



Producers' transition to alternative food practices in rural China: social mobilization and cultural reconstruction in the formation of alternative economies

Qian Forrest Zhang¹

Accepted: 3 September 2023 / Published online: 21 September 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

The shift from the conventional agri-food system to alternative practices is a challenging transition for agricultural producers, yet surprisingly under-studied. Little research has examined the social and cultural processes in rural communities that mobilize producers and construct and sustain producer-driven alternative food networks (AFNs). For AFNs to go beyond just offering “alternative foods” or “alternative networks” and to be constructed as “alternative economies”, this transformation in the producer community is indispensable. This paper presents a case study of a rural cooperative in Shanxi, China. The discontent with both productivist agriculture and the social decay in communities motivated a group of women to engage in a decade-long process of social mobilization, cultural reconstruction, and learning by experimentation. Through this, they developed an alternative vision and successfully created a localized alternative socio-economic model, which I call “anti-productivism”. It prioritizes ecological sustainability, self-reliance, reciprocity, and cultural values over output maximization, productivity growth, commodity exchange, and monetary gains. This case contrasts sharply with the urban-initiated, consumer-driven AFNs studied in the China literature, which mostly just offered alternative foods but brought little change to the producer community. It shows that the *alternative economy* must be embedded in an *alternative community* united by strong social bonds and shared cultural values.

Keywords Alternative food networks (AFN) · Alternative economies · Productivism · Cooperatives · Moral economy · Agroecology

Abbreviations

AFN Alternative food networks
FSCL Farmers' Specialized Cooperatives Law
NRRM New Rural Reconstruction Movement

Introduction

In alternative food networks (AFN), the participating producers must have certain attributes—at the very least, using ecological or traditional farming or processing methods to produce organic or artisanal products (Watts et al. 2005).

In some cases, this type of traditional producers still exists in the marginal agricultural areas and can be recruited into AFNs (Bellante 2017; Sage 2003). But in a context where the industrial and productivist agricultural regime has become economically dominant and ideologically hegemonic, the construction of AFNs would require conventional producers to transition out of the dominant system and culturally re-orient and materially retool themselves to become alternative producers. We do not need to be farmers to know that this “secession” (Kloppenburger et al. 1996) from the dominant system is financially risky and technically challenging, especially when pursued on an individual basis. This then raises the question: what motivates and, more importantly, enables producers to make this transition to alternative food practices?

This question has not been adequately addressed in the literature. In most studies of AFNs, the cases were either formed through consumer-driven processes (e.g., Bellante

✉ Qian Forrest Zhang
forrestzhang@smu.edu.sg

¹ School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, 10 Canning Rise, 179873 Singapore, Singapore

2017; Martindale 2021; Rosol 2020; Si et al. 2015; Zhong et al. 2022), which then recruited producers into the networks, or based in an area where such producers were already present (e.g., Feagan and Henderson 2009; Ilbery and Maye 2005; Jarosz 2008; Sage 2003). In this consumer-focused literature, as Beingessner and Fletcher (2020, p. 130) point out, the availability of producers of alternative foods is often taken for granted. When AFNs are just about producing alternative *foods*, especially when these foods command higher prices, then producers' transition into these AFNs can be a reactive process of responding to consumer demands and done through simply making changes in farming methods. Even large, conventional producers and retailers can participate in AFNs when they start producing and distributing "quality" foods for higher profits (Buck et al. 1997; Goodman and Goodman 2007; Ilbery and Kneafsey 1999; Winter 2003).

There are, however, a wide variety of "alternative systems of food provision" that "exist along a spectrum, from weaker to stronger" (Watts et al. 2005, p.27), varying in their ability to resist incorporation into the conventional system. AFNs that focus only on alternative *food*—foods that have higher or special quality, such as organic, artisanal, or locally produced (Ilbery and Kneafsey 1999; Winter 2003)—are a weaker form than those that emphasize the alternative *networks* through which food passes (Watts et al. 2005). In two recent publications, Marit Rosol (Rosol 2020; Rosol and Barbosa 2021) further advocates bringing in "alternative economies", characterized by a set of alternative economic practices, as the "third pillar"—in addition to alternative *food* and alternative *networks*—in the conceptualization of the alterity of AFNs. In this view, AFNs in the strongest form are constructed as "alternative economies" and require not just changes to the products (as material outcomes) and the distributive networks (as institutional arrangements), but more importantly, social and cultural changes to all actors involved—producers, intermediaries, and consumers—so that they have "various degrees of disengagement from the existing food system" and become embedded in "commensal communities" (Kloppenborg et al. 1996, pp. 37–38).

Rosol's proposal, however, does not discuss what conditions would enable the creation of AFNs as alternative economies. This study addresses this question and extends this line of research. I argue that the most crucial but also challenging step in the formation of an alternative food economy is the transformation of the producers. In fact, the reason that most AFNs do not constitute alternative economies is precisely that the producers involved have not adopted alternative economic practices (Pole and Gray 2013; Rosol 2020). Conventional producers have all kinds of lock-ins with the dominant agri-food system, and their livelihoods

depend on it. The secession from the conventional system and transition into an alternative economy therefore is often motivated not purely by instrumental considerations, but also driven by moral convictions. In addition, at least in the Chinese context where individual producers' scales are all too small, creating an economically viable AFN is a collective action that requires social mobilization and community building. Therefore, when forming or joining these strong variants of AFNs, conventional producers must first adopt changes in social relationships and moral values and undergo a social-cultural transformation to become "alternative producers".

In the AFN literature, however, few studied the experiences of the producer-driven formation of AFNs (for an exception, see Rosol and Barbosa 2021), and an in-depth analysis of the complex dynamics of producers' transition to alternative food practices is still missing. To fill this gap, this paper presents a case study of a comprehensive rural cooperative in Shanxi Province, China and examines the social mobilization and cultural reconstruction that reversed social decay in the community, created an alternative economic model that includes an AFN, and transformed conventional commercial farmers into "alternative producers". Before I get into the empirical analysis, the next three sections first review the literature on agricultural producers in AFNs and the conceptualization of alternative economies, discuss the rise of a productivist agricultural regime and, partly in response to it, the growth of AFNs in China, and introduce the research methods.

Re-centering producers in alternative food economies

Producers and consumers in AFNs

Alternative food networks (AFN) refer to a range of new practices of food provision that, in response to environmental, health, justice, and ethical concerns from both producers and consumers, seek to address problems that arose from the current industrial, productivist agri-food system (Jarosz 2008; Renting et al. 2003; Rosol and Barbosa 2021; Si et al. 2015; Watts et al. 2005). In the Global North, where AFNs first emerged and proliferated, most studies focus on either how consumer demands drive the emergence and development of AFNs (e.g., Renting et al. 2003; Rosol 2020) or consumers' perceptions of AFNs and motivations in participating (e.g., Feldmann and Hamm 2015; Pole and Gray 2013). In this literature, the availability of producers of alternative foods is often taken for granted (Beingessner and Fletcher 2020). In some cases, alternative producers are already present, and no question is asked about how they

became so. In other cases, producers are implicitly seen as reactive: when consumer demands for alternative foods rise and distributive channels are created, producers will respond positively to market signals and can be recruited into AFNs.

A much smaller number of studies have empirically examined the experiences of alternative producers in AFNs. Research in this literature typically focuses on either producers' motivations for joining AFNs (Beingessner and Fletcher 2020; Charatsari et al. 2018; Ilbery and Maye 2005; Jarosz 2008) or their perceptions of and relationships with other participants in AFNs (Albrecht and Smithers 2018; Feagan and Henderson 2009; Sage 2003).

Producers' motivations for forming or joining AFNs are diverse. Some are primarily driven by instrumental considerations—for example, to escape the “squeeze” in conventional markets created by rising production costs and declining revenues (Renting et al. 2003). In many cases studied in the Global North, however, the formation of AFNs often has a “social movement” character (Buck et al. 1997) and is motivated by the ecological and social justice visions of the participants (Jarosz 2008). For this reason, in addition to the desired quality attributes of the alternative products, participants of AFNs also seek to establish new environmental practices, consumer-producer relationships, and alternative distributive networks. More comprehensive studies of producers in AFNs have shown that political and social visions play a key role in some farmers' participation in AFNs and that these goals can have conflicts with economic realities (Beingessner and Fletcher 2020; Jarosz 2008; Feagan and Henderson 2009).

In addition to finding the heterogeneity in producers' motivations and practices, studies have also shown that producers' practices in farming and in interacting with consumers are also varied and are shaped by their motivations of participating in AFNs. When producers are recruited by consumers and, when joining AFNs, are responding to market demands and prioritizing economic feasibility, this instrumental orientation tends to elicit practices that are inconsistent with the ecological and social-justice goals in the idealized notions of AFNs, making these weaker variants of AFNs more susceptible to conventionalization (Goodman and Goodman 2007; Ilbery and Maye 2005). In contrast, when producers join or create AFNs for social and political motivations, they show firmer rejection of the conventional system and greater commitment to alternative ideals and practices, leading to more socially and ecologically sustainable outcomes from these stronger variants of AFNs (Beingessner and Fletcher 2020; Feagan and Henderson 2009).

A hypothesis that emerges from these studies is that the stronger variants of AFNs cannot just recruit producers motivated purely by instrumental considerations, but

require those who are culturally committed to the AFNs' alternative values and socially embedded in a commensal community. Therefore, for this type of AFNs to become successful, a social-cultural transformation of conventional producers must first take place to create a community of alternative producers, united by strong social bonds and shared cultural values.

Transforming producers, constructing alternative economies

To my knowledge, none of the existing studies of alternative producers has examined empirically the cultural and social processes through which producers develop alternative visions and social-political motivations and build an AFN to pursue those. Jarosz (2008) advocates an analytical approach of AFNs that focuses on processes rather than attributes and sees AFNs as emerging from political, cultural and historical processes. The processes she refers to are macro-level, structural processes such as urbanization and rural restructuring; those I focus on here are community-level processes of social mobilization and cultural reconstruction.

There is a consensus in the literature that AFNs share some fundamental characteristic on the production side. Minimally, these include a smaller scale of production and the use of organic inputs and ecologically friendly farming methods. A broader set of characteristics further includes independent family ownership, the practice of multi-cropping, on-farm vertical integration and diversification, and reliance on either household labor or non-monetary labor exchange. In a conventional agri-food system dominated by large-scale, mono-cropping industrial agriculture that relies on chemical inputs, wage labor and agribusiness intermediation with markets, these alternative practices are, at best, economically inefficient and, at worst, irrational (at least in the short run and in the absence of assured market premiums for alternative products), hence the economic struggles that many alternative producers face (Bellante 2017; Feagan and Henderson 2009; Jarosz 2008). Therefore, these alternative practices are only sustainable when underpinned by an alternative economy and adopted by producers who embrace a set of alternative values other than income maximization. These heterodox cultural orientations and economic practices are antithetical to the tenets of the neoliberal, industrial agri-food system, and therefore, cannot be taken for granted to be naturally present in some producer populations. Instead, they must be deliberately cultivated and mobilized. As Kloppenburg et al. (1996) put it, it takes the active efforts of producers to “secede” from the conventional system and “carve out insulated spaces in which to maintain or create alternatives” (p.37).

Different approaches have been proposed to conceptualize what constitute an “alternative economy” (Gibson-Graham 2008; Holloway et al. 2007; Kloppenburg et al. 1996; Rosol 2020). Two aspects are the most important. First, an alternative economy should be structured as a *moral economy* in the sense that economic activities are guided not purely by the profit motive, calculated self-interest, and market forces, but instead equally by social and moral principles. For alternative food economies, these guiding principles include ecological sustainability, biodiversity, community solidarity, and seeing food and nature as more than just commodities and food production as meeting human needs rather than market demands. Second, an alternative economy requires *community building*. Kloppenburg et al. (1996, p.37) conceptualize this as the formation of “commensal communities”, in which the social linkage both between people (producers and consumers) and between people and the land is properly established or reinstalled. Social relationship within the community is based on trust and reciprocity, rather than self-interest and atomistic market relationships. The centrality of these two aspects to the alternative economy is manifested in the consistent emphasis on *embeddedness* in the studies of AFNs (e.g., Hinrichs 2000; Sage 2003; Winter 2003). Embeddedness, as Hinrichs (2000) tries to unpack by drawing the distinction in degrees of marketness and instrumentalism, manifests in two ways: embedded in community relationships (i.e., social and non-price considerations counteract price considerations—marketness—in economic transactions) and embedded in moral principles and cultural values (i.e., instrumentalism is reined in by moral considerations in individuals’ economic motivations).

The construction of alternative economies, therefore, comprises the two parallel processes of *cultural reconstruction* and *social mobilization*. Cultural reconstruction creates a set of cultural values and moral principles in which economic practices will be embedded and individual motivations rooted; social mobilization builds reciprocity, trust, and social bonds among people and unite them in a commensal community, changing their relationships from impersonal market transactions to social solidarity. These processes create a *producer community* united by strong social bonds and shared moral values, in which the alternative economy—either created by the producers, extended to them by consumers, or jointly constructed—will be embedded. In terms of the specific economic practices, an alternative economy is characterized by its mode of exchange (e.g., reciprocal exchanges over market transactions), working practices (e.g., family labor over wage labor), production principles (e.g., ecological sustainability over output maximization), property ownership (e.g., prioritizing collective ownership), economic organization (e.g., cooperatives),

and forms of financing (e.g., credit cooperatives and crowdfunding) (Rosol 2020). The case analysis presented below documents the social and cultural processes of constructing a “commensal community” of alternative producers, committed to a set of moral values and cultural goals, which then adopted the full set of alternative economic practices.

Productivist agriculture and AFNs in China

Various frameworks have been proposed to conceptualize the dominant agri-food system in the Global North (i.e., the “conventional”), including industrial agriculture, corporate food regime, neoliberal food system, and productivist agricultural regime. This is not the place to comprehensively review the merit of each framework, but I argue that “productivist agricultural regime” (or productivism in short) fits the Chinese case better. Despite the rapid growth of large-scale producers in the past two decades, a key difference between China and countries in the Global North is the dominance of smallholders in the agricultural sector, whose minuscule scale (typically less than one hectare) limits the use of farm machines; hence the misfit with the term “industrial agriculture”. Further, Chinese agriculture remains dominated by domestic companies and directed by the national government, while transnational agribusinesses have a far smaller presence than in other countries, making it less subordinated to the global corporate food regime.

A productivist agricultural regime is characterized by “a commitment to an intensive, industrially driven and expansionist agriculture with state support based primarily on output and increased productivity” (Lowe et al. 1993, p. 221). Studies have shown that the agricultural regime in China today meets most of the criteria of productivism (Chen et al. 2017; Zhang 2022). This regime is built around the goal of maximizing agricultural output and productivity and receives extensive financial support from the state, primarily motivated by its concern with national food security. The institutional changes that took place in the past two decades in areas such as land rights and environmental regulation also promote the entry of agribusinesses into agriculture, which the central state believes are more capable of using technology to boost output and productivity (Yan and Chen 2013; Zhang and Donaldson 2008). Although the national policy discourse acknowledges the persistence of smallholding family farmers as a long-term phenomenon, the national development strategy is clearly treating these small-scale producers as both a remnant from a backward past and an obstacle to the productivist project of “agricultural modernization” (Day 2008; Day and Schneider 2018). More broadly, the conceptualization of the rural is also primarily based on the understanding of the rural as a space for

agriculture (Chen et al. 2017). Productivism in rural China, therefore, extends beyond agricultural production and creates a productivist spatial regime through spatial planning and practices (Zhang 2022).

Research on rural China has long noted a range of problems that have plagued rural communities and Chinese agriculture, including the declining quality and safety of foods (Si et al. 2015), increasing incidence and severity of crop diseases (Wang et al. 2022), environmental degradation caused by intensified agriculture (Chen et al. 2017), exodus of smallholders from agriculture driven by unfavourable government policies and intensified competition from agribusinesses (Zhang and Zeng 2021), and depopulation and social decay (Ye et al. 2013). The rise of the productivist agriculture is a major cause of these problems. Reformative efforts intended to address these problems have been initiated by the central government but have also sprung up spontaneously in the civil society (Si and Scott 2019). The rise of AFNs, including community-supported agriculture (CSA), farmers' markets, buying clubs, ecological farms, and recreational farm rentals, is one of such responses driven by the discontents with the productivist agricultural regime (Si et al. 2015).

In the review of AFN practices in China by Si et al. (2015), which remains the most comprehensive to date on this issue, the authors identified four characteristics of AFNs in China: strongly consumer-driven, primarily by their demands for healthy foods, with extremely limited participation of rural farmers, which then resulted in a low degree of alterity and neglect of social justice concerns. With regard to the producers involved in AFNs, more recent studies have also found that the majority of them are the back-to-land new farmers from non-agricultural backgrounds (Xie 2021; Zhong et al. 2022). The minimal number of rural farmers involved in AFNs are recruited by the urban initiators of AFNs, sometimes hired as wage workers by the urban elites who rented farmland in the countryside to operate organic farms (Martindale 2021). In terms of providing alternatives to the dominant productivist agricultural regime, the AFNs studied in the China literature mainly just provide alternative *foods* to a more affluent and better educated segment of the urban consumer population, who generally have little awareness of social justice issues such as the cultural and social decay in farming communities or interest in alternative economic practices. As a result of this instrumental orientation of consumers, most Chinese AFNs are weak and face serious threats of incorporation and subordination from the conventional agri-food system.

So far, none of the studies of AFNs in China has examined either the experiences of rural farmers shifting from productivist agriculture to AFNs or a case of producer-initiated AFN and the social and cultural processes that made

it possible. In China, producers who want to secede from productivist agriculture and start an AFN face an extra layer of challenge—their small scales. Elsewhere—for example, in Feagan and Henderson's (2009) Canadian case—when a 17-ha. farm is large enough to supply a variety of produce to a community of consumers, the transition to AFN can be an individual action. But in China, when the scale of individual farms is so small (< 1 ha.), for the alternative production to be economically viable, one needs to either rent in a large amount of farmland, which is only financially feasible to investors with capital accumulation from non-agricultural sources (Zhang and Zeng 2021), or mobilize a community of smallholders and make the transition as a collective action. This makes cultural reconstruction and social mobilization in the producer community all the more important to the emergence and development of AFNs in China.

Methods

This study focuses on a comprehensive rural cooperative, the Riverbend Cooperative,¹ in Shanxi Province in northern China. Riverbend now has a rural membership base of over 3,800 farming households across 43 natural villages in two neighbouring townships and operates a direct sales network that reaches over 8,000 urban member households in two cities. I conducted three field trips in October 2015, September 2016, and July 2018, each lasting around a week. My research methods include semi-structured and open-ended interviews with key informants and participant observations in meetings, training sessions, and other social and economic activities. In total, I conducted 24 in-depth interviews, all in Chinese, with managerial staff and trainees of the cooperative (n = 13), ordinary farming members (n = 4), non-member villagers (n = 2), urban household members (n = 3), and external suppliers (n = 2). I also participated in two internal meetings of the Cooperative's managerial committee, two training sessions that the Cooperative conducted for university student trainees, and a focus group discussion between Cooperative staff and a group of scholars. I observed the operation of various functional branches of the Cooperative, including two elderly care centers, two child-care centers, the training school, the guest house, an agricultural supply distribution center, a members' dining hall, and various sites of agricultural production. In addition to the primary data collection, I also referenced materials from other research teams who also studied this case, including the transcript of a meeting organized by an NGO in Beijing (Nonghe Family) in July 2012, in which the founder presented and discussed the Riverbend case, the transcript of

¹ All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

an interview conducted by an activist group, People's Food Sovereignty (2016), with the founder in July 2016, and a report co-authored by a team of Chinese scholars (Zhou et al. 2020). Their observations are highly consistent with mine.

For the managerial staff members of the cooperative, including the founder herself, the interviews tried to find out key events in the history of the cooperative, their evolving understandings and motivations, and the current operational details. The founder has given multiple talks about the cooperative's experiences to various audiences and been interviewed frequently by researchers. In the two interviews I had with her and the one focus group discussion I participated, I noticed that her account, after so many repetitions, has become more scripted—for example, following the same sequence and using the same expressions in describing a certain event at different occasions. Her account certainly has gone through a subjective reconstruction, and is selectively presented. Her recollection of key events has been confirmed by the interviews with other members as well as non-member villagers, although they sometimes used different vocabularies. Her account has also remained consistent over the six-year period—from the first talk I can find in 2012 to my most recent interview in 2018. By triangulating the staff's account with other interviews, I was able to detect two minor discrepancies (one about the use of chemical fertilizer, the other about the dismissal of an experienced manager), but other than those, the rest are consistent. In the narrative analysis of the Riverbend Cooperative's experiences presented next, most of the collective events were confirmed by multiple sources, while individual experiences came from interviews with the relevant party.

The riverbend cooperative: transforming the producer community, building an alternative economy

Catching up on the productivist treadmill and arresting social decay

Riverbend is a natural village located in southern Shanxi Province near the Yellow River. Twenty-five years ago, agricultural practices in this village were no different from those in other parts of rural China. Villagers were increasingly shifting to non-farm wage jobs, which often involved migration to cities, to earn higher cash income. To reduce labour use in agriculture, the traditional practice of diversified agriculture was replaced with intensive monoculture—mostly of wheat, maize, cotton, asparagus, and fruits—that relied heavily on chemical inputs.

One of several agricultural supply stores in the village was run by a young couple; the wife, Shufen Han, also worked as a teacher at the local primary school. Noticing that farmers who bought agrochemicals from her store lacked knowledge about how to best use them, Shufen thought it would be helpful to organize a technical training session for them. For two months in late 1998, she visited more than eighty farmers in a dozen villages, whom she knew were serious about technology use, and gauged their interests in such a training session. Encouraged by the positive responses, she then, with the help from one of her fertilizer suppliers, managed to find two researchers from two agricultural universities in the region who agreed to come. When the training session took place on an unusually cold winter day in December, to Shufen's surprise, more than 400 people turned up. The reception of the training session was so positive and the demand for more so high that Shufen felt obliged to continue with this and turn it into a quarterly event.

At this point, it had not yet occurred to Shufen to reflect on why experienced farmers were in such dire need of technical support or what this continued intensification of the use of industrial inputs would do to farmers' livelihoods. On the contrary, just like other farmers, she was optimistic that the better use of technology would help farmers boost productivity and raise income.

In 1999, she quit her schoolteacher job and devoted herself to delivering the promise of providing four quarterly training sessions. With help from the county government's Women's Federation, which invited instructors from several government agencies and the local science community to conduct training for free, Shufen successfully reached her goal that year. The training raised farmers' technical competence, but also increased their appetite for greater use of industrial inputs and emboldened their embrace of productivist agricultural practices. By 2000, after running regular training sessions for two years, sales at Shufen's shop had increased by 20 times, a clear indication of the deepening of the productivist agricultural regime in the area.

As is well known in studies of productivist agriculture, producers' integration into markets creates "produced exposure" to market risks and increases their exposure to economic precarity—a new form of vulnerability (Rigg et al. 2016). Farmers in the area and the Hans were soon made to pay for this increased vulnerability to market risks. In the fall 2000 harvesting season, a glut of asparagus hit the market, and the price dropped sharply from last year's peak. The Hans were not insulated from the market risks, as many of the asparagus farmers, who had been their long-term customers, purchased supplies with store credit. When they failed to sell their produce, they either could not or chose not to pay the arrears owed to the Hans. The couple quickly

piled up hundreds of thousands of *yuan*² of debt, owed to their industrial suppliers. Soon, suppliers filed lawsuits against them.

To Shufen, the way out of this impasse came unexpectedly: she suffered a serious injury in a car accident and had to be hospitalized for a month. This misfortune made it inappropriate for creditors and their lawyers to press her any harder. They then agreed to extend the repayment period, giving her a much-needed reprieve.

During the period when she was recovering from the accident, Shufen had been thinking about how her good intentions of helping farmers gain technical knowledge unexpectedly ended in this outcome, but no answer transpired. During a visit to her sister, who lived in a big city in another province, she encountered a curious but inescapable sight that can be found in any Chinese city at night: large crowds of people, mostly women, gathered in public places and danced in sync to music blasting out from loudspeakers. She was both puzzled by how spontaneous yet well-organized these nightly dancing sessions were and envious of the active and seemingly carefree lifestyle enjoyed by urban women.

Upon returning home, she set her mind on spreading the urban hobby of public dancing to Riverbend. She again sought help from the Women's Federation, which sent a kindergarten teacher to teach them a fitness dance adapted from the traditional harvest dance. Shufen persuaded five close female friends to join as group leaders, who each then recruited three group members. When the first dancing session took place in Shufen's front yard, the 24 women were surprised to find that a much larger crowd of spectators had gathered and expressed their disapproval of this outlandish behavior with ridicule and laughter. Rumors soon spread, and participants' willingness began to waver. Shufen begged everyone to carry on for at least a month. She was proven right that once a new thing was turned into a regular part of life, acceptance followed. By the end of the month, over 100 middle-aged women in Riverbend had become regular participants in the nightly dancing sessions.

The dancing women at Riverbend had quickly become the envy of other women in the area. Shufen recounted that she was surprised to hear one woman from another village expressing her admiration by saying, "these women are really living a life!" They then responded to this enthusiasm by going to neighboring villages to organize dancing sessions. Like a wildfire, the dancing quickly spread to ten, and then thirty, and eventually forty-three villages across the county, regularly joined by over 1,000 women at multiple locations.

At the time, Shufen could not have known how empowering this social mobilization was to rural women and how important the core group of activists who emerged during it would be to the later developments at Riverbend. The dancing sessions organized women, gave them a collective voice, and emboldened them to become a leading social force in the villages. The enthusiasm with which village women embraced the dancing sessions also put in sharp relief the bleak social life that had prevailed before. Like many rural communities in China, Riverbend suffered from the social decay caused by rapid urbanization, rural de-industrialization, and political instability (Zhang et al. 2015). As factional conflicts between lineage groups had paralyzed village elections and incapacitated the elected Village Committee, village governance was in disarray and public goods provision neglected. The exodus of the most able-bodied and educated portion of the rural population to migratory jobs drained rural areas of their vitality and left behind an ageing and feminized population, creating various strains in family relationships (Ye et al. 2013). In terms of social life, during the long idle season that came with the productivist mono-cropping, women gathered in generational groups and gossiped about their female in-laws, while men drank and gambled; domestic disharmony often followed.

Emboldened by the success from organizing the dancing sessions and determined to enliven social life in Riverbend, Shufen and her colleagues rolled out a series of other social activities in the following two years, including study sessions, sports events, and debate contests. In 2004, they formed a Women's Cultural Centre, which was later renamed Women's Association. The Association then turned its efforts to public goods provision and expanded to mobilize the entire village population. It started with the issue of public hygiene in the village. Waste disposal has been a problem plaguing rural communities in China in recent decades (Zeng et al. 2015). Riverbend was no exception: solid waste of all sorts had overflowed from the limited number of dumpsters and been accumulated on the roadside for years. In late 2004, the Association mobilized the entire village and, within three days, cleared up all the garbage. It also organized an election for a village council; the council then mobilized resources and organized villagers to pave all the alleyways in the village, completed in 65 days in 2005. These events not only brought men into the collective action and delivered direct benefits to everyone, but also clearly demonstrated to all—in a visually striking way—the efficacy of villagers' self-organization.

In the second half of 2005, having recently learned about agricultural cooperatives from attending a training organized by some scholar-activists, Shufen decided to return to where she had previously fallen: agricultural production.

² One *yuan* is approximately US\$0.15.

She was convinced that once the socially organized villagers in Riverbend formed agricultural cooperatives, expanding their scale of production, pooling resources to allow for technological and capital upgrading, and strengthening their bargaining power in markets, farmers' productivity, output, and income would all rise, and they could gain greater economic security in productivist agriculture.

Seven specialized cooperatives were soon formed. These included a handicraft cooperative formed by seven female-headed households, an organic produce cooperative that pooled together over 800 *mu*³ of land from 175 farming households, an industrial cooperative formed by 75 households that produced paint, a cooperative bakery formed by 12 households, and three supply-and-sales cooperatives, each specializing in one type of agricultural supply.

By late 2007, however, in just two years, all seven had failed and been disbanded unceremoniously. While each faced certain unique challenges, overall, the failures were the result of a common set of obstacles that all rural cooperatives across China faced, including lack of start-up capital and technology, the conflict between farmers' short-term needs and the cooperative's long process of maturation, lack of managerial experiences, and free riding by members (Hu et al. 2022). In addition to these internal issues, small farmers' cooperatives also faced insurmountable external challenges inherent to the productivist agricultural regime, such as their subjugation to unfavorable terms of trade in the supply chain and exposure to risks on both input and output markets.

To make things worse, in these two years, as the Women's Association devoted all their attention to developing the cooperatives, their regular activities such as dancing, study sessions, and garbage collection had all been put on hold. The team of activists that had grown over the years had also become demoralized from this experience. As economic conflicts and disputes arose from the failed cooperative endeavors, discord and distrust grew among cooperative members and drove many away from the organization.

Rebuilding community, reshaping values

The year of 2008, for Shufen and her colleagues, was another year spent in reflection and learning. After multiple rounds of internal discussion among the leadership team, two lessons emerged. First, bringing young people back to villages was crucial for sustaining the vitality of rural communities. Second, more importantly, social services and community building, not economic goals, should be the priority. The ups and downs of the past ten years made it abundantly clear to them that social activities generated solidarity, but

commercial pursuits bred discord. A new vision of constructing an alternative economy, guided by social principles and based on community solidarity, started to take shape. The group decided to embark on a two-pronged project: on the one hand, re-building the community through providing social services and moral education; on the other, adopting a set of alternative economic practices in agricultural production and distribution. These two processes, which are analyzed in this and the next section, respectively, unfolded in parallel, mutually reinforcing each other.⁴

After this collective soul-searching, the organization devoted its full attention to organization building in the next couple of years. Adult children of the core leadership, most of whom had been working in nearby cities, were the first batch of young people recruited back. Others followed. A new organizational structure was put in place. At the top, a nine-member Managing Committee oversaw all the operations and made most managerial decisions collectively. A seven-member Supervisory Committee, consisting of the six women who first led the dancing groups plus one young member, provided supervision and strategic advice.⁵ Underneath this was a grid structure consisting of eight functional departments and twelve residential clusters. For each residential cluster, which usually spanned two to four neighboring villages, one cluster head was put in charge, who coordinated the operations of the eight functional departments in that area. Among the eight functional departments, the joint cooperative was the biggest one. It was staffed by, among others, 18 "instructors", each working with around 200 member households spread across three to five villages, supervising production and providing services.

With young blood infused into the organization and a rationalized organizational structure in place, the newly formed Riverbend Cooperative⁶ started a concerted effort to provide a range of social services to villagers. In 2009, the Cooperative began a new project of providing care services

⁴ To facilitate the presentation of the arguments, I separate these two sections thematically instead of following a chronological order. Events within each section are presented chronologically.

⁵ Since 2012, after this new governance structure was put in place, Shufen has largely withdrawn from operational management and is devoting more time to outreach and educational activities. In early 2017, she stepped down from the Directorship of the Supervisory Committee and was succeeded by a 30-year-old woman.

⁶ For simplicity, I use Riverbend to refer to both the village, from which all the activities started, and the organization that has now grown far beyond that one village. The organization, now with a complex structure described above, calls itself a "Community", but it's officially registered as a joint cooperative, consisting of 22 member cooperatives. The Community has member households in 43 villages; but in any given village, not all households have joined it; the participation rate ranges from 30 to 95%. To avoid confusion with the loosely used term of "village community", I will instead refer to the Riverbend Community as the Cooperative or simply Riverbend.

³ *Mu* is a traditional measurement of area used widely in rural China. Fifteen *mu* equals one hectare.

to the growing elderly population in the villages. Houses abandoned by emigrants were renovated and used to house care facilities. The care work was done by a selected group of physically active elderly people (aged 55 to 65) from the same village, who were paid a monthly wage of 300 *yuan*. The Cooperative charged a modest fee—200 *yuan* per month—to cover expenses and insisted that, in accordance with the moral principles of filial piety, the elderly people were not allowed to pay for themselves; instead, all their adult children must share the cost. By 2018, the elderly care service had expanded to 13 villages. Encouraged by this success, the Cooperative also set up daycare centers. Once they had gained more experience in childcare and education, they began to organize summer camps for children from nearby cities and towns, who, in a 20-day period during the summer holidays, would live in the villages, learn traditional cultural values, and participate in handicraft making and agricultural practices.

In the process of caring for the elderly, staff noticed that many of them had difficulties adjusting to the modern lifestyle—many were illiterate, let alone having digital literacy—which resulted in social isolation and a diminished sense of self-esteem. They were highly skillful in traditional handicrafts, such as spinning, weaving, embroidery, and paper-cutting, but these skills were disregarded and devalued. In response, the Cooperative set up handicraft workshops in some of the elderly care facilities, where traditional handlooms collected from villagers were preserved, and elderly people made handicrafts as part of their daily leisure activities. These products soon became popular for use in funerals, weddings, and other festival activities, but their fabrication was not commercially oriented.

In 2012, the organization resumed the garbage collection services that it had first started in 2004. The services had been discontinued in 2007 when local governments, under the nationwide Building a Socialist New Countryside project, had begun to fund garbage collection done by outside commercial providers. The government funding, however, had dwindled over the years and eventually stopped in 2011. After getting used to leaving the work to others, villagers had lost the appetite for doing garbage collection and disposal on their own. The Cooperative had to opt for a new model. Instead of mobilizing villagers to volunteer, it now collected a nominal fee—one *yuan* per month from each household (later raised to two *yuan*)—and then provided garbage collection and disposal services. Initially, the fee collection had been difficult. At Riverbend Village, where they started, after two months' work, they had only collected the fee from 60% of the 300 plus households. Seeing how troublesome this had been, the village authority offered to cover the costs for all households, but the management team resisted. They saw an important value in the fee collection: on the one

hand, staff from the Cooperative would visit each household every month and spend time talking to and getting to know them, which helped build up trust and emotional ties, creating embeddedness; on the other hand, after making a contribution, even just a nominal fee, villagers gained a sense of responsibility and participation and would exercise greater self-restraint when disposing garbage and practicing sorting. In doing so, the Cooperative had in fact inherited an important practice from the Chinese Communist Party's repertoire of revolutionary "mass work" tactics: *mo* (grinding), which involved cadres devoting repeated, painstaking, and sometimes seemingly pointless effort to persuade members of the mass to join a cause, often through gradually grinding down their resistance or simply wearing them out. By 2014, this service model had expanded to 33 villages, and in each village, the work was headed by one young staff member. A team of younger cadres deeply embedded in the communities grew from this process. The garbage collection service, however, had to be discontinued again in 2015, when the county government resumed providing funding for using commercial services.

The Cooperative also devoted efforts to moral education. Initially, the Woman's Association took the lead in combating domestic violence. When a case of domestic violence, typically done by a drunken husband, was reported, a group of women from the Association would then confront the husband, criticize him, and demand apologies and repentance. The Association also intervened in other family disputes such as those between daughters- and mothers-in-law. "Model Families" were identified and honored, and skit shows were staged to re-enact incidents of family disputes to both shame the perpetrators and educate the community. In 2013, the Cooperative began to conduct regular hygiene check-ups on member households, rate their performance, and reward the top 20% in public ceremonies with non-material prizes. Initially, this intrusive measure faced resistance from some members; but through persistence and persuasion, another example of "*mo*", the Cooperative ground down the resistance and transformed household behaviors.

After their failed first attempt at agricultural cooperatives, the management team made the conscious decision to prioritize community building and organization building, which went hand in hand. Through providing social services and moral education in the villages, the Cooperative not only restored its once damaged relationship with some villagers, forged new and strong ties, and gained the trust and goodwill of a large population, but also instilled a set of cultural values such as filial piety, family unity, collective sharing and cooperation, and respect for traditional culture among its members, deeply embedding the organization both socially and morally. The Cooperative had also

accumulated an invaluable knowledge base of member households, knowing in great depth their family relations, personal characters, and economic aspirations and needs. A cohort of young leaders, many of whom had had little knowledge with rural society and agriculture before, also emerged. By 2016, the organization had a full-time staff of over 110, four fifths of whom below 35-years-old. As a result the social mobilization and cultural reconstruction, a new producer community united by shared cultural values and extensive social ties was formed, providing the social and cultural foundation for an alternative economy.

Rejecting productivism, reinventing the food economy

In December 2007, a new piece of national legislation, the Farmers' Specialized Cooperatives Law (FSCL), came into effect, providing legal status to rural cooperatives. The national government rolled out a series of supportive policies, encouraging the creation and development of farmers' cooperatives. A frenzy of setting up cooperatives swept the country.

The rationale that motivated the central government's push for farmers' specialized cooperatives is an unmistakably productivist logic (Hu et al. 2022; Yan and Chen 2013). It was hoped that the cooperatives would pool together the limited resources of multiple farming households and create another mechanism for agricultural production to scale up and become more capital- and technology-intensive. Adopting the productivist model of monoculture, the FSCL also requires that all cooperatives be "specialized" in one agricultural product or service, rather than become comprehensive social organizations.

By late 2008, members of the Riverbend Cooperative, either on their own initiatives or through the organization's coordination, had formed and officially registered 28 cooperatives, each specializing in one agricultural product or service as required by the FSCL, the majority of which were for fruits. While it may seem on the surface that the Cooperative was returning to a path where they had failed just a year before and simply chasing a fad, a different approach was taken this time. In 2008, in their search for solutions, leaders of the cooperative had participated in a variety of training programs on agroecology organized by various NGOs and activist groups. A key actor in this landscape is the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM), a network of scholar activists and local practitioners of agroecology. The NRRM has become the leading advocate of sustainable agriculture based on ecological farming principles (Wen et al. 2012) and served as a hub for knowledge sharing and personnel exchange among AFNs in China (Si and Scott 2016). Both the learning experiences and the

internal reflections resulted in a fundamental shift in the organization's perception of land and approach to agriculture. Shufen's words below express well the organization's rejection of the productivist perception of land simply as an element of production and agriculture as an economic pursuit of commodity production:

"Land is the source of all crops. If we use so much chemical on the land, how could it live well? Just like we humans, we couldn't live well if we take drugs every day.

We are not doing organic farming to make more money; we shouldn't mislead farmers to think that. Instead, we must preserve we farmers' emotional ties with the land and ensure that the land can be forever used."⁷

In operating these cooperatives, Riverbend adopted a set of alternative economic practices, each intentionally selected to counter a productivist principle. The first change is shifting to organic farming. Knowing what a radical departure from the prevailing productivist regime this new model represented, the Cooperative took a gradual approach and started with a land conversion program in 2009. Each farming household who joined was required to first set aside one to five *mu* of land to be converted to organic production. The land conversion would take three years, during which the household, while continuing to farm it, would gradually reduce the use of chemical inputs to zero and shift to only using organic materials. Organic fertilizers came from the composting done by each household, as well as purchases at the Cooperative's supply store. During land conversion, farming output always declined, hurting farmers' income; but after three years, when soil fertility was restored and the use of expensive industrial inputs eliminated, farmers reaped tangible economic returns. After the initial round of trials convinced member households about the benefits of conversion to organic production, the amount of land put under the three-year conversion cycle rapidly increased and reached 9,000 *mu* in 2012.

The second step was to persuade members to shift from the productivist model of monoculture to the traditional practice of multi-cropping. A typical household with 10 *mu* of land was expected to cultivate five different crops—usually a combination of different fruits and vegetables, with a requirement to include wheat to supply their own staple grain. For households raising livestock, the organization would arrange for the internal transfer of 10 *mu* of land to each for wheat production. The wheat farming could be easily done with the help from the farm machinery cooperative,

⁷ Interview, 29 September 2016.

and it not only ensured the self-sufficiency of staple grain for the family, but also produced green fodder for the animals.

Multi-cropping served several important purposes. First, by reducing the scale of any particular crop and having crops with staggered harvesting seasons, it spread out labor time more evenly across the year, making the family self-sufficient in labor supply and eliminating the need for labor hiring. Second, it reduced farmers' exposure to risk of crop failures or market downturns. Third, the multi-cropping helped to restore a healthier local eco-system and reduced the incidence and impact of pests. Finally, multi-cropping helped to facilitate a coordinated withdrawal from markets. In the past, the specialized monoculture was always market-oriented: farmers relied on markets to sell their outputs and buy other essential foods that they did not produce. Multi-cropping reduced such market dependence, as the Cooperative encouraged farmers to prioritize household consumption needs. For surplus food from each household, the organization also coordinated internal exchanges with other members.

These new economic practices were all initiated by the Cooperative's leadership. Participation was voluntary and usually required persistent persuasion by staff members. Here, the organizational structure described earlier played a key role. The 18 "instructors" working under the organic farming cooperative each oversaw about 200 member households. They each first recruited about 10 households who were receptive to organic practices; the 180 households were then given a one-day training each month, and their production needs were closely monitored by the instructors. Once their organic operations became successful, they not only served as demonstration cases to other member households, but were also tasked to provide guidance to others during their transition to organic farming. This cascading model is again adopted from the Chinese Communist Party's repertoire of "mass work" tactics: the practice of "proceeding from point to surface" (*youdian daomian*) through experimentation and model emulation (Heilmann 2008).

The transition to multi-cropping proceeded in a similarly gradual manner. Having gained intimate knowledge about their member households, the instructors were able to provide timely inputs and intervene in farmers' decision making. For example, when a farmer had cut down his peach trees due to declining productivity, the instructor would then discuss with him what new crop should be introduced into his cropping mix, gradually shifting his operation to multi-cropping (People's Food Sovereignty 2016). The trust which they had cultivated in the members from repeated home visits and social interactions was key in making their intervention effective.

By 2016, the Cooperative's agricultural production had reached a scale of 80,000 *mu*, of which over 50,000 *mu*

were members' contract land—the collectively owned land allocated to rural households. All the land remained in the hands of member households, but the Cooperative coordinated their production through providing technical training, purchasing agricultural inputs, supplying farm machines, and selling outputs. The Cooperative coordinated the crop choices by member households to meet a set of organizational goals. These include: 5,000 *mu* each for cotton and rapeseeds, primarily to meet internal needs, 10,000 *mu* of wheat, which, beyond self-consumption, also provided for the 600 livestock farmers, 20,000 *mu* for over a dozen varieties of fruits, and finally, 10,000 for asparagus, a traditional export product of the region. Under this scheme, planning and internal exchange on a community scale to a great extent replaced each individual farmer's dependence on markets.

Members still needed to buy consumer products on the market. The management team had long noticed that the retail shops in rural areas had become a dumping ground for low-quality and fake consumer goods; Shufen's previous experiences in selling agricultural inputs also revealed to her how much profit could be taken by the supply chain. In 2012, the Cooperative started to expand its vertical integration upstream through collective procurement of both agricultural inputs and consumer goods. With a membership base of 3,000 households, it was able to get considerable discounts from wholesalers and ensure product quality.

To further reduce farmers' dependence on external markets, the Cooperative made another bold move in 2014—expanding vertical integration downstream and creating an alternative distributive channel to reach urban consumers. Members of the community all had relatives and friends living in two nearby cities and had long noticed urban residents' strong interests in getting safe and high-quality foods. In 2014, the Cooperative started to recruit urban residents as members, who would then become eligible to receive direct delivery of farm products (vegetables, fruits, wheat flour, rapeseed oil, and pulses) from Riverbend. These organic products were sold at a 30% premium above market prices. This box scheme was a great success, and the membership base in the two cities expanded to over 8,000 households by 2018. Once this direct linkage between the Cooperative's rural producers and urban consumers was formed, most of the agricultural products were now consumed and exchanged within the member community.

In building this alternative distribution channel, the Cooperative first tried operating a farmers-market type of retail shop in one city. But in this process of reconnecting with consumers, similar to what Albrecht and Smithers (2018) find in Canada, they discovered discrepancies between consumers' expectations and conceptions of value and the Cooperative's. The most salient was that consumers simply treated the alternative foods from Riverbend as just

a more expensive commodity and used them to replace their conventional foods, without changing their “unhealthy” lifestyles or socially and emotionally reconnecting with the producers and the land. The Cooperative thus shifted to a box-scheme model and insisted on delivering the produce directly to consumers’ kitchens. While in the kitchen, the deliverer would inspect the seasonings. Consumers were required not to use any artificial seasonings but instead limit to just salt, soy sauce, soy pastes, vinegar, and natural spices. If violation were found again, the delivery would stop. Further, the Cooperative also organized urban consumer members to regularly visit the villages to be “reconnected” and “re-educated”. Consumer members who were found to have “moral deficiencies”, such as gambling, domestic violence, failing to care for parents, using heavy make-up and excessive jewelry, having undergone cosmetic surgery, and wearing revealing clothes, were advised to change the behavior or have their membership revoked. These efforts to re-educate urban consumers, together with the aforementioned programs of summer camps for urban children and handicraft workshops run by the elderly, were all deliberately undertaken by the Cooperative to counter the denigration of rural lifeways prevalent in the dominant urban-biased ideology (Yan 2003) and rebuild rural cultural dignity.

The vertical integration by the Cooperative on both upstream and downstream markets provided concrete economic benefits to members. But leaders of the Cooperative were also motivated by another goal: seeing calculative market transactions between self-interested actors as a source of discord and division, the leadership team wanted to further insulate members from market risks and reduce their needs to transact with uncertain and often predatory external markets. In 2017, the Cooperative even began to experiment with an internal currency called “work points”, a term that had been used under the collective system during the Mao era. Members’ sales of products and other contributions to the Cooperative would be credited with work points, which could then be used for getting products or services.

Another pillar of the productivist agricultural regime everywhere was the state support for agriculture, primarily for the purpose of maximizing output. Riverbend took a conscious stand against receiving any state subsidies and other financial support, knowing well that these came with strings attached and would push the Cooperative away from their goals. Riverbend’s success had not gone unnoticed by local governments; county and municipal officials had repeatedly expressed their interests in supporting Riverbend. But they wanted Riverbend to contribute to their projects, which were all about scaling up monoculture and developing local “pillar industries”. The Cooperative had to either politely decline these offers or, for example, for the “One Village, One Product” project (Smith 2019), feign compliance by

claiming that a particular product of the Cooperative was all produced in one village.

This decision to reject state subsidies had not always been popular with members. In 2009, when local governments announced that all farmers’ cooperatives would receive financial subsidies, opinions were divided among the 28 cooperatives within Riverbend. Eventually, the management team decided that any cooperatives that wanted to take government subsidies must leave the organization. Six did.

On another occasion, after learning about Riverbend’s handicraft production by elderly people and wanting to promote this, the county government allocated Riverbend a retail stall, free of rent, at the county’s top tourist destination, hoping that this would bring greater sales and income to the elderly. The good intention, however, backfired. The hand-made fabrics indeed were well received by tourists, and sales grew rapidly. Now knowing that more production would lead to higher income, younger members in some families, driven by the productivist logic and profit motive, started to pressure their elderly parents to work longer hours and produce more. Some even tried to cheat by buying industrial products elsewhere and masquerading these as authentic handicrafts. After learning about these malpractices, the management team decided to withdraw from the tourist store and forego the potential profits—a clear example of what Kloppenborg et al. (1996) described as “secession” from the conventional system. This experience reinforced their belief that the profit motive is antithetical to the Cooperative’s moral principles and that commercial pursuits like this would only erode the moral economy they wanted to build.

A similar process of secession also took place in Riverbend’s credit cooperative. Initially, in 2006, a credit cooperative was set up by a Beijing-based NGO, which provided start-up capital of 400,000 yuan. By 2012, the annual scale of lending had skyrocketed to forty million yuan, but all the profits from the 20% annual interest were siphoned off by this urban-based NGO. In 2012, Riverbend terminated the collaboration with the Beijing NGO and turned the credit cooperative into an internal service unit, using internal funds that came from members’ capital contributions and deposits and an interest-free loan from a Hong Kong-based foundation. Lending is only to members and conforms with the Cooperatives’ principles of agroecology. The income generated from the credit cooperative became the main source of finance that supported social services such as elderly care and childcare.

Discussion: governance, leadership, and community

The alternative economic practices adopted by the Riverbend Cooperative represent a conscious and systematic rejection of productivism. This alternative economic model, which I summarize as “anti-productivism”, was characterized by, first, a moral embeddedness that sees agroecology as a way of re-connecting farmers with the land and traditional culture, rather than an instrumental way of raising incomes, and uses traditional moral principles to guide economic activities; and second, a social embeddedness which connects the leadership group, the staff, and the ordinary members in dense social relationships and strong bonds and replaces market transactions with self-provisioning and reciprocal exchanges. The two previous sections presented the social and cultural processes of community building and the changes in economic practices separately, but the two projects were in fact closely intertwined and jointly implemented.

The anti-productivism model in Riverbend was the brainchild of Shufen and a small group of activists, inspired by both their previous failures with productivist agriculture and thus recognition of its limitations, as well as their engagement with the NRRM. Many of the transformative visions and alternative practices were introduced from the NRRM and must be “brought to the masses” by the leadership as the “vanguard”. Therefore, both the community building and creation of an alternative economic model were led from above by the core leadership group in a top-down manner. All strategic initiatives, such as shifting to organic farming, establishing collective procurement and urban distribution, and operating social services, were made by the Cooperative’s leadership. Member households were then recruited to join these initiatives on a voluntary basis. Members I interviewed said that they had never participated in a general meeting in which members voted on action items. In this regard, Riverbend deviated from requirement of democratic governance specified in the FSCL. While individual members had almost no sway in organizational decision-making, they always had the choice of exit, as was exercised by the six cooperatives that left the organization in 2009.

The Cooperative expanded in a snow-ball fashion as the core leadership group gradually persuaded, mobilized, and recruited more and more members to join first the dancing sessions, then various social activities, and finally the alternative economic practices. The leadership group owed its success primarily to two practices. First, it recruited and cultivated a hundred or so young and energetic staff members deeply embedded in the community and put in place an effective organizational structure, both of which acted as multipliers for the core leadership group and greatly expanded the mobilizing capacity of the organization.

Second, the leadership, thanks to its deep embeddedness in the community, was keenly attuned to the community’s social needs and rolled out much needed services, which then motivated villagers to join the cooperative.

Members shared the organizers’ motivations and visions to various degrees, as evidenced by their different levels of participation in the Cooperative’s operations. The most committed became “shareholder” members by contributing capital (500 *yuan* per mu) to the credit cooperative and putting their land under the land conversion program and subsequently joining organic production. They were also entitled to dividends from the cooperative’s various economic operations. Others selectively participated in various social activities and the collective procurement scheme at various levels of regularity. Within this group, motivations also varied: some were mainly driven by instrumental considerations and participated in the collective procurement and technical trainings, while others were drawn to the social programs and enjoyed the companionship.

Even though some members’ participation was motivated by instrumental considerations, the organization was not built simply around these instrumental goals, but primarily around the goals of restoring moral values and revitalizing social life. This orientation is in accordance with the tenets of the NRRM, which advocated a critique of developmentalism and a return to traditional culture and cooperative relations (Day 2008; Si and Scott 2016). For this reason, the Cooperative insists on imposing moral and behavioral requirements on members and uses economic benefits as a way to elicit behavioral changes. The values and lifestyles espoused by the Cooperative are heavily influenced by the traditional peasant culture, as reflected in some of the conservative gender norms that they advocate, discussed earlier. This finding echoes Gibson-Graham’s (2008) observation that not all the alternative economic practices are necessarily desirable or inherently progressive.

The construction of this alternative economy has spurred the return migration of around 100 young people from urban jobs, now working as full-time staff in the Cooperative. In most farming households, however, the younger generation was still absent, mostly working in nearby cities. According to interviews with member households, their finances have improved moderately, thanks to savings from discounted collective purchases, significantly reduced use of industrial inputs, and higher incomes from organic farming. But more than these economic benefits, which are not the primary goals of the Cooperative, what members appreciate most are the non-economic benefits, such as the revitalization of community life, improvement in family relationships, advances in the provision of social services, and greater spiritual satisfaction and self-fulfillment.

The Riverbend case contrasts sharply with other AFNs studied in the China literature, which are driven by urban consumers' instrumental needs, minimally involve rural farmers, and have low degrees of alterity (Martindale 2021; Si et al. 2015; Xie 2021; Zhong et al. 2022). Even among the rural cooperatives affiliated with the NRRM, Riverbend is the most successful, while many others have failed (Hu et al. 2022). In every aspect, Riverbend is an exception, but it is one that helps prove the rule: without social mobilization and cultural reconstruction in the producer community, which are absent in all the other Chinese cases, AFNs will not become "alternative economies" and instead only offer "alternative networks" or "alternative foods", while being susceptible to conventionalization. The Riverbend case is selected not as a "typical" or representative case, but rather as an "extreme case" (Seawright and Gerring 2008), whose deviation from the norm, when compared with the larger sample of cases studied in the literature, reveals important lessons. It is precisely the rareness of this case that makes it theoretically valuable. The goal of this study is, therefore, to identify, through a comparison with the "norm", the key processes that can lead to the formation of an alternative community and the construction of an alternative economic model.

In addition to exposing the inadequacies of other AFNs in China in mobilizing and transforming the producer community, Riverbend's experiences also lend support to a key finding in the study of governance and public goods provision in rural China: the stock of social capital in the community positively contributes to better governance and public goods provision (Huhe et al. 2015; Tsai 2007; Xia 2011). As mentioned earlier, the social decay and decline of village communities that had been rampant across rural China since the 1990s was a key factor contributing to the deterioration of rural governance (Zhang et al. 2015). If we conceptualize "community" in terms of both "the social and communal relationships with one another and the land" (Feagan and Henderson 2009, p. 205) and shared values and norms among members, then, in villages like Riverbend, where multiple lineage groups competed politically and market integration intensified atomization and social differentiation, the natural community had become deeply fragmented or even collapsed, making village governance and public goods provision ineffective. The community must therefore be rebuilt before good governance can happen. In other cases, pre-existing solidarity groups, such as the lineage organization in the single-clan villages prevalent in southeastern China, maintained the community and provided the social foundation for rural governance (Tsai 2007). In Riverbend, a new community is constructed across the traditional village boundaries, creating a new social foundation for effective governance.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Riverbend Cooperative's experiences in community building shows how social mobilization and cultural reconstruction created a producer community united by strong social bonds and shared values was formed, which then provided the social and moral foundation for an alternative economic model, which I summarize as "anti-productivism", and a successful alternative food network. In terms of specific alternative economic practices, this anti-productivist model is characterized by, to use the analytical categories provided in Rosol (2020, p. 59), an internal system of allocation and reciprocal exchanges as the primary mode of exchange, significantly reduced use of wage labor in working practices, the adoption of ecological farming and extensification as production principles, the strengthening of collective ownership in land and other productive assets, the use of cooperatives as a mode of economic organization, and a member-funded credit cooperative as the primary form of financing.

This case study adds to scholarship on AFNs in two ways. First, it highlights the importance of studying producers' experiences in AFNs and shifts the focus of the analysis from producers' motivations and perceptions to the cultural and social processes in community building that mobilize and empower them to transition from conventional to alternative agri-food systems. The current literature either takes the availability of alternative producers for granted or underplays the challenges they face, both materially and ideologically, in making the transition to alternative food systems. Riverbend's experiences show that producers faced not just practical challenges when shifting to ecological farming, but ideologically, the prevalent productivist regime also limited their ability to imagine alternatives (Day and Schneider 2018). Their initial foray into organic farming in 2005 was mostly motivated by instrumental considerations—to use cooperatives to boost productivity and strengthen market positions. By this point, even though they had already gone through social mobilization in the community, lacking a vision of an alternative economy still doomed their premature venture. It was only after further community building and learning from external sources that they developed an alternative vision of anti-productivism, formed a new set of non-economic motivations, and then were able to direct their collective efforts toward the right direction.

Second, this study further develops the conceptualization of alterity of AFNs in terms of "alternative economies". This requires not only specifying alternative economic practices, as Rosol (2020) does, but, more importantly, examining the conditions under which these practices could emerge. Building on the conceptualization of alternative economies as both morally and socially embedded (Hinrichs 2000;

Kloppenburger et al. 1996), this study suggests that the moral reconstruction and social mobilization that create a new community of “alternative producers”, endowed with the two forms of embeddedness, must precede the adoption of alternative economic practices.

In addition to these two broad lessons, Riverbend's experiences also reveal a unique challenge that the development of alternative food practices faces in the Chinese context. Emphasizing the importance of producers in the creation of alternative economies raises questions about the producers—for example, what kind of producers are more suitable for alternative practices and more likely to embrace them? In contrast to the minimal involvement of rural farmers in consumer-driven AFNs (Si et al. 2015) and widespread failure in other rural cooperatives (Hu et al. 2022), Riverbend owes its success in no small part to the young people it has attracted back to the countryside, who embraced the alternative model more enthusiastically than ageing rural farmers. When asked about the biggest obstacle to the Cooperative's growth, staff members were in unison in pointing to the lack of understanding and enthusiasm in older farmers about the alternative practices and their deeply entrenched economic mentality. Another common cause that has precluded non-members from joining the Cooperative is labor shortage in the household, prevalent in those left with just an elderly couple. Unable to conduct the physical work required by ecological farming, they have to rely on labor-saving industrial inputs. All these suggest that the further growth of alternative food practices in China may depend on, or at least be aided by, demographic changes, a topic calling for future research.

Acknowledgements I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of the manuscript in every round of review and detailed and insightful comments and suggestions, which greatly improved the quality of this paper. Thanks also to the people at Riverbend for their cooperation and academic colleagues, especially Professors Hu Zhanping and Zhou Li, for help with fieldwork. Remaining errors are all mine.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Albrecht, C., and J. Smithers. 2018. Reconnecting through local food initiatives? Purpose, practice and conceptions of value. *Agriculture and Human Values* 35(1): 67–81.
- Beingessner, N., and A. J. Fletcher. 2020. Going local: Farmers' perspectives on local food systems in rural Canada. *Agriculture and Human Values* 37(1): 129–145.
- Bellante, L. 2017. Building the local food movement in Chiapas, Mexico: Rationales, benefits, and limitations. *Agriculture and Human Values* 34(1): 119–134.
- Buck, D., C. Getz, and J. Guthman. 1997. From farm to table: the organic vegetable commodity chain of Northern California. *Sociologia Ruralis* 37(1): 3–20.
- Charatsari, C., F. Kitsios, A. Stafyla, D. Aidonis, and E. Lioutas. 2018. Antecedents of farmers' willingness to participate in short food supply chains. *British Food Journal* 120(10): 2317–2333.
- Chen, J.-C., J. A. Zinda, and E. T. Yeh. 2017. Recasting the rural: state, society and environment in contemporary China. *Geoforum* 78: 83–88.
- Day, A. F. 2008. The end of the peasant? New rural reconstruction in China. *Boundary 2* 35(2): 49–73.
- Day, A. F., and M. Schneider. 2018. The end of alternatives? Capitalist transformation, rural activism and the politics of possibility in China. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(7): 1221–1246.
- Feagan, R., and A. Henderson. 2009. Devon Acres CSA: local struggles in a global food system. *Agriculture and Human Values* 26(2): 203–217.
- Feldmann, C., and U. Hamm. 2015. Consumers' perceptions and preferences for local food: a review. *Food Quality and Preference* 40: 152–164.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. 2008. Diverse economies: performative practices for 'other worlds'. *Progress in Human Geography* 32(5): 613–632.
- Goodman, D., and M. Goodman. 2007. Localism, Livelihoods and the 'Post-Organic': changing perspectives on alternative food networks in the United States. In *Alternative food geographies: representation and practice*, eds. D. Maye, L. Holloway, and M. Kneafsey, 23–38. Oxford, UK: Elsevier.
- Heilmann, S. 2008. From local experiments to national policy: the origins of China's distinctive policy process. *The China Journal* 59: 1–30.
- Hinrichs, C. C. 2000. Embeddedness and local food systems: notes on two types of direct agricultural market. *Journal of Rural Studies* 16(3): 295–303.
- Holloway, L., M. Kneafsey, L. Venn, R. Cox, E. Dowler, and H. Tuomainen. 2007. Possible food economics: a methodological framework for exploring food production–consumption relationships. *Sociologia Ruralis* 47(1): 1–19.
- Hu, Z., Q. F. Zhang, and J. A. Donaldson. 2022. Why farmers' cooperatives fail in a market economy? Rediscovering Chayanov with the Chinese experience. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2022.2104159>.
- Huhe, N., J. Chen, and M. Tang. 2015. Social trust and grassroots governance in rural China. *Social Science Research* 53: 351–363.
- Ilbery, B., and M. Kneafsey. 1999. Niche markets and regional speciality food products in Europe: towards a research agenda. *Environment and Planning A* 31(12): 2207–2222.
- Ilbery, B., and D. Maye. 2005. Alternative (shorter) food supply chains and specialist livestock products in the Scottish–English borders. *Environment and Planning A* 37(5): 823–844.
- Jarosz, L. 2008. The city in the country: growing alternative food networks in Metropolitan areas. *Journal of Rural Studies* 24(3): 231–244.

- Kloppenborg, J., J. Hendrickson, and G. W. Stevenson. 1996. Coming in to the foodshed. *Agriculture and Human Values* 13(1): 33–42.
- Lowe, P., J. Murdoch, T. Marsden, R. Munton, and A. Flynn. 1993. Regulating the new rural spaces: the uneven development of land. *Journal of Rural Studies* 9(3): 205–222.
- Martindale, L. 2021. I will know it when I taste it': Trust, food materialities and social media in chinese alternative food networks. *Agriculture and Human Values* 38(2): 365–380.
- People's Food Sovereignty. 2016. *2016 Annual Investigative Report: How to organize Chinese farmers today?* <https://www.shiwuzq.org/article.html?aid=919>. Accessed on 5 May 2023.
- Pole, A., and M. Gray. 2013. Farming alone? What's up with the C in community supported agriculture. *Agriculture and Human Values* 30(1): 85–100.
- Renting, H., T. K. Marsden, and J. Banks. 2003. Understanding alternative food networks: exploring the role of short food supply chains in rural development. *Environment and Planning A* 35(3): 393–411.
- Rigg, J., K. J. Oven, G. K. Basyal, and R. Lamichhane. 2016. Between a rock and a hard place: vulnerability and precarity in rural Nepal. *Geoforum* 76: 63–74.
- Rosol, M. 2020. On the significance of alternative economic practices: reconceptualizing alterity in alternative food networks. *Economic Geography* 96(1): 52–76.
- Rosol, M., and R. Barbosa Jr. 2021. Moving beyond direct marketing with new mediated models: evolution of or departure from alternative food networks? *Agriculture and Human Values* 38(4): 1021–1039.
- Sage, C. 2003. Social embeddedness and relations of regard: alternative 'good food' networks in south-west Ireland. *Journal of Rural Studies* 19(1): 47–60.
- Seawright, J., and J. Gerring. 2008. Case selection techniques in case study research: a menu of qualitative and quantitative options. *Political Research Quarterly* 61(2): 294–308.
- Si, Z., and S. Scott. 2016. The convergence of alternative food networks within rural development initiatives: the case of the New Rural Reconstruction Movement in China. *Local Environment* 21(9): 1082–1099.
- Si, Z., and S. Scott. 2019. China's changing food system: top-down and bottom-up forces in food system transformations. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 40(1): 1–11.
- Si, Z., T. Schumilas, and S. Scott. 2015. Characterizing alternative food networks in China. *Agriculture and Human Values* 32(2): 299–313.
- Smith, N. R. 2019. One village, one product: agro-industrial village corporatism in contemporary China. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 19(2): 249–269.
- Tsai, L. L. 2007. *Accountability without democracy: solidary groups and public goods provision in rural China*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wang, C., X. Wang, Z. Jin, C. Müller, T. A. Pugh, A. Chen, T. Wang, L. Huang, Y. Zhang, L. X. Li, and S. Piao. 2022. Occurrence of crop pests and diseases has largely increased in China since 1970. *Nature Food* 3(1): 57–65.
- Watts, D. C., B. Ilbery, and D. Maye. 2005. Making reconconnections in agro-food geography: alternative systems of food provision. *Progress in Human Geography* 29(1): 22–40.
- Wen, T., K. Lau, C. Chen, H. He, and J. Qiu. 2012. Ecological civilization, indigenous culture, and rural reconstruction in China. *Monthly Review* 63(9): 29–35.
- Winter, M. 2003. Embeddedness, the new food economy and defensive localism. *Journal of Rural Studies* 19(1): 23–32.
- Xia, M. 2011. Social capital and rural grassroots governance in China. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 40(2): 135–163.
- Xie, X. 2021. New farmer identity: the emergence of a post-productivist agricultural regime in China. *Sociologia Ruralis* 61(1): 52–73.
- Yan, H. 2003. Spectralization of the rural: reinterpreting the labor mobility of rural young women in post-Mao China. *American Ethnologist* 30(4): 578–596.
- Yan, H., and Y. Chen. 2013. Debating the rural cooperative movement in China, the past and the present. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40(6): 955–981.
- Ye, J., C. Wang, H. Wu, C. He, and J. Liu. 2013. Internal migration and left-behind populations in China. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40(6): 1119–1146.
- Zeng, C., D. Niu, and Y. Zhao. 2015. A comprehensive overview of rural solid waste management in China. *Frontiers of Environmental Science & Engineering* 9: 949–961.
- Zhang, Q. F. 2022. Building productivism in rural China: the case of residential restructuring in Chengdu. *Geoforum* 128: 103–114.
- Zhang, Q. F., and J. A. Donaldson. 2008. The rise of agrarian capitalism with chinese characteristics: agricultural modernization, agribusiness and collective land rights. *The China Journal* 60: 25–47.
- Zhang, Q. F., and H. Zeng. 2021. Politically directed accumulation in rural China: the making of the agrarian capitalist class and the new agrarian question of capital. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 21(4): 677–701.
- Zhang, Q. F., C. Oya, and J. Ye. 2015. Bringing agriculture back in: the central place of agrarian change in rural China studies. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 15(3): 299–313.
- Zhong, S., A. Hughes, M. Crang, G. Zeng, and S. Hocknell. 2022. Fragmentary embeddedness: Challenges for alternative food networks in Guangzhou, China. *Journal of Rural Studies* 95: 382–390.
- Zhou, L., Y. Zhang, H. Zhang, J. Di, Q. Zhang, Q. Chang, J. Du, H. He, H. Lin, Y. Li, and J. Pan. 2020. Discovering rural China through inter-disciplinary fieldwork. *Journal of Shanxi Agricultural University (Social Science Edition)* 19(4): 1–32. [in Chinese].

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Qian Forrest Zhang is Associate Professor of Sociology at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University. His research focuses on agrarian political economy in China. His recent works have investigated agricultural cooperatives, industrial pig farming, the agrarian capitalist class, and land politics. He also serves as editor of the *Journal of Agrarian Change*.