the cradles of the RRM (see Day 2013b). The NRRM team not only founded the rural reconstruction college but also revived Dingzhou as a symbolic experimental zone for rural reconstruction. This unofficial 'first year of NRRM' was also marked by the establishment of several farmers' cooperatives in Henan, Anhui and Hubei, soon followed by a few other projects. A few earlier projects like the Beijing Migrant Workers' Home soon joined the NRRM team. It is interesting to note that all the CSA farms were started after 2008. Although a few more community colleges were established after 2008 to fuel their long-term goal of civilian education, CSA farms became the star projects of the NRRM and attracted the most public attention. This raises the question of why this is the case, and how the NRRM's involvement in AFNs, particularly CSA farms, affected its development in China. Before delving into this issue, we examine another rural development initiative: the 'new socialist countryside' campaign launched by the Chinese government in 2005. An examination of the goals and discourses of this

campaign enables us to better understand the NRRM's value system and its specific tactics.

Distinguishing the New Rural Reconstruction Movement from the New Socialist Countryside Construction Campaign

The NRRM is not the only initiative to address the *sannong* challenges. The NSCC launched by the Chinese government in 2005 also specified clear goals to overcome the *sannong* challenges. The context for the launch of the NSCC campaign is characterized by the increasing urban-rural disparity in terms of income level, infrastructure condition and access to public services (Lu 2006). Hu Jintao, the former president of China, pointed out in a public speech in 2004 that the development of China had entered an era when the industrial sector should feed the agricultural sector and the city should support the countryside. This widely accepted predication (known as the 'two trends' in China) sets the basic political consensus for the rollout of the NSCC. The state-led campaign was initiated to cope with the urban-rural disparity and related challenges in the new era (He and Li 2006; Zeng 2006).

In contrast with the NSCC's idealistic goals set out by the central government, the enforcement of the NSCC by local government reveals a very different picture. Many Chinese scholars noted that the local government's implementation of the NSCC narrowly focused on rural infrastructure construction and village renovation (e.g., He and Li 2006; Wang 2006; Ye and Yang 2006). The comprehensive ambition of the NSCC is always simplified and understood as merely 'building new villages' (Wang 2006) and of the four major goals, the 'clean and tidy village' goal gets the most attention. Large amounts of public funds were spent on so-called 'vanity projects' which did not help to improve people's livelihoods but only improved the superficial image of villages (Wang 2006; Ye and Yang 2006). In certain circumstances, the NSCC functions as a political-right umbrella that justifies the tyranny of local government in taking up farmland and demolishing villages. In this

way, the local government gets construction land for developing real estate and/or accommodating external industrial investments (Lu 2006). The original goodwill of the NSCC is thus abused to personally benefit local officials.

Another consequence of the NSCC concerns the loss of cultural identity due to the homogenous rural planning that disregards local conditions. Local features that characterize a village or an area are easily eradicated in rural land consolidation projects⁵² in the name of the NSCC (Ye and Yang 2006). Instead of making local-adaptive construction plans, local governments pursue an easier one-size-fits-all planning that makes all villages look the same. Critiques of the NSCC also relate to its limited capacity in generating structural changes (Hu 2006; Shi 2013), such as the reform of the overarching *hukou* (the household registration) system⁵³ which is believed to be one of the fundamental institutional settings blocking further reforms (Hu 2006). Allocating farmland property rights to farmers is arguably seen as another far-reaching reform that is hard to achieve in the NSCC (Shi 2013).

In our interview with an influential proponent of the NRRM, he critiqued the NSCC in this way:

In contrast to the 'New Rural Reconstruction', the 'New Socialist Countryside' is a government campaign promoting capitalism in the countryside and building sustainable livelihoods for farmers. But the NRRM focuses on broader values, including ecology. The sannong issue (agriculture, countryside & farmers) proposed in the mid-90s represents three interrelated aspects of agriculture. Agriculture is the economic; the countryside is the ecological; and peasants are the social dimension.

⁵² Driven by the shortage of land resources, land consolidation in China embodies a complicated land use planning process in rural areas. By bringing scattered villages together to form small towns, the land of demolished villages can be rehabilitated to farmland or used for real-estate development or industrial construction (see Huang *et al.* 2011).

⁵³ In July 24, 2014, the China State Council issued the Guidelines for the Reform of the Household Registration System. The *hukou* system (the so-called 'domestic visa system') that divides people into rural and urban was abolished and substituted by a uniform residential registration system. People are allowed to move freely between small cities, towns and villages. Large and middle cities establish criteria (e.g., duration of consecutive residence) for evaluating people to approve residential status.

However, these three ‘problems’ have been over-simplified with hegemonic thinking as only an economic problem.

—Interview with a NRRM leader and researcher,
Chongqing, China, May 06, 2012. (translated from Chinese)

To further understand the interactions between the NSCC and the NRRM, this paper outlines the differences in terms of eight dimensions (Table 7). We summarize these features from three sources: our interviews, a review of NRRM and NSCC promotional documents, and both Chinese and English literature about the NRRM and the NSCC. These eight dimensions are their perspectives about the countryside, leaders, strategies, approaches, major foci, the scale of their rural development agendas, their visions about agriculture, and their schemes for agriculture development. These dimensions capture the major differences between the NRRM and the NSCC campaigns. This comparison does not seek to conceptualize a dualistic paradigm of rural development or stereotype the two influential campaigns but rather to reach a better understanding of them. The contrast sets the foundation upon which we can examine the potential and actual interactions between the NRRM and the state.

Table 7. A comparison of the NRRM and the NSCC

Dimensions	NRRM (Grassroots Initiative)	NSCC (State Initiative)
Leader	Intellectuals and NGOs	State (central and local government)
Perspectives about the countryside	Our homeland is ‘submerged’ or ‘occupied’ by globalization and industrialization	The countryside is left behind by globalization and industrialization
Strategies	‘Devotion to Homeland’, rediscovering and reviving the values of traditional culture and indigenous knowledge; empowering peasants	‘Developing Homeland’, developing the traditional countryside with modern technology and external knowledge; integrate rural society into the market economy
Approaches	‘going to the countryside’, intellectuals working with local	‘urban feeds rural’, capital investment and transfer

	officials and villagers to mitigate the expropriation of the countryside and develop self-governance schemes	payment from the city; agritourism to develop rural economy
Major focus	Cultural focus: rural culture conservation, farmer self-organization incubation, peasants' status and subjectivity	Physical focus: infrastructure construction, village appearance and environment improvement
Scale	Regional experimental sites	National, large scale
Vision of agriculture	Multifunctional, ecological, sustainable, locally-adapted	Modern, industrialized, highly efficient, knowledge and technology intensive
Agriculture development schemes	Introducing social forces and various actors into agriculture, building connections with urbanites, working with small peasants (CSAs, farmers' cooperatives)	Encouraging private capital investment and corporatization of agriculture, vertical integration of small household farms ⁵⁴ ; government intervention in establishing demonstration farms

Source: Authors' formulation from various sources

It is clear that the NRRM is a group of rural development initiatives led by intellectuals and NGOs while the NSCC is a state-led initiative. The difference in leadership to a large extent defines their capacity in mobilizing human, financial and other resources and shows in how they carry out their projects at very different scales. Due to various constraints, the NRRM, although widely embraced by NGOs and other social forces across the country, mainly works on community-based experimental projects that focus on local development issues. They take 'the local' as a starting point by working with local people with participatory approaches. In contrast, the NSCC is a national campaign that involves massive investments across the country. These investments function as external forces that shape the local community, while local conditions and the perspective of local people are downplayed (Ye and Yang 2006, Xin 2008).

⁵⁴ Here we use 'small household farms' to represent farms run by households with collective property rights under the Household Responsibility System in rural China.

The second difference is represented by their perspectives of the countryside, which determines their major rural development approaches. According to the NRRM team's summary, the NRRM views the countryside (which is always referred to as 'our hometown') as a space that is 'occupied' or 'submerged' by the wave of industrialization and globalization and thus needs to be defended or saved. In contrast, the NSCC believes the countryside is left behind by current trends, and therefore needs to catch up with the pace of globalization. This fundamental difference explains their different strategies and approaches to rural development. In order to defend the declining countryside, the NRRM calls for a rediscovery of the value of traditional rural culture and indigenous knowledge. Thus traditional rural culture, especially the etiquette and custom system, is a starting point and tactic to reconstruct the rural society (Liu 2008). This bottom-up approach, as NRRM practitioners on the frontline, Pan Jia'en and Du Jie (2011: 455), described, aims to 'revive community spirit and empower rural residents to build community-centered local economies'. In the spirit of 'devotion to homeland', they call upon intellectuals and NGOs to go to the countryside and work with local officials and villagers. This is reflected in one of their major works—establishing community colleges for civilian education. Their curriculum is very different from their mainstream counterparts. Traditional farming knowledge, handicraft techniques, and farmers' cooperative organization are some of the major programs. In contrast, the NSCC adopts a hegemonic mainstream developmental perspective to 'develop' the backward countryside with a top-down approach. Modern technology and knowledge formed outside the rural sphere is introduced to the countryside while external capital investment and transfer payments from the city are the major approaches to 'feed' the rural population. Rural customs, for example, are seen as needing to be 'civilized', and agricultural production methods are to be 'developed'. The NSCC thus pays little attention to existing knowledge and technologies and puts all its effort into external ones. Agritourism is always brought up as an effective tool for realizing NSCC goals, while the NRRM holds that the countryside should not be turned into "a place of nostalgia or an

ornamental alternative to modernization for the urban ‘middle class’ or ‘leisure class’” (Pan and Du 2011a: 455).

The third difference is reflected in the key focus of their work. He and Li (2006) pointed out that the practice of the NRRM revolves around enhancement of rural culture and farmers’ self-organization capacity (e.g., capacity to establish farmers’ cooperatives) while the NSCC centers on the physical aspects of rural improvement. Civilian education has always been a key focus of rural reconstruction in China, as peasants were typically characterized as ‘ignorant, poor, weak, and selfish’ (Shi 2008, Schneider 2014)⁵⁵. Although the educational level is significantly higher in today’s rural China, traditional moralities and knowledge is vanishing rapidly. In an attempt to reverse this, the NRRM devotes great amounts of energy to public education. For example, the Jiaocun County Rural Experiment in Lingbao, Henan gathered children to learn *Dizigui*, an ancient classic summary of traditional Confucian behavior norms and morality. Holding a very different perspective about capital involvement from the NSCC campaign, the NRRM believes that the countryside should not be turned into ‘a refugee for urban capital through stimulating domestic consumption’ (Pan and Du 2011a: 454). In contrast, the NSCC directs massive investment in infrastructure construction and village renovation (Wen *et al.* 2012b). It is estimated that from 2003 to 2012, 147.8 billion CNY (~24.3 billion USD) was invested in building a rural public drinking water supply system. In 2012, 206.9 billion CNY (~34 billion USD) was spent on road construction in rural China (Li 2013). The allocation of this NSCC-related funding is a result of obscure negotiations amongst officials and different governmental departments (Ahlers and Schubert 2009). The investment-based developmental approach is also a part of the prominent rise of agrarian capitalism (Zhang and Donaldson 2008).

⁵⁵ This widely cited characterization of traditional Chinese peasants (*Yu, Pin, Ruo, Si* in Chinese) was proposed by rural reconstruction pioneer James Yen. He believed that these features are the urgent issue that needs to be addressed by rural reconstruction. His early work of rural reconstruction experiment in Dingzhou, Hebei province in the 1920s was tailored to alter the ‘ignorant, poor, weak, and selfish’ conditions of peasants. However, the perception of peasants in China underwent significant shifts during the various state-led movements and the reform-era in the 20th century. For detailed analyses, see Day (2012, 2013a) and Schneider (2014).

The fourth difference concerns their agricultural development approaches. While the NRRM promotes ecological agriculture as a tool to mitigate the ecological crisis (Pan and Du 2011a; Pan 2012), the NSCC aims to expand ‘modern agriculture’ following the large scale agriculture system in America (Wen and Lau 2008), which is defined by the Chinese state as industrialized, high-tech, mechanized, external input intensive and information-based agriculture (see State Council 2007). The NRRM’s experiment in organic agriculture began when they established the James Yen Rural Reconstruction College in 2003. They practiced organic farming on their experimental plots in Zhaicheng village. In recognizing the basic condition of China’s agriculture system as small household farming, the NRRM is critical of the out-of-place large scale farming based on land privatization that happened in Latin America and instead advocates alternative models to organize small farmers with farmers’ cooperatives (Wen and Lau 2008). In contrast, the NSCC promotes commercialized agriculture (Ahlers and Schubert 2009) by vertically integrating small farmers with external capital⁵⁶ entering agriculture production. Contract farming led by ‘dragon-head enterprises’⁵⁷ has become a prominent model for agriculture development in the past decade (see Zhang 2012). The first State Council document (2012, No. 10) about agriculture industrialization clearly states that, ‘supporting the development of dragon-head enterprises is very important in increasing the organizational level of the agriculture sector, accelerating the transformation of the developmental pattern of agriculture, enhancing the construction of modern agriculture and increasing farmers’ income level.’

⁵⁶ In recent years, China has witnessed a rapid increase of private capitals in the agricultural sector. See Zhang and Donaldson (2008).

⁵⁷ Dragon-head enterprises, the short form of “agriculture industrialization dragon-head enterprises”, refers to those private or state-owned enterprises that are processing, manufacturing and marketing agricultural produce at a large-scale (in terms of permanent assets and value of sales), high economic benefits (high profits and low debt ratio), strong local economic driving capacity (integrated production-manufacturing-marketing chain, large number of contracted farmers, large scale and stable production base), and solid market competency (sound marketing channels and predominant status within the sector). Dragon-head enterprise are recognized by the Chinese government as pivotal players in agricultural industrialization (State Council 2012 documentation no.10:

http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2012-03/08/content_2086230.htm Suggestions on Supporting the Development of Agriculture Industrialization Dragon-head Enterprises by the State Council, P. R. C.).

Recognizing the distinct features of the two initiatives does not mean they are different in every aspect or that each is a coherent and homogenous initiative free from contradictions (see Pan and Du 2011a). The risk of oversimplification should be noted and in fact, the characterization of these two campaigns embodies controversies. In many cases it is hard to say, for example, that the NRRM relies only on indigenous knowledge in their civilian education projects. Information about the modern world is also a common component of their curriculum. A market approach is also frequently adopted by the NRRM to revive the rural economy. Wen Tiejun's approach of establishing peasant cooperatives still needs to work within the framework of the market economy (He 2007). In addition, the NRRM itself is still an external intervention, with strong values and ethics, in rural areas. By the same token, it is also unfair to judge the NSCC as totally ignoring local conditions. For example, the role of urbanization in the NSCC has not been clearly defined. On the one hand, strong public investment has been directed to urbanization. On the other hand, transforming farmers to urbanites is considered a problematic approach⁵⁸. This fluidity of thoughts and practices within both initiatives offers a space for their interactions. In the following section, we examine the challenges of the NRRM, with a special focus on interfaces with the state.

Challenges Facing the New Rural Reconstruction Movement

One has to understand the overarching 'semi-authoritarian state' in China (Ho and Edmonds 2008) before understanding the challenges that socially and politically embedded civil society initiatives can experience. Ho and Edmonds (2008: 2) define the 'semi-authoritarian state' as a political environment that is 'restrictive of, but paradoxically, also conducive to nation-wide, voluntary collective action with less risk of social instability and repression at the hand of the governing elite'. Under the

⁵⁸ Yan (2006) argues that accelerating urbanization is the fundamental approach to solve the *sannong* issue and farmers' should not be left in villages for NSCC. Reducing the population of farmers as an effective tool is also supported by an influential economist Lin Yifu (2005). However, urbanizing the rural becomes an aggressive rural reconsolidation project in practice which leads to many critiques.

semi-authoritarian state in China, democratic movements have been mainly repressed or exiled, and this reflects a weakness of Chinese civil society. Ho and Edmonds (2008) coin the term 'embedded activism' to describe the situation of advocacy in China. However, social movements like the NRRM still enjoy some freedom, as long as it does not overstep the state's power realm of repression. Therefore, on the one hand, collective action groups need to impose self-censorship and de-politicize their activities to stay away from the state's radar of political-sensitivity. Their strategies to deal with the state have to be non-confrontational in order to maintain their legitimacy. On the other hand, collective action groups have developed informal personal connections with the state, via retired officials or state-run organizations, which gives them a certain range of freedom to facilitate their activist goals.

How does the semi-authoritarian state in China impact the NRRM? Although the NRRM is not a movement that pursues political power, it is inevitably political given that social forces in this process are not under the complete control of the state but rather under the leadership of a group of intellectuals and NGOs. Although the experiments of the NRRM are designed to be self-organizing, in practice interaction with the state at various levels is hard to avoid. In fact, although the first wave of RRM in the 1920s led by Liang Shuming attempted to exclude the state from community projects by working directly with peasants and keeping independent from the state, Liang's experiment of civilian education in Zouping, Shandong in the 1930s could have never happened without the assistance of the local warlord (Thøgersen 2009). Thøgersen (2009: 29) argues that 'a general uneasiness about state actors manipulating and dictating rural communities and a growing feeling that classic CCP governing mechanisms are unable to solve the problem of community building dominates the present discourse on rural reconstruction'. Thus, the NRRM is constantly seeking an alternative to the top-down state-led rural development approach, or in Pan and Du's (2011a) words, an alternative to 'the modern dream'.

'Anti-Modern' Sentiment and Interventions of the Pro Modernization State

While the state is increasing rural investment, it is doing so in part in order to integrate rural society into the market economy. Thus the state—contrary to the policies promoted by NRR advocates—is largely continuing with the market-and-urbanization model of rural development. This development strategy depends on the economy's continued growth, the expansion of external and internal demand, and a remarkable increase in urban employment in order to fully include China's large peasant population within the market economy. NRR activists are skeptical on these very points. (Day and Hale, 2007:7)

Social movements in the 'restrictive political environment in which various socio-economic and cultural changes are taking place' (Ho and Edmonds 2008: 2) face various challenges from the state and society itself. As a social movement that aims to counter the modernization ideologies (Pan and Du 2011a), the most fundamental challenge the NRRM faces rests on their will to explore an alternative rural development approach, in contrast to the state's approach of urbanization, commodification and marketization of the rural. Wen Tiejun, the most renowned advocate of the NRRM, noted that the formation and expansion of capital in the history of colonization is the cause for environmental deterioration of the colony and reflects the theory of "'modernization' that we take for granted today" (Wen 2007: 13). Wen's critiques ideas of modernity such as privatization, commodification, marketization, globalization, liberalization and democratization which largely resemble the representations of the neoliberalization trend that has been promoted in the developing world. Hence, the NRRM challenges the hegemonic development thinking that has been guiding the development of China since the economic reform started in 1978 (Day 2013a, b). The 'reflection', a term used by Wen (2007), lays the foundation of the NRRM's social experiments at a local, regional, small-scale level with a focus on empowering peasants amidst the wave of globalization, marketization and urbanization. The NRRM team believes that the critical reflection on, or the

deconstruction of, modernity and their social experiments in rural China forge a new understanding of modernity—‘anti-modern modernity’—which runs through the thinking of the two waves of rural reconstruction (i.e. the RRM and the NRRM).

The closing of the James Yen Rural Reconstruction College at Dingxian County, Hebei province in April, 2007 represented some operational and ideological conflicts between the NRRM and the state. For 3 years and 9 months the James Yen’s revived civilian education programs conveyed not only a bold declaration of alternative development but also the non-compliance of the NRRM’s activities with the state’s trajectories. The college was shut down by (in the name of) the Bureau of Education in Dingzhou City, as the Bureau claimed the operation of the college illegal. A NRRM leader noted in our interview that their eco-architecture model was also claimed illegal by the local government. The village party secretary of Zhaicheng Village, where the college was located, emphasized that although the college received enormous attention and support from society, it would not last without a supportive ‘political environment’ (Weng 2008), an environment in which the state endorses and encourages the operation of alternative developmental programs. The opposition from the local state partly came from the values of the college—promoting solidarity of peasants. The trainees, mainly villagers, were required to exclaim a slogan every day before lectures, ‘be the master of homeland by changing ourselves, building a new countryside by uniting ourselves’ (Xu 2011). This could be interpreted as a sign of revolution with political implications. Instead of focusing on ‘modernizing the village’ (economic development), as the local government wanted, the college aimed to establish peasant solidarity and subjectivity. This offered no economic benefit to sustain local government’s support of the once promising project.

The state’s intervention in the programs of the NRRM is also reflective of its unwillingness to allow large-scale peasants’ alliances due to the concerns about social stability. As Thøgersen (2009: 30) noted in his analysis, ‘farmers are encouraged to solve their own problems through intra-village cooperation, but they are not supposed to organize across administrative borders... they depend on the goodwill of state

actors'. The party secretary of Zhaicheng Village explained that the reason behind the shutdown of James Yen Rural Reconstruction College was that it expanded its educational program to include farmers' cooperative training for people from other parts of the country, which exceeded its original sphere of operations. The overwhelming media coverage on the 'alternativeness' and 'otherness' of the project also put pressure on local authorities. According to Yu (2011), more than 1000 farmers, village leaders, and volunteers visited Zhaicheng for training and other activities. With all of these political issues surrounding the college, it couldn't get official registration after 2005.

Social Disjunction

We see another reason for the NRRM's difficult acceptance into society and that is 'social disjunction', a challenging situation where civilians do not see the need for or the benefits of the NRRM. As one villager from Zhaicheng Village commented on the James Yen Rural Reconstruction College's work, 'James Yen taught us reading and promoted new crop varieties at a time when we needed (the service) but couldn't get it. Times have changed and the condition is no longer the same, but they (the NRRM) have the same ideas' (Weng 2008). This disconnection between the NRRM and people's needs is critical.

The social disjunction is specifically reflected in the NRRM's work in ecological agriculture promotion. The early attempt at organizing local peasants to do ecological farming was arduous. In 2003 when the program started, only four households out of more than 1000 from Zhaicheng Village joined the ecological farming experiment after the college proposed to subsidize 200 CNY for each *mu*⁵⁹ (199.4 USD per acre) of farmland. Local villagers ridiculed ecological farming methods that abandoned synthetic fertilizer and chemical pesticides and herbicides and worried that the pests from the ecological farming plots would cause damage to their crops (Lin, H. 2008).

⁵⁹ *Mu* is a Chinese measurement of farmland. 1 *mu* equals to ~0.164 acre.

The practice of ecological farming was labeled as an unrealistic plan brought by a group of idealists who were not familiar with practical farming in the area. In our interview with one of the leading advocates of NRR, he narrated the story of a donkey, which later became the symbol of the leading CSA in China (the Little Donkey Farm).

My ten years' work in NRR taught me a lesson—ecological problems of rural China are not at all technical problems, they are closely related to the broad social economic background. Let me tell you a story about a donkey... We treated it as a symbol of ecological agriculture and a challenge to petroleum based agriculture because it is a symbol for using animal labour instead of fossil fuels. However, when they started to raise the donkey in Hebei province in 2005, we received objections from villagers who wished they could bring more modern agricultural technology and believed a donkey is a symbol of backwardness. After we brought the donkey to Beijing in 2008, we thought it would be a good help to ecological farming. However, as there was no place to cut the donkey's hoof and no old farmers who knew how to harness the donkey, it became useless and later only a symbol. The embarrassment over the donkey shows that if you want to change the current system, you have to change it entirely and fundamentally.

—interview with a NRRM leader and researcher, Chongqing, China, May 06, 2012. (translated from Chinese)

The donkey experience made the NRRM team realize that the challenge of implementing ecological agriculture in China goes beyond the farm. It is an integral challenge, facing not only technical challenges in farming but also challenges within society. Peasants refused to plow with donkeys because they had been told through other education that the donkey-associated traditional farming system was backward and needed to be replaced by modern and high-tech farming (Schneider 2014).

Petroleum-based farming has become an agricultural norm and a symbol of 'good

agriculture’ that persists in the mind of Chinese peasants, even in those peasants who do not have access to the modern technologies.

Not only were there misunderstandings with local villagers, urbanites also could not understand the NRRM advocates because of the perceived notion, or ‘common sense’, that professors in ‘ivory towers’ do not work directly with lowly peasants in the field. However, this perception was strongly challenged by a news story in 2006—‘professors selling rice’. He Huili, an Associate Professor at China Agriculture University and an NRRM advocate who facilitated the farmers’ cooperative in Nanmazhuang village, Henan province, attempted to sell in Beijing ‘hazard-free’⁶⁰ rice produced by this cooperative. Despite the endorsement of Wen Tiejun, the sale did not go smoothly in the beginning. The inconsistency between the respected title ‘professor’ and the mundane ‘rice seller’ created material for media coverage, often satiric, and opened debates. He Huili and Wen Tiejun were criticized for not obeying the principles of market economy, and for their ‘anti-market’ behaviour (Tong 2006; Wang 2006). Our interviews revealed that they were cheated and lost their first sale when their rice was delivered but not paid for.

The disconnect between the NRRM’s ideal image of agriculture and the Chinese society’s stereotyped image and solidified longing for modernity reveal a severe challenge to intellectual-led rural developmental projects. When taking the state interventions into consideration, the obstacle becomes even more difficult to overcome. Nevertheless, the rapid change occurring in Chinese society offered an opportunity to the NRRM to obtain the support of farmers and urbanites, and in certain cases, even the state. This paper analyzes how the NRRM has coped with these challenges by strategically using avenues heavily loaded with mainstream development ideas that accord with the state’s will. We argue here that AFNs, especially CSA farms, were pushed by the society’s food scares to the frontline of the NRRM. AFNs became an effective tool for the NRRM to carry out their alternative

⁶⁰ ‘Hazard-free’ is a type of certification along with ‘green’ and organic certifications. See Scott *et al.* 2014 for more information.

experiments of rural development while, at the same time, achieve public support.

Coping with the State and the Social Context by Clinging to Alternative Food Networks

‘Whoever understands the times is a great man’ (*识时务者为俊杰*). This Chinese saying, embraced as a motto by many Chinese, is used too easily to blame rigid structural forces as a convenient excuse for failure, while also acknowledging the detrimental impacts of sociopolitical conditions. In recognizing the state’s rural development agenda as being largely modernization-oriented (with urbanization and industrialization embedded within this), the NRRM team has had to use adaptive strategies to cope with this structural arrangement. They developed appropriate tactics to capture, manipulate and apply relevant state initiatives to achieve their own goals. This paper illustrates these approaches from two dimensions. One is how the NRRM has used mainstream discourses to politically justify and promote their alternative initiatives; the other is how they seek a harmonious relationship with the state by seeking common ground.

Using mainstream discourses

In justifying the NRRM’s alternative logic, Wen (2007) argues that western modernization based on three hundred years of colonization cannot be replicated in China and thus, is not a ‘scientific’ concept that can guide the development of China. Modernization has been deconstructed in many different ways in development studies (see Nederveen Pieterse 2010) but there has not been an examination of the concept questioning its ‘scientificity’. This odd but novel angle of deconstructing modernization makes much more sense when linked with the political slogan ‘scientific approaches to development’. The Chinese Communist Party in Hu Jintao’s era summarized the guiding developmental thinking of the country as ‘scientific approaches to development’ (*kexue fazhan guan*) in 2007, giving rich meaning and

also a pivotal position to the term *kexue* (scientific) in development policies, requiring government at every level to make policies based on whether a policy is ‘scientific’. It was later written into the constitution of the CCP as a guiding ideology of the CCP’s work. Thus, examining the scientificity of western modernization becomes relevant and significant in the Chinese political context.

Attempts to stress the political relevance of the NRRM were also represented by how He Xuefeng, another leading advocate of the NRRM, reinterpreted the term ‘socialist’ in the NSCC campaign to include more soft values promoted by the NRRM. He (2007: 30) argues that “the word ‘socialist’ in the new socialist countryside is not an empty word, but one of great significance. *Non-market factors in the villages may be mobilized* for social, cultural, and organizational construction in the countryside that may result in a large increase of *non-economic benefits for peasants*. In addition to economic income, peasants may also obtain cultural and social benefits as well as benefits in terms of *decency and dignity*.” (emphasis added). This is a strong rebuttal to the tendency of over-simplification of *sannong* as an economic issue in mainstream developmental approaches.

Recognizing the power of discourse in providing a solid political base for their initiatives, the NRRM team adopts mainstream terms to promote their alternative and community-based experiments. Table 6, within which the objectives and descriptions of their projects were directly translated from their promotional documents, highlights some of their manipulations of mainstream words (phrases in bold). For example, the Wujin experimental zone claims to ‘experiment with ecological civilization, rural culture and new countryside construction’. ‘Ecological civilization’ became a buzzword in 2012 after it was included in the 18th People’s Congress as one of the five major developmental tasks of China⁶¹. Although official policies guided by this concept have been limited and the state still hesitates in promoting ecological agriculture on a large scale (Scott *et al.* 2014), the NRRM experiment in Wujin of establishing ecological farms realized the importance of the discourse. They even use

⁶¹ The other four are economic, political, cultural and social construction.

‘new countryside construction’ rather than the NRRM to obtain a certain degree of political relevance. Other examples are the use of political buzzwords like ‘promoting scientific development’ and ‘harmonious urban-rural development’.

Seeking a harmonious relationship

Using mainstream discourses has been one strategy of the NRRM to seek a harmonious (non-confrontational) relationship with the state and the mainstream. Indeed, the most solid common ground between the NRRM and the NSCC is they were both forged to tackle the *sannong* issue. In an interview with *Southern Rural Daily*, Wen Tiejun explained his concern about the radicalness of the term ‘reconstruction’⁶².

The international, commonly used term for the rural construction movement is ‘rural reconstruction’, but I am a moderate person and I don’t want others to misunderstand or misinterpret our works, so we call it ‘new rural construction’ (avoiding the term ‘reconstruction’), but the English translation is still ‘rural reconstruction’.

‘Reconstruction’ implies a process of deconstruction, revolution and structural changes while ‘construction’ is a plain term that has no strong connotation. As a way to maintain political sensitivity, translating NRR as ‘new rural construction’ is tricky but clever. The NRRM team has emphasized that their major approach is ‘amelioration’ rather than ‘revolution’ (Pan 2012), again implying its willingness to maintain a moderate manner.

In the 2012 annual CSA symposium, the Rural Reconstruction Center at Renmin University, together with several other academic institutions, called upon CSA farmers to forge a national ‘Ecological Agriculture Cooperation Network’. This organization aims to form an internal monitoring mechanism and facilitate information flow among its CSA members. However, collective actions are often

⁶² Interview with *sannong* scholar Wen Tiejun. *Southern Rural Daily*.
<<http://finance.sina.com.cn/review/20050715/19301803006.shtml>> Accessed 16.12.2013. (in Chinese)

perceived as a threat to social stability and state authority in China. To address this risk, Wen Tiejun, the convener, expressed the role of the network in a modest manner.

What we are currently doing is merely a continuation of the previous exploration of an alternative developmental path that happened almost one hundred years ago. We don't actually cause harm to any interest group. We also don't cause negative impacts on our current policies...It (organizing an ecological agriculture cooperation network) is only a small activity that accords with our big ecological civilization agenda.

—Transcribed and translated from Wen Tiejun's remarks at the launching of the national Ecological Agriculture Cooperation Network, November 30, 2012

These two cases are just a small piece of the NRRM's efforts in forging a harmonious relationship with the state and the private sector. Wen Tiejun, the leading figure of the movement himself, has in fact been viewed as a quasi-official who has an entangled relationship with the state and whose proposals can shape policies (Day 2008)⁶³. This double role provides both challenges and opportunities for the movement's status in the political realm. The complexity of their relationship with the state requires them on the one hand to maintain a relatively moderate profile while on the other hand to lead the grassroots activities looking at alternative development approaches. How this contradictory role will shape their advocacy is yet to be seen.

Promoting Alternative Food Networks

While the NRRM faces various challenges from the state and society, its initiatives with alternative food networks have demonstrated its social and political relevance as well as its vitality. This fascinating process shows how a social movement could magnify its impacts by responding in a timely way to social changes. In the NRRM case, the social change was the loss of citizens' trust in food safety due to the

⁶³ Wen use to work at governmental research departments and agencies and was an influential member of the 'think tank' of the Chinese government.

melamine-contaminated baby formula scandal in 2008 (see Pei *et al.* 2011).

The compelling story of the NRRM's involvement in AFNs dates back to 2003 when they facilitated 'hazard-free' certified rice production in Nanmazhuang, Lankao City in Henan Province. The original production model of the farmers' cooperative was not an effective approach to acquiring customers' trust. The 'cynical' society, to use Pan Jia'en's word, was highly skeptical of the rice which is more expensive due to its low yield, despite it being endorsed by renowned professors. However, the situation changed completely in 2008, one year after the closure of James Yen Rural Reconstruction College (which ironically failed to promote ecological farming in Zhaicheng village). The melamine scandal, coupled with other food safety scandals, created anxiety in the general public. People suddenly became extremely passionate about searching for safe and healthy food and organic food and other types of ecologically-produced food rose in popularity among Chinese consumers. It was at that time that the first CSA project of the NRRM—Little Donkey Farm—took off in the suburb of Haidian District in Beijing. Although both the Little Donkey Farm and Nanmazhuang Farmers' Cooperative followed ecological farming approaches and were directed and endorsed by intellectuals, they had quite different public receptions. A NRRM leader acknowledged the sharp contrast in our interview.

In 2005, Professor He Huili's efforts to promote Nanmazhuang rice got much media attention, but only one third of the media coverage was sympathetic, while one third had no position and one third was satirical (ridiculing her). In 2008, Shi Yan—also an educated woman promoting ecological agriculture—got lots of media attention in establishing Little Donkey Farm, and 99% of coverage was positive. What made the difference? It was the rise of food safety concerns since 2008.

—Interview with a NRRM leader and researcher, Chongqing, China, May 06, 2012. (translated from Chinese)

The Little Donkey Farm soon became the leading CSA farm in China. Our visits to various CSA farms in China found that the Little Donkey Farm was viewed by many

as a model and source of inspiration. The proliferation of CSAs across the country led to an annual national CSA symposium being started in 2010. Shi Yan, the founder of the Little Donkey Farm, estimates that there are now more than 100 CSAs across the country⁶⁴. The influence of Little Donkey Farm later went beyond CSAs and ecological agriculture as it also facilitated some of the earliest farmers' markets and buying clubs in China. For example, they coordinated the first consumer cooperative in China—Beijing Green Ground Cooperative—in 2006. They also have close connections with the first ecological farmers' market—the Beijing Country Fair—and related farmers' markets in Shanghai, Xi'an, Guangzhou, Tianjin, as well as Shanghai *Caituan* Buying Club and Huilongguan Buying Club in Beijing (see Si *et al.* forthcoming). The farm is embraced by urbanites not only for its ecologically produced vegetables but also for its rental plots, which allows urbanites to rent plots to grow vegetables.

Although the farm became a symbol of a civil society initiative in solving food safety problems, it is necessary to recognize the state's support in its establishment and development. According to our interview with Shi Yan, the widely recognized founder working with Wen Tiejun, the government of Haidian District facilitated their access to farmland⁶⁵. Little Donkey Farm is officially titled as the 'integrated production, learning and research base co-founded by Haidian district government and Renmin University'. The farm was endorsed by the local agriculture and forestry bureau. As another example of state support for this style of project, the Big Buffalo Farm was established in 2011 as a cooperative project between Renmin University and the government of Wujin District in Changzhou City. The cooperation between civil society initiatives and the state depends upon their common ground in agriculture development, especially the state's policy in promoting multifunctional agriculture

⁶⁴ Interview with Shi Yan in Beijing, China on December 6, 2012.

⁶⁵ A CSA farmer near Nanjing that we interviewed expressed her disappointment about finding out about the support of government in the establishment and operation of the Little Donkey Farm. She said she was misled by the public image portrayed by the media that the Little Donkey Farm was pure civil society initiative, which led her to underestimate the difficulty in establishing and sustaining a CSA farm.

(recreational agriculture and innovative agriculture⁶⁶). This forges a base for the NRRM and the state to work together.

The growing public anxiety over food safety unveiled a whole new horizon for the NRRM. AFNs, especially CSAs, that won the hearts of both society and the state, became powerful tools for the promotion and implementation of the NRRM's alternative developmental ideas. AFNs help to concretize the movement's idealistic values and reconnect it with the demands of society. Food thus emerged as a promising hope for the NRRM amidst the cynical views and complicated expectations of society and the state. The NRRM team successfully captured the opportune moment to establish several other CSA farms, including the Big Buffalo Farm in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province, the Little Donkey Liulin Farm in Beijing and the Guxiang Farm in Fuzhou, Fujian province (see Table 6). It takes full advantage of Little Donkey Farm as a platform for environmental education targeting customers, visitors, volunteers and farmers who are interested in the CSA model. CSA farms became a much more attractive place for civilian education compared to the rural reconstruction colleges established by the NRRM team. It offers a chance for urbanites to take a closer look at the value of agriculture and 'the rural' as a whole, which underpins the entire NRRM.

Policy Implications of the New Rural Reconstruction Movement

Gaining the support of ordinary consumers did not automatically translate into policy changes, and so the interactions between the NRRM and the state have another facet, which is the NRRM seeking policy changes. Thøgersen (2009:26) argues that the state is willing to cooperate with academic advocates because it believes they can generate new ideas and perspectives. Indeed, grassroots initiatives, which always break current rules⁶⁷, can be developed into future policies in China's distinctive

⁶⁶ These terms refer to the rapidly growing agritourism that builds cultural and recreational elements into agriculture and recreational plot rentals.

⁶⁷ A widely cited example is the establishment of the Household Responsibility System in China in the late 1970s, which was considered as the forerunner of China's Reform and Open era.

policy innovation process (Heilmann 2008a, 2008b).

A good example is the seniors' organization experiments led by the NRRM that create policy implications for the NSCC (Wang 2009). He Xuefeng (2007), another renowned NRRM advocate, emphasized that the countryside could contribute to social stability by becoming an 'emotional and meaningful home' for migrant workers in cities. The NRRM enriches peasants' social, cultural and spiritual life by facilitating self-organizations (such as seniors' associations and cultural performance troupes) (see Qiu 2007) that makes the countryside a 'meaningful' space and thus 'a homeland to which one could return' (He 2007: 36). In this sense, the core of rural construction should be 'social and cultural construction' that enables a way of life with 'low consumption and high benefit' in contrast to the mainstream policy based on a market economy to induce high rural consumption.

The policy implications of the NRRM were summarized by Wen Tiejun in his new interpretation of *sannong* based on his deconstruction of modernization (Wen and Sun 2012; Yan and Chen 2013). The rural problems in three dimensions (agriculture, villages, farmers) have long been a set of challenges, including maintaining 'the growth of agriculture productivity, the development of villages and the increase of farmers' income'. These three developmentalist goals have been guiding China's policy making and developmental agendas for the rural countryside. The NSCC, for example, is a state-led campaign that was designed to meet these three goals. On criticizing the oversimplified economic-orientation and the absence of sustainability and social justice concerns, Wen Tiejun proposed a new interpretation of *sannong*, specifically in reference to the three rural development goals. In contrast to the old *sannong*, he interprets the new one as 'the protection of farmers' rights, the sustainability and stability of the countryside, and the ecologicalization and safety of agriculture' (Wen and Sun 2012: 11). This new interpretation saves *sannong* from an economic-focused over-simplification and recovers its multiple connotations. It highlights the role of 'the rural' in social stability and justice as well as ecological sustainability, which were downplayed or even ignored in previous policies tackling

the *sannong* challenges.

Discussion and Conclusion

In analyzing the dynamic state-society relationship in China, Saich (2000) argues that Chinese social organizations often live in a symbiotic relationship with the state. On the one hand, NGOs' increasingly important roles in environmental protection and solving social problems are recognized by the state and the state is increasingly dependent upon NGOs to provide social services; on the other hand, NGOs need the state's support, or at least passive acceptance, to fulfill their objectives. The story of the NRRM illustrated in this paper is an example of not only the symbiotic relationship itself but also how this relationship is forged. It is a process within which the state adopted the wisdom of intellectuals, and the social organization piggy backs on the state's authority. These mutual interactions in the NRRM case are reflected by the policy implications of the NRRM as well as by the NRRM taking advantage of the mainstream developmental discourses and policies. NRRM experiments in local contexts provide solid experiences in solving social and environmental problems that the state can take into consideration. The critiques of the NSCC being too economically-oriented could be largely addressed by the NRRM's work in civilian education, farmers' social organizations, cultural group facilitation and ecological agriculture promotion. In addition, the NRRM also borrows political discourses proposed by the state, such as 'scientific developmental approaches', 'ecological civilization' and 'harmonious urban-rural development', to justify its political rationality and to seek further supports from the authorities. Its efforts in coping with the state also demonstrate the construction of a harmonious relationship with the state created by avoiding aggressive and revolutionary terms and emphasizing it being a movement of 'amelioration' rather than 'revolution'.

The interactions of the NRRM and the NSCC exemplify some adaptations and accommodations of institutional arrangements and policies in both directions: the

NRRM inspired the construction of the NSCC campaign, at least in terms of bringing the significance of rural issues to the forefront of the policy and institutional realm; meanwhile the NRRM found itself striving to adapt to the state's interests. This bilateral accommodation, we argue, illustrates an effective scaling-up strategy of grassroots initiatives in the entrenched state-led realm of rural development and thus has significant implications for the scaling-up of community level, local and small-scale endeavors in various fields.

Moreover, the complexity of sociopolitical contexts, in which the NRRM is pushing forward its alternative and often anti-modern developmental agendas, is represented not only by the interactions with the state but also the interactions with society. Here, 'society' embodies the farmers with whom they are directly working and the urbanites and other intellectuals who hold contradictory perspectives about their work. Positioned in the middle of the state-society dichotomy, the NRRM is highly dependent upon society's support to make policy impacts, yet large social support and participation might be perceived by the state as a threat to social stability. The early attempts of the NRRM in promoting ecological agriculture, however, encountered little support from farmers and misunderstandings and critiques from urbanites. The situation changed after the food safety crisis in 2008 when the NRRM started a CSA project—the Little Donkey Farm—in suburban Beijing. The CSA project was not just a response to the crisis however, since their promotion of ecological agriculture had begun much earlier. The synergies between their CSA work and the rising food safety anxiety made AFNs effective tools for promoting ecological agriculture and organizing farmers. It also enabled the general public to rediscover the value of the countryside which had long been marginalized in the development of the market economy.

The involvement of the NRRM in AFN development in China exemplified an interesting phenomenon in which AFNs functioned not only as a tool for transforming the food system but also as an accelerator for achieving broader rural development goals. AFNs, while aiming to foster rural development and tackle the food safety

problem, opened a convenient and promising space to develop civil society capacity as the AFNs were less confrontational and politically sensitive than other society-driven initiatives. It enabled the NRRM to demonstrate to the state its potential in solving urgent social problems in a non-confrontational manner. More importantly, it became a powerful instrument to concretize the once romantic and idealistic values of NRR and reconnect them with the demands of society. In this sense, AFNs helped the NRRM to build a solid political and social foundation.

What is more promising for the NRRM is that there are continuing opportunities emerging for them to connect with state developmental agendas and the expectations of the masses. For example, their endeavors in AFNs and ecological agriculture fit with the state's adjustments of the developmental orientation of the agriculture sector. 'Multifunctional agriculture' proposed in 2006, 'ecological civilization' proposed in 2007 (see Wen *et al.* 2012b) and 'two orientations of agriculture' (resource-saving and environmentally-friendly agriculture) proposed by the central government indicate a gradual transformation of the government's policies in agriculture development. They all accord with what the NRRM has been working on and thus, can provide opportunities for the NRRM in the future. Another emerging opportunity is the growing number of migrants, returning to their rural home from urban areas in China (see Démurger and Xu 2011; Fan 2008), who can become a powerhouse for the NRRM's initiatives. Our interviews with CSA farmers in Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu clearly revealed that many CSA farms were established by people who returned from the city with knowledge and ideas that they gained from their urban experience.

Although this paper identifies the strategies of the NRRM in coping with the demands of the state and society, it is still unclear how these strategies shape their initiatives. What the NRRM will be like in the future and whether AFNs will lead to a food-based NRRM is worthy of further study. Despite the remarkable achievements of the NRRM and the emerging opportunities with the adjustments of state policies and the new trends in society, whether the NRRM will become the prelude of a more

fundamental paradigm shift that leads to a ‘new rural development paradigm’ (see Goodman 2004; Watts *et al.* 2005; Renting *et al.* 2003; Marsden *et al.* 2000; Tovey 2009) in China is still unknown. However, the policy implications of the NRRM are clear. As the Chinese government is transforming its rural developmental agendas towards more integrated ones, the experiences of the NRRM in addressing social, cultural and sustainability challenges offer valuable resources.

Paper 4 The Convergence of Alternative Food Networks in ‘Rural Development’ Initiatives: A Case of the New Rural Reconstruction Movement in China

Overview

Rural sociologists and geographers have conceptualized different rural development trajectories including ‘the agri-industrial model’, ‘the post-productivist model’ and ‘the rural development model’. Alternative food networks (AFNs) are increasingly recognized as a ‘forerunner’ and a critical component of the emerging ‘rural development model’ in the west. Meanwhile, Marsden and Franklin (2013) pointed out that there is a ‘local trap’ in the current conceptualization of AFNs that over-emphasizes their local embeddedness and heterogeneity. This ‘local trap’ marginalizes AFNs and, therefore, hinders the potential of AFNs for transforming the industrialized conventional food system. The convergence and scaling-up of fragmented AFNs have been recognized as important ways to address this marginalization issue and thus have attracted considerable attention. However, current studies of the convergence of AFNs focus mainly on the role of food-centered organizations without recognizing the role of the emerging ‘rural development’ initiatives in the convergence of AFNs. Based on in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and analysis of secondary data, this paper uses the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM), an emerging alternative rural development movement in China, as an example to illustrate how the NRRM opens up a novel space for the convergence of AFNs. I argue that the interrelationship between AFNs and rural development is indeed mutually beneficial. The NRRM following the ‘rural development’ trajectory functions as a hub for the convergence and scaling up of various alternative food initiatives. Approaches for the convergence include constructing a ‘common ground’ (i.e., coherent goals and understandings of the social, economic and environmental values of AFNs) for these initiatives, establishing

national alliances and organizations, sharing knowledge, and exchanging personnel among them.

Keywords: alternative food networks; scale up; convergence; the New Rural Reconstruction Movement; local trap; China

Introduction

A significant element of the ‘alternativeness’ of alternative food networks (AFNs) such as community supported agriculture, farmers’ markets and buying clubs that distinguishes them from conventional food value chains is their social and ecological embeddedness (see Hinrichs 2000; Sage 2003; Winter 2003; Morris and Kirwan 2011; Whatmore 2003). In contrast with conventional food systems, the social embeddedness of AFNs stresses social relations and personal connections in the sense of trust and reciprocity that characterize the practices of AFNs (Hinrichs 2000). The ecological embeddedness of AFNs associates with the repositioning of ecology in food production and consumption in these networks from a non-distinctive resource of production input to a critical actor that needs to be enhanced and benefited in food production and the communication of the ecological relations to influence food purchasing choice (Morris and Kirwan 2011). This re-embedding of food networks within social and ecological relations carved new analytical space for the examination of their local heterogeneity and sociopolitical relevance. Various empirical case studies of local food networks and direct food value chains demonstrate their diverse operational approaches, strategies, goals, challenges and opportunities within specific sociopolitical contexts (e.g., Allen *et al.* 2003; Beckie *et al.* 2012; Mount and Andrée 2013; Si *et al.* forthcoming). These studies greatly enrich the understandings of AFNs in distinctive contexts (Marsden and Franklin 2013). Nevertheless, the analyses of AFNs demonstrate a tendency of focusing only on the heterogeneity of them embedded in local contexts, which is called the ‘local trap’ by Marsden and Franklin (2013). This is problematic because, in Marsden and Franklin’s (2013: 637) words,

that this ‘local trap’ too readily assumes a “conceptual constructed marginalization of alternative food movements, partly because of their embeddedness and variety in place”. This over-emphasis of ‘local’ overshadows AFNs’ broad political agenda to restructure the conventional food system and to challenge the neoliberal food regime (Goodman *et al.* 2011; Levkoe 2011; Mount *et al.* 2013). Therefore, it hinders the ‘transformative potential’ of AFNs.

This concern has been reflected in agrifood studies’ growing interest recently in methods of ‘scaling up’ AFNs to foster their ‘transformative potential’ (restructuring the conventional food system) without jeopardizing their alternativeness and authenticity (see Friedmann 2007; Smithers and Joseph 2010; Bloom and Hinrichs 2011; Wittman *et al.* 2012; Mount 2012; Beckie *et al.* 2012; Mount *et al.* 2013; Levkoe and Wakefield 2014). Studies of the ‘convergence’ of AFNs argue for ways to bring diverse local food initiatives together to form a “more institutionally mature and large-scale food movement” (Mount *et al.* 2013: 595). Therefore, we understand convergence as a way of scaling up. While the ‘scaling up’ and ‘convergence’ of AFNs have been recognized as major approaches to address the ‘local trap’, studies of the methods of scaling up focus on the roles of *food-centered* governmental organizations (e.g., Friedmann 2007; Campbell and MacRae 2013), non-governmental organizations (e.g., Winson 2010; Pollan 2010) and alternative food networks themselves (e.g., Little *et al.* 2010; Beckie *et al.* 2012; Mount *et al.* 2013). Rural development initiatives such as ‘rural reconstruction’ movements in Asia, Latin America and Africa that are *beyond but related to* food have been largely neglected.

Therefore, this paper proposes a question — what are the impacts of rural development initiatives, especially alternative rural development movements of which AFNs are considered as building blocks, on the convergence of AFNs? This study links the convergence of AFNs and new rural development movements with a case study of the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM) in China. I argue that the NRRM as a new ‘rural development’ initiative not only facilitated the prosperity of

various AFNs in China, especially community supported agriculture (CSA) farms⁶⁸ but also created an arena for their convergence and scaling-up. This convergence empowers these AFNs by grouping the diverse and fragmented initiatives together. This paper contributes to the existing scholarship of AFNs studies by expanding the scaling up analysis to the rural development domain. It highlights the reciprocal relationship between AFNs and ‘rural development’ initiatives. It also contributes to rural development literature with the Chinese case of the ‘rural development’ model—the NRRM—which has rarely been documented before.

This paper is structured as follows. It first provides overviews of the paradigm shift in rural development models with specific emphasis on the role of AFNs in this shift. I then examine existing literature from the past few years regarding the scaling up and convergence of AFNs in different contexts. After identifying the gap between the growing interest in the convergence of AFNs and the paradigm shift in rural development, I use the NRRM in China as a case to illustrate how the convergence of AFNs is being achieved within a ‘rural development’ movement. I conclude the paper with a few concerns related to the convergence and scaling up of AFNs.

This study is part of a broader research project about the emerging ecological agriculture sector and alternative food networks in China. The research team conducted more than 120 interviews with key stakeholders from the government and non-governmental organizations, the private sector and the civil society initiatives. The qualitative analysis in this paper is based on some of the in-depth interviews with leaders of the NRRM, public media reports, academic and non-academic publications in English and Chinese, as well as documents collected from the national CSA symposiums in 2012 and 2013.

The Shifting Rural Development Paradigm

⁶⁸ CSA farms enable a consumer to pay a farmer before the growing season to become a ‘shareholder’ of the farm. The farmer commits to farming ecologically and typically delivers a share of the harvest to the shareholder on a regular base during the growing season. In this way, the consumer shares both the risk and the harvest with the farmer.

Based on empirical evidence in Europe, particularly the UK, Terry Marsden and several other sociologists (Marsden 2000, 2008; Marsden *et al.* 2002; Marsden and Sonnino 2008) conceptualized three rural development models that deliver different economic, environment and social implications for rural spaces. One is ‘the agro-industrial logic’ that configures the countryside as a space for intensive food production. Another model is ‘the post-productivist dynamic’ that celebrates the consumption side of the rural economy (i.e. rural land as a developmental space) and treats agriculture as a marginal and declining economic sector. The third model is ‘the rural development dynamic’ that discards the ‘agro-industrial’ and the ‘post-productivist’ ways of exploiting rural nature, instead employs short food supply chains as tools to counter the large-scale industrialized food value chains, and centers on agricultural production to achieve rural sustainability goals⁶⁹.

Food is a key factor that distinguishes these three trajectories. The post-productivist model places agriculture as an increasingly marginalized production unit within the broad rural and urban economy (Marsden *et al.* 2002), while the other two models both set agriculture at the heart of rural development, although their approaches to agriculture, and their implications for sustainability, differ significantly. The agro-industrial model treats rural nature as an exploitable production space with a goal of continuously producing food as commodity for the market. It follows the logic of the scale economy with standardized agriculture production. Agriculture is segregated from other rural activities and becomes highly specialized (van der Ploeg *et al.* 2000). Technology, including genetic modification, is adopted as the major way to offset the diminishing marginal productivity (Marsden 2008), although the effects are debatable. In contrast, ‘the rural development dynamic’ puts more emphasis on the contributions of agriculture to social and ecological sustainability and defines it as “a new rural development paradigm which redefines nature by re-emphasizing food production and agro-ecology and which reasserts the socio-environmental role of agriculture as a major agent in sustaining rural areas” (Sonnino and Marsden 2006:

⁶⁹ For a detailed comparison among them, see Marsden (2008: 193).

194). In this sense, it stands out as an ‘agrarian-based’ rural development strategy which is different from ‘the post-productivist model’ that diminishes the agriculture sector and treats the countryside as a space of consumption (Marsden *et al.* 2002). The differentiation of these three distinctive rural development trajectories (see Marsden 2008:193) offers an analytical framework for the study of rural transformation.

Rural development studies of western Europe suggest that there was a paradigm shift from the modernization productivist agri-industrial model to the ‘territorialized and ecologically-embedded’ rural development model in the 1990s (van der Ploeg *et al.* 2000; Pugliese 2001; Marsden *et al.* 2002; Goodman 2004; van der Ploeg 2008). This shift entails the reconstruction of existing social and environmental relations and as a result, the emergence of a new set of rural development practices, networks and theories. This includes a re-embedding of agriculture into local social and ecological relations, a re-localization of food supply chains, a revalorization of resources, and a re-conceptualization of ‘entrepreneurial farmers’ or in van der Ploeg’s (2000) word ‘repeasantization’. ‘New policy support structures’ are also recognized as a component of this shift (Marsden 2008). Thus, the entrenched traditional ‘bio-economy’ in the rural area that is productivity-oriented is transforming to a new ‘eco-economy’ that is locally embedded and based on ecological principles (Kitchen and Marsden 2009; Marsden 2012).

Scholarship in rural development has identified the imperative roles of AFNs in the paradigm shift. The prosperity of AFNs signifies a shift of rural development paradigm from the industrialized productivity-centered ‘agri-industrial’ model towards an agrarian-based ‘rural development model’ that is re-embedded within local social and ecological relations (van der Ploeg *et al.* 2000; Pugliese 2001; Marsden *et al.* 2002; Goodman 2004). In Goodman’s (2004: 6) words, AFNs are theorized as the “innovative precursors of paradigm change, of a more endogenous, territorialized and ecologically embedded successor to the allegedly crisis- ridden modernisation model of conventional industrialised agriculture”. With theorizations of ‘the quality turn’, ‘embeddedness’ and ‘re-territorialization’ of food production and consumption, the

agro-food scholarship argues that AFNs become the *forerunner* and the *engine* of the paradigm shift (Renting *et al.* 2003; Goodman 2004) and their restructuring of food supply chains has been a significant ‘building block’ of the new rural development paradigm (Marsden *et al.* 2000). AFNs have generated employment opportunities and fostered agriculture income growth (see Goodman 2004; Seyfang 2006; Folett 2009; Brown and Miller 2008). Farmers’ markets, Community Supported Agriculture, buying clubs, veggie boxes and farm-to-school projects are some of the common examples (see Tregear 2011; Goodman *et al.* 2012). The impacts of organic farming and short food supply chains nested within the emergence of AFNs go beyond food production and consumption. It constitutes new economic and social connections between rural and broad society in the form of rural tourism (van der Ploeg *et al.* 2000). Besides having implications for economic viability, AFNs (including organic agriculture) also arguably foster environmental sustainability and social justice within both rural and urban spheres (see Pugliese 2001; Allen *et al.* 2003; Hinrichs 2003; Marsden and Franklin 2013).

However, the significance of AFNs in ‘the rural development model’ has not led to a wide discussion of scaling up AFNs in the practical space created by alternative rural development movements. Rather, the current discussion of scaling up AFNs is largely confined to an examination of the potential of *food-centered* initiatives. This ‘food hedge’, I argue, limits the scope of our delving into the scaling up and convergence issue. Driven by this literature gap, this paper proposes a breakthrough of this ‘food hedge’ to expand the study of the scaling up and the convergence of AFNs to the broader rural development domain.

The Convergence and Scaling-up of Alternative Food Networks

When considering the industrialized food system and the capitalist conundrum within which it was constructed, the implications of AFNs go far beyond the local and rural realms. The political economy perspective of AFN studies adds a political layer to the

economic, social and environmental layers of the implications of AFNs (see Henderson 2000). That is, an examination of the transformative power of AFNs at different levels that is either changing existing policies, challenging the industrialized conventional food system or influencing the broader market-based capitalist regime (see Watts *et al.* 2005; Slee and Kirwan 2007; Pollan 2010; Marsden and Franklin 2013; Mount and Andrée 2013; Sadler *et al.* 2014). In this sense, AFNs are not just a ‘ragbag of ephemeral initiatives’ but powerful alternatives to transform food and economic regimes (Marsden and Franklin 2013) and even to “foster new forms of civil society” (Pollan 2010). AFNs constructed a counteractive new political space to achieve greater social control of the food system, so that the economic, social, ecological, health and animal welfare crises related to the unsustainable industrialized conventional food systems can be mitigated or eliminated (Hinrichs 2003; Winter 2003; Watts *et al.* 2005; Goodman *et al.* 2011; Spaargaren *et al.* 2012; Mount *et al.* 2013; Sadler *et al.* 2014). Marsden and Franklin (2013: 640) argue that as the crisis of neoliberal capitalist economy persists and deepens, AFNs as a social movement, *especially when they converge*, can become “major social and political vehicles for embedding and creating the means of transitions to the post-neoliberal eco-economy” (see also Marsden 2010).

However, the transformative power of AFNs and the realization of their political agenda are challenged and confined by their fragmentation and embeddedness. In Pollan’s (2010) words, the current food movement is ‘splintered’ with “many threads of advocacy that can be lumped together”. It is “a big, lumpy tent, and sometimes the various factions beneath it work at cross-purposes”. Although the heterogeneity and local embeddedness of alternative food initiatives are critical in understanding the resistance and alternativeness of AFNs in specific contexts (Allen *et al.* 2003) and they indeed provide a fertile ground for the richness of AFN studies (Hassanein 2003), the extreme diversity of them (i.e., different aims, strategies, actions, locations, policy proposals, etc.; see Hassanein 2003) could forge what Marsden and Franklin (2013) call a conceptual ‘local trap’ for agrifood studies. That is, when the focus of AFNs

studies is overly narrowed down to local embeddedness and loses the ‘big picture’ (the political agenda), AFNs will be readily marginalized in the competing power dynamics of reconfiguring the food system, let alone the broader field of countering the hegemonic neoliberal economy. Numerous critical scholars have expressed similar concerns about local food systems, especially the difficulties of achieving significant impacts on a large scale (see Mount *et al.* 2013; Marsden and Smith 2005; Guthman 2008; Levkoe and Wakefield 2014). Buttel (1997) concerns that the division and diversity within the alternative food movement would hinder its ability to achieve its goals. Holt-Giménez (2011) also points out that the transformative potential of AFNs will not be successfully enforced without a strategic and long-lasting alliance between organizations at different levels.

It is a consensus amongst many food system researchers and food activists that the political and transformative goals of these initiatives can only be sustained with “a more holistic, integrated approach” (Mount *et al.* 2013: 593). Therefore, there have been diverse studies about how the fragmented and local specific initiatives can be scaled-up in a holistic manner. Buttel (1997) calls for an ‘omnibus coalitional agro-food system movement’. Hassanein (2003) notes that developing a ‘strong food democracy’ is a useful approach to transform the conventional agrifood system. It resolves the conflicts among food organizations and transforms “people from passive consumers into active, educated citizens” (Hassanein 2003: 80). It also significantly challenges “the forces seeking control of the system and the very structure of capital itself” within which “lies the transformative potential of alternative agrifood movement” (Hassanein 2003: 85). This resonates with Friedland’s (2010) argument that the progressive and advanced goals of the alternative agrifood movement can be enhanced through an expanded social and political participation that involves not only practitioners and policy makers but also researchers. Mount *et al.* (2013) point out that ‘alternative food movements’ convergence and adopting a ‘regional food system perspective’ could be possible ways.

In terms of specific organizations that potentially scale up alternative agro-food initiatives, governmental food institutions offer a convenient space for the hybridity of various initiatives and the creation of ‘food hubs’. For example, food policy councils established in several cities, such as the Toronto Food Policy Council in Canada, have been providing institutional space for the establishment of various food hubs, community food projects and the interactions among them (see Welsh and MacRae 1998; Marsden and Franklin 2013) and thus have become good ways to practice ‘food democracy’ and to restructure the conventional food system (Hassenein 2003). Non-governmental organizations such as Local Food Plus, a certification agency in Toronto, Canada, can also scale up local sustainable food production by bringing together public institutions such as universities and private businesses (Friedmann 2007, Campbell and MacRae 2013). Grassroots innovations like collective purchase groups which have been largely neglected by AFN studies open up possibilities about how AFNs can proliferate and gain control of food provision (Little *et al.* 2010). Healthy-eating advocacy as a noteworthy form of alternative food movement in North America and Britain, according to Winson’s (2010) analysis, bears the potential to fundamentally challenge the hegemonic neoliberal discourse. Environmental NGOs, as Pollan (2010) notes, are increasingly taking up and involved in food system reform. Mount *et al.* (2013) also identify a degree of convergence among community food projects in Ontario, Canada that brings stakeholders together to address common barriers they face and to develop a more holistic food system development approach. Beckie *et al.* (2012) demonstrate that even spatial agglomerations of farmers’ markets can facilitate the scaling up and development of AFNs through dynamic interactions of knowledge sharing, collaboration and competition.

Although transforming the current food regime has been the most widely recognized goal of scaling up AFNs, it should be noted that scaling up AFNs itself is a multipurpose process that entails the proliferation of various alternative food initiatives, the enhancement of their transformative capacity, and their involvement in policy making or institutionalization. I argue that ‘scaling up’ AFNs does not

necessarily imply an *enlargement* of the *size* of farms, venues or consumer groups involved but can be merely an *enhancement* of *capacities* to make greater impacts through organizing and/or optimizing the organization of diverse alternative food initiatives. The convergence of AFNs can also take place on various levels. It can be a local and regional adventure, a national action or even transnational movement. Food related movements as a whole render diverse fields into arenas for power struggles.

Discussions of the convergence and scaling up of AFNs so far have given substantial credit to food-centered governmental or non-governmental organizations. However, there has been little recognition of their linkages with broader social movements related to sustainable rural development. I argue that the multipurpose feature and diverse meanings of scaling-up AFNs require a novel research agenda that goes beyond looking at *food-centered* approaches. Although it is vital to examine the roles of various food organizations in the convergence of AFNs, breaking the current ‘food hedge’ will open up new space for scrutiny. Given the special roles of AFNs within emerging alternative rural development initiatives (see Renting *et al.* 2003; Goodman 2004; Marsden *et al.* 2000), the ‘rural development’ paradigm, I argue, is the first terrain to push the boundary of scaling-up studies. In this paper, I will use the emerging alternative rural development movement in China to demonstrate how the convergence of AFNs happened within the new rural development paradigm.

The New Rural Reconstruction Movement as a ‘Rural Development’ Case

The NRRM is a revival of the Rural Reconstruction Movement (RRM) in the 1920s and 1930s in China. Initiated by a group of social activists and educators such as Liang Shuming, Yan Yangchu (known as ‘James Yen’), Lu Zuofu and Tao Xingzhi, the RRM was a remarkable social movement in China’s rural development history. The grassroots movement explored ways to salvage the declining countryside submerged in the rapid industrialization process in the 1920s, which disassembled the subsistence rural economy and the traditional social fabric (see Wen 2009). A variety

of social experiments, which aimed to revitalize traditional culture and the rural economy, were conducted by more than 600 organizations⁷⁰ across the country during this period (Pan and Du 2011a; Pan 2012). These activities included programs that sought to empower peasants by providing education and job training, facilitating autonomous organizations among them, improving public health conditions, etc. Although its progress was halted by the Anti-Japanese War which broke out in the late 1930s, the RRM as a significant upsurge in the history of rural development in China generated rich social and cultural implications (see Pan and Du 2011a; Pan 2012; Day 2008).

The challenges facing rural China captured the state's and society's attention again in the late 1990s, two decades after the enforcement of the 'reform and opening' policy. The rapid industrialization and urbanization in China in the 1980s and 1990s not only extracted natural, capital and labour resources from the countryside (Shi 2012) but also rendered the countryside as a laggard with poverty, environmental crisis and social contradictions (see Wen *et al.* 2012a; Guo 2001; Le Mons Walker 2006). Rural China has been suffering from the growing income gap between rural and urban areas, the decreasing economic viability of the agriculture sector, the rampant violation of peasants' rights⁷¹ and the degradation of environment. These problems were conceptualized by a renowned agro-economist, Wen Tiejun, based at Renmin University in Beijing as *sannong wenti* in 1996. *sannong wenti* ('three rural problems' literally) refers to "the rural problems in three dimensions: village communities, agriculture and the peasantry" (Pan and Du 2011a: 454; see also Wen *et al.* 2012a). *sannong wenti* forged a solid ground for the launch of the NRRM by a group of intellectuals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the early 2000s.

To address the *sannong wenti*, the NRRM reintroduced the RRM legacy to the public in the early 2000s. The legacy embodies critical ideas such as criticizing elite

⁷⁰ These organizations had various backgrounds which included social groups, entities from the private sector, governmental agencies and educational institutes.

⁷¹ The violation of peasants' rights in China is mainly reflected in the forceful conversion of farmland to construction land by local governments without full consents from farmers, who are usually under compensated. (see Cai 2003)

culture, knowledge and theories, empowering peasants by cultivating their subjectivities and raising their social and economic status, reconstructing an un-exploitable and reciprocal rural-urban relationship⁷², reeducating peasants with rural culture and farming knowledge, as well as improving the condition of health care (Pan and Du 2011a; Pan 2012; Day 2008; Day 2013a, b; Day and Hale 2007). Besides these ideas salvaged from the RRM's legacy, mitigating ecological crisis has been added as a new task for the NRRM due to the aggravating environmental problems in rural China (Pan and Du 2011a). The NRRM, according to Day (2008: 50), as "a critique of developmentalism and the economic mode of analysis...turns to culture and cooperative relations as vital to the reorganization of rural social life". Thus, it is based on a deconstruction of the 'modernization' hegemony within which the rural space is subject to the appropriation of capital and market forces. Disagreeing with neoliberal logics, the NRRM seeks a reconstruction of an alternative rural development trajectory that revives rural culture, economy and society (Day 2013a, b; Wen 2007).

Borrowing Marsden's (2000: 2008) conceptualization of the three rural development trajectories, I argue that the NRRM in China demonstrates a typical case of the 'rural development' model in four ways. First, the multidimensional initiatives of the NRRM in China go beyond integration and empowerment of marginal communities (Marsden *et al.* 2002). They include ecological agriculture experiments and promotion, facilitating farmers' cooperatives, civilian education⁷³, protection of migrant workers' rights, and sustainable rural development in general. Second, rather than promoting industrial productivity-centered agricultural production, the NRRM

⁷² Un-exploitable and reciprocal rural-urban relationship refers to a vision that urban does not necessarily develop at the expense of rural resources. Instead, they benefit from each other's development and do not jeopardize each other's cultural, environmental and economic sustainability.

⁷³ 'Civilian education' promoted by the NRRM is in contrast with the official educational system which is referred to as 'elite education', an 'appendage' of politics that aims to train people to become elites, leave the countryside, and serve the dominance hierarchy. Rather, 'civilian education' teaches villagers who are lack of educational opportunities to be literate and obtain livelihood strategies, knowledge and techniques that they can use in the countryside (see an un-authored paper on the website of Sichuan James Yen Research Association:

http://www.jamesyan.net/show_hdr.php?xname=LTUAM41&dname=CLT0V91&xpos=81 Accessed Sept. 18, 2014.

focuses on “agro-ecological research and development” (Marsden 2008). Its promotion of sustainable agriculture based on ecological farming principles differs significantly from the state’s prescription of ‘modern agriculture’ through agriculture industrialization. Sustainability of the agriculture sector and prosperity of rural culture in general have been the key foci of the NRRM. Third, although the NRRM evolved in a very different socioeconomic context from those in Europe, it presents a ‘rural development dynamic’ perspective that employs alternative and short food supply chains as powerful tools to counter the large-scale industrialized food value chains and centers on agriculture production to achieve rural sustainability goals. Fourth, the NRRM strongly disagrees with what mainstream economists prescribed for Chinese rural development—to establish a unified market that integrates the rural space so that the purchasing power of the vast rural population can fuel and sustain the country’s economic growth (see Day 2013a). Rather, it is built upon a deconstruction of ‘modernity’ and the marketization, industrialization and neoliberalization that are fabricated into it (see Pan 2012; Pan and Du 2011a; Wen 2007).

Despite the various features of the NRRM that signal the ‘rural development’ model, it is necessary to note that there is a lack of “new policy support structures” (Marsden 2008: 193) in the NRRM in China. Rural development policies in China, intensively reflected in the state-led ‘New Socialist Countryside Construction’ campaign (see Ahlers and Schubert 2009), are productivity-oriented based on large amounts of external investment (see Zhang and Donaldson 2008; Zhang 2012), although ‘sustainability’ and environmental concerns have been gradually integrated into the system (Wen *et al.* 2012b). Nevertheless, this does not hinder the NRRM’s capacity in generating meaningful policy innovations. As Heilmann (2008) noted, in China, ‘decentralized experimentation’, a phenomena in which local officials are encouraged to carry out new development-related approaches, always fed back into the central government’s policy formulation. This policy innovation paradigm has effectively linked local innovations with national policy makings in various domains. The NRRM as a grassroots ‘counter movement’ (Marsden 2008) has been

accumulating experiences from their local projects and attempting to shape existing policies (Wen *et al.* 2012c). Thus, the ‘rural development’ model in China has not been well established due to the lack of corresponding ‘policy support structures’. Rather, as alternative rural development experiments led by the NRRM team are increasingly influential, the ‘rural development’ model is gradually taking shape.

The Convergence of Alternative Food Networks within the New Rural Reconstruction Movement

The Foundation for the Convergence

To understand the convergence of AFNs within the NRRM in China, we will have to examine the foundations for the convergence first. That is, the various projects of AFNs carried out by the NRRM that made it influential enough among Chinese AFNs to call for a convergence of them. Indeed, CSA farms, farmers’ markets and buying clubs established with the direct and indirect support of the NRRM comprise the most prominent AFNs in China. In this process, the NRRM gained a reputation as the leader of AFN development in China.

The NRRM’s involvement in AFNs dates back to 2003 when a professor from China Agriculture University, He Huili (an active advocate of the NRRM), facilitated the ‘hazard-free’⁷⁴ rice farmers’ cooperative in Nanmazhuang, Lankao City in Henan Province. The NRRM believes that dispersive peasants in China need to form alliances to compete in the market economy (Wen 2012). Therefore, it facilitated various farmers’ cooperatives as well as an umbrella organization for farmers’ cooperatives— Green Ground Union — that aims at promoting healthy produce in cities. However, despite its endorsement by renowned professors, the expensive rice produced by the Nanmazhuang ecological farmers’ cooperative failed to win customers’ trust. ‘Cynical’ customers, to use Pan Jia’en⁷⁵’s word, who were skeptical

⁷⁴ Hazard-free (*wu gonghai*) is a Chinese food quality standard alongside two other major standards—green food and organic food. See Scott *et al.* (2014) for more details.

⁷⁵ Pan Jia’en is one of the key leaders of the NRRM in academia. He served as the executive director

about the quality of the rice, made the selling of it extremely cumbersome. However, this situation was altered completely in 2008 when the melamine-tainted milk scandal, together with other food safety scandals, made safe and healthy food a scarce commodity (see Xiu and Klein 2010; Pei *et al.* 2011; Yang 2013; Klein 2013). The public suddenly became very sensitive to food safety (Klein 2013) and certified quality food such as organic food, green and ‘hazard-free’ food (see Scott *et al.* 2014) became very popular among Chinese consumers. Recognizing the urgency of food safety challenges and associated problems in agricultural environment protection, the NRRM worked with the local government of Haidian District in Beijing and introduced CSA model to China. It established its first CSA farm in suburban Beijing — Little Donkey Farm.

Little Donkey Farm soon became the leading CSA farm in China with the endorsement of Wen Tiejun and its founder Shi Yan, a well-known figure in the Chinese CSA community for her work in establishing several CSA farms in Beijing and introducing the original values and structure of the CSA model. The establishment of Little Donkey Farm became a milestone of AFN development in China. Our visits to various CSA farms in China (Shi Yan estimates there to be more than 100⁷⁶) found that Little Donkey Farm was viewed by many as a source of inspiration⁷⁷. Ecological farming technologies, management schemes and promotional approaches of the farm have been widely disseminated and adopted among CSA farms in China. For example, a new alternative food initiative—renting plots to urbanites who want to grow their own vegetables, or ‘recreational garden plot rentals’ (see Scott *et al.* 2014) developed by Little Donkey Farm—was soon adopted by many other ecological farms located close to major cities across the country.

Building on the work of Little Donkey Farm, the NRRM team also facilitated some of the earliest farmers’ markets and buying clubs, as well as several other CSA

of the James Yen Rural Reconstruction College, a key base for the NRRM and has been greatly involved in the operation of the Little Donkey Farm and also facilitated various conferences organized by the NRRM.

⁷⁶ Interview with Shi Yan in Beijing, China, 6 December 2012.

⁷⁷ Interview with a CSA farmer in Chongqing, China, 4 May 2012.

farms in China. In 2009, Little Donkey Farm held the first farmers' market on the farm with the assistance of a non-governmental organization, Partnership for Community Development from Hong Kong. During the '2011 Harvest Festival' organized by Little Donkey Farm, the NRRM brought more than 60 ecological farmers together to hold the largest ecological farmers' market in China. With their connections with ecological farmers' cooperatives, the NRRM coordinated the earliest buying club in China in 2007, Xi'erqi Community Consumer Cooperative, to build direct connections between urbanites and farmers. It inspired more neighbourhoods to establish buying clubs such as Green League Buying Club established at Huilongguan in Beijing in 2010. Our interviews revealed that the NRRM also maintained close connections with the most prominent ecological farmers' market in China, the Beijing Country Fair, and its many related farmers' markets in Shanghai, Xi'an, Guangzhou and Tianjin as well as major buying clubs in China including Shanghai *Caituan* Buying Club and Beijing Huilongguan Buying Club. After the NRRM successfully took the opportunity of the growing demand for safe and healthy food, it expanded its CSA experiments and established a few more CSA farms: the Big Buffalo Farm in Changzhou, Jiangsu province, established in 2011; the Little Donkey Liulin CSA Farm in Beijing, established in 2012; and the *Guxiang* Farm in Fuzhou, Fujian province, established in 2012.

With the establishment of CSA farms and its close connections with farmers' markets and buying clubs across the country, the NRRM opened a practical space for the convergence of AFNs by scaling up diverse alternative food initiatives in China. It should be noted here that food safety and environmental sustainability are only two of the various issues that the NRRM aims to address, despite their important implications for the promotion of the NRRM. The NRRM itself as a rural development oriented initiative is not a food-centered campaign. This makes the case different from many other convergence and scaling up analyses in other countries that have focused on food-centered initiatives and organizations.

Approaches for the Convergence

Our interviews and observations reveal that the convergence of AFNs via the NRRM rely upon several major approaches. The first and fundamental approach is to find a ‘common ground’ amongst these alternative food initiatives — a clear definition of the social, economic and environmental values and goals that these AFNs aim to adhere to and strive for. The ‘common ground’ of these initiatives is reflected in the highly-abstracted themes of the five National CSA Symposiums organized by the activists of the NRRM since 2010. The symposiums attracted not only food activists but also farmers, academics, ecological entrepreneurs, planners, and designers. When the first symposium was launched in January 2010, the theme was *chengxiang huzhu* — mutual support between cities and the countryside. The second symposium held in November 2010 extended the theme to *chengxiang hudong yu kechixu shenghuo* — urban-rural interactions and sustainable life. While the NRRM kept its focus on constructing a new urban-rural relationship, sustainability of the movement was highlighted for the first time. In the theme of the third symposium held in October 2011, *xin nongfu, xin chengxiang* (new peasants, new cities and the countryside), the centerpiece of a ‘new urban-rural relationship’ was joined by an emphasis on the subjectivity of people involved in the movement — those ‘new peasants’ who conduct ecological farming and operate CSAs. The fourth symposium, held in November 2012, was themed *ai shenghuo, ai guxiang* (love life, love hometowns), and aimed at awakening people’s personal closeness with their rural hometowns. The 2013 symposium highlighted the new issues emerging in *sannong* and was themed *xin sannong, da sheji* (new *sannong*, big design).

These themes all shed light on a common understanding of issues that AFNs have been trying to address. That is, the countryside is in decline due to the neoliberally constructed relationship between the urban and the rural — the rural was rendered as a convenient ‘resource pool’ for the urban to exploit (Wen 2012; Wen and Sun 2012). Because of this, environmental crises and social stability challenges now outweigh the

urgent need for food production and income growth. Therefore, there is a new opportunity to create a new mutually beneficial and interactive relationship between the urban and the rural. People need to recast their attention to the countryside and understand the inherent values of agriculture beyond food production. The old *sannong* issue that focuses on ‘agricultural productivity growth, development of the countryside, and boosting farmers’ incomes’, argued by Wen Tiejun, is no longer valid. The country is facing a new *sannong* issue that focuses on ‘protection of farmers’ rights and interests, ecologically sustainable and stable countryside, as well as ecologicalization and safety of agriculture and food’ (Wen 2012; Wen and Sun 2012). This conceptualization sketched the broad goals of, and forged a common ground for, alternative food initiatives in China.

The NRRM’s second approach to scaling up AFNs is to establish national alliances and organizations that bring together independent CSA farms, ecological farmers’ markets and buying clubs. In the First National CSA Symposium in early 2010, the Rural Reconstruction Center—based at Renmin University, a key base for the NRRM—facilitated the establishment of a ‘Community Supported Agriculture Alliance’ to form an alliance among some of the earliest CSA farms in China. In the Fourth National CSA Symposium in 2012, the alliance was expanded and transformed to a ‘National Ecological Agriculture Cooperation Network’ that incorporated various alternative food initiatives including CSA farms, ecological farmers’ markets and buying clubs. In explaining the rationale for the network, its proclamation stated⁷⁸,

Although environmental protection and ecological agriculture have attracted a lot of attention, medium and small scale ecological farmers still face tremendous challenges. Due to the lack of financial, technological and logistical support, it is hard for them to compete in the market on their own strength....academics and NGOs recognized this and thus hope to corral various strengths together to

⁷⁸ Translated from the proclamation of the establishment of the National Ecological Agriculture Cooperation Network. We obtained this document from the 4th National CSA Symposium in 2012.

effectively support medium and small scale producers and the development of ecological agriculture.

The National Ecological Agriculture Cooperation Network organizes workshops which enable a more efficient knowledge and information flow among different ecological farms as well as consumer groups. It includes a group of academics who serve as consultants for its members. It also facilitates internal monitoring (i.e. ecological way of farming and no usage of chemicals) by organizing random visits to farms. Therefore, it forms an autonomous and self-governing entity for the once dispersed AFNs.

Knowledge sharing is the third approach that the NRRM uses for convergence. The symposiums invited academics involved in the study of ecological agriculture and rural development to present for farmers. To maintain the reputation of the small ecological farms, Zhou Zejiang, the representative of International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement, was invited to introduce the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) to the audience. PGS thus became a useful concept for farmers' markets and ecological farms established with the assistance of the NRRM. Little Donkey Farm, as the star project of the NRRM, held 'national CSA and family farm training workshops' to share their ecological farming techniques and also their experience in establishing and managing a CSA. Denis La France, a Canadian organic farming expert, was also invited several times to share knowledge about organic farming with CSA farmers in China. In December 2012, the NRRM facilitated the International Conference on Sustainability and Rural Reconstruction and invited researchers and activists from Peru, Brazil, Cuba, Indonesia, Nepal, India, Nigeria, Japan, and other countries to share their work in food sovereignty, ecological sustainability, rural development, land reforms and community cooperation. According to Wen Tiejun, this event helped activists in China, including those involved in AFNs, to realize that they are not alone. Their ability to make an impact will be enhanced by uniting with people from around the world.

The fourth approach for the convergence of AFNs is personnel exchange. Our interviews with managers of CSA farms revealed that volunteers and interns are recruited to participate in daily farming, and these interns are even exchanged between farms. For example, an intern we interviewed at the Little Donkey Farm in Beijing later joined the Hechuren Farm, a newly established CSA farm in Chongqing. A mission of the National Ecological Agriculture Cooperation Network is to accept internship applications, assign interns to its CSA member farms and encourage exchange of interns among them. This personnel exchange greatly facilitates the dissemination of farming knowledge and techniques. For example, the method of covering land with straw to control weeds and maintain soil humidity was introduced to Hechuren Farm from Little Donkey Farm. The personnel exchange also enhances the sense of community and encourages solidarity among CSA farms across the country, which is critical for scaling up their impacts. Other forms of mutual supports among CSA farms, such as promoting products for each other and providing moral support and guidance to new farmers, also contributed greatly to the convergence of these farms.

I argue that these approaches for the convergence of fragmented alternative food initiatives in China empowered these AFNs to have greater impacts on food policies in China. The NRRM's cry for a new rural development model highlighted the significance of ecological and social issues and poverty in the countryside and brought them to the forefront of the policy realm. *Sannong wenti* has been widely adopted in Chinese national rural policies. It also inspired the state to launch a national campaign called 'New Socialist Countryside Construction' (Central Committee of the CCP 2005). Although its orientation, strategies and approaches are quite different from the NRRM (see Ahlers and Schubert 2009; Wen and Lau 2008; Wen *et al.* 2012b), the state-led campaign did borrow wisdom from the activists of the NRRM. Wen Tiejun has long been a member of the 'think tank' behind the formulation of national rural policies.

The convergence of AFNs in China also attracted a more solid base of customers and thus bestowed more power on the NRRM group to work with local government. For example, Little Donkey Farm was designated as a demonstration farm by the government of Haidian District in Beijing. Big Buffalo Farm is also the remit of a cooperation with the government of Jiaze County in Changzhou, Jiangsu province. The impacts on policy are gradually being seen. For instance, CSA as an initiative that contributes to environmental sustainability of the countryside has been written into a local government's policy for the first time. The "Regulations of Fostering Ecological Civilization in Guiyang Municipality" (Standing Committee of the 12th People's Congress of Guiyang 2010) enacted by the municipal government of Guiyang, the capital city of Guizhou province, in March 2010 specifies that "(we) promote the CSA model to build a green linkage between the rural and the urban with so that they can support each other and develop together" (Clause 15).

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper elaborates the roles of a rural development campaign — the NRRM in China — in the convergence of fragmented and locally embedded AFNs. Some of the most prominent means to achieve this are constructing a common ground for these initiatives, sharing knowledge among them, establishing national alliances and organizations, and exchanging personnel. The NRRM team that facilitated all these activities shaped the movement according to the needs of CSA farmers, farmers' market organizers and vendors, and buying clubs. The NRRM thus became a base camp for AFNs to share, debate, consent and unite, which is crucial for the convergence of these grassroots initiatives so that they can make greater impacts on agricultural and rural policies and the food system. Indeed, with a very different vision of rural development from the Chinese state, the NRRM itself is political. The political agenda of AFNs forms a synergy with the movement which reinforces the goals of both.

This paper concludes that the relationship between AFNs and rural development is indeed reciprocal. On the one hand, AFNs have been widely recognized for their ‘forerunner’ role in a paradigm shift towards a more economically viable, ecologically embedded and socially just ‘rural development’ model. On the other hand, the possibility that alternative food development initiatives can contribute effectively and comprehensively to the convergence and scaling up of AFNs has been largely overlooked. Understanding the reciprocal relationship between AFNs and rural development enables us to deliberately draw on the strengths of alternative rural development movements and/or initiatives for more effective promotion of AFNs. By uncovering the potential role of alternative rural development initiatives in the convergence of AFNs, this paper not only contributes to the study of scaling up AFNs but also contributes to our understanding of rural development.

Although this paper focuses on the convergence of AFNs, as observed in the NRRM case, AFNs in China are far more than ‘reactive alternatives to the mainstream’ (Marsden and Franklin 2013: 640). They are indeed a powerful tool to boost the ‘rural development’ initiative. There is no doubt that the degradation of the food environment in China, reflected by the accumulating food safety scares, has made AFNs powerful tools for the NRRM. Our fieldwork in China identified various strategies that the NRRM adopted to take advantage of AFNs to acquire a certain political legitimacy and social relevance. AFNs, besides their role as a forerunner and a ‘building block’ of new rural development models, have made political contributions to the NRRM in China. That is, AFNs, in the name of tackling food safety and agricultural sustainability problems, which are largely not politically sensitive in the Chinese political economy contexts, opened a convenient political space for the development of civil society capacity. Food advocacy, compared to many other realms of advocacy that have obvious political connotations, is much less politically sensitive and thus easier to approach in China’s political context.

While the paper recognized the positive impacts of the ‘new agrarian-based rural development’ campaign on AFNs, whether there may be negative impact is still an

open question. An independent CSA farmer in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, complained to us about how Little Donkey Farm has misled other CSA farmers by promoting its success without mentioning the various supports it received from the local government⁷⁹. Her feeling is that the NRRM inspired many to start alternative food initiatives but failed to inform them about its governmental resources or assist them to address the challenges. This division between the NRRM-initiated AFNs and other AFNs within the same advocacy space created by the NRRM might hinder its convergence efforts.

The different developmental process that these two types of AFNs underwent in China is reflected in the discussion of how diverse initiatives can achieve ‘convergence with diversity’—a sense that heterogeneity of AFNs and the place-based knowledge and experience they have can be preserved within the process of convergence. The convergence of AFNs happens not only with different approaches, as the paper has addressed, but also in different dimensions and on different scales. These differences render the convergence of AFNs a contradictory process which is shaped by the diverse foci, approaches and strategies of these heterogeneous initiatives (see Levkoe and Wakefield 2014). However, our fieldwork in China found limited contradictions *among* these AFNs. Rather, tensions exist mainly among actors *within* individual initiatives. This might be because of the nascency of these initiatives and the close connection that most of them have with the NRRM, which reduces potential contradictions. However, it is still necessary to further unpack the process of convergence, in Levkoe and Wakefield’s (2014) words, the ‘complex assemblage’, to examine the conflicts and tensions within their interactions and how these tensions are mitigated in this process. Although the case study of this paper does not directly tackle this issue, the NRRM’s approach to construct a common understanding of the rural problems that China faces among these initiatives, and illuminate these AFNs in terms of their abilities to address these problems, indeed effectively diminished these tensions. In this process, the diversity

⁷⁹ Interview with a CSA farmer, Nanjing, Jiangsu province, China, 13 May 2012.

of these initiatives (e.g., different ecological farming techniques) does not *hinder* the collaborative process but rather *fosters* the communication among these initiatives. ‘Convergence with diversity’, in this sense, is attainable.

Regarding the policy impacts of the convergence, the convergence of AFNs does not necessarily result in a genuine reconfiguration of the conventional food system or food policies. As Marsden *et al.* (2002: 817) argue, “new agrarian-based rural development” will not become mainstream unless it is “accompanied by a redefined and strategically organized rural development policy framework”. AFNs will have to find ways to leverage greater political legitimacy and economic standing if food system transformation and policy changes are their ultimate goals. Although we’ve seen an integration of a CSA model in a local government’s regulation (the regulation issued in Guiyang), the change is still marginal. Therefore, ‘a new policy support structure’ will be the most solid fortress that the NRRM needs to establish before it can shift the rural development trajectory in China. This process will be highly dependent upon the specific sociopolitical and economic context in China. We expect a process of power struggles that will be significantly different from western experiences. How AFNs can be more widely integrated into agrifood policies in the specific sociopolitical context of China is worth studying.

Conclusion

AFNs have been extensively examined in the west as counter-hegemonic initiatives that aim to challenge the globalized and industrialized food system (Goodman and Goodman 2008; Maye *et al.* 2007; Goodman *et al.* 2011; Tregear 2011). The alternativeness of AFNs has been mainly analyzed from four major dimensions: economic, social, political and ecological alternativeness (e.g., Whatmore *et al.* 2003; Allen *et al.* 2003; Kirwan 2004; Watts *et al.* 2005; Holloway *et al.* 2006; Feagan 2007; Jones *et al.* 2010). However, such alternativeness is not self-evident in many cases. Critical sociological and geographical studies argue that the ecological, economic and social alternativeness of AFNs deserve scrutiny. These critiques center on AFNs' social inclusion goals (Hinrichs and Kremer 2002; Guthman 2008), social justice concerns (Hinrichs and Allen 2008; Allen 2010; DeLind 2011), and environmental outcomes (Hinrichs 2003; Dupuis and Gillon 2009; Jones *et al.* 2010).

Meanwhile, rural development studies have categorized the trajectory of rural development into three major types that deliver different economic, environment and social implications for rural spaces (van der Ploeg *et al.* 2000; van der Ploeg 2008, Marsden 2000, 2008; Marsden *et al.* 2002; Marsden and Sonnino 2008). These three rural development models are 'the agro-industrial logic' that configures the countryside as a space for intensive food production, 'the post-productivist dynamic' that celebrates the consumption side of the rural economy and 'the rural development dynamic' that discards the 'agro-industrial' and the 'post-productivist' ways of exploiting the rural nature, and employs short food supply chains as effective tools to counter the large-scale industrialized food value chains, and centers on agricultural production to achieve rural sustainability goals.

The critical connection between these two groups of literature (i.e. alternativeness of AFNs and rural development paradigms) lies in the critical roles of AFNs in the shift of the rural development paradigm in Europe from the 'agri-industrial' model to the 'rural development' model (see van der Ploeg *et al.* 2000; Pugliese 2001; Marsden

et al. 2002; Goodman 2004; van der Ploeg 2008). With theorizations of ‘the quality turn’, ‘embeddedness’ and ‘re-territorialization’ of food production and consumption, the agro-food scholarship argues that AFNs have become the forerunner and the engine of this paradigm shift (Renting *et al.* 2003; Goodman 2004) and their restructuring of food supply chains has been a significant ‘building block’ of the new rural development paradigm (Marsden *et al.* 2000).

However, it is still unclear how AFNs coevolve with rural development initiatives in pragmatic sense. To analyze this issue and bridge the two scholarships, there needs to be an examination of AFNs that is more closely linked to rural development initiatives. AFNs in China and the NRRM thus provide the cases that exactly match this need, for two reasons. First, Chinese AFNs just recently emerged and are highly fluid. Second, the NRRM as a rural development initiative is a major driver for the development of AFNs in China. Hence, in this case, AFNs and rural development are emerging and evolving together. Therefore, this dissertation probed into AFNs in China and its complicated relationship with grassroots rural development initiatives and with the state as a backdrop.

Drawing on the extensive discussions of AFNs and rural development in the west, the four papers in this dissertation looked at the AFNs and its relationship with the NRRM from different angles. The first paper characterized AFNs in China by interrogating their ecological, social, environmental and political alternativeness. To better illustrate the contestations within these AFNs, the second paper analyzed the contested space of the Beijing Country Fair farmers’ market created by the interactions among key actors including market managers, vendors, customers and the state. The third paper builds on the understandings of AFNs in the first two papers and examined the critical driving force behind them—the NRRM. It compared the NRRM with the state-led rural development campaign of “new socialist countryside construction” (NSCC), analyzed the challenges and opportunities facing the NRRM from the state and society and how the NRRM is coping with state pressure. The fourth paper looked at the flip side of the interactions between the NRRM and AFNs

in China—the impacts of the NRRM on AFNs. It revealed how the NRRM functions as a hub for the convergence and scaling up of various alternative food initiatives in China.

Empirically, these four papers contribute to the existing agri-food studies on AFNs and rural development in at least four ways. First, the study of AFNs in China fills in a gap in current AFN studies that mainly examine industrialized market economies. Second, the examination of the Beijing Country Fair illustrates the roles of the state in configuring the contested nature (i.e. tensions and conflicts embedded) of AFNs. It reveals distinctive contestations, which are very different from those in the west, within farmers' markets in China. Third, the case study of the NRRM offers a sharp contrast between grassroots and state-led rural development initiatives and illustrates how grassroots rural development initiatives can survive and be successful in the face of a semi-authoritarian state by taking a more non-confrontational stance and advocating an amelioration rather than a reform of the current developmental regime. Fourth, the analysis of the relationship between AFNs and the NRRM in China demonstrates how rural development initiatives can play a critical role in the convergence and strengthening of fragmented AFNs.

The key findings of the study can be summed up as follows. First, alternativeness of AFNs in China is uneven and varies among different elements of alternativeness. The state is a key player in shaping the contested nature of AFNs. Second, the NRRM as a critical grassroots rural development initiative not only adopts AFNs as critical tools for promoting its rural development agenda but also functions as a hub for the convergence of various alternative food initiatives in China. The dissertation concludes that the relationship between alternative food and rural development initiatives can be reciprocal, although the synergies between them are subject to various challenges in the socio-political context of China. This study contributes to existing scholarship by documenting/highlighting/revealing a set of AFNs that are introduced by, and co-evolved with, a rural development initiative—the NRRM. It

bridges academic discussions on the convergence of AFNs and scholarship on rural development paradigms.

In the following table, I summarize the principal findings and contributions of each of the four papers.

Table 8. Principal findings and contributions

Papers	Principal Findings	Contributions
Paper 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There are four major types of AFNs in China, including CSA farms, ecological farmers' markets, buying clubs and recreational garden plots rentals; 2. Chinese AFNs are strongly 'consumer driven' which limits their alternativeness and transformative potential; 3. Different types of AFNs in China reflect very different elements of alternativeness; 4. Healthfulness of food is the most important element that drives consumers' participation in AFNs; 5. Consumers do not share the same extent of ethical values as initiators of AFNs. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It updates the existing literature of AFNs with newly emerged initiatives in China that have not been well documented to date; 2. It reevaluates the critiques of AFNs' alternativeness by examining the alternativeness of AFNs from specific elements; 3. It provides an analytical framework for characterizing nascent AFNs that have not developed a full spectrum of alternativeness.
Paper 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The state is a key actor that shapes the contestations of farmers' markets in China; 2. The contestations within farmers' markets in China revolve around several aspects including power structures among key stakeholders involved in the market, relations among vendors, ethical values, especially the downplay of 'local', and consumer motivations; 3. The contestations within the farmers' market in China both resembles and differs from what have been observed in western farmers' markets; 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It provides a case of a nascent farmers' market in China which has not been documented before; 2. It highlights the critical role of the state in shaping the contestations within farmers' markets in China; 3. It illustrates distinctive contestations, which are different from those in the west, within farmers' markets in China; 4. It highlights the significance of sociopolitical contexts in

Papers	Principal Findings	Contributions
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Farmers' markets in China are perceived by the state as a potential threat to social stability; 5. Farmers' markets in China are using different strategies such as obtaining administrative approval through business partners to address the challenges. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. shaping the practices of farmers' markets.
Paper 3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The NRRM is a rural development initiative that is very different from the state-led initiative in terms of various dimensions; 2. The NRRM facilitated the development of many alternative food initiatives in China; 3. The NRRM faces dual challenges from the state and from society; 4. The NRRM has adapted to the challenges from the state by adopting mainstream discourses in promoting their activities to seek a harmonious relationship with the state; 5. The NRRM addresses society's demand for safe and healthy food by developing ecological agriculture and AFNs; 6. AFNs have been adopted by the NRRM as powerful tools to concretize its romantic and idealistic values, reconnect them with the demand of society, and reinforce alternative rural development dynamics; 7. There are emerging opportunities for the NRRM to ally with state developmental agendas and the expectations of society. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It contributes to the rural development literature by providing a case of grassroots initiative in China; 2. It identifies the linkage between the NRRM and the food safety crisis in China; 3. It contrasts grassroots and state-led rural development initiatives by distinguishing the NRRM from the state-led NSCC in terms of eight dimensions.
Paper 4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Current studies of the convergence and scaling-up of AFNs focus mainly on the role of food-centered organizations without recognizing the role of rural development 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It contributes to the rural development literature by recognizing the role of alternative rural development initiatives in

Papers	Principal Findings	Contributions
	initiatives;	the development of AFNs;
	2. The NRRM represents initiatives that fall into the ‘rural development’ paradigm;	2. It contributes to the discussion of the convergence and scaling up of AFNs by linking it with rural development initiatives;
	3. The relationship between AFNs and rural development is mutually beneficial;	
	4. The NRRM opens up a novel space for the convergence of AFNs;	3. It highlights the reciprocal relationship between AFNs and rural development initiatives.
	5. Approaches for the convergence include constructing a common ground for these initiatives, establishing national alliances and organizations, sharing knowledge among them, and exchanging personnel.	

These four papers, although having distinctive foci, collectively explored the emergence, characteristics and implications of AFNs in China and its complicated reciprocal relationship with the rural development initiative—the NRRM. The principle findings of each paper revealed that although AFNs were introduced by food activists from the west, they are significantly different from their counterparts due to the strong consumer-driven feature and the interventions of the state in its development. The evolving manifestations of alternativeness, the inconsistency in ethical values between their initiators and customers, as well as the contestations among various players all differentiate AFNs in China from western ones. Thus, AFNs in China have been significantly shaped by the specific sociopolitical contexts. This makes our study an important contribution to the existing literature that has drawn heavily on western experience.

AFNs in China are evolving rapidly due to several reasons. Firstly, the nascency of these AFNs determines the uncertainty of their future. Most initiatives emerged since 2008. Their value system and modes of operating are immature and fluid. The

institutionalization of many initiatives is still in its infancy. Secondly, the rapidly changing social trends will further complicate the landscape of AFNs. AFNs have flourished in some parts of China because of the food safety crisis in 2008 and its aftermath. Whether and for how long this food safety anxiety will continue to fuel the expansion of AFNs is unclear. Meanwhile, as the NRRM is functioning as a driver for the development of AFNs, the expansion of AFNs seems to be increasingly values-oriented and addressing food safety concerns might become less important in the future. Thirdly, the changing power dynamics among various groups, including food activists, grassroots organizations, consumers, ecological producers, and the state, will also shape their developmental paths. Food activists are promoting ethical consumerism and the ecological and social values of AFNs. The state is promoting modern industrialized agriculture while also giving somewhat more emphasis to ecological sustainability. Consumers are looking for healthy and safe food while receiving information from both food activists and the state. Thus, how and to what extent AFNs will remain alternative in China is highly dependent upon the negotiations among these key actors. Therefore, my characterization of AFNs in China is dependent upon observations of these initiatives in their infancies. Some principle findings here, such as the landscape of alternativeness of various AFNs, might fluctuate in the future. Despite this, by depicting their emergence and characterizing these initiatives, my study provides ‘stepping stones’ for further studies of the evolution of AFNs in China.

This research also probed into the discussion of alternativeness in AFNs. The economic, social, ecological and political dimensions of alternativeness have been criticized by examinations of AFNs in the west. Debates on to what extent AFNs are alternative shook the foundation of AFNs’ counter-conventional stances. On the one hand, these critiques inspired people to cast doubt on the ‘transformative potential’ of AFNs (see Levkoe 2011) in terms of generating a meaningful alternative to the conventional food system. On the other hand, they also highlighted the fact that AFNs were not necessarily alternative in terms of all the dimensions of alternativeness.

Rather than analyzing alternative food initiatives according to the major dimensions of alternativeness that are inexplicit, I argue that it is too simple to negate the status of certain AFNs because of their lacking of certain dimensions of alternativeness. Therefore, I argue that an examination of these initiatives according to an unpacked and more specific set of elements of alternativeness is helpful. These specific elements of alternativeness, which represent various alternative features of food and of embedded relations, offer a more feasible analytical framework for characterizing AFNs, especially nascent ones that have not developed a full-spectrum of alternativeness. In this way, this research demonstrates that the landscape of alternativeness varies among different AFNs. Rather than simply categorizing an initiative into either alternative or conventional, this study offered an example of the various ways in which AFNs can be alternative.

Although this study is mainly based on interviews with initiators of these AFNs, consumer perspectives are more important in shaping AFNs in China. This does not undermine the validity of the study though, given that consumer opinions, particularly their desire for safe and healthy food, were well captured by our interviews with initiators of AFNs and the analyses of secondary sources. However, further research on consumer perspectives will still be beneficial to sketching out the whole picture of AFNs in China. That is what makes investigations of the features of CSA customers in China (e.g., Chen 2013a, b) important.

Another significant contribution of these papers in general relates to its analysis of the relationship between the NRRM and AFNs. Although there have been studies looking at the role of AFNs in rural development, the role was generally described as ‘building block’ and ‘forerunner’ of the ‘rural development’ paradigm. AFNs were rarely treated as a powerful tool for alternative rural development initiatives to confront various challenges from the state and society. My examination of the NRRM in China, especially challenges confronting it and its strategies to address these challenges, offered an empirical example to illustrate another layer of the role of AFNs in rural development. AFNs thus can be not only ‘forerunners’, ‘engines’ and

‘building blocks’ (Renting *et al.* 2003; Goodman 2004; Marsden *et al.* 2000) of the emerging new rural development paradigm (see Ploeg *et al.* 2000; Pugliese 2001; Marsden *et al.* 2002; Goodman 2004) but also a powerful tool to address challenges that confront the paradigm.

A significant observation from my studies is the critical role of the state in shaping AFNs in terms of setting restrictions, challenging legitimacy, and negotiating political implications. The state as a critical player in the practices of AFNs in China differs remarkably from AFN development in the west. Recognizing the potential of AFNs’ in generating new economic opportunities and boosting sustainable rural development, the state also fosters the development of AFN development in certain circumstances. This is partly reflected in the establishment of several CSA farms with the support of local governments. The state’s promotion of new developmental discourses such as ‘ecological civilization’, ‘two-orientation agriculture’ and ‘low carbon economy’ also bestow a certain degree of legitimacy and significance on the NRRM’s efforts in fostering AFN development in China.

However, these fragmented supports from the state do not indicate a ‘new policy structure’ that encourages a ‘rural development’ model as Marsden (2008) suggested in Europe. The Chinese state’s complicated role in AFN development is more reflected in its unaltered policy orientation that falls into the ‘agro-industrial’ rural development paradigm. The deep-rooted pro-industrial sentiment is expressed in guiding governmental documents such as the 12th Five Year Plan (2011-2015) and the Modern Agriculture Development Plan (2011-2015) issued in 2011. These two highest ranking policy documents exhibit the contradictory position of the state in agriculture and rural development. That is to say, the Chinese state strives to achieve sustainability within the industrial model of agriculture development. On the one hand, the state interprets ‘agricultural modernization’ as high-efficient, high-tech, large-scale, mechanized, standardized, professionalized, and productivity-oriented agriculture, which is nothing close to be sustainable; on the other hand, the state also

highlights in the document a carbon emission reduction within the ‘modern agriculture’ and environmental protection of the farmland.

I argue that this contradictory position contributes to the state’s complicated and contradictory role in AFN development. Although the state, mainly local government, facilitated the establishment of several alternative food projects, its deep-rooted and long-established pivotal support for agricultural industrialization has not changed. The productivist agricultural and rural development policies, as Wen Tiejun argues (see Wen and Sun 2012), help little in solving the *sannong wenti*. Rather, it is increasingly contributing to the emerging economic, social and environmental crises in the countryside. Therefore, as Wen Tiejun’s new interpretation of the *sannong wenti* suggests, there needs to be a shift of policy focus from increasing productivity and boosting farmers’ incomes to rural sustainability, ecological safety, and protection of farmers’ rights. This resonates with the emergence of the ‘rural development’ paradigm that has been observed in Europe, although there is still a long way to go before the theoretical assertion could be translated into policy and practice in China.

The NRRM, despite its rapid development in recent years, received little attention from rural development scholars. This study highlighted not only its proactive role in the development of AFNs but also its strategies to construct a non-confrontational relationship with the state and meet society’s demand for safe food. The complexity of the NRRM’s adaptation to state power and societal conditions illustrated the importance of flexibility of a grassroots rural development initiative. In a political environment within which collective actions are highly sensitive, it is especially a challenge to constitute new forms of social organizations. Marsden (2008) pointed out that the ‘rural development’ model can only become influential with a “new policy support structure”. Marsden *et al.* (2002: 817) also argue that “new agrarian-based rural development” will not become mainstream unless it is “accompanied by a redefined and strategically organized rural development policy framework”. In this sense, although the NRRM is an initiative that represents a ‘rural development’ model, the paradigm has not been formalized in China. The agrarian-based rural development

model, which differs from the ‘agro-industrial model’, is still at its early stage of formation. The NRRM will have to strive for policy impacts before it can facilitate the rural development paradigm shift in China.

The implications of the NRRM for rural development policies in China might be vague, but its significance for the development of AFNs is clear. This paper looks at not only how AFNs are adopted as powerful tools for the NRRM but also how the NRRM has shaped and will continue to shape the thriving AFNs in China.

Understanding the reciprocal relationship between AFNs and the NRRM or rural development initiatives in general requires interrogations of the other side of the story, that is, I argue, an examination of the impacts of rural development initiatives on the convergence of AFNs. Although the fourth paper addresses this issue by examining the NRRM’s efforts in the convergence of dispersed AFNs, we need further studies to monitor the impacts of the convergence on food policies and food systems in China. That is, how will the convergence be translated into structural changes.

Driven by the growing awareness of the ecological and social implications of consuming ‘good’ food, Chinese consumers will have an increasing demand for food channeled through AFNs in the near future. Although there is a value distinction between AFN initiators and their customers, this distinction will be gradually minimized with these initiators’ efforts in public education. Indeed, this will be a long and rough process but we have seen actions being taken. Food education is increasingly being recognized by the public. Food courses in the field are happening on Shared Harvest Farm in Beijing. For sure, AFNs will be marginal in China’s agri-food system for a long time but they are reaching to more customers.

Another potential topic for further research concerns the contested nature of AFNs that are a function of specific socioeconomic and political conditions. The second paper interrogated various contestations within a farmers’ market in Beijing in terms of the power structure, vendor relationships, consumer motivations and the discourse of ‘local’. Nevertheless, these contestations are highly place-based and context-specific. Other AFNs especially CSAs and recreational garden plot rentals in

China are also situated within local conditions. Understanding the situatedness is a key to understand the diversity and evolution of AFNs in China. This requires more empirical case studies that examine the value and operational challenges confronting these initiatives.

This dissertation explores the critical geographical understandings of ‘place’ in the relationships of food. The characterization of Chinese AFNs exemplifies the role of ‘place’, a compound of ecological, social and political relations with geographical identities, in shaping the practices of these initiatives. In recognizing the ‘place’ (or the local embeddedness) in alternative food initiatives, the exploration of the convergence of AFNs examines a specific dimension of ‘place’—the ‘scale’. It looks at the possibility of going beyond the ‘local’ and forging a new set of alternative human-food relationships on a larger scale. I argue that the NRRM’s efforts in the convergence of AFNs transcend different scales and bridge the ‘local’ with the ‘national’. The dissertation also adopts geographical ideas of comparative studies between different regions. The examinations of Chinese AFNs and the NRRM are built upon existing literature based on western experience. The geographical differences within which Chinese and other AFNs establish and develop give the specificity and thus the value of the studies. Comparing China with industrialized market economies enables us to better understand the problems and the embeddedness of, as well as the opportunities for, Chinese AFNs.

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