

# Characterizing alternative food networks in China

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**Abstract** 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

## Abbreviations

AFN Alternative food network  
CSA Community supported agriculture

## 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, p. 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;

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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) and public procurement programs (Allen and Guthman 2006; Kirwan and Foster 2007), community gardens, and more (see Goodman and Goodman 2008; Tregear 2011; Reynolds 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 (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 6 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<sup>1</sup> 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 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

<sup>1</sup> Green food is food quality standard in China that is lower than the organic standard (see Scott et al. 2014).

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 min to 5 h. 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

Among the various facets of AFNs that have captured the attention of agro-food scholars, one 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 socio-economic and political contexts. Although AFNs are generally characterized as values-based initiatives, in contrast to the conventional industrial food 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 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) notion of "autonomous food spaces." According to Wilson (2013, p. 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" can over-emphasize the political facet of AFNs and overshadow 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 elements.

While the dichotomous characterization of food venues as "alternative" or "conventional" may seem too simplistic and problematic (Sonnino and Marsden 2006), food initiatives such as CSAs, farmers' markets and buying clubs still possess particular attributes that distinguish them, to various extents, from mainstream market venues and thus underpin their alternativeness. According to Whatmore et al. (2003, p. 389), these novel initiatives are generally conceptualized under the AFN umbrella based on three main dimensions of "alternativeness" that they have 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 characterize most of their fundamental features, we would add a fourth dimension—ecological alternativeness (see Jones et al. 2010). Ecological alternativeness addresses a common feature of many AFNs to the extent that they embrace ecological production practices. These four major dimensions of alternativeness constitute the fundamental AFN discourses, and underpin AFNs' tension with the hegemonic neoliberal industrial food system.

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 of 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, p. 389) in AFNs is mirrored in the promotion of CSAs, 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 among food activists that Allen (2010, p. 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. Alternative food discourses highlight local modes of production and distribution (Allen et al. 2003; Feagan 2007) and direct encounters that reconnect consumers and producers (Holloway et al. 2006; Wiskerke 2009). The face-to-face

interaction in AFNs conveys relationships that are more than impersonal commodity exchanges, but rather a connectivity that embodies a 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, p. 301). Correspondingly, “reconnection” between producers and consumers, alongside “re-placing” and “re-localization,” are seen by agro-food scholars as some of the most prominent features of alternative food initiatives (Kirwan 2004; Watts et al. 2005; Wiskerke 2009). This suggests that “reciprocity,” rather than the dominance of either consumer or producer, defines the “reconnection.” Consequently, this understanding of “reconnection” leads to the specific focus on “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 relations of trust and reciprocity. Reconnection and trust are seen as inherent components of alternativeness in AFN discourses.

The third dimension of alternativeness covered in the AFN 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 (e.g., Nestle 2007). 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 among 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 element of political alternativeness, which is especially prominent in North America (Goodman 2003), is critical in constructing the oppositional and social political transformative potential of AFNs.

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 by reducing “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, p. 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 elsewhere. Rather, the manifestations of these dimensions, 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 (particularly ecological and organic agriculture) and in less processed food, there is a general assumption of the healthfulness of food in AFNs. For health reasons—to reduce their exposure to agro-chemicals and to antibiotics in meat—Chinese consumers are seeking out organic and ecologically produced foods via alternative food procurement channels (see Shi et al. 2011a; Scott et al. 2014). However, discussions about alternativeness in AFN literature have paid much less attention to this “healthfulness” element. This is a point that we seek to highlight in this paper.

Critical studies of AFNs in North America and Europe question the various dimensions of “alternativeness,” particularly regarding their claims of social inclusion (Hinrichs and Kremer 2002; Guthman 2008), social justice (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 the “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 concerns that current interrogations of alternativeness have not sufficiently

recognized the variation in dimensions of alternativeness across diverse social, political, and economic contexts.

Therefore, to overcome the critiques of the binary view of “alternative” versus “conventional” characterizations of food systems, we argue that a further unpacking of existing dimensions of alternativeness is necessary. This 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, strengthening social ties and personal connections, socially just, and political. These elements are projections from the four major 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 alternativeness that is embedded within, and is also a reflection of, local geographies. AFNs in China display strong evidence of alternativeness around food “healthfulness” and nutrition, but weak representations of social and political elements in terms of reconnection, social justice, and forms of political association.

### 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. 2012; Murdoch and Miele 2004) in China.<sup>2</sup> The belief in food being sacred and central in traditional Chinese culture has been shattered by numerous food safety scandals in recent years (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. 2012, p. 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 of fraudulent organic products in markets (Yin and Zhou 2012), the state enacted a much more—some would say overly—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 (or about 300 million people) in China belonged to the “middle class” by the year 2010, and the 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 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 since about 2008 to establish various alternative food ventures in Chinese cities. 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 number.<sup>3</sup> 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 identified above. 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 typically portrayed as selfish and shortsighted.<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> 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 context. 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.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, even if there is one, the number cannot be accurate, given the rapidly changing landscape of AFNs in China. The fuzzy definition of AFNs also makes it hard to do a national count. For example, some self-proclaimed CSA farms do not have members prepay at all and are merely food delivery businesses.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the founder of a CSA farm, 6 December 2012, Beijing.

**Table 1** 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 plot 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* **		✓			Weak

\* These elements were rarely mentioned by our interviewees

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

alternativeness embedded in AFNs into eight elements (see Table 1). These elements pertain to either the features of food within these AFNs or to the relationships among stakeholders (between producers and consumers, producers and nature, and among producers themselves). We also identified alternative food initiatives that reflected these elements, as well as the connections between these elements and consumer motivations. This analysis underscores how the "situated AFNs" in China reflect a very different landscape of alternativeness from those 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 but are intertwined characterizations of alternativeness.

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 tended 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. 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 promote "eating local". Other elements of alternativeness are still at the early stage of being communicated by food "activists" to patrons of alternative food initiatives. 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 seek organic certification, in part because consumers do not 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 deciding whether to buy food from there.

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 Paüla 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 Tiejun,<sup>5</sup> has been particularly noteworthy in the promotion of CSAs, peasant cooperatives, and the social economy (Shi et al. 2011a, b; Wen et al. 2012; Pan and Du 2011a, b). NGOs, though few in number and constrained 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 “alternative” were these CSAs in terms of the eight elements identified above? Our interviews with CSA farmers and interns on farms revealed a strong understanding of the ecological alternativeness and its health implications. CSA farmers agree to avoid the usage of synthetic fertilizers and chemicals and believe that this will contribute substantially to environmental sustainability. The slogan “eat local, eat seasonal” is promoted by a small number of food activists as well as by CSA farms. “Social ties and personal connections” among CSA farmers and between CSA farmers and their customers are also highly valued (see Table 1).

Despite some evidence 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 by market-oriented entrepreneurs, operating within rather than beyond the neoliberal market logics, it is hard for them to escape the circle of profit-motivated commodity production. Some of the elements of alternativeness may thus be subdued in order to cater to consumer needs. For example, although “eating seasonally” has been widely praised by CSA farmers, we still observed an online debate on microblogs between some CSA farms on whether it was appropriate to grow vegetables in greenhouses, thereby violating the principle of “eating seasonally”.

As noted earlier, 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 many CSAs, although they are priorities for some CSA operators.<sup>6</sup> Social justice as an element of alternativeness is not reflected 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 making.<sup>7</sup> Peasants who

hold the original land-use rights on the farmland are often hired as farm workers but their opinions were not always welcome. For their part, CSA shareholders preferred to interact with farm managers (well-educated entrepreneurs called “new peasants”) than with real peasants (Liu 2012a, b). Thus, small-scale farmers are not empowered, 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 labor, small peasants, and “sharing more harvest” with them.

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. Moreover, much of China’s organic production has been subsumed by large food companies and operated in the same way as a conventional food business.<sup>8</sup> The political element in terms of articulating “new forms of political association and market governance” is also minimal among CSA farmers in China. It is noteworthy, nevertheless, that the Rural Reconstruction Center at Renmin University in Beijing has been holding annual nationwide CSA symposiums since 2010. At the 2012 symposium, CSA farmers decided 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.

#### Farmers’ markets

Another noteworthy form of AFNs are farmers’ markets.<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> In late 2012, Professor Wen facilitated the establishment of China Rural Construction Institute at Southwest University in Chongqing.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with a CSA farmer, 6 December 2012, Beijing.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with a CSA farmer and farm workers, 1 April 2012, Beijing.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with a CSA farmer from Chongming Island, May 27 2012, Shanghai.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a Beijing Country Fair farmers’ market organizer, 3 April 2012 and 6 December 2012, Beijing. We identified about 20 organic or ecological farmers’ markets across the country. The frequency, popularity, reputation, and acceptance of these markets differ greatly.

The Beijing Country Fair farmers' market is the most prominent example. The market was operated by five 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 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 in 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 vendors (out of the 30 approved farms, NGOs, social enterprises and other 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 quickly.

We examined the alternativeness of the farmers' market according to the eight elements listed in Table 1. 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 Fair.<sup>10</sup> 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 conducting the inspections. 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 organizers 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 between farmers and consumers" (Beijing Country Fair 2011),

where a sense of community is forged and developed. Thus, all elements of alternativeness are represented in this farmers' market, although to different extents.

However, many of these elements of "alternativeness" are only perceived by the market's major facilitators, not by its ordinary customers.<sup>9</sup> Rather, it is food safety and food quality 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, or elderly people with poor health conditions. These groups are believed to have the strongest demand for healthy food.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the loyalty of consumers at these markets is typically based on their trust in the safety and quality of the food, rather than a deeper interest in connecting with producers. The market manager expressed her concern about the difference in values between market organizers and customers:

For us [market organizers], 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 organizers, 6 December 2012 in Beijing)

Despite its strong ethical positions, the Beijing Country Fair farmers' market organizers face criticism from customers for being too "producer-centered" and "disparaging consumers' interests" by emphasizing the central position of farmers within producer-consumer relations, giving farmers a role as educators of consumers.<sup>12</sup> 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 farmers' market also faces critiques from those who disagree with its use of the term "organic" 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 by producers who are not certified, the market organizer explained:

<sup>11</sup> Interview with a CSA farmer, 6 December 2012, Beijing.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with the founder of a buying club in Beijing, 9 April 2012, Beijing.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with one of the Beijing Country Fair Farmers' Market organizers, 3 April 2012, Beijing.



[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 that 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 space.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, it will affect the way that the alternativeness of the Country Fair, and many small-scale farms, are represented.

### Buying clubs

Buying clubs are another strong consumer-driven initiative amid the widespread food safety anxiety in China. The earliest buying club in China emerged around 2004 when a group of self-described nature lovers started to regularly purchase homegrown 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, Chengdu Urban Rivers Association, supported by a Hong Kong-based NGO, Partnerships for Community Development, introduced the residents 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, arranging for their members to visit farms, providing members with opportunities to experience farming, and educating them about farming. 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 closer relations. They bring together farmers in Sichuan province

<sup>13</sup> Interview with a small-scale ecological farmer, 2 June 2012, Fuzhou, Fujian province.

by organizing a farmers’ market. 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 soap.<sup>14</sup>

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 characteristics of the people—housewives with children—who founded several major buying clubs in China.<sup>15</sup> 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” elements.<sup>16</sup> 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 Heartland holds, it is hard to judge whether more buying clubs emerging in the future would promote these principles to the same extent. In addition, it is a huge challenge for the small number of initiators to effectively communicate their ethical values to the rapidly growing members, whose primary motivation for joining the buying club is simply to have access to safe and healthy food.

### 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 m<sup>2</sup>) and provide advice to urbanites who are keen to grow their own organic vegetables (similar to community garden plots in North America). These urbanites usually proudly call themselves “weekend peasants” or “mini landlords” (Little Donkey Farm 2012). They visit their plots at least once every weekend. One explanation for this trend since 2008 is the

<sup>14</sup> Interview with founders of Green Heartland, 30 April 2012, Chengdu, Sichuan province.

<sup>15</sup> Two other prominent buying clubs in China, the Green League Mums’ Buying Club and the Shanghai Caituan, were founded by and comprised mostly of housewives.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with the founder of Beijing Green League Mum’s Buying Club, 9 April 2012, Beijing.

popularity among Chinese white collar workers of Happy Farm (China Agriculture Information Web 2013), 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 motivations 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 find that renting a plot is a good way to relive their nostalgia about the old times, educate their children in the countryside, feel 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 an environment of an extreme lack of trust of food producers and processors. Responses from a diverse range of interviewees reinforced this point. Second, the form of plot renting that entails renting a small piece of land is also linked 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 is distributed among its collective village members. This imposes a great challenge for CSA operators to acquire consolidated areas of farmland. Accordingly, plots rented to urbanites are 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 moved to the city to live with their children, many of whom are the first “migrant worker” generation in cities. Detachment from land leads to an “emotional vacancy” for the seniors trying

to fit into city life (Little Donkey Farm 2012). Renting a plot, albeit quite different from their former farming experience, is one solution. This social context defines plot renting as a Chinese alternative food initiative, but one that is quite distinct from western types of AFNs.

### Situating alternativeness 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, 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. These elements are reflected in AFNs and are recognized by consumers to varying extents.

Our case studies revealed that AFNs in China demonstrated uneven extent of these elements of alternativeness. Within the Chinese political economy, there is “an apparently restrictive political environment in which rapid socio-economic and cultural changes are taking place” (Ho and Edmonds 2008, p. 2), many confrontational and transformative strategies embedded within AFNs are adapted. Similar to the cases 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 noted by Whatmore et al. (2003) is not always apparent in the Chinese context. Chinese AFNs, situated within a particular social, political, and economic background, exhibit a very different landscape of alternativeness, as we have shown in the previous section. This context that characterizes AFNs in China is shaped by three key factors.

First, in Chinese government and research circles, there is a narrow understanding of organic farming and a strong “technological managerialism” (Goodman and Goodman 2008), linked to the broader scientism and its manifestations in governmental policies. Consumers tend to consider organic farming merely as a farming practice that provides safe, quality food. There is a widespread concern among Chinese governmental officials and researchers that if too widely adopted, organic agriculture could jeopardize

<sup>17</sup> We have also heard about this ‘weekend farming’ phenomenon in Japan and South Korea (Los Angeles Times 2010; Urban Plant Project Seoul 2010).

national food security by reducing productivity (see Scott et al. 2014). Government policies to support the development of organic agriculture are mainly limited to infrastructural aspects (e.g., subsidies for construction of greenhouses) to promote the scaling up of organic farms rather than improving agronomic production practices. 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 not considered. 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 awareness.<sup>18</sup> Although some attempts by food activists to 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—in terms of a strong concern for the provenance of food—has not yet been widely embraced among ordinary consumers in China, despite being promoted by CSAs, farmers’ markets and buying clubs. 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, in winter in northeast China, means only cabbage, daikon radish, and potatoes. 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 2014). As many CSA farmers acknowledged, shareholders’ main complaints have been about the limited choice of produce. It has posed a key challenge for food activists in China, despite CSA farms, even at their early stage of development, are trying their best to promote the “alternative” practice of eating 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, but this is bound to be a long and difficult process.

The third aspect of context within which Chinese AFNs have evolved is the lack of social justice concerns. Although farmers’ markets and buying clubs organizers in China have an awareness of social justice in opening up opportunities for farmers, consumers who are driving the development of AFNs 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 AFN literature are more a romanticization than a reflection of actual ethical values within AFNs in China. Many buying clubs and farmers’ markets are merely direct procurement channels for many consumers. In many AFNs, trust is not substantially built between producers and consumers, 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.

Despite this lack of trust and social justice, we have seen a strong set of core values among the small number of AFN organizers. Therefore, there is a disconnect in values between the organizers of these AFNs and their customers. This disconnect 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. The lack of strong civil society organizations in China is also a contributing factor. This is consistent 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 limited to date. On the one hand, the organizers 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 initiators include striving to increase communications between producers and consumers in farmers’ markets (orally or in written flyers or online), organizing “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

<sup>18</sup> Interview with a CSA farmer, 2 June 2012, Fuzhou, Fujian province. The farm tried to collect organic food waste from its shareholders in order to make compost but it got little response.

evolving rapidly amid the dynamic interactions between AFN initiators and customers. 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 evolutions in its food system, in terms of recent changes in the sphere of civil society. This paper provides the first systematic characterization of AFNs in China, thereby providing a counterbalance to the current AFN literature that deals mainly with industrialized market economies. Our identification of the four major types of AFNs in China—CSAs (including certified and uncertified organic farms), farmers' markets, buying clubs, and recreational garden plot rentals—builds on the scholarship on AFNs by providing new observations, some of which are consistent with and some of which contrast with already documented experiences of AFNs.

We argue that the critiques of AFNs' alternativeness can be addressed by further unpacking the major dimensions of alternativeness into more specific elements. In so doing, we provide an analytical framework to scrutinize AFNs from the perspective of features of food (i.e., healthy, local, seasonal) as well as relationships between consumers and producers, producers and nature, and among producers themselves (i.e., 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 1). 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 people from urban backgrounds. 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; Schumilas 2014), 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. In contrast to AFNs in the west, other elements of alternativeness associated with AFNs were 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," among other elements of alternativeness, conveys "weaker alternative systems," in Watts et al.'s (2005, p. 30) words. Thus, Chinese AFNs face genuine threats of "incorporation and subordination" within conventional food provision channels. Third, besides the different elements of "alternativeness," 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 making in CSA operations.

This paper also identified a potential value inconsistency between AFN initiators and 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 and health concerns. Therefore, food activists in China are trying to cater to consumer concerns while also promoting a wider set of 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.

The "consumer driven" feature also shapes the alternativeness significantly by pitching the core attributes of alternative food initiatives as meeting food safety requirements while ecological and social values are given less prominence. 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 reconnecting with the land and with others. And CSA participants also demonstrate a certain level of ecological awareness. But these values are weaker compared to the interest in healthfulness of food within these initiatives.

Despite the limited alternativeness in Chinese AFNs, cyber space—especially *weibo* (Chinese for 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 in the contested discourses, or the problematization of alternative values, within these AFNs. The uneven alternativeness that we analyzed in this paper is a result of this adaptation. Nevertheless, debates are ongoing, and the power dynamics within this adaptation are changing rapidly. How Chinese AFNs will evolve in the coming years is yet to be unveiled.

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