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Tasting the Cosmological Rift: Alternative Food Networks in China's Ecological Civilization

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Authors Declaration

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

The current literature on Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) is split between two camps regarding their potential to transform the food system: the 'progressives' and the 'radicals', or 'optimists' and 'pessimists'. Likewise, China's concept of Ecological Civilization has prompted a polarised debate, with scholars arguing Ecological Civilization is either an authentic ecological ethos or a form of greenwashing. Exploring AFNs in China, this PhD suggest that these differing camps regarding AFNs overlap more than previously supposed and that the current debate regarding Ecological Civilization is the wrong debate to be having. By intertwining AFNs and Ecological Civilization, this thesis argues that the pragmatic approach Chinese AFN actors adopt in response to three core tensions of AFNs, reveals how radical change does not necessarily require a radical form of politics. It is this pragmatic approach that allows China to begin navigating the emerging cosmological rift of our times, namely that between human development (i.e. global capitalism) and the immovable ecological limits of this development.

Based on qualitative fieldwork of Chinese AFNs (Guangdong), this thesis suggests that Ecological Civilization, as a pragmatic approach, can be characterised in three different ways. First, through the expectations participants have of the material (sensory and aesthetic) qualities of an Ecological Civilization. Second, through Chinese middle class subjectivities, which are both pragmatic and idealistic in form. Third, through forms of (rural) cosmopolitanism, which suggest that Ecological Civilization has the capacity to 'ruralise' global capitalism as a distinctive Chinese form of 'cosmopolitanization'. Together, these three insights indicate that AFNs have a transformative potential despite their internal tensions, and that Ecological Civilization is a productive and mobilising concept, not just an ambiguous slogan of an authoritarian government.

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Acronyms

AFN – Alternative Food Network

CCP – Chinese Communist Party

CSA – Community supported Agriculture

NRRM – New Rural Reconstruction Movement

PGS - Participatory Guarantee System

Prologue

This thesis is an attempt to tackle and understand China's recent national project of 'Ecological Civilization'. Less recognised than China's other recent headline declarations of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' and the 'Chinese Dream', Ecological Civilization has nevertheless made a significant impact on national policy and on China scholarship in general. Since its inception, Ecological Civilization has excited left-wing eco-Marxists, revived scholarship concerned with the merits of traditional Asian eco-philosophy and has offered a source of succour for those despondent with the Western responses to the ecological crisis. At the same time, this occupation with Ecological Civilization has attracted cynicism, and in some quarters scorn, regarding the authenticity of these new ecological commitments when China is still the world's primary greenhouse emitter. Regardless of this debate and ones position within it, China has nevertheless emerged as the globe's leading economic power and remains the world's most populous nation. Its decisions regarding Ecological Civilization will therefore not just affect China itself, but the whole planet. Moreover, the pressure is on China to respond to environmental issues due to the intense ecological pressures China itself is under.

While the big questions of Ecological Civilization provide the larger context for this thesis, the heart of the PhD is rather more grounded in mundanities and practical realities of everyday life. Indeed, the 'heroes' in this thesis are the Chinese 'new farmers': the entrepreneurial urbanites who have decided to leave their mega-cities and 'return to the land' to take-up ecological farming. The farming initiatives they have created, part of what may be called 'Alternative Food Networks' (AFNs), are partly an expression or a reflex in response to China's ecological issues, providing my research a concrete focus from which to explore the trajectory and undercurrents of China's Ecological Civilization project. Put another way, this PhD aims to act as a bridge between the rather abstract and grand project of Ecological Civilization and the everyday challenges faced by the Chinese 'new farmers'.

One of the 'heroes' in this PhD is 'new farmer' Peter Pan. At the age of 27, with a master's degree from the U.S. in marketing, he has decided, alongside three friends, to leave the perks of corporate city life and instead lease 7 hectares of land in the countryside to start an ecological farm. For many, his decision flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Agriculture, especially on this small-scale, is an assumed low-profit, high-risk and labour-

intensive industry. His disappointed grandma is appalled at his choice to farm after she spent all her life trying to ensure the future generations of her family would not have to return to 'peasantry'.

Peter must also face the mistrust and misunderstanding most of the local villagers have towards his farm. At worst, they consider his farm as a destabilising presence which is damaging the social fabric of the village. At best, many villagers think of Peter as another 'rich boy' lacking in business sense, wasting money by not only renting land from them, but also paying them to work on it. In their view, his determination not to use chemical inputs is a sure sign his farm will not produce enough to survive. Scaled-up and taken from a perspective of Ecological Civilization, this localised issue points to much larger questions of China's rural-urban divide, the negotiation of which will similarly be fundamental to the emergence of Ecological Civilization.

Financially, Peter's 6-month-old farm also has steep challenges. From the outset, ecological agriculture, which by nature is a long-term enterprise requiring a high-level of initial investment, requires long-term strategic planning and development – an aspiration not suited to China's current economic climate that values quick and lucrative returns on investment. His plan to develop a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) format for selling his produce also has disadvantages. In a CSA regime, members or families subscribe to season-long subscription of produce, with consumers paying a large up-front initial price for vegetable boxes that the farm will send twice a week to their doorstep. Whilst a successful format in the West, in China where consumer confidence in producers is low and 'ethical consumption' is not a developed concept. Peter therefore needs to devote much time, money and energy into cultivating a sustainable consumer base that would support this model.

How Peter responds to these practical issues is reflective of the larger difficulties facing Ecological Civilization and China's supposed transition from an 'Industrial Civilization'. Indeed, his decision to farm is crucial to understanding Ecological Civilization as a whole. The motivations behind his seemingly illogical decision, its wider context and potential consequences, reflects a microcosm of the many personal decisions made in China that will ultimately begin to shape Ecological Civilization.

While all these challenges seem insurmountable for Peter and Ecological Civilization more generally, organic and CSA farming does have interesting and exciting potential for the future. The emerging alignment between local governments and small-scale enterprises are becoming possible as Beijing continues to push its Ecological Civilization mantra. Already Peter has had meetings with mayors of nearby cities and has negotiated contracts with the canteens of nearby government departments to provide them with produce from his farm. This interest, while currently nascent, is only likely to develop further with time as the pressure for local governments to display their ecological credentials mounts.

Furthermore, the government's concern for rural development has also meant villages have funding for 'beautification' projects. In partnership with the village council that governs the farmland, the villagers can utilise Peter's skills to apply for this funding and create developments and infrastructure for the village that would also benefit Peter's CSA farm i.e. a restaurant, hiking trials and an inn for potential tourism. Indeed, as time has gone on, his relationship with the village has improved. More of the villagers are now considering working for him, his current employees are beginning to accept monthly payments (not daily as before), and also organised workshops have been arranged between Peter and the older villagers, retired farmers who are willing to share with Peter the ecological farming techniques they used in the past before chemical farming became the norm.

Culturally too the 'new farmer' is becoming recognised as acceptable and even noble profession. Arguably the 'new farmer' Shi Yan has become a celebrity figure in China. Accredited with creating the first working CSA farm in China, she is not only known to her peers but has also appeared as a frequent guest on many media outlets in China, had international coverage with Al Jazeera and the BBC, and has met with high-level Chinese government officials.

From a business perspective, the market for healthier and ecologically grown food is growing rapidly in China. Not only is China's middle-class growing (the market that can afford Peter's produce), its awareness concerning environmental issues and food safety is increasing too - suggesting that long-term lucrative financial rewards are possible in the small-scale ecological farming business. This also hints at the larger interplay occurring between state and society regarding this drive for Ecological Civilization.

In exploring Ecological Civilization and AFNs in China, this thesis has also provoked a journey of self-reflection for me. Studying phenomenon in a context with philosophical traditions different to my own has forced me to question the taken-for-granted epistemologies prevalent in my own culture and academic field. Hopefully then, the following thesis will have become interesting beyond its own particular subject matter, and offering some engagement for those without an explicit interest in AFNs or China.

Picture 1. Me (left) with New Farmer, Peter Pan.
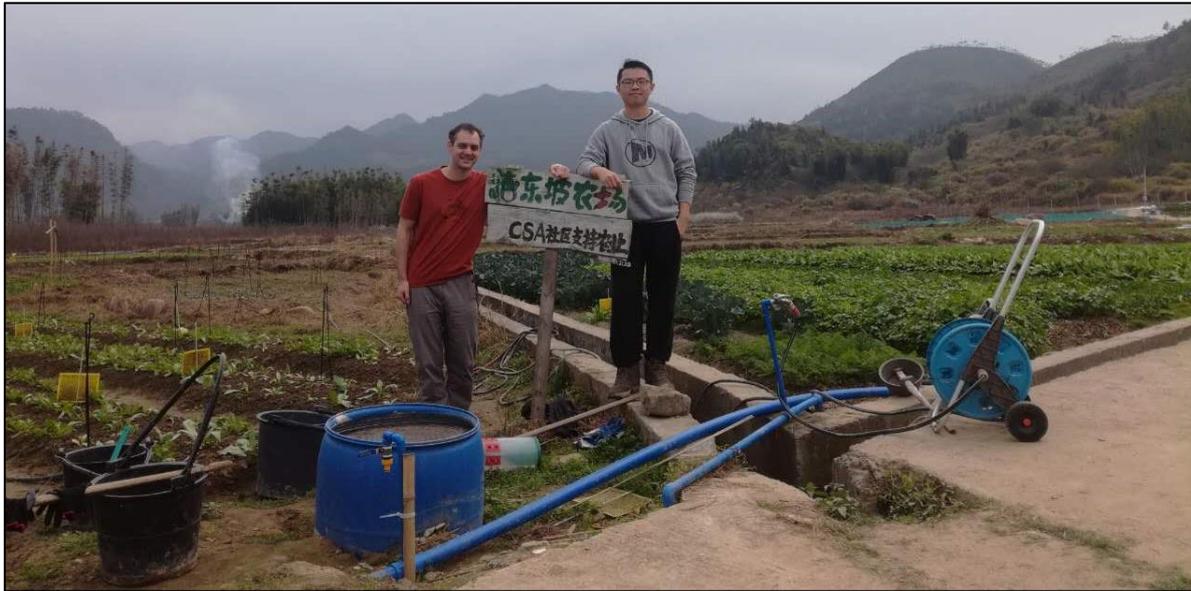
Chapter 1

What will China's 'Ecological Civilization' come to mean? Exploring Ecological Civilization with Chinese 'Alternative Food Networks'.

Introduction

'Taking a driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change, China has become an important participant, contributor, and torchbearer in the global endeavour for ecological civilization' - Xi Jinping at the opening session of the 19th Communist Party Congress - October 2017 (Xinhua, 2017).

Since its announcement in 2007, China's project of Ecological Civilization has seen a rapid increase in attention that culminated recently at China's most important political conference - held every 5 years – the 2017 'Communist Party Congress'. Xi Jinping's above announcement - proclaiming that Ecological Civilization is no longer national in scope but is a project with wide reaching global connotations - is not just an ambitious and politically inspired boast, amplified by President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement. Indeed, the question of 'what will Ecological Civilization come to mean?' will ultimately be one of global importance as China's Ecological Civilization will likely shape the environmental footprint of not just China (which includes nearly one fifth of humanity and soon to be the world's largest economy), but also the trajectories of socio-economic, technological and cultural development of a substantial majority of the world. China's new, investment heavy, 'Belt and Road Initiative' infrastructure project, for example, is already set to affect much of the Eastern hemisphere.

Intellectually and philosophically, Ecological Civilization also points towards a longer-term significance that goes beyond its own likely lasting influence, in its novel juxtaposition of 'ecological' and 'civilization' (in both Chinese and English). Indeed, 'ecology' and 'civilization' not only speaks directly to the epochal challenges of our time, but also to crucial debates within culture and academia that is grappling with ways to conceptualise and think productively with our emergent global responsibilities.

The most prevailing of these responsibilities regards the intense strain that human activity is putting on the natural functions of Earth. So much so, that the 'ability of the

planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted' (MEA, 2005: 5). This emerging rift between economic growth and immovable ecological limits, between human 'being' and 'nature', infers a significant rupture of the social-ecological system. It suggests a fundamental collapse of the boundaries between science and society, society and environment, artificial and natural, and the global and local (see Latour, 2014).

This collapsing of boundaries resonates with Chinese cosmology in which the 'mandate of heaven' - or the right to rule - is dependent on the emperor maintaining the *cosmic order* between the heaven and earth, the environment and society. In the past, Chinese emperors could lose the mandate of heaven for failing to adeptly mediate the cosmic forces - i.e. by presiding over consecutive poor crop years - which would give cause for the emperor to be legitimately overthrown. In many ways, the Chinese leadership today has been forced to confront this cosmological rift head on: in order to maintain societal stability - and their mandate to rule - the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) must continue the rate of economic growth necessary to meet the increasing aspirations of the population, whilst also reversing the ecological consequences of rapid modernisation. Indeed, the various forms of this rift has come to the explicit attention of the Chinese state, with the CCP itself beginning to authorise reports that emphasise how human life is at risk due to human-induced climate change (Evans-Prichard, 2015). Therefore, Ecological Civilization has emerged in China as a crucial political project that attempts to navigate this 'cosmological rift' that is often paralysing in its scale.[1]

In light of this significance of Ecological Civilization, the overarching aim of this thesis will ask '*how is Ecological Civilization able to do productive 'work' as an idea or concept?'* In order to unpack Ecological Civilization and begin tackling this question - albeit only very partially - this PhD applies Ecological Civilization to the context of food systems. The relevance of food systems to this research aim lies in how the underlying issue of the food system reasserts the cosmological rift as a practical issue. As put by political economist Robert Biel (2016: 7), the principal concern of food systems can be summarised into two key points:

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[1] In Marxian terms, this clash between economic growth and ecology has been described as the 'metabolic,' or 'ecological', rift (Foster et al., 2011).

- *1) we cannot fundamentally address food issues without addressing the whole structure of society;*

- *2) we are nevertheless in some sense obliged to do so, since there is, at this moment, a window of opportunity to change the food paradigm while there is still enough food 'around'. We dare not delay food-system transformation under the excuse of waiting for more general societal change, because by then it would be too late.*

To put another way, in order to resolve food issues (or at a larger scale, the cosmological rift) there must be a societal transformation that is somewhat utopian in form. Paradoxically however, the current social-political condition (i.e. 'capitalism') is preventing a transformation occurring - and yet a transformation must occur in the short time-frame we have left. This tension is not just apparent on an abstract level; it manifests itself in various ways at the local scale too. For example, organic Chinese farmers have often articulated notions of idealism with food system whilst also expressing the capitalist realities:

"When you love the universe, the earth, all creation, you get beautiful food. Before, I only knew to make money to buy food and get fed, thinking that as long as I have money, I can buy stuff I need, but it's not like that. You have to give, to offer love, to be grateful, to respect and revere. It's totally changed me, mentally and spiritually." (Chinese Farmers Market vendor, 2016, #5)

"I can see the market is great. I foresee the market is great..." (Chinese 'new farmer', 2016, #2).

These two quotes highlight the critical tension that underpins AFNs worldwide and articulates the problem posed by food system change i.e. how does one farm ecologically, working towards a grander 'idealistic' vision whilst current logic demands producer's farm pragmatically, and exploitatively, in accordance to the market. Likewise, Ecological Civilization has to also navigate this fine line between inspiring a new form of development (i.e. new forms of human 'being') and being realistically workable in contemporary society. Therefore, how this cosmological rift is 'resolved' at a smaller scale (i.e. AFNs) will have to be replicated on the national, if not global, scale if 'Ecological Civilization' is to be constructed.

Food is particularly adept medium to bring together the abstract /distant issues of the 'environment' - i.e. the complex food-agriculture-water-environment nexus (Zhu et al., 2017) - into contact with the vivid somatic experience of lived everyday life. In other words, food is well placed to link Ecological Civilization as a government slogan with Ecological Civilization as something that is lived and practised by people at every level of society. This a point made more salient due to the increasing consensus that the industrial food system has contributed to the serious ecological challenges facing the world's populations. Therefore, the way we eat, and procure food daily, is a fundamental aspect of this ecological challenge.

China, perhaps more than any other country, epitomises this challenge concerning everyday food practices and the agriculture-water-environment nexus. The rapid industrialisation and capitalisation that have characterised China's past two and half decades has come hand in hand with the transformation of small household farming (Zhang & Donaldson, 2008), increasing population growth and changing (more meat based) diets (Wu & Zhu, 2015; Wong & Huang, 2012), a growing reliance on fossil fuels for fertilisers, pesticides and transport (Jiao et al., 2018), and a rapid process of 'supermarketisation' (Reardon et al., 2005). As with many other parts of the world, the sum of these changes has led to a significant contribution to water, soil and air pollution, climate change and a loss of biodiversity (McMichael, 2007; Weis, 2007). Although many parts of the globe are facing these environmental issues, China is perhaps experiencing the consequences of an industrial food system the most acutely (Ely et al., 2016), with suggestions that China may struggle to feed itself adequately due to farmland being lost to urbanisation and the increasing degradation of existing farmland (Brown, 1995; Mai, 2008).

These issues have occurred, in part, due to the remarkable speed of China's development and the unregulated 'wild-west' style approach to its industrialisation. Consequently, this has recently caused dangerous problems to emerge with the Chinese food system. As documented by Garnet and Wilkes (2014), China's food system is causing excessive chemical residues in fresh produce, significant water pollution from agricultural runoff, an abuse of artificial additives in processed food, an uncontrolled proliferation of genetically modified crops, and health problems due to the heavy-metal content in the soil used for farming (see also Scott et al., 2014; Wu & Zhu, 2015). Unsurprisingly, this poorly

regulated industrial approach to farming has created a wake of food scandals in recent years - with the melamine-tainted milk formula scandal in 2008 having the highest profile to date. This issue of food safety is potentially a significant political issue also, as the basis of legitimacy for Chinese governance, historically, has been on providing the people's right to subsistence above anything else; an idea established in early Confucian doctrine (Bell, 2008: 33). Thus, China's historic problem of maintaining itself as a 'food secure' nation has been turned on its head. It is no longer the traditional challenge of producing enough food, but rather an issue of food safety or producing 'quality' food (Si et al., 2015).

In response to these food system issues and the increasing necessity for safe food procurement, new and diverse forms of food procurement are emerging in China. On the surface, these new modes of food procurement are comparable to the 'Alternative Food Networks' (AFNs) operating in the Western countries, which are typically understood as a reaction to conventional 'capitalist' food networks that separate the consumer from the producer (Harris, 2010).[2] In China, these AFNs have the potential to grow beyond their Western counterparts due to the seriousness of China's food safety issues and the importance that food has in Chinese culture. Indeed, a popular saying in China is 'food for the people is the most important thing' (*Minyishiwentian*), a sentiment echoed by the staff of the 'China Green Food Development Centre': '[In China,] "food is god", so food safety is essential for the health and stability of society' (Scott et al., 2014: 158).

In the national project of Ecological Civilization, food will inevitably become a crucial pillar that sustains its eventual formation due to the connection between food safety, (ecological) agriculture, and the primacy of food in Chinese culture. Already, in official Ecological Civilization policy documentation from the CCP, '*Central Document No. 12: Further promoting the Development of Ecological Civilization*' (released in April 2015), a reference is made to organic and ecological agriculture 'as examples of innovation that require government support' (Geall, 2015: 15). This importance of food in the process of 'greening' China is further heightened by food's potentiality for initiating transformations at a systemic level: 'food [can become] the epicentre of the reformation of our relationships to

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[2] 'West' and 'Western' are used in this thesis not just as a reference to the geographical regions of North America, Europe and Australia, but also to distinguish between Western and Chinese sets of ideas, beliefs, attitudes and convictions.

economies, cultures, ethics, politics and ecologies' (Goodman & Sage, 2014: 9). This new, small, and alternative segment of the Chinese food system might therefore be helpful in providing new avenues for solutions that can improve not only China's issues regarding food safety and the ecological issues affecting Chinese agriculture, but also help usher in an Ecological Civilization.

These AFNs or 'short-food-supply-chains' (Renting et al., 2003) refer to an assemblages of diverse initiatives. The most common of these initiatives, listed below, have all been found in China (Si et al., 2015):

- Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs): 'Members' of a CSA share the risks and benefits of farming by covering in advance the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer's salary in these schemes. In return, the members receive shares of the farm production regularly throughout the growing season, usually through a periodic fresh food box, the quality and amount of produce in box reflective of that year's harvest.
- Farmers Markets: These markets sell only organic or ecological food and attempt to connect farmers directly with consumers. They also often act as platforms for education and related advocacy.
- Recreational Garden Plot Rentals: Plots of land where groups of citizens work regularly together to propagate agricultural produce for personal or public consumption with both growers and consumers generally being residents of the local neighbourhood that hosts the garden.
- Buying Clubs: Non-profit associations set up to carry out collective purchase of foods and distribution thereof, without application of any charge to members. They often aim to include ethical outcomes that involve forms of social solidarity, environmental sustainability and food quality.

In a Western context, AFNs have emerged gradually and over a long period of time (in comparison to their Chinese counterparts) as initiatives seeking to shorten the food chain, prompting forms of direct exchange between producer and consumer, whilst promoting ideals of local (organic) food, community, and the environment. AFNs are thus presented as being 'alternative' to conventional food networks. As a consequence, AFNs have been positioned by scholars as *local* sites of emancipation from the demands made by

global neo-liberal forces that are undermining food quality, health, the local economy, community, trust and the environment (Murdoch et al., 2000; Jarosz, 2000; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Whatmore et al., 2003; Pretty et al., 2005; Morgan et al, 2006; Schlenker & Villas-Boas 2006). By being 'alternative', AFNs are argued to be bringing 'positive value to local economic and social connectivity, environmental conservation, and known provenance and quality – in other words authenticity – [in response to] the negative costs of global food transportation, pesticide use and industrial agriculture' (Seyfang, 2005: 300).

AFN research has also begun to focus on the 'materiality' of AFNs (Holloway et al., 2007), for example, the sensuality and aesthetic qualities of food (Turner, 2014; Turner & Hope 2015), and the tactile qualities of an AFN farm (Hayden & Buck, 2011). In this research the most significance aspect of 'alternativeness' in an AFN lies with the somatic and visceral qualities of food, and it is through this medium that the capacity of AFNs to foster systematic change is the most pertinent. In other words, it is the freshness, taste or sense of nostalgia that organic or ecological food provokes, or the tactile spaces of a CSA (e.g. attending distribution, cooking more, volunteering at the farm) that can generate a significant change in how people relate to the food system.

Angela Tregear (2011) has outlined these benefits of AFNs, referring to them as 'headline claims'. Based on research in Europe and North America, she notes how AFNs have become lauded as initiatives that can foster a transformative impact on the food system in five ways:

1) Establishing a more rooted locale by (re)connecting consumers with the processes of the food system (Marsden et al., 2000).
2) Increasing the livelihood potential for agricultural producers, by allowing farmers to diversify and increase margins (Pretty, 2002).
3) Fostering a more ecologically-minded form of farming, as AFNs tend to subscribe to organic and or sustainable farming practices (Renting et al., 2003).
4) Encouraging values like social justice, due to the embedded nature of direct exchange, which creates trusting and respectful relationships (Ilbery & May, 2005a);
5) Creating a wider and positive impacts beyond the AFN enterprise itself by fostering harmonious community relations (Winter, 2003) encouraging democratic involvement

in food provisioning (Hinrichs, 2003) and by providing an economic multiplier effect that provides additional employment opportunities to the region (Sage, 2003).

These headline claims however, have all attracted criticism (Tregear, 2011). Research has begun to characterise AFNs as having fundamental contradictions, which prevent them from being able to adequately scale-up and challenge or transform the food system on a larger and more significant scale. These contradictions inherent to AFNs have challenged the optimistic accounts of AFNs by undermining the assumed social, economic and environmental benefits AFNs supposedly engender, to the point that the notion of AFNs having a transformative potential has been challenged (Tregear, 2011). Born & Purcell (2006) have provided one of the most salient critiques regarding AFNs in this vein, problematizing the assumption that local and small-scale food networks are automatically and inherently advantageous due to their size. They emphasise instead how scholars have tended to understate the potential for conflict, asymmetric power relations and disharmony at the local level (see also Harris, 2010; Wald & Hill, 2016).

In addition to this critique regarding scale, Holloway & Kneafsey, (2000) and Jarosz (2008) have argued that the novel reconnection of producer and consumers involved in AFNs does not automatically ensure 'just' relations between the two. Similarly, others have highlighted that AFN participation does not necessarily equate to a radical or more virtuous shift in 'motivation' or 'values' of the producers (Tregear, 2011: 423) or the consumers involved (Miele, 2006) – largely due to the influence the conventional food system has on shaping the values and priorities of consumers and producers (Mount 2012: 111). Furthermore, the notion that AFNs have a positive wider regional impact has also come under question, with research arguing against the assumption that AFNs are always economically advantageous to the producer (Kneafsey et al., 2013) and that AFNs tend to emerge in already economically developed areas (Ricketts Hein et al., 2006). The assumed environmental benefits of AFNs have also been questioned, with research (re)assessing the supposed positive impacts of localised food chains on the physical environment (Edward-Jones et al., 2008), especially in regards to food miles (Born & Purcell, 2006).

This critique of 'headline claims' has translated into a divide between 'optimists' and 'pessimists', which can also be described as a split between 'progressive' and 'radical' camps (see Constance et al., 2014: 30). Whilst both camps agree that AFNs and alternative

agri-food movements have made notable improvements to agriculture, the food system and sustainability, they differ on the extent to which these enterprises and movements should directly oppose and challenge 'capitalism'. For the radicals (see Allen, 2008; Guthman, 2008), unless AFNs are designed around forms of political engagement that are attempting to collectively secure social justice and human rights, they are ultimately market-based approaches in danger of facilitating neoliberalism (Constance et al., 2014: 31). In contrast, the progressive camp (see Morgan et al., 2006; Goodman et al., 2012) argues that AFNs can be transformative whilst working alongside capitalism if they adopt reflexive and open forms of localism and are 'grounded in sub-regional, agro-ecological, multifunctional worlds of food, with progressive food policy council governance' (Constance et al., 2014: 31).

These debates and exchanges in the literature on AFNs, as argued by Tregear (2011: 420), are 'appearing to entrench scholars in established theoretical positions, rather than encouraging the breaking of new boundaries.' This entrenchment is largely a result of the framing used by the radical 'pessimists' and progressive 'optimists'. For example, the pessimistic account takes the accepted definition provided by the optimist on what a transformative food politics means and then measures AFNs against this venerated standard. This standard, which requires AFNs to open possibilities for 'agri-food stakeholders to participate in ethically minded, transparent systems, where they are better connected to one another and to the markets and environments in which they are immersed and depend on' (Bos & Owens 2016: 3), is then easily found to have not been met. Pessimists have been able to provide evidence to the contrary of the headline claims and suggest AFNs are not inherently predisposed to these transformative characteristics and can even display characteristics of the mainstream network that they are purportedly aiming to subvert. This argument is easily made, as AFNs have to operate within the conventional food network itself, and so 'optimist' and 'pessimist' accounts often occur simultaneously within research.

Alternative Food Networks in China

Recent research into Chinese AFNs appears to be recreating this entrenchment between reformist and radical AFN perspectives. Current scholarship of Chinese AFNs seems poised between a position of cautious optimism (Shi et al., 2011; Si & Scott, 2016; Schumilas

& Scott, 2016) against a more pessimistic perception (Day & Schinder, 2017) regarding the transformative potential or the 'alternativeness' of AFNs. Arguably, Chinese AFNs are well positioned to polarise this debate further, due to the accelerating levels of uptake of 'CSAs', Farmers Markets and rurally based social enterprises, that are also seemingly driven by typical commercial forces (Si et al., 2015).

This commercial focus of Chinese AFNs has been highlighted by empirical research in numerous ways. Case studies of Chinese AFNs has shown how they are heavily weighted in favour of AFN 'members', with members showing little, if any, desire to develop a respectful and more trusting relations with producers (Scott et al 2014; Si et al., 2015; Klein, 2009). Furthermore, as prices of conventional produce in China is so low, organic or ecological produce is marked-up significantly in China relative to Western organic food, exaggerating further the middle-class bias often associated with AFNs. AFNs and organic-based initiatives in China, despite their structural or spatial characteristics, also appear to be not developing good ecological practices, with extensive reporting of fake organic /ecological food organisations becoming common in China (Winglee, 2016). In addition, AFNs in China have predominantly only developed in peri-urban areas surrounding China's cosmopolitan centres - Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou-Shenzhen - suggesting AFNs are a product of rural redevelopment, as opposed to enterprises that can foster wider regional development in rural areas.

Thus, from a typical Western gaze, Chinese AFNs do not appear to exhibit characteristics which would highlight them as case studies embodying a strong 'alternativeness' or a transformative potential given their rather instrumental formation in the wake of reoccurring food safety scandals (Si et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2014). From Day & Schneider's (2017) perspective, AFNs in China are projects of wealthy urban entrepreneurs, which are aimed at urban consumers and are thus, examples of villages being forced to rely on more powerful outside economic agents for economic growth. An AFN displaying these features in a Western context would arguably be written off as an inauthentic outlier that has been corrupted by mainstream agribusiness (see Tregear 2011: 424) or categorised as a 'weak' alternative (Watts et al. 2005). Indeed, research on Chinese AFNs has tended to revolve around: exploring middle-class urban relations with rural producers (Shi et al., 2011, Klein, 2014); assessing China's wider approach to ecological food and farming (Scott et al.,

2014); examining how their networks are prompting forms of collective agency (Schumilas & Scott, 2016); and studying how AFNs transform notions of trust between producers and consumers (Wang et al., 2015) - as opposed to research concerned explicitly with their capacity to impact the larger food system. With the exception of Zhenzhong Si & Steffanie Scott's (2016) paper which linked AFNs to rural development strategies, little work to date has explore how Chinese AFNs might initiate a 'transformative food politics' on a larger structural scale (Levoke, 2011; Goodman et al., 2012) – a critical and seemingly unresolvable tension that haunts most AFN-orientated papers.

The entrenchment of perspectives in AFN literature, which is partly reoccurring in Chinese AFN literature, is not unique to this field of research. In fact, this optimist / pessimist framing appears to be especially prevalent in China scholarship at a variety of levels. For example, popular bestsellers *When China Rules The World* by Martin Jacques (2012) and *Death by China: Confronting the Dragon - A Global Call to Action* by Peter Navarro and Greg Autry (2011) are also polarised accounts with the former reflecting a positive account of China's rise and the latter providing a more negative perspective. In specialist research fields too, the optimist versus pessimist framing is prevalent. Tang Wenfang's (2016) book *Populist Authoritarianism* for example, navigates, falsifies and refines, using empirical data, the polarised - and often incorrect- opinions of China's political system. Likewise, in a discussion of China's innovation credentials, David Tyfield's (2018) book *Liberalism 2.0 and the Rise of China* stages a debate between optimists and pessimists regarding China's position as a global leader of innovation. To conclude this debate, Tyfield astutely observes that 'attempting to adjudicate between the optimist and pessimist cases…is a fool's errand. For both are right. And both are wrong. And it is precisely this feature of China's innovation system that is its most important and defining characteristic and, in the greatest irony of all, its greatest strength.' (ibid: 97).

Using Tyfield's observation as a starting point, this thesis similarly attempts to displace the entrenched account of AFNs. I argue that China's unique context highlights how the tensions inherent to AFNs are a potential advantage. Indeed, the opportunity to explore 'inauthentic' or perceived 'outlying' Chinese examples of AFN case studies is in fact of particular value for scholars of AFNs. That in China, these AFN outliers are clearly manifestly the norm, Chinese AFNs can act 'as a basis for reflecting more critically on original theories

and expectations about food systems, to reassess them more deeply' (Tregear, 2011: 424), making them an ideal case study for prompting a nuanced engagement with AFN processes. Indeed, a key theme throughout this thesis is to unsettle the (largely Western) notion of AFN 'impasses' (see Tregear, 2011) and suggest instead that the tensions in AFNs may in fact be compatible and generative - an aspect which emphasised in a Chinese context.

Therefore, this thesis is not seeking to ask of Chinese AFNs if 'they generate alternative modes of social organisation that challenge injustice and other problematic aspects of the food system?' or to evaluate 'how self-reflective and critical they are?' (Papaoikonomou and Ginieis, 2017: 2; DeLind, 2011) - questions commonly asked of their Western counterparts. Instead, I suggest these are the wrong yardsticks with which to measure AFNs. These questions tend to provoke examples and evidence that can be found to support either an optimistic or pessimistic view. Furthermore, these questions carry with them an implicit assumption that, as scholars, we should have expectations of the agendas AFNs should be in pursuit of. This ultimately restricts the analytical value of these types of questions. As emphasised by Clarke et al., (2008: 221):

'Portrayals of alternative food networks tend to assume not only that organic food networks try to uphold certain right principles and ensure certain good outcomes, but also that these networks should try to uphold certain right principles and ensure certain good outcomes. Our argument here is not that they do not, nor that they should not, but that the ethics concerned are far more complex than this suggests.'

Adopting a more deferred perspective - i.e. making fewer assumptions in advance - when exploring AFNs, can perhaps encourage a further scrutiny of the non-virtuous goals (determined by the current prevailing 'progressive' definition) being pursued by AFNs before writing them off for failing to appease a hypothetically desired outlook (see also Tregear, 2011: 425). It is within this vein that AFN scholars have called for more variation in AFN case studies, which have been overwhelmingly concentrated in Europe and North America (Maye & Kirwan 2010: 10). Exploring different national contexts is also important, as they can provide a sounding board to (re)assess the established theoretical and moral assumptions concerning AFNs, and their potential for affecting the wider food system (ibid).

China provides a pertinent context for this provoking of mainstream AFN research due to the significant historical, cultural and economic differences China has with the West, which have inevitably shaped the trajectory of AFNs in China differently. Schumilas (2014: 3) for example highlights the importance in recognising China's differing economic, political, civic and cultural systems when exploring Chinese AFNs as a Western scholar:

"AFNs in the global north have emerged in liberal capitalist democracies with industrialized food systems characterized by private land ownership, a declining small farm sector, consolidated farm to retail chains, predominance of supermarket retail, standards and laws ostensibly to safeguard food safety, and an extensive civil society sector organizing and advocating for changes in various ways. The Chinese context sits in contrast with its unique version of 'capitalism with social characteristics', a commons approach to land ownership, predominance of smallholder agriculture and traditional marketing chains based on wholesale and wet markets, a focus on agricultural productivity to support an obsession with food security and increasing meat consumption, nascent food safety legislation, and a civil society with limited autonomy from an authoritarian state that keeps shifting the terrain of what is permitted."

As AFNs in China are emerging in a significantly different context to the West, this suggest researches should be theoretical flexible in their analysis in order to recognise that AFNs are not just emerging 'from somewhere else' as it were, but also 'where they are going' is also likely to be very different (Martindale et al., 2018). In other words, there can be no (and nor should there be any) expectation of convergence (i.e. on the 'Western' model) (ibid).

In addition to the differing aspects between the West and China, as mentioned above by Schumilas (2014), this research also gives weight to this notion that the formation of 'modernity' in contemporary China is 'compressed' (Chang, 2010). Scholars often distinguish between two types of 'modernity' - 'solid' and 'liquid' (Bauman, 2000) - and China appears to experiencing both simultaneously (Chang, 2010). In the language of Beck (1994), the first phase of modernity refers to the Fordist mode of production, industrialisation and urbanisation, which is driven by the relationship between capital, machines and labour. 'Modernity' is then followed by 'reflexive modernity' which refers to the emergence of post-Fordist and knowledge-based economies that is based on an influx of

information technologies and the delinking of land, capital and labour through its reflexive and mobile capacities (see also Ma, 2012: 303). China has undergone both modernity and reflexive modenity simultaneously, unlike in the West (which has seen a gradual progression from one phase to the other), due to rapid development that occurred after China opened-up in 1978. As put by Chang, (2010: 446):

"Compressed modernity is a civilizational condition in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system."

The consequence of this compression is a compounding of the challenges incurred by both kinds of modernity and with increasing orders of magnitude. In other words, compressed modernity has forced a doubling down on internal contradictions (Han & Shim, 2010). It is precisely this condition that makes an investigation of the tensions in AFNs literature so compelling, as they are intensified to a point in which they must either 'give' or be circumvented in some fashion.

Compressed modernity is a critical aspect in the context of AFN research that exaggerates further the contradictory tensions that underpin AFNs i.e. initiatives that are both precarious 'counter-movements', and as 'opportunist' enterprises (McClintock, 2014). This aspect of 'compressed modernity' in China, I suggest, increases the visibility of the contradictory tensions driving Chinese AFNs, opening them up to deeper analysis. In fact, whilst Tregear (2011) defines these AFN contradictions as 'impasses', I suggest in the light of Chinese case studies of AFNs, that 'tension' is perhaps a more apt term due to the potential for these impasses to allow friction and be productive.

Research Questions: The Three Core Tensions of AFNs

This PhD intends to tackle not only the tensions internal to Chinese AFNs, but to explore how these tensions also speak to the larger project of Ecological Civilization. That both are concerned with reconciling the limits of 'capitalist' development - albeit at

different scales - suggests that similar contradictory forces are shaping the tensions occurring at the heart of both projects. I argue that 'compressed modernity', in conjunction with China's differing economic, political, civic and cultural systems, highlights how the underpinning tensions of AFNs operate not as impasses, but a productive force channelling the growth of these AFN projects. Likewise, I suggest that this same productivity reveals how, on a larger scale, Ecological Civilization can also be productive, despite its use as a somewhat abstract national slogan.

The research questions are therefore structured around three key AFN tensions that were highlighted by Tregear (2011: 422-423) as impasses. These tensions were the focus of my China (Guangdong) based fieldwork and structured the research questions of this thesis:

Tension 1: *The relationship between producers and consumers in AFNs appears positive, 'novel' and 'trusting'. However, as is typical of the conventional food network, they can also be impersonal and instrumental.*

Research Question 1: *How is 'trust' constituted in Chinese AFNs? And what does this reveal about the constitution of Ecological Civilization?*

A key theme in AFN literature is whether, by shortening the food supply chain, AFNs can positively affect the producer-consumer relationship. The processes of direct exchange and trust formation are pivotal in the supposedly novel and direct producer-consumer interaction that occurs with AFNs. Typically, it is assumed that these local level processes are based on equitable relationships and are democratic in outlook, or that they should be striving towards this. Chinese case studies are well positioned to explore this tension, as Chinese consumers - and producers - tend to be instrumental from the outset, with no specific aims of achieving a 'novel' relationship.

How Chinese AFNs constitute trust and establish lasting relationships, despite their seemingly instrumental relations, may also hint at how the Ecological Civilization project will ultimately sustain itself. Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that a government slogan alone will compel significant changes in lifestyle at a national scale and across all sectors of society. This thesis suggests that Chinese AFNs are able to sustain the relationship between buyers and growers by emphasising and celebrating the somatic and visceral qualities of their 'fresh' and 'ecologically' produce food. Thus, similar qualities (beyond food) amplified

via social media technologies, may also be instrumental in the eventual constitution of Ecological Civilization.

Tension 2: *The personal values and motivations of AFN actors are radically different from those associated with the mainstream food system and yet, they appear to mirror the values and motivations of the mainstream food system on occasion too.*

Research Question 2: *What do the developing dispositions of AFN actors reveal about the emerging subjectivities that may come to characterise Ecological Civilization?*

AFNs are often regarded as initiatives that embody and encourage a set of ethical and idealised subjectivities that are opposed to those associated with globalised agri-industry. However, the empirical reality of how AFNs actually operate on the ground highlights how this is not always, and is perhaps rarely, the case. The Chinese example of AFNs is illuminating in showing how the majority of AFN participants are overtly instrument and pragmatic in their engagement with AFNs, whilst also displaying idealistic and abstract sentiments.[3] The evolving subjectivities on display in Chinese AFNs thus complicate and displace this 'either-or' binary and demonstrate how AFNs can 'do well' while simultaneously 'doing good'.

As AFNs are predominantly middle class in formation, this research question explores in particular what constitutes China's middle class subjectivities and how they are evolving - especially in conjunction with the Chinese discourse of '*suzhi',* which refers to person's 'quality' based on their level of 'social development'. Whilst the Chinese middle class is still forming as a quantifiable category of society, its weight is likely to be significant enough to shape the subjectivities that will come to define China's future Ecological Civilization. Arguably the 'character' of these Ecological Civilization subjectivities is already emerging in Chinese AFNs.

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[3] The concepts 'pragmatic' and 'pragmatically' are used in this thesis in two different ways. In an empirical context (primarily chapters 4,5 & 6) 'pragmatic' is used in contrast to 'idealistic' or 'abstract' when describing specific features of AFNs that involve more instrumental motivations and strategies. Elsewhere, 'pragmatic' is also used in conjunction with pragmatism, the theoretical lens which is commonly associated with John Dewey (1991 [1927]) -

<u>Tension 3</u>: *AFNs have the capacity to positively affect and develop wider systems and economies. At the same time however, AFNs appear to be a product of already developed rural regions.*

<u>Research Question 3</u>: *What does the emergence of rural cosmopolitanism alongside AFNs mean for the capacity of a) AFNs to affect the wider region and b) Ecological Civilization to affect a transition away from an 'Industrial Civilization'?*

AFNs seem to be emerging as a product of already developed rural areas despite being 'hyped' as tools for rural development. In China, this issue is compounded due to intense social, economic, environmental and especially political conditions, which restricts the capacity of AFNs to be overtly 'alternative' or anti-market. In this chapter however, I use the lens of rural cosmopolitanism to offer a different interpretation of how AFNs can affect the wider region and suggest that AFNs can encourage change or institutional critique, though a subtle pragmatic means.

Taking direction from Beck's (2010; 2015) use of cosmopolitanism /cosmopolitanization, I also scale up this argument to the context of Ecological Civilization and suggest that forms of cosmopolitanism displayed by AFNs may also offer ideas to negotiate the larger tension concerning human development and impending ecological limits. Key to this argument is the role of China's unique rural sphere, which has retained most of its 'indigenous' culture, despite modernisation, enabling a form of 'ruralisation' of global capitalism.

PhD Structure

Following this introductory chapter, chapter 2 will examine the current literature of Ecological Civilization. In this second chapter, I outline how Ecological Civilization is being discussed inside and outside of China. Currently, Ecological Civilization is being debated in relation to a supposedly 'ecological turn' taken by the CCP, with commentators debating if it reflects an authentic ecological commitment or an exercise in 'greenwashing'. Arguing that this debate misses the importance of the Chinese context, this second chapter aims to explore how the concept of Ecological Civilization is actually being applied and utilised in China. Food and agriculture is then used as an example to highlight how change and

innovation occurs in China, in order to suggest possible trajectories for Ecological Civilization development.

Chapter 3 is the thesis's methodology chapter. In this chapter, I highlight that I do not see myself as a 'sinologist' per se, but rather as a human geographer, using my experience of China to contribute to geographical theory (see also Lin, 2002). As such, this is not a typical methodology usually found in a PhD thesis, in that I do not simply outline my case studies and detail why I chose certain methods. I focus more on my personal experiences as a Western fieldworker in China, outlining how I applied my fieldwork methods whilst also simultaneously attempting to construct theory. I highlight specifically the challenges that occurred during my fieldwork, regarding positionality, translation and interviewing in an 'authoritarian' state. As opposed to overcoming or circumventing these challenges, I suggest that embracing them is the most fitting approach, using my positionality as a methodological tool in itself. The aim of this chapter is thus twofold, to give context to my fieldwork and methodological approach and to perhaps offer guidance for potential future China scholars that are also aiming to become more than sinologists.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6, are the fieldwork chapters. They explore the key tensions inherent to AFNs and begin to answer the research questions as outlined above. Each of these three chapters are structured similarly. First, they all begin with a discussion of the tension as it is understood in Western literature. Second, the tension is then applied and juxtaposed against the current nascent literature on Chinese AFNs. Third, a more detailed discussion on how the Chinese context interplays with the tension occurs which is based on my own fieldwork. Finally, I speculate, using the insights gained from exploring the tension, on how Ecological Civilization's eventual and on-going construction may come to be characterised.

Chapter 7 works as a concluding chapter, bringing together the observations and speculations of the previous chapters. This chapter attempts to answer the research questions and addresses the overall aim of this thesis. I describe how Ecological Civilization is more than a slogan and has the capacity to animate the everyday and grounded practises of individuals, communities, organisations into a concrete realisable project. In making this argument, I use my experiences of Chinese AFNs to reflect on the assumptions of Western

human geography regarding political change and to suggest why the concept of Ecological Civilization tends to confound Western analysis.

Original Contribution to Knowledge

The contributions to knowledge made by this thesis are fourfold. First, and on a basic level, this thesis is adding to knowledge by expanding AFN research to China, a relatively new area for AFN case studies. Before 2014, very few papers had been published on AFNs in China, the most significant of which was written by the founders of China's first CSA scheme 'Little Donkey' Farm which began in 2008 (see Shi et al., 2011). In 2014 (when this PhD began), a research team from Waterloo University, Canada, headed by Steffanie Scott, released three PhD theses on the subject, authored by Zhenzhong Si, Theresa Schumilas and Aijuan Chen, and have since collaborated on a handful of published papers.[4] More articles have begun follow since their publications, with Chinese scholars in particular beginning to explore and publish in this field (Krul & Ho, 2017; Yang, 2016; Song et al., 2015) However, it is still an area nascent in development and, to the best of my knowledge, no AFN research has been published with case studies taken from the Guangzhou or the Pearl River Delta region - the site for my fieldwork, and a key location for ecological or organic orientated agriculture in China (Riggs, 2005).

The second contribution this thesis makes to knowledge lies in its approach to exploring AFNs. As opposed to seeking to relate Chinese AFN examples to more general and conventional AFN theories, this thesis has attempted to approach AFNs without a prior theoretical commitment, emphasising instead the context and complexities of contemporary China. This approach has been taken in part to avoid the danger of empirical material becoming 'a confirmatory adjunct to pre-determined argument, rather than a source of complex insights upon which arguments can be tested and refined' (Tregear, 2011: 429). By applying this more deferred opened-ended methodological approach to Chinese based fieldwork, I hope to formulate theories and ideas that can help reengage scholars with the tensions that have begun to stymie AFN research. Put another way, by using empirical data from China, this thesis hopes to make conceptual or theoretical contributions

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[4] Jakob Klein from SOAS also published a paper on Chinese alternative food movements in 2014, based on case studies from Kunming.

to *mainstream* AFN literature (especially concerning these three tensions), to which geographers working in other field-sites can take note, and perhaps even adapt, within the context of their own AFN research accordingly.

Third, this thesis adds to the emerging debate on China's project of Ecological Civilization. As one of China's flagship 'projects' or 'slogans' it has attracted much interest within and outside of China. Currently there is little English language material addressing Ecological Civilization on its own terms, of how Ecological Civilization is being used and promoted in China (Oswald, 2014; Huan, 2016) - a gap this thesis is keen to address. Indeed, the combining of Ecological Civilization and AFNs in order to address this gap, is a unique take of both these subjects across the literature. To the best of my knowledge, the majority of English language literature that does discuss Ecological Civilization from a Chinese perspective does so only from a philosophical or a political theory approach, without attempting to substantiate it with on-the-ground examples - with perhaps the exception of papers by Wen et al. (2012) and Hansen & Liu (2017). Thus, this thesis seeks to continue this 'fleshing out' of Ecological Civilization and to contribute to that tricky academic endeavour of bridging abstract concepts with more grounded everyday practices.

Finally, and as an unexpected consequence of the above, I believe this research also challenges some of the core assumptions Western geographers tend to uphold regarding AFN analysis - namely, the notion of reflexive localism and the tendency to over emphasise the political. While this is not a new strand of thought, making this argument via Chinese AFN research is a novel and potentially telling route to do so, due to the unique differences of the Chinese context.

Chapter 2

Bringing Ecology and Civilization Together: A Food-Based Perspective

'Ecological Civilization' (*Shengtai Wenming*) has gained much traction since its initial introduction to the Chinese government lexicon in 2007 by Hu Jintao. Its usage as term marked a realisation on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that economic growth alone can no longer be at the core of development goals and that for development to be sustainable, it 'must entail a list of elements including the right relationship between man and nature' (China Daily, 2007). Thus, China's project of 'Ecological Civilization' is a recognition that a version of 'green development' is becoming necessary due to the rising tension between essential economic growth and the increasing levels of environmental degradation. In China's 2012 National Congress, Ecological Civilization was elevated to the Chinese Constitution, raising it, at least theoretically, to the same level as economic, political, cultural and social priorities in future development planning (He et al., 2013). The CCP's commitment to Ecological Civilization represents a significant new development in its political ideology, moving away from Deng Xiaoping's development 'at-all-costs' mantra (Huan, 2010).

Since its usage by the CCP, Ecological Civilization has begun to frequent many media sources that frame this project as an opportunity for China to take control of its worsening environmental problems. For example, news articles are linking Ecological Civilization with: China's emerging green economy; the CCP's attempts to develop an alternative to GDP; new laws that curtail corporate polluting; and government-led strategies behind developing a public 'ecological' awareness (Fullerton, 2015, Brahic, 2014; Meng, 2012; Ma, 2007). With the US withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement, these Ecological Civilization stories are becoming more prominent, with the added suggestion that China can lead the world's 'global environmental regime' (Wang-Kaeding, 2018). Academics internationally have also taken to the concept of Ecological Civilization, with a variety of scholars from China and worldwide commenting on this national project (Wen et al., 2012; Oswald, 2014; Wang et al., 2014; Zhuang, 2015; Huan, 2016; Margerison et al. 2016; Marinelli, 2018). German scholar Joachim Spangenberg (2014) for example envisions 'Ecological Civilization' as the only possible way forward for China amidst its dire environmental problems, while

Australian academic Arran Gare (2012), goes further, suggesting that China's approach to Ecological Civilization is the world's last hope for achieving global stability in a period of global environmental change. In order to encompass the many perspectives of Ecological Civilization, this chapter has been divided into three sections.

Part 1 of this chapter explores the terms 'ecology' and 'civilization' in the context of the intellectual debate (which is occurring predominantly outside of China) that the announcement of Ecological Civilization has triggered. On one side of the debate 'optimists' are arguing that Ecological Civilization, especially with its reference to traditional concepts (neo-) Confucianism and Taoism (see Chen, 2008; Yuan, 2018), reflects an authentic ecological engagement for living more 'harmoniously' with nature (Kassiola, 2013; Gare 2012). The pessimists argue however that there is nothing inherent to Ecological Civilization that supposes an ecological ethic and that it is, at best, a means for the CCP to propose unpopular, but basic, environmental reforms - and at worst, a form of destructive greenwashing (Heurtebise, 2017; Bruun, 2013). Underpinning this debate is ultimately the question of wheather an authentic 'Ecological Civilization' lies within vestiges of traditional Chinese thought, or could only arise through contemporary, and potentially radical, actions of cultural criticism.

I argue that this debate between optimists and pessimists is largely the wrong debate to be having, as it misses the specific Chinese context of what is meant by 'ecology' and 'civilization'. In other words, the debate fails to recognise how the cultural effects of a re-ascendant China may develop new paradigms that meaningfully address the current and universal wicked problems (i.e. ecology) that have been solely incubated by Western-dominated thinking. In place of this debate this section explores how 'Ecological Civilization' actually does productive work that could possibly be enacted at a scale that goes beyond China. I argue that whilst Ecological Civilization is in many ways functions as an ambiguous and flexible government slogan, it is also clearly not 'nothing' and is able to do productive 'work' as an idea or concept.

Part 2 in this chapter seeks to contextualise Ecological Civilization within in its own Chinese discourses. Whilst there are many published English language Ecological Civilization articles in circulation, there is little work to date that is attempting to contextualise Ecological Civilization 'against the circumstances in which it is used and promoted in China'

(Oswald, 2014). This point of recognising Ecological Civilization's place of origin becomes even more salient as Ecological Civilization is being directly attached to specific policy actions and goals, more so than in past CCP-led civilising projects of Material, Spiritual and Political Civilization (Geall 2015; Oswald 2014; PRCEE, 2014). Therefore, this section details how 'Ecological Civilization' is being promoted, promulgated and used in China through four specific dimensions of discourse: Ecological Civilization as a scientific-technocratic endeavour; Ecological Civilization as an alternative worldview; Ecological Civilization as Chinese exceptionalism; and Ecological Civilization as a green grassroots movement. These examples are then juxtaposed with the previously explored contexts of 'ecology' and 'civilization' to suggest how Ecological Civilization becomes an effective policy tool.

Part 3 in this chapter focuses on China's agricultural systems to provide a concrete example of how Ecological Civilization becomes an effective policy and to set-up the rest of this food-related thesis. Considering the primacy that food has in human life (particularly in China with its banqueting-centred culture), and its role as a particularly intense site of environmental problems, the eventual formation of China's project of Ecological Civilization will inevitably be linked to food. Indeed, food is a promising arena in which to explore China's challenge of spanning the planetary-environmental-'macro' i.e. Ecological Civilization, and the lived-everyday-'micro'. For food brings together the huge ecological impact of agriculture (including livestock), fishing and the most immediate and basic, somatically experienced and seemingly mundane, yet also hugely affective and culturally significant realm of human practices respectively. Furthermore, the prominence of food geography as an extensive field in and of itself lies in food's unique position as the 'ultimate social-nature' providing 'an entry point towards analysing and contesting broader social, political and economic relations from production to consumption' (Alkon, 2013: 644). Thus, how agricultural policy, farming practices and consumer habits (regarding procurement and eating) in China change and evolve will significantly shape the eventual formation of Ecological Civilization.

Part 1 - Ecological Civilization: An Authentic Ecological Ethos or Greenwashing?

Ecological Civilization, now firmly established as a guiding directive for policy, has direct references to traditional (often Confucian) thought in its respective CCP reports,

policy papers and Chinese scholarly articles (Chen, 2008; Zhang et al., 2011; Jia et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2014; Yuan, 2018).[5] Specifically, holistic Confucian concepts like a 'united heaven and humanity' (*tianrenheyi*) are linked to Ecological Civilization alongside references to a 'harmonious' relationship between man and nature (Chen, 2008; Yuan, 2018). This official endorsement of 'eco-spirituality' in the world's most populous, economically dynamic country has caught the attention of various Chinese, and international academic constituencies who want to have an alternative to eco-destructive global capitalist modernization.

Notable Western natural scientists James Hansen and Michael E. Mann have begun to express hope in China's environmental policy due to a disappointment with the response of Western nations to climate change (Hansen, 2010; 2015; Mann & Kump, 2015). In the social sciences, the American-based Marxian journal *Monthly Review* has been prolific in publishing Ecological Civilization articles and have begun to link Ecological Civilization with Ecological Marxism and Constructive Postmodernism (Wang et al., 2014). Similarly, UK-based Katherine Morton (2009: 113) has also advocated for Ecological Civilization. After examining the legacy of Chinese environmental statecraft she suggests that the value of Ecological Civilization lies in its 'remini[scence] of traditional conceptions of nature in which the human and physical worlds are intertwined'. Evidence for this historical holism has been found too with China's traditional farming systems – often lauded as the earliest examples of sustainable and efficient agriculture (Wen et al., 2012) – some of which are based on Confucian precepts (Shapiro, 2012: 87).

Perhaps the strongest advocate for a Confucian 'green theory' to date has been proposed by American political scientist Joel J. Kassiola (2013). Arguing under the auspices of 'Comparative Political Theory', Kassiola views the contemporary relevance of Confucianism as a 'powerful antidote to the root cause of the environmental crisis: modernity and its values, constituting the currently hegemonic worldview' (228). Understanding Confucian philosophy as an anti-modern tract in which human beings alone are not viewed as the ultimate value as they are in anthropocentric modernity, but are instead embedded in the cosmic order, Kassiola proposes that Confucianism can provide

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[5] For an overview of the history of 'Ecological Civilization' (*shengtai wenming*), concerning its linguistic origins, see: Heurtebise (2017) & Oswald (2016).

much needed fresh conceptualisation, new ways of thinking and new vocabulary for understanding today's ecological crisis.

Eco-philosophers have also begun exploring traditional Chinese concepts of nature, in particular US-based Tu Weiming and Mary Tucker, who have made a link between Confucian (and Taoism) philosophy and ecological values (Tu, 1998; 2001; Tucker, 1993; 2014, see also Jenkins 2002; Tianchen, 2003). A notion supported by recent empirical work from a British-Chinese collaboration that suggests a significant link between Chinese people's attitudes towards morality, harmony and nature, and their understandings of the ancient philosophies of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism (Margerison et al., 2016).

The philosophical foundation for a link, or a relationship, between Chinese traditions and ecological values occurs predominantly in two ways. Tu (1998; 2001) for example, has outlined in detail how Confucianism encourages a disposition of 'being' which is amenable to a more ecological way of living. In his framing, Confucian thought is able to generate a practical ecological politics due to the Confucian onus on 'self-cultivation' - which relates to the performance of 'correct' practices that travel outwards as extending considerations from oneself to eventually humanity as a whole. For Tu, this focus on practices or cultivation is different to having a 'correct' Confucian mind-set:

'The Confucian worldview, rooted in earth, body, family, and community, is not adjustment to the world, submission to the status quo, or passive acceptance of the physical, biological, social, and political constraints of the human condition. Rather, it is dictated by an ethic of responsibility informed by a transcendent vision. We do not become "spiritual" by departing from or transcending above our earth, body, family, and community, but by working through them.' (Tu, 2001: 245)

This understanding of Confucianism, which involves a form of practical activity or productive work, (i.e. self-cultivation) creates a different and more universal kind of cognition then found with classic Confucian textual traditions and rituals, potentially increasing the appeal Confucianism to the more pragmatic-minded would-be Ecological Civilization practitioners. Whilst traditional Confucian ideas of self-cultivation is restricted to human society, in neo-Confucianism - which involves Taoist traits - environmental problems are also incorporated

into the cosmic order, as the range of self-cultivation is extended further (Arler, 2018; Tianchen, 2003; Tu, 2001).

Secondly, traditional Chinese thought is generally supposed to have a holistic and therefore 'harmonious' worldview between humans, nature and heaven (*tianrenheyi)*. This holism is centred on the notion of 'the natural way' (*dao*) and the idea of having 'no action' (*wuwei*) in which one strategically follows the path of least resistance in tune with 'nature' (Mathews, 2016). However, dualism re-enters in this formation of the 'natural way' as conceptually, there must also be a 'ways off nature' that can lead astray (Arler, 2018). For Arler (2018: 105-106) this paradox is resolved somewhat with the concept '*tianrenheyi*' that positions heaven (*tian*) as:

'the perfectionist element, where we should search for the ideal "way of nature" – whereas the other part of the concept, nature as a whole, has a much stronger relation to earth and includes a variety of "ways off nature". This way, humans can be part of nature (as a whole) at the same time as they strive to find the more heavenly "way of nature".'

In this formulation the 'holism' of nature is able to encompass the dualism between 'ways off nature' and the 'way of nature' - making Confucius thought appealing to deep-ecologists ad philosophers of 'green' theories.

This interest in the ecological underpinnings of Chinese traditional thought has revitalised a debate that crystallised in the 1970s – namely whether Asian ideas of nature could provide a viable alternative to the Western modernisation (Hudson, 2014). However, as with the 1970s critiques of Asian eco-spirituality, critical questions have re-emerged concerning the practicalities of putting traditional Asian or Chinese concepts into practise. For even if Asian 'eco-spiritual' thought is taken as a theoretically sound philosophy in the first place (and not just a form of Orientalist imagining), Western colonialism and capitalism may have already distorted traditional Asian concepts of nature beyond use (Hudson, 2014).

This point, that tends to question Asian eco-spirituality as a philosophy or as a set of ecological ethics, has come under much scrutiny and critique in relation to a specific Confucian inspired Ecological Civilization too. Danish sociologist Ole Bruun (2013: 2) has been the most vocal critic, highlighting that the 'metaphysical holism' central to Confucian thought:

"…is very different from the epistemological holism of ecology. It tends to imply that nature is spontaneously self-generating in a constant transformation process, while man's relationship with nature is not essentially a moral issue: man and his activities belong to nature's own cyclical processes. Ethical extension is not encouraged, since every aspect of nature is subject to the same inherent dynamics of creation and recreation, and any given state of balance may be termed 'harmonious' if beneficial to man."

Bruun's (2013) critique carries weight as this Confucian understanding of nature is still visible in China today. Indeed, it is difficult to exaggerate the current and projected impacts of environmental deterioration in China which are currently most visibly through air pollution, the health impacts of which are currently being felt by millions of Chinese every day (Watts, 2010; Shapiro, 2012).

Domestic tourism in China, for example, reveals starkly how this Chinese 'holistic' perception of nature works in practise. Chinese tourists who visit designated holiday places or 'honeypot sites' generally employ a perspective that does 'not privilege nature or the environment and do[es] not recognize these as distinct spaces that must be treated as sacred' (Shepard & Yu, 2013: 43). In other words, Chinese nature tourism it is not a Western-style reaction against modernisation that wishes to 'return to nature'. As argued by Nyiri (2006: 50), 'scenic spots [in China] are attractive not because they are natural but because they are well developed, attract visitors, credentialed, spatially mapped and standardized'. The result of this holistic perspective is not therefore a valourisation of nature but a 'civilizing' of nature, which can equally lead to, if not more so, increased levels of environmental degradation.

This holism is therefore problematic for the 'optimists' of China's Ecological Civilization, who are often Western deep-ecologists and Western neo-Confucians. Whilst they are deeply interested by the 'holism' inherent to traditional Chinese thought, which involves a 'deep green' eco-centric ethics and/or a sense of nature's sacredness and (supreme) value 'in itself', this notion of holism is only possible from a Western perspective that is fundamentally dualist (man vs. nature) and positions nature as separate from humanity. Although Confucianism is unquestionably more holistic than much of Western thought, this has not equated 'nature' with 'sacredness'. Chinese thought, in particular

Confucianism, is actually one of optimal and harmonious management (or government) of 'nature' for human purposes.

Since in China there is no traditional philosophical position where nature can be held up as sacred - a foundational aspect of Western environmentalism - this is a position that historically, has been more damaging towards the environment. In other words, when 'nature' is not separated from 'man' as argued in Confucian thought:

"…humans exist within a web of mutual dependency with each other…premised on a desire to tame and control not nature but 'qi', the energy force that emanates everywhere as a means of both personal improvement and social order…the lack of any division between humans and the physical world [implies] an obligation for humans to utilize ['qi' and thus] the physical world to benefit themselves and others." (Shepherd & Yu, 2013: 35)

This notion that the natural world can be changed to benefit 'civilisation' is manifest not only in contemporary China but historically too. In both imperial China (Hudson, 2014) and China under Mao (Shapiro, 2012), the state engaged in large scale engineering projects involving large scale deforestation, extensive rice cultivation, wide-spread irrigation the building of grand canals between North and South China and the construction of great walls, which whilst often marvels, inevitably led to massive environmental damage (Zou, 2013). Put another way, Chinese cultural traditions have tended to emphasise the utility of natural resources, not their 'sacredness' (Elvin, 2004; Watts, 2010).

For the pessimists of Ecological Civilization, China's poor environmental record, both contemporary and historically, has led to scepticism regarding the environmental credentials of a Confucian inspired eco-philosophy. However, this 'pessimist' viewpoint is equally a product of a flawed Western centred perspective. To suggest Ecological Civilization is form of CCP greenwashing results largely from 'Western media and specialists [that have] generally analyse[d] Chinese economic dynamics along a continuum of capitalism, failing to capture relevant forms of geopolitical socialist-communist expression and their local-to-global impacts' (DeVillar, 2012: 155). In other words, this notion of 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics' is a 'poorly declined definition' (Parenti, 2013: 140) that assumes the symptoms and problems of Western capitalism such as 'greenwashing' (see Budinsky & Bryant, 2013) can, more or less, be transferred directly over to China. As acknowledged by

Parenti (2013: 142), more work needs to be focused on 'developing alternative analytical categories/theoretical ideas based on empirical work and related to the *hybrid* substance of China's developmental path and its experimental policies' (emphasis added). Thus, Ecological Civilization needs to become fully contextualised, in order to understand the nuances of this hybrid developmental path, broadly speaking 'socialism' and 'capitalism', in order to examine adequately China's potential development trajectories. In other words, an engagement with China's unique civilizational history is required first, before positing views on its possible trajectories of (ecological) change.

China's Civilization

China often defines itself as a 5000-year-old civilization, a 'fact' all Chinese school children can parrot. Whilst the actual duration of Chinese civilization can be debated, it is nevertheless irrefutable that China remains as the largest and longest political territorial entity of all time, with a rich history of world trade and technical-scientific innovation (Arrighi, 2007). This unique aspect of China often causes two distinct tendencies to emerge in Chinese commentary; an orientalising of Chinese culture or, the application of a universal (i.e. Western) framing to China that is lacking in cultural nuance (Parenti, 2013). The task for China scholarship therefore, is to recognise simultaneously, that 'no reified cultural Chinese "essence",' has been preserved over the millennia, but 'there [still] remains an unquestionable continuity across this period…between the "China" today' and what perhaps extends further back than a millennia of history (Tyfield, 2018: 79).

A central tenant of China's remarkable and incomparable history is its maintenance of a strict hierarchical formation in its centre and a largely autonomous periphery. Throughout China's history, with little interruption, China's society has had an emperor figure in its centre and at its (extreme) periphery, the bulk of the population. This bulk or 'peasantry' has always been relatively free from the centralised and institutional control of the centre, and has somewhat counter-intuitively, always enjoyed a relatively autonomous - if not precarious - position centred on pragmatic day-to-day practices and relations of interpersonal trust (Tyfield, 2018 79; Fei et al., 1992). Liang Shuming, a leader of China's rural reconstruction program in 1930's, aptly expresses how this particular societal formation works when he noted that 'it is absolutely insufficient to depend on external

forces (state power) … (because) the countryside is a place that state power cannot reach; there are not enough police' (Pan & Du, 2011: 458). A sentiment similarly echoed in Holbig's (2013: 70) description of contemporary Chinese governance: 'to tackle this problem [of public dissent], the regime is increasingly pursuing a strategy of segmentation: while the populace at large is given relatively free rein as long as it accepts the basic rules of the [state], the party is rather painstaking in its efforts to keep a tight rein on the present and future political elite''.

Whilst seemingly unworkable, from a Western account of history, this particular configuration of society has afforded China its incredible millennia-long civilization status. As Tyfield (2018: 78) vividly describes:

"It is precisely the conjunction of this top-down imperial hierarchy and the bottom-up resilience and pragmatic personal-relational manoeuvring, and their mutual acknowledgement and disregard or neglect, that afforded the integration of such a massive group into a single territorial civilization and its robust durability down the millennia. The persistent presence of a strong imperial authority, if possibly distant from day-to-day life, afforded a unified sociopolitical order and social peace that, so long as it did not interfere too much, underpinned the continuation of everyday life and participation in a great civilizational project that made everyday life in China Chinese; i.e. in Chinese language, 'civilized' (Han) from the 'Middle Kingdom' at the centre of the world (Zhongguo)."

Critically then, China's success as a civilization, is not because China's governance consists of rule by a uniform form totalitarianism. In fact, the use of 'terms such as "dictatorship," "authoritarianism" and "single-party system" (often used interchangeably to draw a negative portrait of China) are rarely associated with a systematic analysis of the relationship between the Chinese authorities and the rest of the society' (Parenti, 2013:145; see also Tang, 2016).

Recognising the immense scale and durability of China's civilization is also crucial for understanding China's modern-day relationship with global capitalism. For this configuration of civilization, and its unique people-politics/state-citizens dialectic, has enabled China to absorb capitalism without altering its fundamental structure. Indeed, China's modern-day clash with neoliberalism, rather than eroding and undermining China's civilizational

structure, has instead somewhat disciplined neoliberalism, 'to its continuing and spectacular advantage' (Tyfield, 2018: 82) – most notably by breaking apart the once taken-for-granted marriage between market liberalisation and democracy whilst also creating unprecedented levels of growth that lifted millions out of poverty (Holbig, 2013). Put another way, China's 'survival' in its clash with global capitalism is because its form of authoritarianism is clearly fragmented, allowing for significant flexibility between both its hierarchal centre and its relatively autonomous citizens, and between the dynamism of capitalism and the stoicism of China's civilization.

This 'fragmented authoritarianism' is evident at all levels of government (Mertha, 2009). Governance in China has been characterised as a mix of diverse, overlapping and competing different institutions, which are operating without 'a single and unified chain of command being issued from Beijing' (Tyfield, 2017: 97). In lieu of this subsequent 'structured uncertainty' (Breznitz & Murphree, 2011), born from the irrational incentives and disincentives that result from this form of governance, it is necessary for the CCP to provide a guiding national level discourse to direct its brand of fragmented authoritarianism towards some sort of coherent direction.

China's civilization (*wenming*) discourse for example, provides an important function that helps facilitate this fragmented authoritarianism, especially since the 1980's as China continues to embrace neoliberal forces and the extra levels of societal complexity this involves (Dynon, 2008). This 'civilizational' narrative provides Beijing with a means of establishing a national directive that can be reproduced omnipresently throughout Chinese society. As an important tool of governance then, the CCP has ensured that *wenming* discourse has infiltrated every scale of daily life in China:

'Wenming exists at both the highest and lowest levels of discourse, from the most esoteric of theoretical journals to the most basic of anti-spitting signage. A product of the Party promotional machinery, it has also become the stuff of the broader social landscape, from media reportage, cartoonage and Microsoft Word's Chinese language input system to the lexicon of day-to-day conversation. Civilization theory (albeit often in its most unsophisticated forms) finds itself replicated in innumerable, diverse and often spontaneous ways, providing a coding for both prescribing and describing ways of acting, doing and being— from bodily functions to governing the people.' (Dynon, 2008: 108-109)

This civilizational discourse has become effective at propagating the wishes of Beijing outwards, allowing local governments and citizens to interpret and strive towards its edicts autonomously, without the use of a less flexible, more laborious and burdensome apparatus of direct management. In other words, civilization discourse / official state language has emerged as an attractive political tool - for a non-democratic government - that can manipulate a vast population in a certain direction (Holbig, 2013) without encouraging its radical interpretations. This notion is central to how Ecological Civilization functions in China and has precedent in past civilization discourses utilised by the CCP.

The past civilization discourses of Material, Spiritual and Political Civilization were similar directives to Ecological Civilization that have been issued by Beijing in order to direct local governments – and people - accordingly to the national pressures of the time. The discourses of Material and Spiritual Civilizations were originally articulated in the late 1970s, during the opening-up period, and were devised to temper the drive of excessive economic gain with notions of morality. For example, they encouraged citizens and organisations to go out and acquire material wealth, but only to an 'adequate' level - in a bid to promote economic growth but also limit economic disparity (Dynon, 2008). In short, these discourses were domesticating society 'to the new market imperatives of the state and the economy' as ordained by Beijing (Olsen, 2014: 3). Importantly, these civilization discourses are not solely a CCP prerogative; they are also reflections of the angst of the Chinese people in a period of turmoil that the CCP has to mediate and manage. Political Civilization for example, announced in 2002 by Jiang Zemin, which 'focused on regulation, law, governance and institution-building' (ibid), was as much a response to the CCPs increasing concerns about corruption, as it was a result of the frustration Chinese citizens were having in legalising their complaints (Dynon, 2008). Likewise, with Ecological Civilization, Margerison et al. (2016: 7) emphasise 'that this change [towards Ecological Civilization] is already taking place and that the government policy is a manifestation of that change.'

This reflective and circular aspect of civilization discourse between state and society is critical, as it supposes a self-recognition on behalf of the current governmental departments /elites that the governance of China requires reform, *in response* to society's demands – not the other way around (Tang, 2016). In regard to Ecological Civilization, its connotation of political reform has been explicitly recognised at high level Party conferences

(See Xi, 2013 communique in the CCPs' 18th National Committee), pushing one Chinese commentator to suggest that Ecological Civilization is spurring a 'self-revolution of government' in order to meet the demands of a changing society (Zhang, 2015). The civilization discourse can therefore be understood as a politically reflexive tool of CCP, used retrospectively to help guide and accommodate the changing dynamics of Chinese society. In other words, civilization discourse acts as a powerful instrument for political mobilization and regime legitimacy as it negotiates the dialectic occurring between people and politics / state and citizens.

Key to this state-society dialectic (and *wenming* discourse) is the Chinese concept of '*suzhi*'. Synonymous somewhat with virtue, this widespread concept which emerged in the 1980s, refers to a person's level of 'quality' or 'the physical and mental condition of people and their personal ability and cultivation' (Liu et al., 2017: 5). Since China's opening up period, *suzhi*, in concert with *wenming*, is broadly dictating the current aspirations of society (Shepherd & Yu, 2013: 37; Jacka, 2009). In the context of official discourse, 'a sustainable society needs moral and well-educated (ideal) citizens with high-level *suzhi* while at the same time personal development needs a sustainable social context. Therefore, enhancing people's *suzhi* becomes a way to transform China's population burden into human resources' (Liu et al., 2017: 5).

In relation to Ecological Civilization, '*suzhi*' reflects a mobilisation of the population from *being* an ecological burden towards *becoming* an ecological resource. Xi Jinping for example has stated that 'in addition to creating more material and cultural wealth to meet people's ever-increasing needs for a better life, we need also to provide more quality ecological goods to meet people's ever-growing demands for a beautiful environment' (Xinhua, 2017). Put another way, the benchmark for a 'sustainable social context' in today's China requires an improvement in the quality of the environment (Liu et al., 2017: 5), a point acutely demonstrated by the levels of pollution in Chinese cities. The removal of this pollution is therefore required to improve the quality of life (i.e. s*uzhi*) at both an individual and societal level. Thus, under *wenming* discourse, the ecological aspect of civilisation is emphasised, not achieved as such - in the wake of increasing levels of environmental degradation that are damaging China's capacity to be 'civilized'. Put simply, to be civilized in contemporary China involves an ecological aspiration.

Similar to *wenming* discourse defining and advocating *suzhi* is not solely in the remit of politically party elites. Arguably, it is China's emerging middle class, with its growing size, weight and dynamism (Therborn, 2012; Li, 2010), which is beginning to dictate what characterises the highest levels of *suzhi*. Writing in terms of 'brand' consumption practices, Tyfield (2018: 150) for example, highlights it is the middle class, which are displaying and striving towards the highest levels of 'quality':

'…as recent developments in taste show…away from the more ostentatious trappings of Western luxury brands (e.g. the duty free airport fare of Louis Vuitton bags, Rolex watches, French make-up and perfume or Italian tailoring or sports cars etc…) to more deliberately understated and possibly East Asian brands (such as Korean make-up), it is the modest, hard-working middle class that are framed as the highest 'quality' persons here not the elite.'

Thus, Ecological Civilization and its formation will likely depend far more on the Chinese middle class, their anxieties and aspirations, and how they re-orientate *suzhi* towards an ecological-based disposition, as opposed to the 'tastes' of the political cadres of the CCP. Indeed, the prominence of the middle class in dictating *suzhi* is a point that the CCP is acutely aware of, explaining somewhat why the CCP have allowed middle class entrepreneurs to join the 'party' since 2000 (Jing, 2017: 38). In sum, Chinese notions of *suzhi* and *wenming* point to how China's state-society relations are profoundly different to that of the West, despite the adoption of 'neoliberalism' by the state since 1978.

Politics in an Ecological Civilization

The relationship between the Chinese state and its citizens, people and politics, appears as an anathema from a typical Western perspective. As a result, many analysts caught between extremes when commenting on China, predicting either China's inevitable collapse or announcing the beginning of a Chinese century with both arguments relying on China's supposedly 'authoritarian' and 'apolitical' political system (see also Campbell, 2015; Tang, 2016). On the one hand, the regular reoccurrence of protests in China (albeit under-reported) are interpreted by some Western journalists as clear evidence of the Chinese political system's crisis; on the other hand, Xi's strongman authoritarian approached is also billed by some as a necessity for China to negotiate its myriad and

complex challenges. Crucially however, both these perspectives are omitting the data that shows there is socio-political dynamism in China that is not only being allowed 'by administrative and political reforms, but also by the general improvement in the living conditions of millions of people' (Parenti, 2013: 13; see also Tang, 2016). This complexity, in regards to the processes of politics and reform in China, suggests that a more deferred and open-ended lens - without preconceived expectations – is required of Chinese political analyses.

To reach a more nuanced understanding of China's politics and its social-political dynamism, I rely in part on the work of American pragmatist John Dewey. Known for his work on experimental politics and public participation, Dewey - alongside Charles Sanders Peirce and William James - introduced new ways of conceiving the processes of politics and reform (Marres, 2007; Harney et al., 2016). A pragmatic lens which shifts analysis towards an agenda that explores how alternative institutional designs can emerge and promote progressive ideals without resorting to revolutionary radicalism is perhaps appropriate for understanding the political system of China, given that it is entirely focused on mobilising change whilst avoiding radicalism or revolution. The recent work of political geographers Clive Barnett and Gary Bridge (2013) is useful here too in their advocacy of a pragmatic approach toward political change. Using the insights made by Dewey they argue for a pragmatic approach to politics that is able to 'think through problems of coordination, institutional design, and the justification of the common good', and avoid the tendency to overemphasize 'agonism, conflict, and dissension' that is typical of the radical democracy literature (Barnett & Bridge, 2013: 1024).[6] Furthermore, Dewey's 'spirit of experimentalism' and his emphasis on innovation 'as an enabling condition for, as well as a feature of, democratic process' (Marres, 2007: 765),[7] suggest that his understanding of pragmatism is particularly suited to a country which has been defined by experimentation (Jing, 2017; Dirlik, 2012) and innovation (Tyfield, 2018, Arrighi, 2007) in recent decades.

China's more ancient history also lends itself to a lens of pragmatism. Throughout China's millennia-old civilization, self-preservation as a prevailing strategy has emerged in

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[6] Hassanein (2003) makes a similar point in regards to AFN analysis.
[7] Democratic is understood here in the sense of the social capacity to freely express innovative ideas and vital concerns - as opposed to electing representatives.

response to the all-embracing and omnipresent volatility of both political and natural forces (Julian, 2000). China's agricultural regime has always been highly vulnerable to variable natural processes, such as the flooding of the Yangtze River, and China's political system (with its 'rule by man' rather than 'rule of law' traditions) that has tended to strike out suddenly at perceived dissent, suppressing and censoring its citizens on an erratic basis. As a result, from the times of early China to the present day, Chinese citizens have had to evolve cautious and practical responses to the challenges of the day, with pragmatism emerging as an internal and largely unselfconscious rationality (Mathews, 2016), that has shaped China's distinctive philosophical and literary tradition (Julian, 2000).

This unconscious pragmatic rationality is also evident in China's contemporary political economy. For example, whilst the political economy is 'an apparently restrictive political environment …rapid socio-economic and cultural changes are taking place' (Ho & Edmonds, 2008: 2). As the boundaries for acceptable activism are often unclear and activism could be interpreted as an existential threat to the political regime - a historical facet of Chinese life in which everybody, i.e. 'the public', is cognizant of - the processes behind this change are therefore pragmatic and un-politicised in form. In other words, the lack of political freedom does not result in an attempt by people to seek 'politicization'; instead, there is an attempt for people and organisations to work pragmatically, in pursuit of their own strategic projects, *within* the political conditions set by the state.

These strategic projects of Chinese civil society, whilst 'fragmentary, highly localized, and non-confrontational [in] form' (Ho & Edmonds, 2008: 14), does not automatically negate the capacity for the Chinese state to instigate radical change. Over the medium-long term, they can act as dynamic processes that are capable of causing significant alterations to the regime as a whole. Put another way, small-scale movements pragmatically working with the state can be a viable alternative to radical high-pressure civil-society movements for inducing 'radical' changes. Indeed, the boundaries set in place by the state on civil society are not fixed with predefined parameters but are amenable to forces that test and push the supposed limits. These forces suggest China has a distinct process able to prompt significant change, one which has been empirically demonstrated in many accounts (Cai, 2010; Chen, 2012), especially in the context of land use rights (Trichur, 2012; O'Brien & Li, 2006) environmental politics (Beach 2001; Martens 2006; Stern, 2013) and with issues of food

safety (Legget, 2017). It is only if protests or developing NGOs / organisations at a local level are seen to be developing new forms of civil society that are operating outside of the market mentality and are explicitly propagating alternative ideals that the state is likely to step in to censor that form of initiative from developing (Hale, 2013). Chinese activists are therefore forced to engage in politics in a piecemeal and dispersed way that pragmatically works with(in) the state. Whilst this may not appear radical in form, over the long term it may drive radical change, indicating that pragmatism and radicalism are not mutually exclusive.

In the context of pragmatic politics, the question asked of Ecological Civilization concerns its ability to direct this pragmatism towards a specific end, namely a form of sustainable development. By operating on a grand, but in many ways indeterminate scale, Ecological Civilization is perhaps able to direct the pragmatic efforts of China by signalling a recalibration of society's (political) parameters. These parameters, now conditioned by a sense of 'ecology', will then shape the every-day activities that are being practiced by 1.4 billion Chinese people. These activities are not only just 'allowed', but are also solicited in some sense by the Chinese state, through discourses of *wenming* and *suzhi* encouraging individuals and organisations to work within these changing parameters and to also test and push them.

The key agents for this 'testing' of parameters are the Chinese middle class, the most dynamic and anxious aspect of society that also drives innovation. The policies and slogans of the state reflect the parameters, and then the middle class adapt and push them accordingly. These changing parameters are signalled by subtle shifts in state slogans which are formulated with the middle class in mind. As put by Tyfield (2018: 153):

Hence, whether regarding the 'China Dream' of generalized, 'moderately well-off' (xiaokang) prosperity,… or the 'new normal' of slower but more stable and service-oriented growth,… or the escape from the 'middle income trap' via an 'innovation-oriented society' rebalanced to high-quality, high-value-added goods and their consumption, … or the building of a globally-leading 'Ecological Civilization'…; in every case, it is explicitly the middle class that are imagined as the goal and agents of these slogans.

In this formulation, Ecological Civilization is more than just parameter outlining the scope of acceptable activity, but is also acting as an imaginary that is mobilising the population. Often the middle class are seen as the 'goals and agents of these slogans' which not only points to the demand of the middle class for an Ecological Civilization, but also their role in shaping CCP policy.

There are parallels here between Ecological Civilization as a mobilising imaginary and Barnet & Bridge's (2013) framing of the 'all-affected principle'. The 'all-affected principle' is typically understood as a democratic notion that argues all who are affected by a decision should have a right to participate in the making of it. In the context of political geography, this principle has been utilised to reconsider the scale of democracy, with calls for this concept to be respatialised at a level beyond the nation state to accommodate the complexities of globalisation (ibid). For Barnet & Bridge (2013: 1026), however, its meaning is less explicit:

 "the all-affected principle emerges less as an abstract causal criterion and more like an animating political intuition, providing reasons to act by implicitly drawing on values of equal moral worth."

In their formulation, Barnett and Bridge suggest that the 'all affected principle' works best as a guiding imaginary or a wider insight, not a project to be necessarily put into explicit action. Similarly, Ecological Civilization can be said to be also acting as an 'animating intuition' or a 'normative force generating political claims' which does not pit antagonists against each other in an 'either-or' scenario (ibid). As with the 'all-affected principle'/intuition, Ecological Civilization does not need a preconceived `project' or set of categorical oppositions, but it serves as a kind of broadly shared set of values that can be drawn upon, to help frame and legitimate specific projects.

So whilst Ecological Civilization may appear to mean 'everything and nothing' as a government slogan, there is perhaps a reasonably clear and substantive sense of what it is not - continuing air pollution, soil erosion and desertification etc. - enabling people, organisations and institutions to work against 'unsustainable' development. This pragmatist approach affords a productive, creative and open-ended engagement with a specific issue that is nonetheless a politics with space for agonism.

Part 2 – Ecological Civilization in the Chinese Context of Discourse

This section seeks to explore specifically how the conjunction of these two terms, ecology and civilization, is productively doing 'work' as an 'animating intuition' in China. I highlight four examples of prominent Ecological Civilization discourses that suggests it 'works' as mobilising slogan by being more than the sum of its parts: Ecological Civilization as a scientific-technocratic endeavour; Ecological Civilization as an alternative worldview; Ecological Civilization as Chinese exceptionalism; and Ecological Civilization as a green grassroots movement.

Ecological Civilization as a Scientific-Technocratic Endeavour

Perhaps the most visible of China's Ecological Civilization discourses is its association with science and technology. In this framing, Ecological Civilization is predominantly a technological solution to the problem of global environmental change, especially as the Chinese approach towards science and technology is particularly utilitarian. Since the Opium Wars (beginning 1839), which signalled the Western 'humiliation' of China through use of superior technology (gunboats and firearms), one of China's key and enduring aims over the last 100 years or so, has been to 'catch-up' with Western levels of technological development. An approach to science and technology that has had three key manifestations:

(a) technology has been treated as a mere 'tool', detached from its social and political context; (b) it is treated as a finished solution, diverting attention from the necessary processes of technological learning from advanced economies; and (c) a narrow focus of technical specialism is adopted in science and engineering at the expense of social, policy and managerial expertise, often associated with an elitist approach to technology development. (Shen & Williams 2005: 198)

In essence, these manifestations create an approach towards science in China in which an overwhelmingly positive account of technological progress is taken for granted, and its connection with social progress assumed uncritically. In other words, China's historical relationship with the West, in conjunction with the condition of compressed modernity, has not afforded China the time to develop adequately its own critique of science and

technology (i.e. a critique of modernity) (ibid), the legacy of which is still apparent in China today.

Ecological Civilization, and 'green development' more generally, have become closely associated with this utilitarian approach towards science and technology and is often used to emphasise China's increasing level of technological development. This is in keeping with past campaigns promoted by the CCP since the 1950s that sought to target intellectuals and students to encourage them 'to study science in order to strengthen the country' (Hansen & Liu, 2017: 323). Today the CCP a is consistently emphasising a 'scientific outlook of development', a phrase that reoccurs in numerous leading policy documents and speeches. This pressure for China to take a lead in science and technological innovation is also apparent in Chinese articulations of Ecological Civilization. The CCP's third plenary session of the 18th National Committee 2013, which was convened partly to accelerate Ecological Civilization-based policy decisions for example, explicitly relates Ecological Civilization to a scientific approach:

To promote ecological progress, we must…improve the system of natural resource property rights and the system of natural resource utilization control, draw a red line for ecological protection, implement sound compensation systems for use of resources and for damage to the ecological environment, and reform the ecological protection management system" (Xi, 2014)

In line with the above sentiment, the Chinese leadership has thus given the remit of Ecological Civilization to a department of predominantly natural scientists in order to clarify the 'red line' or danger zone for ecological protection (Oswald, 2014; PREEC, 2014; Lu et al., 2015). This technocratic management approach to Ecological Civilization has fostered increased research and funding particularly in the field of 'ecosystem services' (Lu et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2014). One of China's flagship projects for Ecological Civilization for example revolves around assessing and evaluating, in totality, the ecosystem services of Hainan Island. Informed by the work of ecological economist Robert Costanza, China hopes to create in Hainan 'the first natural capital balance sheet for one of the world's major municipal governments' (Fullerton, 2015). As argued by Hansen and Liu (2017: 323), Ecological Civilization reflects a continuation of 'the state's promotion of science [and]

increasingly accentuates not just China's need to study and apply science, but also the need for China to take a lead in scientific and technological innovation.'

The theory behind this 'scientific'-dominated approach is that by producing extensive natural capital assessment guidelines for example, policy makers are able then to correctly adjudicate 'where environmental restoration/remediation is required and appropriate' (Lu et al., 2015). In this guise, Ecological Civilization can be seen to be emerging as a top-down technocratic process concerned with the mapping and zoning of ecological regions. The emerging trend for Ecological Civilization analysis by Chinese scholars has thus tended to 'pay more attention to policy instruments and local practice of Ecological Civilization construction rather than rational analysis of the concept itself' (Huan, 2016: 53). This focus is apparent with both the majority of Chinese Ecological Civilization literature, and in the form of material Ecological Civilization projects too.

Since the introduction of the Ecological Civilization concept in 2007, China has embarked on a varied eco-city construction plan that utilises the mapping and zoning technique that feature extensively in ecological modernising strategies. To date, 287 prefecture-and-above level cities are involved in projects that range in definition and meaning: eco-city; low carbon city; low carbon eco city; eco-garden city (Khanna et al., 2014: 111). All these projects are experiments based on a comprehensive top-down framework for low carbon planning. These eco-city projects rely extensively on a variety of indicators and targets which are used to 'scientifically evaluate the progress of regional Ecological Civilization construction' (Liu et al., 2014: 97). For example, Guiyang City in Guizhou Province has been tasked to: 'improve development patterns of China's geographical space; promote all-around resource conservation; intensify protection of the ecosystem and the environment; and enhance system building to promote Ecological Civilization' (PREEC, 2014: 50, Oswald; 2014). In other words, China's eco-city projects have tended to 'draw on ecological modernisation and the role of specific techno-environmental solutions to notions of urban, climate and energy crisis' (Capriotti, 2014: 11) as opposed to provoking theoretical debates on what an eco-city or 'Ecological Civilization' means.

This focus on 'geographical space' or zoning has been recognised by leading eco-city proponent Richard Register (2006) as an important step in creating an 'ecological' city that occurs alongside the involvement of multiple local development and stakeholders. However,

'in China, eco-cities are not sold by motivated citizens to their peers and governments as major contributions to sustainable production and consumption, but by local governments to future developers, high-tech corporations, and highly educated inhabitants as attractive green areas where they can generate extra GDP, produce new technologies, and live comfortably and safely' (de Jong et al., 2013: 110). The form of eco-city building occurring in China, which occurs as a process of corporate branding, often fails to reduce the consumption of materials and energy, as this aspect only possible through public engagement (Premalatha et al., 2013).

Furthermore, if eco-cities are conceived as top-down branding projects, they will likely be analogous to the emergence of 'community vitality' and 'social resilience' – aspects which are core if an eco-city is to become viable. Indeed, arguments have been made that eco-cities in China may emerge as 'ecological enclaves' that are in danger of becoming 'pearls in the sea of degrading urban environments' (Wong, 2011: 131; Zhuang, 2015). Envisioned as corporate ventures, China's eco-city projects may only become concerned with creating environmentally amenable zones for (particular) residents, forgetting the larger urban context where the environmental externalities of the eco-city are off-set (Caprotti, 2014; Hodson and Marvin, 2010; Zhuang, 2015). The question arising for China then is: can the proposed social character of a city as 'harmonious' – which reads as 'stable, quiet and politically disengaged' (Caprotti, 2014: 15) - be compatible with the type of public necessary to make an eco-city worthwhile? The track record of Chinese eco-city projects suggest not, with the majority of projects abandoned - often before they really began - and categorised as utter failures (Zhuang, 2015). This reoccurring fate of China's eco-cities suggests that Ecological Civilization will have to go beyond a scientific, technocratic and top-down framing, for it to be realised on any meaningful scale.

Ecological Civilization as an Alternative Worldview

Whilst there is a strong scientific and technocratic domination of the Ecological Civilization discourse in China, it does not have a monopoly. Indeed, Ecological Civilization is provoking a societal-level reflection of the human relationship with the environmental at large. This is similar affect to the one provoked by the concept of the Anthropocene -

popularised by Nobel award winning chemist Paul Crutzen (2002) - which has reasserted the ecological crisis on a geophysical and earth-systems scale in the West. Both concepts appear resonate together in a myriad of ways (see Marinelli, 2018; Heurtebise, 2017; Spangenberg, 2014), especially in how they both point to major debates about planetary urbanism and the future socioecological metabolisms amongst the city, countryside and wilderness.

Questions asked by social scientist Wan Juran (2013) for example - Dean of Tsinghua school for humanities social science - hints at the profound implications Ecological Civilization entails. Wan considers that 'as "cultural beings" possessed of an intellect how are we to perceive and understand the relationship between ourselves and the world…?' and likewise, 'we need to undertake sincere and profound self-criticism: with what sort of mentality should we approach the world we live in?' (2013: 148). These are questions which echo's those asked by Western Anthropocene scholars. Gisli Palsson, leading a team of Western social scientists, asks 'how can humanity 'navigate the transition to a fully Anthropocene society during a period in which the prevailing social values and institutions are still those of an earlier epoch? (Paslsson et al., 2012: 5), and climate change scholar Michael Hulme has similarly deliberated 'we know how the world works, but no longer what it means… [how do we] rediscover the being-knowing world that has been sundered?' (2013: 306). Amidst this project of Ecological Civilization Chinese social scientists have begun to respond to these deeper questions and offer their own sinicized responses.

Pan Jiahua, the director of the Institute for Urban and Environmental Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, offers the dominant Chinese response to the questions provoked by Ecological Civilization. He puts forth a notion of Ecological Civilization as a technological endeavour 'focused on the quantitative assessment of the supply-demand ratio of the ecosystem' fused with the promulgation of traditional philosophical notions such as '*tianrenheyi*' (Marinelli, 2018: 17). In many ways, Pan reflects the consensus articulated by the CCP, arguing that Ecological Civilization requires technocratic management alongside a re-emphasis of a Confucian set of ethical behavioural norms. He suggests that a change in these norms will redirect the current political economy, away from industrial civilization, towards a holistic-based Ecological Civilization (ibid).

The field of Marxism in the Chinese social sciences provides another example of how the questions regarding Ecological Civilization and the human-nature relationship is being sinicized. Indeed, Ecological Civilization as a concept lends itself to Marxist interpretation, as it can be is easily framed as the next stage of development after industrial civilization (Oswald, 2014). This connection of Ecological Civilization with Marxism is unsurprising, as the latter acts as the founding ideology from which the CCP derives its legitimacy and as such, many intellectual ideas are required to pass through Marxism. Furthermore, the recent take-up of 'Ecological-Marxism' in China for example, as an in-vogue theoretical framework in which to explore environmental issues, has been attributed in part to the CCP's elevation of Ecological Civilization (Wang et al. 2013).

Since in China, scholars are required less to function as critics, who excavate and assess what has already occurred – which would be politically problematic – they are instead pushed to develop Chinese society accordingly. Ecological Marxism has emerged as an apt tool with which to do this, allowing scholars the scope to develop 'Marx' without challenging the official account of 'Marxism', China's Marxist past or the current regime. For the thoughtful but potentially regime-problematic Chinese intellectual to participate explicitly with environmental issues and environmental social movements, the auspices of Ecological Marxism - and Ecological Civilization - prevents the potential clashes with Communist Party politics or the alienation of traditional Marxist scholars (Wang et al., 2013). Thus, under a Marxist framing, Ecological Civilization is not so much a tool to critique capitalism (as it might be in the West) but permission to 'ecologise' the future.

Social scientists in China have also begun use this permission to 'ecologise the future' to suggest a more radical break with Marxism. In a special issue on Ecological Civilization in the journal *Social Sciences in China* (2013, volume 34: issue 4), scholars were invited to discuss Ecological Civilization and its sister concept 'Beautiful China'[8] and breakdown past analytical frameworks and consider alternative worldviews. Chinese historical geographer Zou Yilin's (2013) paper for instance, takes a deep time perspective of China's environmental history and moves beyond a Marxist framing of the issue. Zou (2013: 197-198) for example, emphasises the need to recognise that:

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[8] A term coined by the CCP to combine Ecological Civilization with a more literary label that can invoke 'imagination' and 'poetry' (see Wan, 2013).

'in reality, the productive forces are only one of many contributing factors, and at times not even the most important one. In certain circumstances, the sociopolitical system and economic institutions, as well as people's mentalities, religious beliefs, culture and customs have all played an extremely important role.'

Instead of focussing on the 'forces of production' and the notion that history is a linear process - a framing overtly prevalent in Chinese scholarship - Zou make as convincing case for Chinese scholars to revisit outdated analytical frameworks, to develop new ways of thinking and to challenge the established norms that have become inhibiting. In other words, he recognises that many of the established theories of social science are no longer fit for purpose in an era of Ecological Civilization.

Another Chinese scholar, seeking to underline the theoretical implications of Ecological Civilization is Huan Qingzhi (2010; 2016). For Huan, Ecological Civilization is an opportunity and a resource for both a radical critique of capitalist society and for imagining different socialist futures. He argues that Ecological Civilization needs to be emphasised as a 'socialist Ecological Civilization' in order to necessitate the necessary comprehensive social-ecological transformation required away from global (i.e. Western) capitalism. He fears China may reproduce of 'the results, models and ideas of environmental management' synonymous to Western counties, of which many 'Chinese researchers are devout believers' (Huan 2016: 60). Ecological Civilization's potential, Huan argues, can only be realised if the CCP and governmental departments open-up further to the Chinese social sciences, to allow for a more critical and 'socialist' input, which would cement its radical potential (ibid).

Ecological Civilization appears then to be giving Chinese scholars the freedom to envision the world in a way similar to Anthropocene scholars have. Yet, the origins of their intellectual imagining have arisen from different starting places and from a significantly different political context. This is unsurprising given the context of China's revolutionary history. The cultural connotations involved in these 'answers' by Chinese social scientists concerning the implications of Ecological Civilization avoid reference to sudden upheavals or radical paradigm changes, something more common with Western interpretations of the Anthropocene. Instead, Chinese scholars reflect more a debate on what should be emphasised in the construction of Ecological Civilization i.e. econometrics, Confucianism, socialism, holism, Marxism etc.

Ecological Civilization as Chinese Exceptionalism

Underpinning some of the above discourses is a sense of Chinese exceptionalism – in which Ecological Civilization is presented an antidote and alternative to Western modernity. This idea of Chinese exceptionalism has a long history and is a continuation of the CCP using 'Chinese antecedents to global issues in order to nativize the issue or even to prove Chinese superiority' (Bruun, 2011: 213; Brown, 2015). Ecological Civilization is not free from this form of appropriation and is in many ways emblematic of it.

Hu Angang (2014), economics professor at Tsinghua University, is perhaps the leading proponent of framing Ecological Civilization as a form of Chinese exceptionalism. Recognising that China is in a precarious position – a phase of rapid economic development during a period of increasing ecological degradation – Hu has argued that this position, within the larger global context, provides a positive opportunity for China. In the modern industrial era since 1750, China has always been 'behind' the West. Hu claims, however, the new 'global' pressure for an ecological form of development gives China:

"...a chance to stand on the same starting line and stay in the same camp as the United States and other developed western countries, with the opportunity to become the instigator, innovator, and leader of the fourth industrial revolution, the green industrial revolution." (Hu, 2014: 10)

For Hu, then, green development is the greatest strategic opportunity for China in the twenty-first century, allowing China to 'overtake' the West. This notion of a new 'industrial revolution' and a future green economy in China, has also been made by bestselling economist and social theorist Jeremy Rifkin, whose 2008 book, *The Third Industrial Revolution; How Lateral Power is Transforming Energy, the Economy, and the World* sold more than 300,000 copies in China - in its 2013 translated edition (Roberts, 2013). Rifkin argues that China is aptly positioned to initiate the next industrial 'green' revolution for three key reasons; 1) Its ample reserves of renewable energy resources; 2) a social market economy that can develop the necessary infrastructure; and 3) a philosophical tradition that seeks balance and harmony between humanity and nature (ibid).

Hu, (2014: 24) like Rifkin, also draws upon China's traditional philosophy and Marxist heritage - with its 'dialectics of nature' - in order to shape the discourse surrounding

Ecological Civilization accordingly. Although Hu is willing to engage with Western 'Sustainable Development', it is more from a position that seeks to learn from its failures - and to appropriate certain technologies - as opposed to developing a working mutual relationship with the 'West'. For Hu, a green industrial revolution in China would suppose a re-imagining of the key concept of 'sustainable development' that is distinct to the West:

In the new era of green civilization, humanity will need to completely change its philosophy, theory, and practice of development; as an amendment to the traditional mode of industrialization, sustainable development has proven unable to meet the needs of the new era; we have to supersede the prevalent western approach and propose a new concept of development, open up a new theory, and formulate new practices—the concept, theory, and practice of green development. (Hu, 2014: 12)

The clear sub-text to Hu's analysis is that one may identify the concepts of development (as currently understood), environmental destruction and the West on the one hand, and *therefore* Ecological Civilization as development, environmental sustainability and China on the other hand. This new 'civilization' is not merely welcomed as a route to solving the terrible and terrifying environmental challenges the world faces, and almost nowhere more so than in China, but also *and primarily* as a historical conjuncture that presents the conditions for and augurs, finally, China's return to 'its "rightful place" at the centre of global geopolitics, technology and culture" (Tyfield, 2016: 305). There is, of course, a certain ecological tension here, if ('Communist') China does go onto 'save' global capitalism.

Not all Chinese academics are guilty of Hu's hubris; from a less 'exceptionalist' position Zhang, Li and An (2011: 839), who envision Ecological Civilization as the means to achieve a low carbon society, define Ecological Civilization as:

"…the achievement of a profound reflection on traditional form of civilisation, especially industrial civilisation, and the great progress of human civilization form as well as civilization development concepts, road and model."

Implicit here is the suggestion that all civilizations are being forced to reflect on industrialisation, and that romanticising traditional forms of civilization, even Chinese tradition, is not necessarily helpful in creating a new development model. Furthermore, a United Nations research report, titled *Institutional Innovation of Ecological Civilization:*

Conceptual Understanding and Experience Reference (PRCEE, 2014), is indicative of an evolving EU and Chinese collaboration concerning the 'global sustainable development process'. This growing mutual relationship, which attempts to pool together the different China-EU theoretical resources, seeks to upgrade and localise 'sustainable development' /Ecological Civilization globally. From a Chinese perspective, this relationship appears to be particularly beneficial in developing methods of enabling 'public participation' (PRCEE, 2014; EU-C, 2011), an aspect in which China has little practical experience in (Wang, 2014)– although it is explicitly referred to in recent Ecological Civilization policy documents (Geall, 2015).

Ecological Civilization as a Green Grassroots Movement

Often overshadowed as a discourse, bottom-up public participation in China's Ecological Civilization is nonetheless emerging as a recognisable grassroots movement. This notion of a Chinese grassroots has largely gone unnoticed from the perspective of the West that tends to view Chinese activism as being neutered, due to civil organisations having a strong dependence on the state, and the authoritarian style of Chinese governance. However, environmental activism, which can be framed as a politically neutral issue in China, is one sphere that has always had scope to pressure the Chinese state (Hansen & Liu, 2017; Stern, 2013; Martens, 2006). Indeed, environmental mass protest incidents have increased from an estimated 8,700 in 1993 to 180,000 in 2012 and are often directed against local polluting industries and the authorities who protect them (Yeh, O'Brien & Ye, 2013: 917).

This bottom-up pressure became much more pronounced in 2008, which proved a pivotal moment for NGOs and other similar civil society groups in China following a new law that gave citizens the legal right to obtain government information (Hilton, 2013).[9] In the same year, the major crises of the Sichuan earthquake and the melamine milk-formula scandal also prompted new levels of measured criticism in the mainstream media and unseen before outrage on social media towards government policies and responses. For China's environmental movement, the increasing success of investigative journalism and the

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[9] This transparency law is referred to as the 'Regulations on Government Information' and was passed in January 2008 alongside the 'Measures on Open Environmental Information' (laws came into force May 2008)

rise of social media have become particularly important in shaping government criticism and creating popular movements. Riley et al. (2016), for example, highlights how China's green public sphere is dependent on citizens being creative and strategic with social media, in order to create adept socio-material organisations capable of generating mass mobilisation (see also Brunner, 2017). Similarly, the success stories of environmental journalism in China since 2008, prompted geographer Sam Geall to edit a book discussing in detail how journalism and Chinese NGOs have found ingenious ways, within the scope set by the government agencies, to increase the effectiveness of China's grassroots environmentalism (Geall, 2013).

This peculiar dynamic between state and society regarding environmentalism was recently exposed with the viral Chinese documentary, *Under the Dome* (Chai Jing, 2015), which takes a stark look at China's air pollution woes and has been likened to Al Gore's milestone for American environmental politics *An Inconvenient Truth* (Duggan, 2015). Initially allowed to air by the State censors, *Under the Dome* was only removed after it became an internet phenomenon and established itself on the cultural landscape – hinting at the fine line between accepted activism and abrupt censorship. In other words, the central government is keen to promote environmental campaigns on mainstream media in order to raise environmental awareness and instruct the public on new environmental rules and regulations (Li, 2009). At the same time however, environmental campaigns cannot be allowed to create levels of citizen outrage that would lead to criticism of the CCP.

This navigation between censorship and tolerated activism will be crucial in the process of Ecological Civilization. To date, the use of laws concerning this navigation have not been successful. The absence of an effective institution or defined procedures for promoting and ensuring public participation in environmental management has meant that environmental protection laws have been largely superfluous in application (Chen et al., 2015: 525). With the onset of Ecological Civilization, however, with its various pilot and demonstration zones, experiments have emerged that attempt to create viable mechanisms for public participation that do not depend on a judicial process.

The most prominent of these experiments is the 'Jiaxing Model', which has been lauded as a 'successful demonstration of public environmental participation in urban areas' and has since been applied in 10 other neighbouring cities (UNEP, 2016: 17). The key feature

of the model is the creation of an Environment Protection Union that works under the auspices of the official Environmental Protection Bureau and involves a 'Civilian Environment Protection Inspection Team' (Wang, 2014). This civilian team is able to inspect the behaviour of companies and factories to see whether they have 'polluting' behaviour and on some occasion arrange surprise and random visits (ibid: 13). On an individual level too, citizens in Jiaxing can also participate in environmental governance through various innovative activities. For example, individuals are allowed to create 'naming lists' identifying polluting industries on behalf of the Environmental Protection Bureau, have powers to force polluting industries to sign and publish apology letters via mass media, and a jury duty option for citizens to partake in environmental-related court cases (ibid).

In another example, villages in Jiangsu province (striving to become 'Ecological Villages') have piloted the 'Environmental Community Consultative Group' as a means to engage community members directly in local ecological-development decisions (Chen et al., 2015). The group is focused on encouraging:

"…environmental information disclosure, environmental education, enhancing public environmental awareness, changing environmental behaviors of residents, encouraging support and guidance in public participation, and carrying out dialogue and negotiations with government agencies and enterprises." (ibid: 527)

This commitment to local participation is evidence of the CCP's willingness to experiment with forms of civil society – albeit forms which have been crafted by the state. Furthermore, it shows a self-aware and pragmatic approach to Ecological Civilization which is granting to the Environmental Protection Bureau the capacity to offload its mounting responsibilities to citizens (Wang, 2014) and is opening up alternative - locally directed - avenues for environmental remediation (Chen et al., 2015).

Another similar route for public participation via Ecological Civilization has been characterised by the projects of scholar and activist Wen Tiejun. The national slogan of 'Ecological Civilization' has provided Wen with a tool to legitimise his 'New Rural Reconstruction Movement' (NRRM)[10] initiatives, which are attempting to offer a radical

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[10] The NRRM has been described as "…a diverse network involving thousands of people and hundreds of organizations (NGOs, peasant organizations, academic institutions, student groups, ''social enterprises,'' and a few state agencies), loosely united by the goals of reversing the rural-to-urban flow of resources and

alternative to conventional modernity in China's countryside (Wen et al., 2012). Architects of the NRRM oppose the traditional framing of rural and peasant problems that tends to put peasants in the category of either 'peoples waiting to be urbanised' or 'agricultural producers that may need more rural infrastructure'. For Wen and his peers, NRRM is an experiment in a third way, an alternative form of modernity that reimagines the countryside as a site that can be dynamic and cosmopolitan. By taking advantage of China's unique position of having extensively industrialised whilst still retaining an 'indigenous population larger than 100 million'[11], Wen has sought to develop traditional agricultural knowledge to develop the resilience of rural areas in response to the ecological crises that farmers are, increasingly, having to face (ibid: 30). For Wen and his colleagues, Ecological Civilization is an opportunity for China to return to its agriculturally-led civilizational path - with Western industrial civilisation representing an unfortunate distraction (He et al., 2015).

Hansen & Liu (2017) similarly connect grassroots activism and Ecological Civilization without referring to a specific state-led (eco)project. They connect grassroots activism with air pollution protests, arguing that Ecological Civilization acts as an imaginary that can reach and mobilise the population in rural China. Ecological Civilization, they write, has helped to 'legitimize and revitalize China's "green public sphere" including the media's expanding discourse on ecological and sustainable development' (2017: 5). In practise, this has meant that people have adopted words like 'ecological' (*shengtai*), 'environmental protection' (*huanbao*)', green' (*lüsu*) and 'environment' (*huanjing*) in their daily language, which they then use to express their grievances legitimately, resorting to 'the language of scientific reasoning and harmony' when protesting (Hansen & Liu, 2017: 2-3; see also Yang & Calhoun, 2007). To return to the language of Barnett & Bridge's (2013) vision for the 'all affected principle', Ecological Civilization is acting as an intuition that can be drawn upon and activated. In this way, the crackdown on behalf on Xi's government on forms of activism does not negate the potential for protest, but rather shows that protests have to be complicit, or have the veneer of complicity, with the aims of (local) governments (see also Lora-Wrainwright, 2012: 122). Ecological Civilization thus acts as a mechanism by which to

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(re)constructing sustainable, self-sufficient communities based on cooperation among peasant households, supported by agroecological skill-sharing and alternative marketing" (Hale, 2013: 53)

[11] "Indigenous" is referred to here as 'the retention of indigenous knowledge and culture among a considerable part of Chinese society, the 99%, as differentiated from Hong Kong or Shanghai which were transformed by western colonial culture' (Wen et al., 2012: 30).

'approach' the state, and perhaps also a means - even in a very cautious and round-about way - to hold the state to account.

These (somewhat) state sanctioned grassroots movements in China suggest there is a clear potential for different parts of society – local residents, academia, enterprise, policy makers and others - to converge in realising Ecological Civilization. However, there are still significant barriers preventing the full realisation of local participation. Both Wang (2014) and Chen et al. (2015) highlight that there is still a long way to go in developing participatory models that raise public environmental awareness, provide information on environmental issues and grant more autonomy to citizen-based organisations in effective ways. In addition, Xi Jinping's recent rise as China's strongman, and the associated crackdowns on 'participating' publics – in particular human rights lawyers –also puts into question what the state means by 'local participation'. As put by Hansen & Liu (2017: 324), as Ecological Civilization is opening-up new doors for environmental activism, it is also closing others and keeping some firmly locked.

The following section now attempts to flesh out in more detail how Ecological Civilization works practically as an 'animating intuition' using the example of food and agriculture.   It details how the above 4 discourses coalesce, and how the dialectic between Chinese state and society is shaping China's trajectory towards an Ecological Civilization.

Part 3 - Food, Agriculture and Ecological Civilization

Agriculture and food form one of the fulcrums in which the tension between economic growth and environmental degradation – the backdrop of Ecological Civilization – is especially manifest. Since the opening-up period, with the all too recent memory of rationing, scarcity, and famine still vivid, the focus of Chinese agricultural policy has been a key priority for the Chinese government and is centred around increasing production rates and providing affordable food (Jin et al., 2017). However, producing a large amount of food, for a growing population that is increasing its appetite for more energy intensive foodstuffs, whilst avoiding contamination and staying environmentally benign, is a tough proposition (Huang, 2011). This is especially the case as, proportional to the size of the country and its

population, China has a significant shortage of arable land[12]– a point which is a historical testament to the strength of traditional (pre-Mao) Chinese farming practices, highlighting China's position as a predominantly 'agricultural civilization' for most of its history (Wen et al., 2012).

In contemporary China, agriculture is shaped by the paradox of having surplus agricultural labour, and (increasingly) limited amounts of arable land. As plots in China are generally small, this has meant an emphasis on technological intervention – but not the mechanization and the aggregation into large farms conventionally presupposed when agriculture is 'modernised'. Consequently, China has embarked on a yield-centred approach to agriculture that is based on investing in chemical fertilisers (Jiao et al., 2018), high yield seed variations (Ely et al., 2016) and intensive industrial processes (Schneider & Sharma, 2014). This form of agricultural intensification in China has been a political priority for decades due to changing diets - higher demands for meat (and maize for feedstock) – and the decreasing availability of arable land (Jin et al., 2017). The environmental and social costs of this policy, which began over 30 years ago, are now being acutely felt in contemporary China.

The environmental costs arising from intensive and industrial agricultural regimes are not unique to China. For example, the links between monoculture farming at large scales; industrial livestock operations; the dependence on fossil fuels (for food transportation, fertilisers and pesticides); and their effects on water, soil and air pollution, climate change and biodiversity loss are well established (Levkoe, 2011, McMichael, 2007; Weis, 2007). These agricultural processes in China during recent decades have perhaps been the most intense of any country. The use of nitrogen-based fertiliser in China alone makes up a suggested 9-15% of China's total greenhouse gas emissions (Ely et al., 2016), significantly degrading soil quality (Shen et al., 2013). The overuse of pesticides (Xu, 2017) and the high concentrations of industrial heavy metals found in the soil (He et al., 2013) are also significant issues for China more so then anywhere else (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, these direct agriculture impacts and emissions fail to include the environmental effects of supermarketisation, refrigeration, food transport and imports, and the changing patterns of urbanisation and mobility, which are occurring in China (Ely et al., 2016: 261). Unsurprisingly,

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[12] China uses 7.63% of the world's cultivated land to feed (its) 19.78% of world's population (Jin et al., 2017).

China has attempted to resolve this wicked problem of limited arable land, a high density of smallholders and increasing dietary pressures with agricultural intensification and the promotion of ecological/organic farming i.e. 'sustainable intensification' (Jiao et al., 2018).

Organic / Ecological Agriculture in China

Organic standards were created in China at the beginning of the 21st century, initially aimed only at developing the export market. China's domestic 'organic revolution' began between 2005 and 2006, when 'there was an eleven-fold increase in land reported under organic management; from 298,990 hectares to 3,466,570 hectare' resulting in China having 'more organic farmers and more land under organic horticulture than any other country' (Paull, 2008: 1-2). In this period ecological agriculture also became important domestically,[13] due to the development of Chinas own organic standard in 2005 and the increasing valuation of its domestic sales of organic food, which in 2009 reached US$1.7 billion - significantly more than the value of organic exports of US$464 million in the same year (Scott et al., 2014: 161). The potential for further increases in this domestic value are still remarkable considering that only 0.36% of China's agricultural land is certified as 'organic', which is significantly below par when compared with other countries (Paull, 2014: 60). Alongside organic certification, however, 'green' and 'hazard free' certifications are also available in China, which are less stringent than their organic counterparts - allowing for degrees of pesticide and fertiliser use (Scott et al., 2014). This is a significant factor when one considers that for 'Green Food' certification, there is more than three times the agricultural area potentially available than with organic certification (Paull, 2014). In China therefore, there is an incredible potential for widespread ecological farming adoption given that there is a 'large reserve pool of farming land and farmers that have a history of third-party scrutiny and certification, and which can progress, with some adjustments to their production and oversight practices, along the path to organic certification' (ibid: 74).

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[13] Ecological agriculture is used in this thesis as an umbrella term referring to what are called agroecology practice, eco-agriculture, or organic agriculture in the United States; bio-agriculture, eco-agriculture, biodynamic agriculture, or low-input agriculture in Europe; and natural farming or alternative agriculture in Japan, South Korea – all of which reflect many similarities and approaches.

This remarkable potential for a vast uptake of ecological forms of agriculture is increased when one considers the seriousness of China's everyday food safety issues (Yan, 2012; Lu, et al. 2015), with the case of melamine-tainted milk formula scandal in 2008 - causing 6 deaths and nearly 300,000 cases of children suffering from kidney problems – being the most high-profile (Yang, 2013). Food safety is also an issue with the staple foods - rice, maize/corn and pork - 44% of rice samples in Guangzhou, for example, was found to contain poisonous levels of cadmium (Kahn & Zheng, 2016: 43). These examples instantiate the wider concern by the Chinese public who consider food safety as a top issue (Yan, 2012).[14] Instances of fraud regarding organic branding have also complicated the problem, compromising consumer trust of certification. The numerous amount of food issues have led to 'what can we eat?' becoming one of the most commonly raised question on social media websites by Chinese netizens (Wang et al., 2015) - and this is despite China's control of social and mainstream media that is averse to fomenting forms of social panic (Paull, 2007: 5). Some countries have even banned Chinese food imports – Japan for example - due to food safety fears (ibid). These incidents, which have been exposed over the past two decades, show no signs of declining (Yan, 2012; 2015). Furthermore, institutional distrust in China regarding food is also occurring due to the 'perceived' uncontrolled spread of GM crops (Ely et al., 2016). Together these uncertainties regarding food suggest that the Chinese social contract between the Chinese state and its people - which depends on the availability of (safe) food (Bell, 2008: 33) - is being placed under increasing pressure, hence the CCP's urge to promote ecological farming.

As a response to these increasing domestic fears over food safety, the reoccurring scandals of fraudulent 'organic' marketing and the increasing need to match EU standards (Scott et al., 2014), China's ecological and organic agriculture standards and rulings were revised in 2012 (Xie et al., 2015). This revision occurred in the same year that Ecological Civilization was elevated into China's constitution and was established as a key guiding directive of future policy. Outlined in its underpinning policy papers, a firm commitment to 'transform[ing] the agricultural growth model by promoting a circular economy' was made (Geall, 2015). This policy has since been has translated into additional organic regulations -

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[14] Wikipedia also has a page dedicated to the recording of Chinese-based food scandals (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food_safety_incidents_in_China).

including the 2014 'Organic Product Certification Regulations' - that have 'substantially promoted the development of organic farming in the countryside' (Xie et al., 2015: 354). The year 2016 was also a watershed moment in agriculture policy, marking the first time in which productivity targets for staple foods in provinces did not increase, replaced instead with an increased focus on quality and certification.[15]

However, whilst organic and ecological food standards have become more stringent, the problems surrounding food certification has persisted. The issue with certification lies with the government's continued monopoly over the certification process and their ability to also regulating the market incentives, which weakens its integrity (Theirs, 2002). This form of governance inevitably creates a conflict of interest, reducing the capacity for regulation enforcement and the legitimacy of the certification process (Scott et al., 2014). The degree to which certification of ecological or organic produce is considered reliable is therefore still questionable, despite the introduction of new regulations in 2014, especially from the perspective of cynical consumers (Wang et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2016).

Furthermore, certification is an expensive and bureaucratic process, inaccessible to many smallholders who may be practising organic forms of farming already. At the turn of the millennium, as Sanders (2006, p. 118) points out, 'there still existed instances of organic farming in China, despite years of grain monoculture and the Green Revolution'. However, when small-scale farmers have had accesses to certification this 'has been neither a consequence nor a facilitator of farmers' association or empowerment' (Theirs, 2002: 368). Although rural areas in China already persist in low-carbon techniques, they are subsistence -orientated and often under-pressure to increase productivity immediately. Increasing the productivity of smallholders becomes an issue if agro-ecological farming principles are to be maintained, as the transition to improve agro-ecological methods often decreases productivity in the short term and does not significantly increase productivity in the long-term (Pant, 2016) – an issue exacerbated by China's small average farm size which is under half a hectare (Lowder et al., 2016; See also Table 1 below).

In addition, while pockets of unofficial organic/ecological farm practices occur in China, there is little scope for these small-scale enterprises to impact the food system due

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[15] In conversation with Luo Shiming, Professor of Agroecology at South China Normal University (2016).

to their 'limited capacity for communication, [their] lack of social and economic capital' and the absence of 'policy at the micro level' to support them (Yang et al., 2016: 15; Ma et al., 2009). Indeed, local government institutions, which control how land is used, have the necessary authority to institute agricultural development plans (crop specialisation, farming process, the market arena) and can thus move farmers at will (Theirs, 2002: 369). These circumstances undermine a key tenet of organic farming: a long-term relationship between the autonomous farmer-steward and their own land (ibid; Ma et al., 2009).

Table 1. Comparing Farm Sizes (Taken from Bloomberg, 2017)

Farm Size Comparisons
Less than 1 hectare · 1-2 hectares · 2-5 hectares · Greater than 5 hectares

	0%	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%
China			93%			
Japan		68.5%				
India		62.9%				
Thailand			37.2%			
Brazil			63.2%			
France			70.9%			
U.K.			76.9%			
U.S.			89.3%			

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
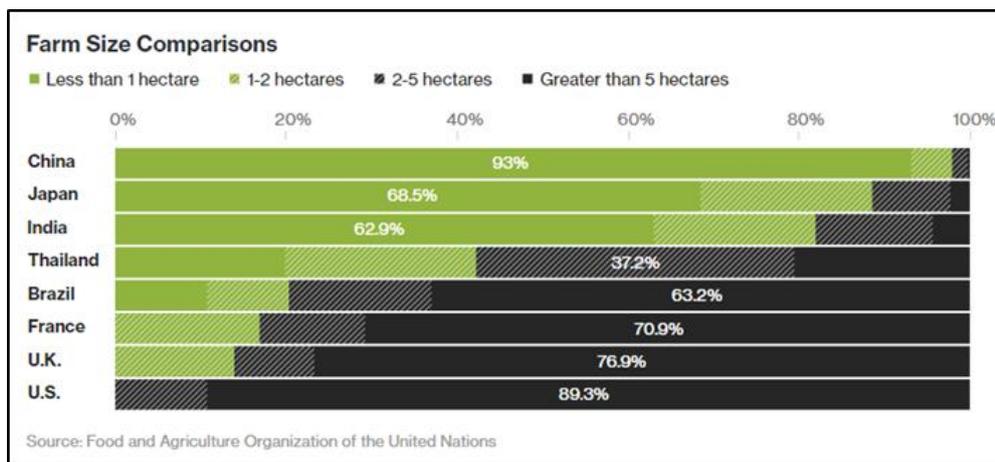
The particular political economy of rural China – involving an unreliable certification scheme, small-scale farms, and unhelpful institutional regimes - suggests China's 'organic' ambitions are severely limited. However, these 'weaknesses' arguably also serve as China's greatest strength, especially if the process of 'mainstreaming' small scale ecological agriculture 'is essentially paradoxical in terms of procedural (e.g., institutional processes of organising, belonging, learning), and substantive aspects (e.g., increasing productivity, social equity and environmental justice)' (Pant, 2016: 305). Indeed, the 'successful' mainstreaming of organics in the US has caused a backlash of criticism, with many food activists questioning if the 'supposed' environmental, social and economic benefits associated with organics had actually occurred (Obach, 2017). Given the large agro-ecological and cultural diversity of rural China, the enormous size of the country's internal market, the immense number of China's small-scale farms and the fragmented authoritarianism of the Chinese state, the 'mainstreaming' of organics – as per the US model – is unlikely to occur. Crucially however, the particular configuration of China's rural sphere is potentially more enabling for

developing an ecological or organic farming future, as it offers a variety of intriguing trajectories that are different to the conventional Western approach.

Trajectories for Agriculture in China's Ecological Civilization

To assess the possible trajectories of agriculture in China, it is important not only to recognise China's unique rural political economy, but also the relationship between top-down policy, innovation and the realities of how the adoption of trajectories or 'pathways' occurs. Current literature has begun to highlight that it is necessary to combine governmental institutional forces with the accompanying reactive societal forces. For example, Scott et al., (2014), in their analysis of ecological agriculture in China, differentiate between direct policy support, indirect policy support and civil society initiatives; and similarly, Ely et al., (2016) differentiate, in their discussion on maize production and consumption, between government-led 'systematic rationalities' and the more bottom-up 'lifeworld rationalities' in identifying potential transitional pathways. In other words, the various forces of society that are becoming animated by the Ecological Civilization project, all need to be taken into account when exploring China's possible development pathways. I therefore adopt Tyfield's (2018) framing of Chinese innovation, which recognises that it is the *spin-off trajectories,* which occur as a result of the top-down 'agent' effects meeting the bottom-up and 'systematic' effects, that are where the most intriguing, and perhaps most likely, trajectories will occur. This focus on the spin-of trajectories goes beyond previous work as it highlights the importance of the unintended consequences that result from the interactions of 'contradictory' forces. As put by Tyfield (2018: 98):

'Chinese innovation makes sense as a dynamic system only once we have examined both the direct and intended outcomes and those that are unintended and/or indirectly produced, perhaps in the evolution and emergence of systems and system capacities'

Thus, to understand how agriculture might develop in China's Ecological Civilization, this section will adapt Tyfield's (2018) schematic that highlights how unintended consequences occur when the intended institutional level combines with the unintended effects at system level:

Table 2. The quadrant of Chinese innovation-as-politics (Adapted from Tyfield, 2018: 99).

	Direct effects (at agent level)	*Indirect effects (at system level)*
Intended	What the CCP Party-state wants to have happened and has	What has emerged as the case in a seeming vindication of party-state policy but entirely separately from, or even in direct opposition to, express governmental intentions and levers
Responded	What the CCP Party-state directly produces, in its deepening encounter with capitalism, thereby thwarting its goals	**What is in turn emerging from or immanent within these system-functional effects**

Intended direct effects - Land Consolidation

When applying agriculture to Tyfield's schema, land consolidation emerges as the emblematic intended state policy, i.e. the direct effects at agent level that is countering the losses of arable to land to urbanisation (Huang et al., 2011).[16] Designed principally to intensify and rationalise agriculture by developing new environmental and yield efficient seed varieties (Long, 2014), this land consolidation approach is in keeping with the CCP's increasing tendency to 'equate industrial agriculture with modernisation and development' (Ely et al., 2016: 134; Schneider & Sharma, 2014) and encourage more corporate forms of farming (Hornby, 2016). The high priority given to self-sufficiency and food security by the Chinese government has meant that land consolidation strategies are currently expanding in China, with the Chinese government investing approximately 100billion RMB (approximately $16.1 billion USD) each year on land consolidation and related irrigation projects (Luo & Timothy, 2017: 503). Estimates have that between 2006 and 2010 there were 124,085 land consolidation projects covering an area of 110,600 km² (ibid: 502). Government targets aim to maintain total farmland at the minimum of 120 million ha and have ambitions to increase overall agricultural productivity by 10% by year 2020 (Jin et al., 2017: 1). The conventional wisdom, worldwide, is that land consolidation has overwhelmingly positive 'economic, social, ecological and psychological' effects in all areas of the globe (Luo & Timothy, 2017: 502;

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[16] 'According to statistical data released by the Ministry of Land and Resources of China (MLRC), total cultivated land decreased approximately by 8.35 million ha between 1996 and 2008' (Huang et al., 2011: 93).

Huang et al., 2011; Long, 2014) hence its priority in China. To date, land consolidation has been celebrated in China for reducing land fragmentation, improving land use efficiency, increasing agricultural production, driving rural development initiatives, expanding the size of rural land-holdings and farm plots, improving rural infrastructure, and facilitating the increased mechanisation and transportation of agricultural goods (Luo & Timothy, 2017).

Responded direct effects (at agent level) – Limitations of Land Consolidation

Contrasting research on land consolidation in China has however, begun to emphasise that land consolidation is not a 'panacea' for China's rural issues (Long et al., 2010). For example, there is evidence to suggest that land consolidation is causing significant unintended effects that is causing problems ecologically (Wang et al., 2015), socially (Long et al., 2010), and also in terms of agricultural productivity - with recent research suggesting that land consolidation has actually reduced agricultural output (Jin et al., 2017). These 'responded effects' of land consolidation have occurred due to the large rupturing effects of land consolidation that 'go beyond the physical, economic and environmental aspects of agrarian land', and significantly affects 'the social and cultural structures of rural society' (Luo & Timothy, 2017: 503). As a result of these 'responded' consequences, much of the Chinese literature has begun to suggest alternative models of land consolidation evaluation, that incorporate aspects beyond productivity (Jiang et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2015; Jin et al., 2017) and instead encourage bottom-up farmer involvement in their design and implantation (Jin et al., 2017; Luo & Timothy, 2017).

Intended Indirect effects– Taobao Villages

China's land consolidation projects, and their limitations, have caused unintended bottom-up effects, which are quite different to the intended outcomes of CCP policy. Rural e-commerce centres have begun to emerge in China's countryside in which smallholders in China produce goods - foodstuffs, textiles, garments and furniture - in their village and then sell them directly to consumers, via online third-party trade platforms (Zeng et al., 2017).[17] This phenomenon began in the mid 2000's and by 2009 news reports had begun to label the more concentrated rural e-commerce centres as Taobao villages. Their meteoric rise, since the mid-2000's, has been enabled somewhat by land consolidation projects which have

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[17] The principal platform used is 'Taobao' – the Chinese equivalent of 'eBay'.

simultaneously improved rural infrastructure - i.e. internet access, paved roads etc. – and has also dispossessed rural 'peasants' of their farm land, with the latter then reinvesting their 'land' compensation money into e-commerce (Yuan et al., 2017).

Named after China's leading e-commerce trading platform, Alibaba-owned Taobao, Taobao Villages eventually became officially recognised and supported by Alibaba in 2013.[18] Since 2013, and in conjunction with CCP rural development projects, Alibaba has invested multi-billion RMB projects into 'Rural Taobao' schemes to increase the development of Taobao Village projects in rural China (Li, 2017: 58; Zeng et al., 2017). The growth and success of Taobao villages, especially since 2013, has seen plaudits liken this explosion of rural e-commerce process as 'bottom-up urbanisation' (Li, 2017). In many ways the development of Taobao villages are similar to the 'Township Village Enterprises' programme of the 'opening-up' period which did much to rejuvenate rural development on the back of agricultural mechanization and rural industrialization after the break-up of the commune system.

The exponential success of Taobao villages lies in the advantage that e-commerce has in connecting smallholders to the market, without going through profit-sapping intermediaries and alleviating problems regarding information asymmetry i.e. access to current market prices and forecasts (Zeng et al., 2017). This, in combination with recent support from both Alibaba and the CCP in terms of rural infrastructure development, increasing internet availability and providing relevant village-level training courses have done much to reduce poverty and rural inequality in China (Li, 2017), hence the CCP's retrospective support for Taobao villages. For smallholders, rural e-commerce has allowed 'agri-products [to] be sold at higher prices…[and] the online marketing competition also compels producers to improve the quality of agri-products and the efficiency of the food supply chain' (Zeng et al., 2017: 454). These smallholders are often the returning younger members of the family, who have lived in the city, are tech savvy, often well-educated and are using the internet to support their hometown-based agricultural enterprises. These e-commerce minded farmers are commonly referred to as China's 'new farmers' (Zou, 2014).

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[18] China's online already massive online retailing market is dramatically increasing (1.2 trillion RMB in 2012 to 4.7 trillion in 2016 of which Alibaba has a 70% market share) particularly with rural netizens (Li, 2017: 57).

There are some drawbacks however, to Taobao Villages. Recent literature for example has highlighted the unequal distribution of these Taobao villages, with the majority located in the hinterlands of already wealthy regions in South-East China, not the rural areas of Western China that are most need of economic advancement (Li, 2017). Furthermore, Taobao villages may result in smallholder dependency on the e-commerce platforms, with villagers entering into unequal power relations (ibid). Other studies have emphasised the potentially negative effects Taobao Villages may have on rural culture (Lin et al., 2016).

Responded Indirect Effects– Alternative Food Networks (AFNs)

An unintended by-product of both land consolidation projects and the development of rural e-commerce is the emergence of AFNs in China (see Table 3). These Chinese AFNs are reminiscent of those short food supply chains movements found in Europe and the US (Harris, 2010; Jarosz 2008; Dupuis & Goodman, 2005; Whatmore et al. 2003). Typically, AFNs are understood as initiatives aiming to connect producers and consumers directly with the purchase of local and organic food. In practice, AFNs refer to a diverse range of initiatives involving the production, distribution and retail activities of food that are distinct from the food processes synonymous with big agri-business and 'supermarketisation'. Common to all these AFN initiatives - as with 'Taobao villages' - is a dependency on internet platforms to communicate and exchange payment with consumers who might be in cities many kilometres away from the AFN farm (Zhang & Zhang, 2012; Shi et al., 2011; Zeng et al., 2017).

Due to variety of food procurement options in China - e.g. wet markets, street stalls, the myriad collection of small farm-holdings through peri-urban and rural China, food-centred festivals and the wide practise of edible gift exchanges - the distinction of *alternative* food networks is not as stark in China in comparison to the West. However, the recent emergence of larger monoculture-based farms and the massive levels of supermarketization in China over the last 40 years has, at least from the vantage point of China's new middle class, given credence to the 'alternative' term engendered by these new forms of food consumption practises that emphasise direct exchange between consumers and producers.

These new alternative forms of food procurement in China have been almost solely driven by the onset of reoccurring food safety scandals, in which the 2008 melamine baby

formulae scandal is seen as a watershed for this moment of food 'awakening' for the Chinese middle class (Shi et al., 2011; Yan, 2012; Wang et al., 2015).[19] Likewise, the majority of those managing and initiating these AFN-type projects are urban professionals from the city (Yang, 2016), and are taking advantage of the land-consolidation laws which are facilitating this form of agricultural entrepreneurialism (Hornby, 2016; Gürel, 2014). The middle-class character of these emerging AFN enterprises, the managers of which are also referred to as 'new farmers' (Yu, 2015), lies with the parallel emergence of a Chinese middle class developing as a social category in China (Shi et al., 2011). Indeed, the Chinese middle class is an increasingly important segment of Chinese society that is becoming synonymous with innovation, a propensity for low carbon innovations and socio-technical novelties (Li, 2010; Tyfield et al., 2014).

Framed as a form of innovation, as depicted in Table 3, AFNs are an unintended by-product of the CCP drive for modernisation and land consolidation. The decision by the CCP to commit to a rural modernisation policy, particularly after 2008 (see Day & Schinder, 2017), meant that local and regional governments lost the incentive to develop agricultural land. However, the increasing arable land pressure following this 'modernisation' has forced Beijing to centralise agricultural land policy in order to protect farmland from development projects (Zhong et al., 2017). Through this centralisation process, land consolidation became the preferred format to rationalise and increase agricultural output (ibid). Under land consolidation, however, unintended social and environmental realities have become apparent and undermined the productivity and efficiency of this centralised policy. Despite, and partly as a result of, these negative outcomes, land consolidation has also afforded certain conditions that enabled bottom up forms of development i.e. 'Taobao villages' – which retrospectively become adopted by official policy. In addition, these unintended conditions in conjunction with the emerging dynamic and innovative middle class, also striving for a form of Ecological Civilization, has led to further innovation – which in the agricultural sector has led to AFNs.

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[19] China's first Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm 'Little Donkey farm' in Beijing also began in 2008.

Table 3. The quadrant of Chinese agriculture innovation (Adapted from Tyfield, 2018: 211).

	Direct effects (at agent level)	Indirect effects (at system level)
Intended	**Optimist** - Land Consolidation programs - Efficient large-scale state and science-led organic/ecological food production	**Disrupter** - Taobao Villages - Rural villages using ecommerce platforms to sell food (among other goods) - Bottom-up development - Originally neglected by state, but now formally embraced, specifically by policy that seeks to alleviate rural poverty
Responded	**Pessimist** - Studies show less efficiency / productivity after consolidation - Local discontent with these projects - Doubts about long-term ecological sustainability	**Alternative** - ***Evolving Chinese AFNs (in co-productive parallel with the emerging middle-class)***

These innovative middle class 'spin-offs' are thus workable, yet unplanned responses to the economic, environmental and social issues behind the centralisation of agriculture, land consolidation and sustainable intensification - they are *not* emerging as an explicit protest against CCP policy. Indeed, the emergence of AFNs in China infers a cycle of development based on a pragmatic reaction, one that is constantly adapting to the larger scale of political policy, middle-class dynamism and (unintended) infrastructure opportunities. Indeed, this dynamic, regarding how innovative trajectories emerge in conjunction with the role of Ecological Civilization as an animating intuition, reveals how China might develop a low-carbon pathway of development. Already with agriculture, this dynamic is beginning to be translated effectively, with AFNs contributing to rural development by reversing the hollowing-out effect caused by rural to urban migration (Liu

et al., 2010), and adding forms of cosmopolitanism to rural regions (alongside Taobao villages). Most notably for example, the Guiyang municipality of Guizhou province has recognised 'Community Supported Agriculture' (CSA) - a type of AFN - as an enterprise that can contribute to Ecological Civilization and rural development, by writing it explicitly into local government policy (Si & Scott, 2016: 1093).

Conclusion

Ecological Civilization as a national slogan draws upon China's key cultural currents - tradition, socialism, development and global engagement - in a myriad of ways. Its chief utility therefore, lies in its management of these cultural currents, which helps China remain 'stable' as a civilization. The flexibility and ambiguity of Ecological Civilization is crucial in this regard as it works as an open-ended question, allowing intellectuals and policy-makers from all perspectives to make sense of and develop it accordingly. Indeed, its current interpretations range from an understanding Ecological Civilization as a version of Western 'sustainable development' (with the proverbial 'Chinese characteristics') to a more Marxist understanding as a particular stage of development; from an articulation of another *'wenming'* discourse or, as Wen Tiejun envisions, an alternative to modernisation (Oswald, 2014). In other words, China's Ecological Civilization is being shaped by a variety of forces: Confucian (and also Daoism and Buddhism) heritage; utilitarian approaches to science; the legacy of socialism; a motivation to reassert China's position as a global leader; and a preoccupation with the CCP's legitimacy; and is thus able to mobilise wide-range of academics, enterprises, citizens and state institutions across China towards its realisation.[20] Although the four specifically discussed Chinese discourses of Ecological Civilization - scientific-technocratic endeavour, alternative worldview, exceptionalism, and grassroots movements – could all be framed to accommodate either side of the opening debate between optimists and pessimists regarding China's ecological credentials, in conjunction, they hint at how Ecological Civilization is working across China as an 'animating intuition'.

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[20] The asymmetrical power relations between policy-makers, scholars, government etc. has allowed some ideas to gain more traction then others (Huan 2016: 57).

In the context of China's agriculture, I argue that AFNs are emerging as one of many possible (in combination with other) trajectories for agriculture development in China which is shaped in part by the mobilising imagination of Ecological Civilization. AFNs in particular emerge as a particular interesting avenue to explore to offer insights on the development, and possible formation, of Ecological Civilization, due to their potential to coalesce with the major discourses associated with Ecological Civilization in China and the top down-bottom up forces that are driving China's evolving path. In other words, AFNs reflect a viable and obvious trajectory that China's agriculture development will continue to involve, based on how they operate in the interstices between intended state policy and its unintended effects at the systematic level. For example, it is the land consolidation policy of the CCP in combination with the exponential growth of rural e-commerce - alongside other factors including China's emerging middle class and rural-China's unique political economy – which has created conditions fertile for the growth of AFNs in China, AFNs that are on different trajectory in comparison to their Western counterparts. In the remaining chapters, the trajectories of these Chinese AFNs, and how the processes underpinning them are occurring, is explored.

The next chapter will therefore outline my approach to the China 'field' and provide the context for my following fieldwork chapters on Chinese AFNs. These fieldwork chapters will explore AFN tensions with the goal of gaining insights about Ecological Civilization. This route of enquiry will also explore how these tensions, which have begun to inhibit scholarly research of AFNs more generally (Tregear, 2011; Mount 2012), can be reframed.

Chapter 3

Hurdling Barriers or Embracing Predicaments? Qualitative Research in China

This thesis is attempting to reconstruct, or at least open-up, the mainstream theories that surround Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) *on the basis of the Chinese experience.* This chapter is therefore a personal reflection on my relationship and engagement with the Chinese 'field', the findings from which provide the substance in my later chapters. In this chapter, I hope to highlight the challenges of doing fieldwork in China and to sketch out what these challenges mean for critical self-understanding. In other words, this chapter attempts to shed light for future researchers, not just on the process of collecting empirical data from China, but also on how this data can make conceptual or theoretical contributions to mainstream research literature.

The attraction for scholars to do fieldwork in China lies not only in its new global prominence, but also in the unique set of challenges China offers, many of which stem from the challenges of physical, political and linguistic accessibility. In the past, these challenges have meant that China is relatively under-researched as a place, and that 'China geography' has had a certain ripeness and excitement for empirical research in the sense of an old-school anthropologist discovering a new tribe due to its relative isolation (Pieke, 2000). Indeed, fieldwork in China has always had the allure of providing surprising or counter-intuitive discoveries, providing a valuable opportunity for scholars to challenge the assumptions that stand behind our own perspectives (O'Brien, 2006). As research has begun to move on, the excitement of Chinese fieldwork today now lies more with the potential for China-based research to inform, adapt and challenge mainstream theorisations (Lin, 2002; Fan et al., 2004; Pieke, 2014). In fact, due to China's continuing rise as a global power, understanding China and Chinese ways of understanding of the world is going to become increasingly influential - to the point where China geography, and China based social science, will urgently need to be integral part of mainstream disciplines – not just a niche subset (Murphy, 2010; Parenti, 2013; Pieke, 2014; Tyfield, 2016).

Despite this potential behind China based research, there has been a tendency for 'China geographers to restrict themselves to their self-confined circle of empirical studies' (Lin, 2002: 1816). This is a sentiment that has been echoed again, twelve years later, by

Pieke (2014: 132) who, from an anthropological perspective, noted that 'China anthropologists make few conceptual or theoretical contributions of which anthropologists working in other areas take note, let alone adapt and develop'. For China geography to make valuable contributions to professional geography however, China scholars will need to combine empirical data with a theoretical contribution more intentionally then they have in the past (Lin 2002).

To convincingly combine these two distinct aspects of research is, however, particularly challenging, requiring the researcher to achieve the difficult balance between 'both theory and substance, abstraction and precision, nomothetic generalization and idiographic description' (Lin 2002: 1825) in his or her work. Linking empirical Chinese research to mainstream theoretical debates has been done before and often to great effect, notably the work of Lawrence Ma and his colleagues, who, by using Chinese examples in the field of transnationalism, identified the influence of native-place ties as being the most significant aspect that shapes patterns of migration (Ma, 2002; Ma & Xiang; see also Lin, 2002). O'Brien & Li's (2006) work also adeptly juggles focused and thickly descriptive case studies - specific to China - with broader generalities, allowing them to inform on the more mainstream frameworks surrounding contentious politics and (rural) social movements. This chapter therefore discusses, using personal empirical examples, how to collect empirical research from China whilst also balancing it with theoretical engagement.

This is move away from a more traditional and 'scientific' methods chapter associated with human geography PhDs that tend to be interchangeable and focus on providing a comprehensive overview of which methods were used, and the pros and cons associated with different methical approaches. As Mann (2016: ix) has noted:

> *'Nearly all of the qualitative PhD theses I read (and all the MA dissertations I read) had between one and five pages on the differences between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. They then go on to say that, after careful consideration, semi-structured had been chosen. And that was usually that, as if those categories are self-explanatory.'*

Instead of discussing in detail the merits and disadvantages of certain qualitative strategies, this methods chapter attempts to engage more explicitly with my personal reflections on

the challenges that occurred whilst using my methodology, critically analysing how my semi-structured interviews evolved and changed over the course of my fieldwork.

I believe that this alternative methods chapter, that emphasises how I approached my fieldwork challenges, might be more useful to upcoming (China) geographers and future PhD students, especially as detailed accounts of how scholars overcome problems in the field is a rarity not confined to the China field (Thøgersen & Heimer 2006; Lareau & Shultz 1996). This approach also carries an increased importance if, as Sultana (2007:375) writes, 'over-concern about positionality and reflexivity appear to have paralyzed some scholars into avoiding fieldwork'. My intention then, in this chapter, is to suggest that the challenges of China-based researched for Western researchers should not be viewed as barriers to be hurdled, but rather as inevitable predicaments - which whilst adding to the complexity of the issue, also provide valuable learning experiences that can be turned around to the researcher's advantage.

In making this argument for embracing the challenges of qualitative research in China, I first outline my fieldwork sites and methodology. This is followed by a reflection of the processes that underpinned my fieldwork at three different stages of the PhD: pre-field; during the field; and after the field.

Description of Fieldwork Sites and Methods

<u>Fieldwork Sites</u>

My fieldwork site(s) comprised of AFNs in and around the Guangzhou & Shenzhen metropolitan area (the 'Pearl River Delta' – PRD), which are China's 4th and 5th biggest cities (by population) respectively. These cities are located in Guangdong province, a region of China that has a relatively long history of ecological agriculture. In comparison to other provinces in China, Guangdong's environment is especially suited towards organic or ecological forms of farming. Indeed, farming in Guangdong has never been subsistence based, due to its hilly topography and climate. Guangdong agriculture has tended to focus more on sub-tropical fruits (Guangdong once accounted for 50% of the global lychee production – Riggs, 2005). Unlike other provinces, agriculture in Guangdong has historically

been strongly market-orientated, an attribute which became accentuated after China's internal transportation system rapidly improved in the 1980 and 1990s:

'As China's internal transportation system led to lower costs for moving products to market, and as supply of certain agricultural commodities outstripped demand, different growing regions in southern China came into direct competition for markets. A glut in key commodities—particularly fruit—has put a premium on <u>differentiating products by quality</u>, and on more aggressive marketing of products from Guangdong both within China and abroad.' (Riggs, 2005: 48, emphasis added)

In order to 'differentiate products by quality', organic agriculture developed as a natural pathway for Guangdong farmers to achieve this. In response, the state government of Guangdong, more so then others, has granted more autonomy for its farmers to make 'ecological' production decisions by recognising the importance of the 'quality' produce market in Guangdong (ibid).[21] Furthermore, important scientific institutions in Guangdong like the South China Agricultural University and the Guangdong Natural Science Foundation have gone against the grain and prioritised ecological agriculture as a long-term research avenue, with a particular focus on participatory agricultural research.

'With resources to contribute to collaborative research programs, high-level political support for rural development, and a scientific cadre oriented towards agroecological research, the structure was in place for Guangdong to make rapid strides in reorienting its agriculture sector away from an exclusive focus on production volumes, and towards ecosystem health, environmental services, food quality and safety, and enhanced farmer incomes'. (Riggs, 2005: 47).

The fruits of this academic climate, which has promoted ecological agriculture since the early 2000s, is evident now with the number of 'organically-minded' agricultural graduates in Guangdong today. For example, in many of the larger AFNs surrounding Guangzhou, graduates have been hired to help direct and run the farm or even managing their own in collaboration with university support. Depending on the size and success of the farm, these graduates may be housed and paid a wage typical to that of a graduate starting a career in

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[21] The local state in Guangdong was already predisposed to endorsing ecological agriculture formally due to the advantages this agriculture method has in regards to soil erosion (Riggs, 2005) - an issue that plagues most of China, especially in provinces prone to flooding like Guangdong.

the city and usually work by instructing the migrant labour force on ecological techniques. During my time in Guangzhou, I also met with a company that specialises in providing services to organic farms, offering to instruct the 'new farmers' on various ecological farming practises and to 'train up' their migrant labour force.

Guangdong also has a highly developed consumer market that has an interest in, and the purchasing power for, higher-end organic produce. This market advantage over other provinces lies with its longer history of foreign investment (raising wealth levels earlier), the presence of cosmopolitan centres in the PRD like Guangzhou, Shenzhen and, across the border, Hong Kong, and an extensive media focus on food safety issues -including Guangzhou's respected and controversial *Southern Weekend* paper, famous in China for its investigative journalism. This has given the region a wealthy, educated and aware consumer base - that is increasingly food anxious due to the proliferation of food scandals - which also helps to facilitate the development of AFNs and ecological/organic agriculture. Indeed, 'new farmers' from other parts in China, many of which have better environmental conditions for ecological farming, often sell their 'quality' produce in Guangdong.

From a national perspective, it is worth noting that 2015 has been highlighted as a watershed moment for agriculture in China, in that for the first time agricultural policy documents - principally guided by the larger national program of Ecological Civilisation – have begun a transition away from production-focused initiatives towards more ecologically driven objectives. For example, after 12 years meeting the requirement to increase grain production, Guangdong (in 2016) is no longer under obligation by the CCP to do so. [22] This change in policy underlines a significant commitment from the CCP to develop ecological agriculture.

During my fieldwork period in Guangdong, from late 2015 to early 2017 (20 months), I visited - at least twice - five key farms which were located on the outskirts of Guangzhou (see Fig 1 below, A-E). When based at one of these five sites, I often visited additional (often smaller) ecological farms / AFNs in their neighbouring area. The bulk of my research was centred around two of these five AFNs, a twice-a-month organic farmers market hosted

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[22] In conversation with leading agroecologist Professor Luo Shiming from South China Agricultural University, October 2016.

by the platform 'Bringing City and Country Together' (*ChengXiangHui*) and the largest CSA

farm in China 'Four Season Share' (*SiJiFenXiang*)

Figure 1. Map of Fieldwork Sites in Guangdong

Source: Google Maps, Top Left Image - Wikipedia.org
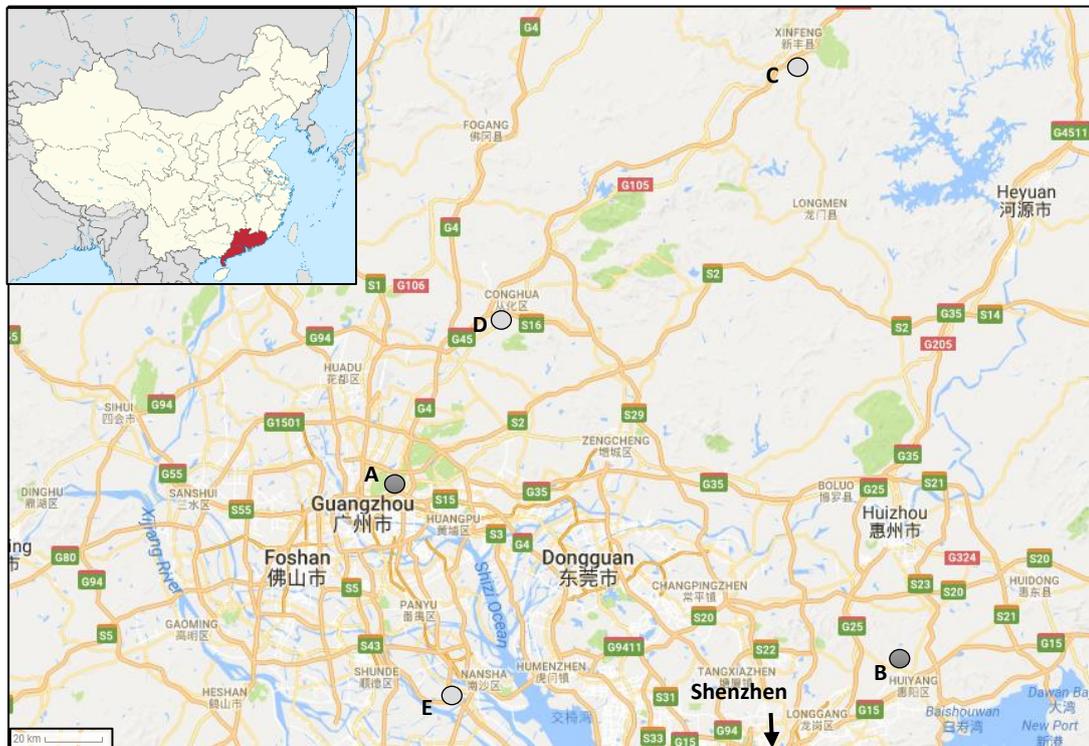
Key

⬤ = Major Fieldwork Site
◯ = Secondary Fieldwork Site
A. = Bringing City and Country Together - *ChengXiangHui*
B. = Four Season Share CSA farm – *SiJiFenXiang*
C. = Peter Pan's Farm – *ShuDongPo*
D. = Beautiful Garden Farm - *NongGengTianYuan*
E. = *Dongsheng* Farm

ChengXiangHui - Bringing City and Country Together

'Bringing City and Country Together' defines itself as a 'Public Service Platform' and

is located in the centre of Guangzhou city (*Taojin*) in Guangdong. Five organic shops/CSA

farmers initially formed the platform in September 2010, after coming to the conclusion

that they needed to pool their resources together in order to market CSA membership

efficiently and to promote 'organic' living in Guangzhou. In December 2010 they defined

their three mission statements: 1) to promote mutual support between the urban and rural

areas; 2) to aid small farmers in developing organic farming; and 3) to promote a low carbon

lifestyle in the cities. Since January 2011 *ChengXiangHui* has held an organic farmers market event monthly which showcases natural and ecological ingredients, organic products, fair trade products, environmentally friendly household items and handmade products. In addition, *ChengXiangHui* provides regular educational lectures free to the public that relate to its mission objectives– often inviting speakers from around East Asia. Recently, the platform is experimenting with adding additional activities to their farmers market like fishing and screenings of independent cinema films. In sum, the platform hopes to provide urban residents a direct access to nutritious and "authentic" food while protecting farmers from less developed areas from exploitation. They also aim to increase the awareness of ethical consumerism amongst people in the cities and to provide help and support to those famers taking part in organic farming with the ideals of CSA.

During my residency in Guangzhou, I was a regular shopper and participant at *ChengXiangHui.* I took this opportunity to establish relationships with the vendors, farmers and customers at the market and it is from this base I drew the majority of informants for my interviews. Through this platform I was able to visit some of the organic farms that surround Guangzhou, understand the lives of those involved at the platform take part in their peer-based certification scheme - Participatory Guarantee System (PGS)[23] – and I also presented for them in one of their educational lectures.

Picture 2. *ChengXiangHui* Farmers Market**.**

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[23] PGS is a peer review scheme whereby farmers and vendors visit each other farms to ensure organic methods are being employed, and to give advice on how they can be improved further. PGS is found the world over and is a common scheme adopted by small scale farmers who cannot afford official organic certification.

<u>Four Season Share - *SiJiFenXiang*</u>

Four Season Share is located to the north of Shenzhen (the north-east of Guangzhou) in Zhoutian village (close to Huizhou city). The village itself is a heritage site and is the birthplace of a famous communist general. Tourists come here to see the village's ancient buildings, cycle ways, natural scenery, the general's childhood home and local *hakka* (non-Han) culture. Four Season Share farm is situated in the middle of the heritage area and covers, in total, 13.3 hectares that includes 28 large greenhouses (covering approximately 3.5 hectares). The farm is next to Jixinshi Reservoir, which is Huizhou's primary – and protected - water source that serves Four Season Share's irrigation needs. This organically certified farm is the owner's third attempt at creating a large scale working CSA farm in China, and in terms of membership is currently the largest in China. The owner Mr Lei is well known and respected in China's 'organic' circles and, for many, his CSA farm – and its business and management model - is the one to aspire to.

The farm employs a professional management team, not only for logistical reasons – the farm delivers 1400 vegetable boxes to its members weekly – but also as a PR department that utilises social media to ensure an almost 24-hour contact with their members. The owner also hires graduates / interns, with degrees in agriculture who have a passion for ecological farming, to direct and guide the local and migrant labour. The majority of the farm's workforce is housed on site and agro-ecology graduates are paid a wage not dissimilar to that of city for equivalent work. In the weekend, members and tourists visit the farm to take part in farm-based activities.

I spent two weeks during April 2016 at Four Season Share farm. During my stay I helped in many of the farm's daily tasks and, in return, was housed and fed. Staying here provided me with the opportunity to meet and talk with many people who worked in the different departments across the farm; this included a meal with the owner during one of his business dinners at the farms restaurant. Although I could not have any formal in-depth interviews during my time on the farm – due to the absence of a translator – with my broken Chinese and their pigeon-English I was able to have informal conversations that contributed to my research diary.

Picture 3. 'Four Season Share' CSA Farm.

Methods

I used a variety of methods to conduct my research in order to capture the diversity of ways participants experienced AFNs. I used interviews, participant observation and monitored the social media presence of AFNs and the social media dialogue between 'new farmers' and CSA members – most of these methods being reliant on using a translator. The main source of data came from semi-structured interviews that raised questions related to consumer and producer motivations for AFN participation, their experiences and challenges with AFNs, and the reasons behind buying produce directly from the consumer. It is at the different and various fieldwork sites that I met with the majority of my informants and interviewees. In addition to meeting with 'new farmers' and the members of their initiatives, I also interviewed urban planners (in charge of rural gentrification projects), agroecology academics, a representative of an organic fertiliser company and volunteers working at the platform *ChengXiangHui* who were based in Guangzhou city. Of my informants, 20 'formal' recorded interviews were completed (see table 4), each lasting about 50 minutes. I was able to re-interview some of the new farmers in my core fieldwork sites (see fig. 1). Many more spontaneous (non-recorded) interviews took place as I came across unexpected AFNs on my 'trips' away from my main fieldwork sites and also from my regular attendance to the farmer's market. My thoughts from these spontaneous meetings were recorded in a research diary.

To increase the validity and reliability of my fieldwork data my interviews were accompanied with other data sources. Of particular note were my discussions with key

stakeholders in China's 'alternative' food movement / rural development in China who I was able to meet with when I co-convened a workshop on Ecological Civilization.[24] The workshop included Wen Tiejun, an agricultural economist who initiated the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM) that is responsible for many AFNs across China; Shi Yan, founder of China's first CSA farm who has since founded two more Beijing based CSAs; and Luo Shiming, a prominent agroecologist at South China Normal University.

Table 4. Survey of Recorded Respondents.

No.	Location	Producer/ Consumer	Position of Respondent
1	Four Season Share	Producer	Owner/Manager
2	Beautiful Garden Farm	Producer	Owner/Manager
3	Dongshen Farm	Producer	Quality Control Manger
4	Peter Pan's Farm	Producer	Owner/Manager
5	ChengXiangHui	Producer	Vendor / Farmer
6	ChengXiangHui	Producer	Vendor / Farmer
7	ChengXiangHui	Consumer	Housewife
8	ChengXiangHui	Consumer	Retired Academic
9	ChengXiangHui	Consumer	Teacher
10	ChengXiangHui	Consumer	University Student
11	ChengXiangHui	Producer	Vendor / Farmer
12	ChengXiangHui	Producer	Vendor / Farmer
13	Four Season Share	Consumer	Housewife
14	ChengXiangHui	Consumer	Retired Bank Teller
15	Biofertilizer Company	N/A	PR Manager
16	Dongshen Farm	Consumer	Accountant
17	Peter Pan's Farm	Producer	Farmer
18	ChengXiangHui	Producer	Vendor / Farmer
19	ChengXiangHui	Consumer	Investment banker
20	ChengXiangHui	Producer	Farm Manager

Another source of data I used was the translated social media transcripts between the farm Four Season Share and their members. I was able to acquire twenty-two extracts

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[24] Workshop for the Joint Institute of Environmental Research & Education at South China Agricultural University: *Ecological Civilization, Urbanization and the Agricultural-Food-Water Environment Nexus* - January 8th-9th 2018.

from WeChat[25] that varied in size and had occurred between the farm and its members over the past 6 months in 2016 - which I translated later. This rather unique data set provided a great lens to analyse the interactions between the members and the farm and helped triangulate my findings with the interview data and the other secondary sources examined - the websites and social media-based newsletters of the AFNs I visited.

I now set out this paper into three parts, the pre-field, fieldwork and post-field stages. In each stage, I give a thorough account of my personal experiences concerning my methodology, including my attempts at reflexivity, and my efforts to balance theoretical sensitivity with empirical research.

Pre-Field Reflections

<u>Deciding on a theoretical approach</u>

It is typical, and strongly advised, for students of a social science persuasion to decide on an appropriate theory for their thesis and to use its tools and framework to explore and explain the social phenomenon in question. However, the rise of China as an alternative pole to the Western development trajectory offers a unique opportunity for China scholars to escape the somewhat rigid theoretical and conceptual frameworks commonly applied in the social sciences. In fact, the very allure of China is its explicit invitation for researchers to come up with alternative forms of understanding. Not only is this approach academically intriguing, but perhaps important in decolonising academic discourse.

For example, in Kuan-Hsing Chen's (2010) landmark book, *Asia as Method: Towards Deimperialization,* he puts forward 'Asia' as a method, or a strategy, to overcome assumptions about the one way flow of Western modernity (i.e. the universalising values such as freedom, equality etc.).[26] Chen argues that the West has entered Asian history and imaginations - whether anyone likes it or not - and has influenced Asia's development accordingly. For example, the very notion of an Ecological Civilization can only emerge through a dialogue with the West's civilizational ecological shortfalls and impasses. Indeed,

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[25] The Chinese social media equivalent of 'WhatsApp'
[26] Chen's 'Asia as Method' is a rejuvenation of the concept that was first coined in the 1960's by Japanese scholar Takeuchi Yoshimi.

the concept of Ecological Civilization itself was drawn from Western sources, namely Roy Morrison's book *Ecological Democracy* (1995) which has the first usage of the term (see Zhang et al., 2011). Furthermore, part of Ecological Civilization usage as a concept in China - as mentioned in Chapter 2(p. 57) - is to suggest a Chinese superiority over the 'failed' Western attempts of sustainable development i.e. a failed Western attempts of 'civilization'. The central thesis of Chen's 'Asia as method' is to develop a *decolonising agenda* by using the idea of Asia as an 'imaginary anchoring point', allowing East Asian societies to become reference points for each other (Chen, 2010: 212). It is through this self-referencing act, argues Chen that the existing knowledge structure can be transformed and Asian subjectivities rebuilt. Similarly, in this thesis, I have tried to use Asian frames of reference, as opposed to a universalising theory, to guide my analysis.

As an approach, 'Asia as method' also has merit practically. For if the challenge of (contemporary) China lies in its vast size, the immense scale of its internal variations, its continuing rate of rapid change, and the very open question of what China is changing into, then attempting to reach a comprehensive picture of reality in China is not a realistic endeavour. This is a move away from the past Sino-ethnographic approach that tended to view 'China as a natural unit that is interwoven in, while being separated from, others area of the world' (Pieke, 2014: 125). By recognising instead that China is undergoing a 'globalizing, civilising, creolization process…in which Chinese culture is [just] one of the ingredients', the task of choosing a precise theoretical approach for the sinological field is far more confounding, and perhaps even limiting, to the research exercise (ibid). Put another way, it is important to avoid the tendency to adopt Western notions of policy and analysis which assume that China, post opening-up, would echo the processes of development engendered by Western political and economic forms. Indeed, China's rise on the international stage should be seen as an invitation for scholars to reassess social phenomenon in a fresh light, which might become crucial, especially as China increasingly asserts its economic power globally.

To put into Beckian terms, this thesis involves 'methodological cosmopolitanism' that seeks to explore 'the possible role of East Asia in "correct[ing] and redefin[ing] the self-understanding of European modernity" by looking at "Europe from a non-European perspective; that is, with Asian eyes"' (Beck, 2010 in Han, 2015: 45-46). This approach has

many merits in the context of my own research, as it is precisely the worn out conceptual binary categories of AFNs (applied by Western scholars) - alternative/conventional, global/local, capitalist/non-capitalist - that have stymied their analytical development (Holloway et al., 2007; Levkoe, 2011; McClintock, 2014; Turner & Hope, 2015). Although recent research has sought to move beyond these conceptual categories, their shadow still somewhat haunts the analytical discussion (Tregear, 2011). By analysing AFNs in a Chinese context (i.e. by being obliged to adopt new frames of reference), the hope is to discover new insights and to develop different ways of understanding of AFNs.

For Asia as Method to push and critique existing mainstream theories, empirical fieldwork in China needs to take advantage of this potential. As put by leading China scholar Kevin O'Brien (2006: 38):

"China is teeming with things that shouldn't be (i.e. theoretical anomalies), which our interviewees are glad to serve up to us. One of our key jobs is merely to recognize and repackage these insights for disciplinary colleagues who have been working with grand theories that actually apply only in a limited context."

To allow these 'theoretical anomalies' to emerge, a far looser conceptual approach to the field is recommended. Indeed, an approach that values curiosity and an open-ended engagement with a 'field' as unique as China is potentially more thought provoking and insightful then a method that is driven by a particular theoretical lens. The style of methodology I required therefore needed to be sensitive to the theoretical discussion surrounding the issue in question, but to have enough flexibility to remain open for empirical data emerging independently to established theory. The approach I adopted therefore bore some relationship to 'grounded theory' which focuses on the delicate relationship between theory and empirical data (Glaser, 1992).

This PhD is not then, a purely empirically led study, but one that is informed by a theoretical awareness, albeit without a deeply cemented theoretical commitment. Put another way, my methodology attempts to 'differentiate between diverse types of theoretical statements (namely between definite and precise hypotheses on the one hand and broad and general heuristic concepts on the other hand) and their differing role in the process of theory generation' (Kelle, 2007: 512). Thus, the coding strategy for the data

analysis in this thesis was designed around general and broad heuristic concepts – based upon a wide range of reading – to develop in step with the increasing empirical content. This flexible coding strategy is able to take advantage of the most valuable moments of an interview:

"Invariably it was most helpful not when my informants answered a question, but when a response demonstrated that my question was poorly put: that it had been conceptualized incorrectly or that I had posed a dilemma that did not exist or missed a dilemma that did". (O'Brien 2006: 36)

It is from these instances, as described above by O'Brien, that China based research is able to develop into a body of work able to contribute and affect to mainstream theory. However, a theoretical scope too narrow or precise in focus would not allow for a wide range of interview questions that allow these moments to occur. Achieving this fine balance towards theoretical commitment and empirical data prompts the researcher to develop analysis simultaneously with the fieldwork process. This encourages a constant reformulation or abandonment of the coding categories in light of the growing empirical data (Kelle, 2007).

<u>Reaching the field</u>

China-based research also prompts the very practical question of how to access China for fieldwork and empirical engagement. Historically this has been difficult, hence the relatively 'underexplored' novelty of China for ethnographic-driven disciplines. Indeed, China was not really practical as a 'field' until 1978 and even since China's 'opening up', periods of upheaval – i.e. Tiananmen Square 1989 - have closed China again (Smith, 2006; Pieke 2014). Even in today's China, the ever-present difficulty in obtaining visas and research permits and using the internet - especially in the long-term – has meant that extensive research, in one field site, over a significant period of time, is still fairly uncommon (Pieke, 2000; Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006; Turner, 2010).

Recent developments in higher education, involving collaboration between Chinese and Western higher education institutions have however opened up possibilities for longer-term focused social science research recently. I have, for example, been a direct benefactor

of such a collaboration, receiving funding and support from 'SEW-REAP', [27] a China-EU partnership project aimed at supporting longer-term secondments for PhD students and staff coming from the EU to China – during my PhD I lived for 20 months in Guangzhou.

The increasing frequency of these partnerships between Chinese and foreign institutions is linked to the dramatic rise of Chinese students in higher education over the past decade leading to a significant increase in 'studying abroad' programs (Fazackerley & Worthington, 2007). Emerging in parallel with the increase of foreign students is the rapid spread of Confucius Institutes outside of China– many of which are often located in foreign universities (Lahtinen, 2015). This increased international-focused higher education activity in China has help foster collaboration opportunities between Chinese and foreign universities. Perhaps the most significant potential for these emerging collaborations lies with the passing of a new law in China (passed in September 2003) that allowed foreign universities to establish, in partnership with Chinese institutions, campuses and research centres in China (Ennew & Fujia, 2009). Since the pioneering efforts of the University of Nottingham's Ningbo campus, in Zhejiang province, and the opening of the Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University institution in Suzhou, many more universities in the UK have started to develop campuses and research centres in China (including my own, Lancaster University, as well as a raft of other institutions from the US, Australia and Singapore).

Given that all research in China requires affiliation with a host university or research centre, the increasing proliferation of these collaborations is a promising development for those looking for funding and longer-term China fieldwork opportunities. Indeed, if these partnerships only aid the foreign researcher in navigating, or bypassing, the mazes of Chinese administration necessary to obtain visas and research permits, then they have already opened-up China considerably for more research.

Unfortunately, for social scientists, there is a tendency for these institutional partnerships to focus more on the natural and physical sciences - as they tend to draw on

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[27] SEW-REAP (or 'Addressing Food **S**ecurity, **E**nvironmental stress and **W**ater by promoting multi-disciplinary **R**esearch with **E**U **A**nd China **P**artnerships in science and business) is a project funded by the EU's 'EuropeAid' body (see http://ukcn-irice.org/sew-reap_home/).

China's academic strengths, not their weaknesses (Ennew & Fujia 2009).[28] This was very much my position on my arrival to Guangzhou in 2015 - as part of a program designed predominantly for natural science research. This meant that during my secondment in China I was based in a research institute with a nominal Chinese supervisor, both of which were concerned with different disciplines. Whilst not ideal, and perhaps an unusual example, it was still a robust platform from which I could begin to immerse myself into the complexity of Chinese society and start doing preliminary fieldwork. However, it meant that there was a significant onus on the individual social science researcher to build, maintain and develop a chain of contacts him or herself, in order to establish a useful social network conductive for qualitative fieldwork. My first few months in China therefore entailed the rather challenging journey of establishing contacts with those actors involved in AFNs, often by following a winding route that entailed a mix of obliging early contacts and accidental meetings. Being free from a specific theoretical or methodological focus, and having the necessary long-term access to the field, I could take the opportunity to slowly integrate myself into the culture, build up connections and contacts, do preliminary interviews, and familiarise myself with my research area.

Reflections on the Fieldwork Process

<u>Methodological approach</u>

Undertaking a theoretically open methodological approach in an unfamiliar and relatively novel field is an ambitious, somewhat daunting and potentially time-inefficient task. To manage this challenge, I adopted Pieke's (2000: 145) 'serendipitous' approach to fieldwork, which seeks to actively create 'the conditions to encounter the unexpected' in order to create pursuable opportunities. In practice, this serendipity methodology influenced how I related to the field, which emerged more as a series of processes, as opposed to a reoccurring visit to a fixed locality. To put another way, in order to find my participants, I often had to take a roundabout route that involved numerous encounters and

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[28] There are also promising signs for foreign social scientists in China. Geographers Scott Sharpe and Alec Thornton from the University of New South Wales via their PhD student Hao Duan - based in Shandong University - have been able to, through their university partnership, interview local government heads of department. This opportunity has arisen because local-regional governments in China are being encouraged by the state to work more closely with their universities.

events. For example, my discovery of 'Four Season Share' initially began with me registering on the WWOOF China (Worldwide Workers On Organic Farms) website, which acts as a platform for placing organic farming volunteers with farms needing additional labour and skills. Through this website, I made contact with a Waldorf school[29] that was looking for teaching volunteers. I went to visit this school for a weekend and I later found out the school was renting land from a CSA farm. This CSA farm happened to be largest in China and I was able to arrange a 10-day stay, to learn in detail about how it operates. It was here I was able to gather additional fieldwork data due to the access I had to transcripts of social media intereactions between the farm and its customers. If the aim is to develop theoretical contributions from an unfamiliar China field, then Pieke's serendipitous approach is perhaps not only more practical, but also a more valuable approach for this form of research.

This serendipitous approach to qualitative fieldwork is a strong commonality throughout social science research in China (see for example Heimer & Thøgersen's edited volume *Doing Fieldwork in China*, 2006) and heightens the issues of researcher positionality due to its unscripted, and researcher-led, emphasis. Positionality (or identity) consists of gender, age, education, ethnicity, nationality, social contacts, class and, perhaps especially when considering research in China, one's 'philosophical perspectives and ways of viewing the world' (Turner, 2010: 126). In many ways, positionality is intimately linked to the challenges involved in qualitative work that takes place in a setting where cultural norms, languages and spatial environments are unfamiliar - i.e. misinterpreting data, power differentials and the meanings behind participants' behaviour (Mullings, 1999; Mill and Ogilvie, 2003; Sultana 2007; Denzin & Lincoln 2011). As argued by Maxwell et al. (2016: 96), these multiple identities that researchers assume 'can significantly affect the conduct of qualitative interviews – impinging on not only *what* is communicated, but *how* it is communicated and *how* it is interpreted as well.' Ensuring that your research methodology includes elements of reflexivity - recognising the biases your positionality might bring to the research - is perhaps more important than when researching in your home context, as the pitfalls and potential for error is further increased and potentially more distorting.

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[29] Waldorf schools are a large independent-school movement which subscribes to a pedagogy that emphasizes the role of imagination in learning, values a holistic understanding of student development, and is free from any form of quantitative testing.

However, positionality should not be considered solely as a burden for the researcher to be alleviated through good reflexive practice.[30] In many ways this serendipitous approach to fieldwork, which is dependent on meeting many people, forces the researcher to embrace his own positionality - a notion which is somewhat enhanced in a Chinese context. Using personal relations or *guanxi* - the Chinese concept referring to 'connections' or 'relationships' that entail implicit mutual obligations - to approach potential participants is critical in China and relies on aspects of your positionality. For example, this open-ended *guanxi* approach to fieldwork (see also Zhang & McGhee 2013) encouraged me to adopt what sociologist Thomas Gold (1989) calls 'guerrilla interviewing'. This interview method develops a wide range of contacts by taking the opportunity, somewhat spontaneously, to pick people almost at random (in my case at organic restaurants and farmers markets) to engage in friendly idle conversation about the research topic. Here I could take advantage of my position as white British foreigner in China, which for many Chinese is still an interesting novelty and perhaps sets me out as a potentially interesting *guanxi* contact to have. In other words, guerrilla interviewing, in many ways, is easier as a white foreigner in China then it might be for a local. Thus, I employed this method extensively at first in order to generate early research data, to make important connections and get a feel for the general context of Chinese AFNs.[31] To take advantage of one's positionality, however, does not negate the importance of reflexivity. In the following sections on 'interview challenges' and 'working with a researcher and a translator', I suggest some examples of reflexive practice for qualitative-based research in China.

Interview Challenges

As outlined above, interviews, both spontaneous and the more formal-recorded semi-structured interviews were my principal research method. Interviewing in China is a rather unique experience - as are other forms of qualitative research – as Chinese society generally is unaccustomed to it. Those employing quantitative social science, on the other hand, is a widely used tool of the CCP – used to directly inform on social policy design – to

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[30] Foucault & Blanchot (1987: 21) also critique an overly focused reflexive discourse for running 'the risk of leading the experience of the outside back to the dimension of interiority'. In other words, there is a danger that reflexivity can construct certain moral positions as being the only justifiable option available.
[31] My style of guerrilla interviewing was perhaps not as freewheeling as Thomas Gold's as I often had to introduce my translator at some point before being hamstrung by my limited Chinese.

the point where researchers have commented that they are often 'walking in the footsteps of the Communist Party' (Hanson, 2006: 81). Quantitative methods tend to have far more restrictions then their qualitative counterparts, as the former represents 'real science' in China while qualitative research is seen to have less value (Pieke, 2000; Wei, 2006). In other words, there is a certain freedom allowed for qualitative research in China that can be taken advantage of due to its perceived lack of scientific importance. Indeed, such is the novelty of qualitative research in China, one must be prepared to explain repeatedly to informants what the value is in doing a long-term qualitative study of a society of which you are not a part, and have a limited understanding of the local language.

This increased freedom surrounding an interview-based methodology does have caveats though, especially when fulfilling the ethical requirements expected by Western universities that involves informed consent. As noted by Smith (2006: 139) 'the ethical question is difficult in the context of doing sensitive research in repressive states, like China, since if one acted according to the code of ethics recommended by sociologists in developed, democratic countries one would fail to obtain any data at all.' While perhaps overly polemical, Smith's assertion carries a certain weight, especially if conducting research in politically sensitive areas or with government officials. In my case, to prevent creating barriers or putting my informants off participating I had to make my information and consent sheets appear less formal or official then the format suggested by my institution. If collaboration between participant and reviewer is enhanced by less formal arrangements, which is especially the case in China (Zhang & McGhee 2013: 54), then formal consent forms can negatively affect the informal atmosphere necessary for a relaxed and open interview.

While all my interviews took place in an informal environment, how Chinese participants react to the recorder device and consent forms can vary wildly and is dependent on a whole host of variables. These might range from the setting, one's relationship to the participant, the topic (and the participants relationship to the topic), and even on how the conversation develops during the interview. I have had situations where, on the appearance of a consent form, participants have turned away, mid-interview I have been asked to turn the recorder off, and, on occasion, participants have needed extended amounts of reassurance concerning anonymity at the end of an interview. I have also had the opposite reactions, with large farm businesses inviting me in, sending out a mid-level

employee to do an interview with me, and signing consent forms without second glances during a spontaneous visit - as if they have done qualitative interviews many times before. The key lesson I learnt is to be prepared either way, to adapt flexibly to the participants' mood, consistently to reflect on the interview process, and to develop my interview approach accordingly.

Although my research was in a politically neutral field, I was keen to ask some of my informants about the government's attitude towards AFNs and similar related schemes. Questions that asked a personal opinion of the state occasionally made my participants feel uncomfortable due to, I suspect, a general unwillingness to criticise the government, especially when interviewing with formal consent forms and a recorder. Taking a leaf from Zhang & McGhee's (2013: 55) approach of 'de-focusing the research topic', which they used to interview government officials in Xinjiang regarding acutely sensitive policies targeting minorities, I adjusted my line of questioning. Instead of asking 'does the government support this form of enterprise', I began to ask: 'the government has recognised certain problems of industrial agriculture, creating policies to reduce the use of pesticides and fertilizers, Could the government do anything else to support AFNs?' This technique, which highlights the already existing policies and aspects of the government's attitude, reduces the potential for participants to feel 'compromised as a betrayer of government polices' (ibid). A defocusing approach is helpful in fostering rapport and confidence in my interviewee's, allowing them to open-up if the question touches on sensitive topics.

Another, and perhaps under-identified, aspect that needs to be acknowledged when interviewing Chinese participants is that of 'face'. Hu (1944) explains that 'face' in Chinese culture revolves around two concepts: social image or prestige (*mianzi*) and personal or moral integrity (*lian*), both of which are profoundly caught up in ways of speaking. In other words, these concepts capture the way 'face can be gained or lost, given to others or taken from them through communication; restraining boundaries of self-disclosure inhibit the sharing of negative points related to one's self, family or in-group in the wish to protect significant others (public disagreement can be a strong face-threatening, or face-losing, act)' (Corrtazzi et al. 2011: 519). Therefore, much of qualitative data obtained in China needs to be viewed through a lens that recognises the preservation of social and/or moral worth may have been more important to my informants than credibility or truth (ibid).

The question that arises from this issue of 'face' for qualitative researchers becomes: what can be learnt from encounters, especially those involving topics that could involve face-threatening acts, in which it is likely that face matters more than objective 'truth(fullness)'? For example, in an interview with an employee from a large-scale organic farm that had taken on AFN attributes, he was quite negative of those small-scale AFN farms that were likely more 'green' or 'organic' relatively but had not invested in official organic certification. Could his negativity, which seemed at odds with the rest of the interview content, be an example of saving his companies 'face'? This example highlights that the concept of 'face' needs to be in the back of the researcher's mind when interviewing in China. Complicating this issue further, while 'face' might account for – or create – some interesting irregularities in qualitative data, its application is slippery. As put by Corrtazzi et al. (2011: 519): '"face" is a double-edged sword and it is not clear from previous research how this works across languages with the same participants: it is possible that interviews in English with a westerner may lead to a frankness not disclosed to a fellow Chinese in Chinese on some topics.'

<u>Working with Research Assistants and Translators</u>

The language barrier and the nuances of Chinese communication are significant challenges to the qualitative researcher in China. Working with an assistant who can translate is often essential, and if fieldwork is long-term, you will likely need to find more than one. Ideally, a research assistant for fieldwork in China is someone who knows about your topic to some degree, is competent in English and Chinese languages, familiar with both cultures and has an experience in qualitative research methods. It was with these criteria in mind that I began searching for possible candidates from the friends and contacts I had made during the preliminary aspects of my fieldwork. Over my fieldwork period, I predominantly drew on two research assistants, Echo and Chloe, who may have not fitted my criteria perfectly, all became essential to my fieldwork. Due to my limited Mandarin ability, I required my research assistants to ask my interview questions, and follow-up questions, whilst I recorded the exchange. Thus, my interviews were done through a third party, potentially affecting the frankness and confidence of my informants. In my experience, the degree to which using a third party affected the 'openness' of the interview may have been ameliorated somewhat by the shared ethnicity of my translator with the

participant, possibly encouraging further disclosure due to their common familiarity of language and culture (Cortazzi et al., 2011).[32]

Taking advantage of this latter point concerning shared language and culture I looked to 'training-up' my assistant to becoming more than just a translator. Initially, my research assistant, during the interviews, would translate briefly for me the respondent's answer, in order to allow me to ask a follow-up question. After working together over a period of time, and when my research assistant grew more confident, I encouraged Chloe to ask the follow up questions spontaneously, allowing the interviews to flow more comfortably and fluently. Admittedly, this 'training' is a time-consuming process and one that has to be repeated if your research assistant changes.

After conducting the interviews, I was also dependent on my assistants for transcribing and translating the interview data. The process of translation is a critical aspect of any methodology that requires foreign fieldwork and is rarely reflected upon explicitly in the methods section of research (Temple & Young, 2004). Since qualitative research is the study of meanings within subjective experience – and that subjective experience has a two way process with language (Van Nes et al. 2010) - its under-acknowledgement in research is surprising. That language is used to express meaning, indicates that language also influences how meaning is constructed. This linguistic influence over meaning suggests that translators cannot help but become part knowledge production (ibid: 313 see also Latour, 1999: 24-79).

The influence of the translator is further inflated when one considers the complexities involved in giving words to experiences, as the meaning of experiences is not necessarily fully expressible for all subjects in language.[33] This inevitable gap between language and meaning forces the translator to adopt the extra role of 'interpreter' adding complications to the act of translation. Simon (1996) articulates this problem of translator/interpreter as an issue of determining 'cultural meaning', which is not simply an exercise in locating 'meaning' within the culture itself, but a complex process wherein 'meaning' is in constant negotiation, continuously shaped by its reuse through language. Thus, Simon argues:

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[32] This point is complicated again, if we consider that some Chinese participants on some issues may feel they have more freedom to talk to a non-Chinese interviewer (see also Cortazzi et al. 2011)

[33] For more on the theoretical and practical difficulties of translation see Venuti (2004).

"The solutions to many of the translator's dilemmas are not to be found in dictionaries, but rather in an understanding of the way language is tied to local realities, to literary forms and to changing identities. Translators must constantly make decisions about the cultural meanings which language carries, and evaluate the degree to which the two different worlds they inhibit are 'the same'. These are not technical difficulties, they are not the domain of specialists in obscure or quaint vocabularies…In fact the process of meaning transfer has less to do <u>with finding</u> the cultural inscription of a term than in <u>reconstructing</u> its value." (Simon 1996: 131-2, emphasis in original).

For qualitative researchers using translators it must be assumed then that the translators themselves are producers of research data who, through the process of 'reconstructing value', will (also) influence analysis via their own personal identity and life experiences. That translator's occupy this hybrid role and are themselves producers of research data; they are also influencing the analysis process via their own personal identity and life experiences. The literature on translation suggests four measures to account for this hybrid role of the translator. First, the translator needs to be familiar with both cultures (Cortazzi et al. 2011: 521). Second, the researcher needs to recognise and understand the translator's personal opinion and feelings towards the research topic (Temple & Young 2004). Third, the translator needs to be considered as an additional informant, not just as an objective observer (ibid). Fourth, data analysis needs to be done in 'a side-by-side procedure, in which the researcher and the translator discuss possible wordings' (Van Nes et al. 2010: 315).

In my own translation procedure, I tried to adopt these above measures as was practically possible. For the majority of my translations and transcriptions a different assistant was used to the one who carried out the interview. Echo, who translated, was more experienced in doing translation (Mandarin to English) – she did it as a part time job for a local English expat magazine – and was familiar with both cultures. I would then check Echo's translations for accuracy, when possible, with my research assistant (Chloe) who undertook the interview. While a rather convoluted methodological process, it did enforce a form of reflexivity - and triangulation - through a series of social interactions that afforded a form of *social* or *inter*-subjective reflexivity. By having to engage frequently with the data, with my assistant, during the data interpretation process, I was able to crosscheck between

interviewer and translator. This process also assisted in the 'checking' of my own biases i.e. my specific cultural/gendered/racial lens (Maxell et al., 2016: 107). Indeed, there are significant advantages to 'working with native researchers and/or "community researchers" (individuals trained in the research protocol who represent the population of potential participants)' who 'can offer perspectives that better inform the data collection and meaning making processes' (ibid).

One clear benefit of this rather convoluted methodology involved the translation process directly and added an extra dimension to my research. For example, when I could tell that the translation was not fluid, or had expanded beyond the text of the original, suggesting a difficulty in translation (see also Berman, 2004), this prompted me to do further investigation. This often occurred when the participants used culturally bounded words - which are often difficult to translate (Van Nes et al. 2015: 315). In one memorable example, a translation read as '[The eggs from] 'Small Straw Hat' farm are laid by free range hens raised by a group of young people also with dreams' - in which 'dreams' stood out as an unusual or interesting term. Working with my assistant, I discovered that 'dreams' was a translation of the word *Qinghuai* which is difficult to translate into English directly. Looking at examples of other contexts when *Qinghuai* is used in Mandarin, together Chloe and I devised a more accurate translation: 'a noble quality which values a non-utilitarian state of mind with a willingness to overcome difficult challenges'. Although a time-consuming process, this attention to translation can help provide a valuable extra layer, or thickness, to qualitative analysis.[34]

In this section, I have highlighted some of the difficulties involved during the interview process and with the use of third parties during the interview process. By adopting reflexive practices to engage in these challenges productively, I have illustrated that many of the issues faced by researchers abroad, can potentially be turned to the researcher's advantage – and act as positive learning experiences. These techniques I believe have helped 'strengthen[ed] [my] commitment to conduct good research based on building relations of mutual respect and recognition' (Peake & Trotz, 1999, in Sultana 2007: 376).

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[34] Reflecting back, I think it would have been easier to spot these instances of difficult translation if I had had two versions of the translation, a version that was very literal, and another which was completely focused on conveying the correct meaning.

Post-field Reflections

<u>Analysing Data</u>

Maintaining a theoretical standpoint that also allows empirical data to emerge somewhat independently from a-prori assumptions is a conundrum that has occupied much of the literature concerning 'grounded theory'-type methodological approaches (Allan, 2003; Kelle, 2007). In order to recognise, group and code your interview data, there has to be a familiarity with the theoretical discussions that surround your topic. However, analysing your identified key points without overly relying on familiar theoretical constructs is also necessary to allow 'novel' insights to emerge. As with the other methodological challenges outlined in this chapter, this conundrum is not a challenged to be solved or an issue to be alleviated through adopting circumventing measures. Instead, this challenge, or balancing act between theory and empiricism, is something to be embraced and positioned as the driver for a methodological approach in which theory is constantly developed in parallel with the fieldwork. This is a contrast to the usual 'social scientific' conceit that has the researcher knowing exactly which theoretical lens to apply to the fieldwork from the beginning, which then facilitates a tidy testing of the theory and the arrival at a precise conclusion based from empirical evidence. The process and temporal sequence of theoretical clarification vis-à-vis the fieldwork outlined here however is far more chaotic. In an age defined more by 'complex systems', this unorthodox approach perhaps has more traction in its conclusions, due to its closer alignment with 'chaotic' reality.

The question then becomes of how researchers can manage this 'chaos'. In other words, how do researchers use empirical data creatively within undefined theoretical constructs? In O'Brien's (2006: 38) discussion of a similar methodological approach, he not only provides a passionate advocacy of this research approach to this form of methodology, but also highlights some insights regarding the management of empirical data without strict theoretical guidance:

"*Let's try to explain what occurs in China more analytically than we have in the past by clustering our findings <u>under a host of often made-to-order concepts</u> and bringing Chinese experiences into social scientific ways of thinking more than we have up to now. Let's take*

some chances and present what we come up with in a form that can be tested, if not by us, then by others." (emphasis added)

As noted by O'Brien, key to making sense of 'chaotic' data is the idea of using 'made-to-order concepts' (see also Parenti, 2013), a tool which has proved critical to my overall PhD. For me, this notion of using creative concepts refers to the process of identifying the perhaps 'uncomfortable' or the seemingly mundane (but frequent) elements that may have emerged from the interview data, and then adopting perhaps unusual theoretical concepts to explain them. For example, one particular aspect of Chinese AFNs I found interesting was the rather more pragmatic, as opposed to utopian, sense of place these schemes evoked – which differs to the Western literature on AFNs. This rather unexpected revelation prompted me to reassess AFNs differently, pointing me towards other theoretical lenses not usually associated with AFNs.

In my following fieldwork chapters, for example, my analysis of AFN has tended to utilise a 'Deweyan' pragmatist-based lens, a philosophical approach which has been ridiculed in the past (Barnes, 2008) and is rarely advocated as a valid perspective in which to frame research (Harney et al., 2016). However, in my analysis of the material qualities (chapter 4) subjectivities (chapter 5) and rural cosmopolitanisms (Chapter 6) of Chinese AFNs, 'pragmatism' has come through as a 'made-to-order-concept' most appropriate to frame the discussion. That pragmatism is rarely used in AFNs research has enable this PhD to suggest novel insights that may have gone unnoticed if a more orthodox methodological approach was used. Indeed, I hope that this PhD begins to hint at *novel* problems, questions, ideas and solutions regarding AFNs, which has been only possible due to my adoption of an open-ended use of methods.

Further implications

The methodological strategy outlined in this chapter advocates 'theoretical eclecticism' (see O'Brien, 2006). This approach is dependent on the reading of more literature - not less, as often associated with grounded theory-type methodologies - to make sense of the implications behind the participants' comments and to situate your work in relation to others (ibid: 39). Put another way, it is only from a point of sufficient 'theoretical eclecticism' that a robust position to analyse findings can emerge. Thus, I have explored a

wide range of theories throughout this PhD - i.e. green capitalism, neo-Confucianism, alternative hedonism, ecological-Marxism, pragmatism, rural cosmopolitanism, trust, compressed modernity - in order to achieve an adequate and robust understanding of AFNs in China.

The findings that result from this style of methodology I used in this thesis are crucial for helping unveil China's 'misleading masks', and to '(de)construct…theories for the mainstream geography discipline on the basis of the Chinese experience' (Lin 2002: 1825). The latter approach is especially necessary if the China-based scholar is to prompt and provoke others in the discipline to not only to recognise the value and importance of empirical-based China research, but also to encourage them to perhaps review and adapt the universal application of the theories they value and use. In other words, whilst adopting a precise theoretical angle, in light of China's growth and unknown trajectory, is an inappropriate starting point for doing China-based research, conversely, formulating a theory is perhaps precisely the right aspiration as a conclusion (Lin 2002; Parenti, 2013; Pieke, 2014; Tyfield, 2018).

In the context of Chen's 'Asia as method' too, this aspiration of theory making is also a valuable endeavour, in the sense of creating a route towards academic decolonialisation. For example, my approach to this research - which attempted to explore Chinese AFNs on their own terms - goes someway to increasing the potential for future work to anchor its analysis in Asian rather than Western references.

To arrive at an academic position that formulates theory, via the form of methodology outlined here, also involves an important, and inevitable, personal component. To embark on qualitative research of any kind that involves creating relationships and processes of reflexivity, is, by its very nature, a learning experience that engenders personal growth. In my case, China-based research has forced me profoundly to reassess some of my core geographical foundations, regarding the given assumptions about how political change occurs. For me, doing research in China has brought to the fore that the Western-centred approach, which is designed around exposing hidden power relations in order to open-up political possibility, is based on a premise that only values a utopian sense of hope (see also Barnett, 2011). In a country where explicit political opposition is heavily restricted, the dynamics of resistance that emerged from my study were not only far

more nuanced than I expected but also – and of equal importance – undeniably present, and yet too easily overlooked by a Western gaze seeking only for explicit vocal opposition and 'resistance'.

In sum, China-based research hints strongly towards a new possible Kuhnian paradigm shift - in which China (understanding China and the Chinese understanding of the world) is going to become increasingly influential. Whereas previously, China was of peripheral interest to dominant Western readerships - probably affecting the confidence of China scholars to offer fundamental theoretical insights - this will likely change going forward. In fact, considering China's rise to international prominence and its global ambitions of (literal) (re-)construction i.e. the 'Belt Road Initiative', and/or its pitch for global leadership against climate change as a Trump-led US vacates that role, this level of theoretical input from China-based scholarship *has* to change. Potentially, then, this thesis might not just stand as a guide for future China scholars but may resonate with many other professional geographers over the coming decades.

Chapter 4

Eating Ecological Civilization: Trusting through Material Qualities

Tension 1: Do AFNs entail a positive 'novel' (re)connection between producers and consumers?

Introduction

'In fact, we feel sorry for you [CSA member]. You trust us so much and pay us beforehand, but your choice is limited. It will be better in the summer.' ('Four Season Share' social media message, 2016)

'Our farm must be close to our customer because currently the customer is waking-up [to food safety issues], but they don't trust online things, if they have some trust issue we can say ok, come and visit our farm and we can show you. They need to see it and they need to experience it. The trust [issue] is a big situation. It is a common problem in China. So, we need a farm near our customer' (New farmer, Beautiful Garden Farm, 2016, #2).

These opening quotes highlight the 'trust pressure'[35] Chinese AFNs are under. Both quotations point towards a certain delicacy the farmer must employ when cultivating membership and hints at the form of one-sided relationship producers have with consumers in AFNs. This issue of trust, and the relationship between producers and consumers, makes up one of the core tensions that dominates much of the Western literature of AFNs: do AFNs entail a positive 'novel' (re)connection between producers and consumers (Tregear, 2011)? A key headline claim of AFNs is that they involve consumers and producers in novel relationships, which are set apart from the relationships of distance characterised by mainstream food systems (ibid). These novel and direct relationships in AFNs are often celebrated for fostering embedded qualities, like 'morality', 'social justice' and 'equity', through the process of 'direct exchange' between producers and consumers in AFNs (Seyfang, 2005; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Jarosz, 2008). It is through this direct connection of buyers and sellers, it is argued, that there is a transformative potential for the food system, due to the ecological, social and moral (re)connections being made between producers and consumers (Dowler et al., 2009; Kneafsey et al., 2008; Turner, 2011; Hayden

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[35] 'Trust pressure' is a term coined in this thesis to describe the intense pressure AFNs in China are under to develop relationships with potential members.

& Buck, 2012) that would not necessarily occur in a conventional food network. Thus, a key conclusion often drawn is that 'trust' or 'connection' between consumers and producers is a key outcome of AFNs.

Trust, as defined by Zhang et al. (2016: 271), 'means that individuals involved in interactions expect others to follow "normal" patterns and routines in social life so that the continuity of social reality can be taken for granted'. Trust is linked, then, to people's expectations of what constitutes normal everyday life. In AFNs, the expectation of the buyer is usually centred around the seller is producing quality, safe, sustainable and ethically produced foodstuffs at a fair price; whilst the seller expects the buyer to accept a higher price; food at a non-standard/supermarket appearance; flexibility and patience regarding the quantity, the seasonality, and the diversity of the produce on sale.

However, as recent research is beginning to emphasise, when these expectations are met, and trust is functioning within the AFN, this does not necessarily guarantee a form of authentic 'reconnection' (Mount, 2012; Thorsøe & Kjeldsen, 2016). Indeed, empirical evidence has begun to question the potential for positive 'novel' relationships to form, as AFNs are also exhibiting 'typical' producer-consumer relationships. In China this tension is perhaps even more apparent, as the motivation for consumer participation in Chinese AFNs appears to be centred on the procurement of safer food amid the food scandals currently inherent to the conventional food network (Scott et al., 2014), and for (related) reasons surrounding family health (Klein, 2009). Thus, initial participation in AFNs in China are often absent a desire for a form of reconnection (Klein, 2014; Si et al., 2015). The high levels of deference offered by producers towards the consumers highlighted in the opening quotes of this chapter, for example, reveal how tenuous the levels of trust and 'reconnection' in Chinese AFNs are. Furthermore, in comparison to conventional food, which is especially cheap in China, organic /ecological food has an especially high premium, thus buyers are far less flexible and patient regarding the appearance, standard and perceived quality of the produce, increasing the pressure on the producer-consumer 'trust-based' relationship. Within this climate, it is seemingly less likely for novel reconnections to emerge via AFNs in China.

Despite the instrumental relationship between producers and consumers found in Chinese AFNs, the market for ecological food alternatives has rapidly expanded since 2010

(ITC, 2011; Zhou et al., 2013). As a result, much of the scholarship has begun to reassess the potential Chinese AFNs have in significantly impacting the food system (Klein, 2015; Si & Scott, 2015; Ely et al., 2016) - albeit without a focus on the producer-consumer relationship. In this chapter, the producer-consumer relationship is specifically explored in the context of Chinese AFNs in relation to how this aspect, too, may add to the transformative potential of AFNs on the larger Chinese food network. How this producer-consumer relationship evolves will also have a significant bearing on Ecological Civilization, the eventual formation of which, when scaled-up and across industries, will depend significantly on consumer-producer, urban-rural and state-society interactions.

China is an apt AFN context to explore producer consumer interactions due to the explicitly practical and instrumental nature of the initial participation consumers have with AFNs. Furthermore, the producer-consumer interaction in modern-day China has to happen in a context where distrust and suspicion between producers and consumers have become entrenched - especially in the context of food (Wang et al., 2015; Yan, 2015). With scandals regarding cooking oil, the recycling of out-of-date meat, the contamination of egg-based products and staples like rice being compromised becoming commonplace[36], the prism through which AFNs in China are perceived becomes inherently tied with up trust. Indeed, the very act of eating is based on trust. Eating involves the incorporation of the 'outside' world with the 'inside' world of the body, which is steeped in issues of anxiety and risk (Kneafsey et al., 2008: 13). That the industrial food process is now breeding 'symbolic danger' in the form of chemicals and trace elements only enhances the issues of anxiety and risk involved with eating (ibid).

Adding additional pressure to the trust between producers and consumer in China is the absence of altruistic consumer narratives like 'buy local' or 'ethical consumerism' (Klein, 2009; Scott et al., 2014). These narratives, which have a longer and more established tradition in the West (Malpass et al., 2007), have alleviated, to some degree, the burden AFN producers have to reach out and convince consumers of their authenticity.

This issue of trust in China is not exclusive to the food system. The dark edge behind China's rapid and intense industrialisation has allowed companies in many industries to

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[36] For example, Wikipedia has a page dedicated to the recording of Chinese-based food scandals (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food_safety_incidents_in_China).

bypass regulation, undermining trust in numerous sectors and industries. Therefore, the onus on producers to reach out and connect with consumers to form new bonds of trust is starker in China than in the West. Indeed, there is an urgent and pragmatic need for AFNs in China to organise and optimise their food initiatives specifically around the producer-consumer relationship due to this more intense 'trust pressure'.

The intensity of this 'trust pressure' has meant that, for AFNs in China, assuming direct exchange between consumers and producers guarantees, or at least encourages, a form of reconnection is especially fraught. Unlike in Western countries where 'in opinion polling, consumers consistently and overwhelmingly indicate a willingness to grant trust to farmers as a generic group, and exceptional levels of trust to small and/or local farmers' (Mount, 2012: 114), in China, scepticism comes first. For AFN research, this aspect is potentially liberating as in China, due to the intense 'trust pressure' in society (particularly concerning food), there is little or no expectation for a positive 'reconnecting' outcome to emerge from direct exchange. This prevents any inclination for AFN scholars to implicitly assume direct exchange leads to, or encourages, a positive outcome – a tendency highlighted in Western AFN literature (Mount, 2012; Thorsøe & Kjeldsen, 2016). This chapter aims to explore critically the processes that facilitate direct exchange and suggests that trust is not just an outcome of AFN participation but is tied-up intimately with how the produce of AFNs is framed. It is from this angle that I argue that the transformative potential of the novel AFN consumer producer relationship lies not in assumed 'moral' outcome of AFN participation, but through pragmatic strategies aimed to relieve 'trust pressure'. These strategies, I suggest, tend to emphasise food's 'material' qualities (Turner, 2014) - namely the sensory and aesthetic qualities of food - and relies on social media to celebrate these qualities. When scaled-up, these strategies also offer interesting insights into Ecological Civilization and its possible formation.

This chapter starts with a brief description outlining the current literature of this AFN tension. The tension is then examined within the context of the current Chinese AFN literature and the wider Chinese context of trust. Based on fieldwork observations, I next discuss the different strategies AFN participants utilise to build trust, highlighting in particular the celebration of the material qualities of food. Finally, I explore the wider implications of trust and material qualities in the context of Ecological Civilization.

Exploring the 1st Tension

The principle attribute of AFNs is how they bring producers and consumers into closer proximity, which is why many commentators also refer to them as 'short food supply chains' (Renting et al., 2003; Marsden et al., 2000). Closer proximity between producers and consumers is said to encourage a process that socially (re)embeds the farming and agricultural sector with forms of 'morality' (Sage, 2003: 49). In other words, during the process of direct-exchange between producers and consumers, something other than money is passing hands. Notions of social justice, sustainability, risk-sharing, transparency, locality and - importantly - trust, are also involved in the transaction, thereby transforming and creating new and more moral forms of relationship between buyers and sellers (Ilbery and Maye, 2005; Kirwan, 2006; Smithers et al., 2008). For instance, a recent study by Opitz et al. (2017: 189) on AFNs in Germany found that consumers involved in AFNs developed an increased awareness for 'food (seasonality, cooking/nutrition, housekeeping aspects) and agricultural production (farmers' perspectives and requirements, cultivation)'. Thus, at a larger scale, AFNs and related initiatives could foster stronger community relations (Winter, 2003) between urban and rural sectors of society (Preiss et al., 2017), help drive a collective environmental and socio-economic consciousness (Pinna, 2017), and encourage and enable actors to participate democratically in the system of food provisioning (Hinrichs, 2003; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005).

The tension emerges as, alongside these claims of a novel relationship emerging between producers and consumers, empirical research has also highlighted many instances of injustice, non-environmental practices and unequitable relations between producers and consumers - despite direct exchange occurring. In some Western-based AFNs, for example, research showed how participation did not guarantee personalised relationships (Allen et al. 2003; Selfa & Qazi, 2005; Ostrom & Jussaume, 2007). On the farm as well, instances of the exploitation of migrant workers (Allen et al., 2003; Alkon, 2013) and interns (Ekers et al., 2016) have also undermined this headline claim that positive novel relationships are also occurring internally in AFNs, between the producers of AFN themselves. AFNs are, however, operating within a system dominated by conventional food networks, suggesting that these empirical findings are not to be unexpected. Yet these contradictory attributes have prompted some to play down the transformative and radical potential of AFNs.

To date, much of the literature on Chinese AFNs seems to confirm this tension, with much empirical research arguing that Chinese consumers are only concerned with procuring safe food (for the family), for cultivating healthier, slimmer and more beautiful bodies(Legget, 2017: 8), or as a display of 'quality' / 'class' (*suzhi*) (Klein, 201 5). The notion of participating in AFNs for social or ecological reasons in Chinese AFNs is largely absent (Klein, 2014; Scott et al., 2014; Legget, 2017). In other words, the novelty of Chinese AFNs appears to lie only with the buying of ecologically – and therefore safe - grown produce in a hazardous food system, and that the direct exchange occurring is without the embeddedness that tends to be automatically assumed and associated with Western AFNs. Si et al. (2015), for example, observe that there is often a large disconnect in values between the producers i.e. managers of the Chinese AFNs - who subscribe more to the embedded social and ecological values engendered by AFNs – and their AFN members. Indeed, Chinese AFNs, from my own fieldwork observations, tend to stress the 'negative' characteristics of this tension: firstly, they are likely to be absent of personalised relationships due to the majority of ecological farms operating through online trading platforms (without buyers meeting directly with consumers); secondly, they are more predisposed to being market-orientated, focusing specifically on the affluent classes which are able to pay higher food premiums due to the low costs of conventional food in China; and thirdly, the likelihood of farm worker exploitation is increased due to the surpluses of labour in China, China's distinct rural-urban divide and the general lack of empathy in China for low-paid migrant workers.

What this tension highlights, as recent Western recent AFN research has noted, is the assumption 'that consumers join an AFN to learn more about food production, interact face-to-face with producers and avoid the anonymous conventional production system' is erroneous (Thorsøe & Kjeldsen, 2016: 171). Instead 'interactions with producers are not always common [in AFNs] and the reasons for joining an AFN are multiple' (ibid 171). In other words, trust is not an assumed result of direct interaction, but 'trust in the direct exchange may be as much a predisposition as an outcome; as much an absence of distrust as it is the creation of trust' (Mount, 2012: 114). For example, participation in AFNs, as with supermarket consumption, already assumes a level of trust (or distrust) and that transactions could both increase and decrease trust. That trust is not a guarantee of AFN

participation does not negate the potential for AFNs to have a wider transformative effect on the food system, but rather highlights that the transformative potential of AFNs is not dependent on having personalised 'novel' and trusting relationships between consumers and producers. As argued by Albrecht & Smithers, (2017: 80), whilst 'reconnection' and 'trust' is an important part of food system change, which encourages 'education and knowledge sharing, as well as for bringing awareness and diverse partnerships and actors together to address distribution and infrastructure challenges', other aspects are perhaps more salient. Recognising the variety of different values involved in AFN participation and how AFNs enable the 'fluidity' of the renegotiation occurring between producers and consumers for example, is arguably the most crucial aspect (ibid). This 'fluidity' is especially emphasised in Chinese AFNs due to China's climate of 'trust pressure' which forces Chinese AFNs to emphasise flexibly and adaptability over 'reconnection' regarding their consumer relationships.

The Chinese Trust Pressure

The apparent absence of 'novel' reconnections in Chinese AFNs is largely a function of the 'trust pressure' that is present in contemporary China. The context for trust, or its salient lack thereof, in Chinese society results from a combination of factors. China's Confucian legacy, in conjunction with the effects of the Cultural Revolution, has meant China has always had a general distrust of strangers. However, China's recent experience of rapid industrialising and modernising over the last forty years (compressed modernity), and its embracing of neoliberalism and 'bottom line' economics has created a general ambiance of mistrust in Chinese society. Indeed, many Chinese have begun to lament how 'money, interest and selfishness are replacing mutual respect and filial piety which used to function as the morals binding Chinese society together' (Zhuang, 2015: 145). As Chinese activist Dai Qing once remarked, in the wake of a traffic incident which saw Chinese drivers continually drive past a fatally injured pedestrian, 'all the traditional values of Chinese society were thrown out of the window to make way for Mao and the rest of the party leadership. But that [Maoism] died long ago, and there was nothing to replace it except materialist hunger' (in Shapiro, 2012: 91).

There is of course, more nuance to this explanation of 'trust pressure' then a simple replacement of Maoism with materialism. Quantitative research exploring levels of interpersonal trust in China, for example, revealed that 'trust' in China is remarkably high in China in comparison to other countries (Tang, 2016). Importantly however, there are different forms of trust that need to be distinguished. For example, there is trust at the civil level i.e. the trust persons have towards urbanites, businesspersons and strangers, which when compared with trust at the parochial level (family and relatives) and the communal level (neighbours, schoolmates, fellow homeowners), the 'trust' is significantly lower (Tang, 2016: 65-66). Indeed, it is perhaps telling, in the context of Chinese AFNs, that the principal tool for marketing is through word of mouth (Si et al., 2015), with many members inviting other relatives or close friends to the scheme once they have verified its 'trustworthiness'. This aspect of word-of-mouth marketing also stood out in my own fieldwork. For example, in a social media exchange between 'Four Season Share' and one of their members, the member gave them advice on how to effectively advertise towards his friends and offered to give the farm his friend's addresses so Four Season Share could send them taster packages of produce (see Appendix 1).

In addition to this context of 'compressed modernity', the Chinese trust pressure is also a consequence of China's urban-rural divide, a division that has been described as an apartheid-like system. This marked societal division between rural and urban populations has its roots with Mao's policies of radical socialism which established a defined and legalised division between the rural 'peasants' and their urban counterparts. The 1958 *Hukou* (Household Registration) system for example introduced legal restrictions on rural-to-urban migration based on individual status in which persons were designated as either being 'agricultural' or 'non-agricultural'. In practise such a system restricts migrants of rural backgrounds from acquiring property and state services in urban areas and has allowed the government (in the reform era) to direct migration - often termed 'floating population' (*liudong renkou)* - to certain urban areas and designated 'Special Economic Zones' with the granting of temporary residential permits. This divide between the rural and urban populations in China has become so distinct in terms of income and development in recent years that it has emerged as a frequent topic of critique in China's political and media

discourse - the recent party conference in November 2017 for example reiterated the importance of this issue again (Xinhua, 2017).

This general urban-bias of CCP policy making has meant that discontent in rural China is a commonplace, with rural protests frequent in Central and Western China (Hale, 2013; Yeh et al., 2013). The increasing social tensions in rural China largely stem from the issue of urbanisation, in which peasants are becoming enclosed in an increasingly marketised and consumer-based society without ever being fully accommodated by it (He, 2007; Day, 2013). Although 'peasants' are being exposed to consumer society, and having their aspirations raised, their limited income is preventing them from fully taking part in this new consumer society. The culmination of this bias has reduced – in the eyes of the Chinese state - the heterogeneous rural lives of Chinese 'peasants' 'to a monotone level of low development', to the point where urban citizens think of Chinese peasants as being 'primitive', 'uncivilised' and having 'no culture' (Lai, 2014: 546). NRRM proponent He Xuefeng (2007: 35) thus concludes: 'in sum what vexes them [peasants] is not purely material, but spiritual and social. The current problem that peasants face is not purely economical, but cultural; not purely about the mode of production but their way of life in order to give them meaning'. This particular condition of the rural countryside has meant that alienation towards their urban counterparts has emerged. In the context of food, this alienation between rural and urban populations has manifested in acts of carelessness regarding the food preparation that happens in the countryside involving food that is intended for consumption in the city. Indeed, examples of deliberate food adulteration and the poisoning of urban produce has been found to occur in rural china. (Yan, 2015).

The effect of China's trust pressure has meant that Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes in China have had to adapt the classic North American CSA example. In the US, CSA farms are typically characterised by a sharing of risk between the farmers and their members. The members invest an upfront cost for a season-long subscription for a regularly delivered vegetable box, with an acceptance that the quantity and quality of the produce will vary over the course of a season depending on how well the crops grow. In China, CSAs have had to alter the payment structure - to a more pay-as-you-go format - in order to reduce the risk carried by the 'more cynical' consumer. For some, this negates the entire point of the CSA farm. However, it does open up to the (Western)

researcher the interesting dynamics of trust and 'reconnection' that is occurring in Chinese AFNs in comparison to the West.

China's past food systems, for example, already challenges certain assumptions regarding 'alternative' food provisioning networks. During the socialist period in China, pre-opening up, policy at the time encouraged provinces and cities to be self-sufficient with food (i.e. not relying on imports from other provinces). Thus, food production cycles were integrated with the seasons and the surrounding countryside and, yet, the producer-consumer relationship was still separated as the state mediated the exchange through distribution centres in the city (Klein, 2014). In other words, China's previous 'socialist' food system was clearly 'alternative' in comparison to the contemporary mainstream food system and yet, had evolved without embodying novel and trust-based relationships between producers and consumers.

Furthermore, a reduced producer-consumer reconnection in food systems is not necessarily a detrimental aspect. In Galt's (2013) assessment of CSA projects in California for example, he argues that the focus of developing novel and trusting relationships between members and farmers can lead to farmers 'self-exploiting'. Due to the strong bonds of trust between consumer and producer in certain CSA farms, Galt argues farmers develop a strong sense of obligation to their members to the point that they under value their work in order to maintain perceived consumer expectations. This is an interesting contradiction: 'Self-exploitation in CSA appears to be occurring, despite the social embeddedness of CSA as exchange relationships' (Galt, 2013: 13). Hayden & Buck (2012: 339), from the consumer perspective, also found that an intimate relationship between consumer and farmer in CSA's could diminish other aspects of interconnection (i.e. with the environment, with the ethical aspects of participation and the general enjoyment of being involved with an AFN). Thus, the 'trust pressure' in China could also be considered beneficial for putting a healthy distance between producers and consumers that ensures the producers livelihood and allows consumers to engage with other aspects of AFNs beyond the relationship with the farmer.

Trust and AFNs in China

It is important to distinguish between two types of trust: 'institutionalised' and 'personalised' (Giddens, 1990), before exploring how the trust pressure is navigated in Chinese AFNs. Institutionalised trust refers to an implicit trust in systems, a necessity in a complex and modernised society, as a trust in persons alone would become too convoluted and incapacitating for a large complex society to function adequately. A reliance on trust in systems is therefore necessary, as modern food networks often have commodity chains which are potentially global in length and have numerous bodies and persons which act upon food between production and consumption. Mainstream food systems therefore require institutionalised trust in order to facilitate the consumers' confidence, which is placed in the formal institutions whose role it is to ensure food quality in conventional retail outlets e.g. supermarkets, wet markets, convenience stores, and restaurants. However, China's period of rapid modernization has meant that consumers have simultaneously become more dependent on forms of institutionalised trust, whilst formal institutions are also becoming increasingly fragmented, uncoordinated and over-stretched.[37]

This tension between an increasing dependence on institutionalised trust, whilst institutions are becoming fragmented and uncoordinated, is especially manifest with ecological produce with its labelling and branding. In China, there is an increasing level of consumer distrust of labels, with reports of 'organic' or 'ecological' food being sold falsely (Veeck et al., 2010); one high-profile scandal involved a Wal-Mart in Chongqing and their supposedly organic pork produce (Tang, 2011). The tendency towards fraudulent labelling is partly due to the system of organic certification that is run by third parties. In practice this has meant that organic certification in China can be paid for without the necessary checks; farms are told in advance of audits; and oversight of certification is uneven (Winglee, 2016; see also Thiers 2002). Consequently, consumers are tending to perceive private food labels as being either counterfeit, or the result of bribery with dubious third-party organisations, as opposed to an assurance of food quality and safety (Sun & Collins, 2013; Liu et al., 2013).

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[37] The Chinese institutions in charge of food safety have had much criticism for having inefficient & contradictory regulations, a lack of third party oversight, loopholes, limited coordination, and uncertainty regarding their own jurisdiction (see Wang et al., 2015).

In response to failing levels of institutional trust, the Chinese government has attempted to restore consumer confidence by increasing consumer knowledge through government-endorsed and multi-tiered organic labelling schemes (Scott et al., 2014), and also by publicising revisions made to the 2009 Food Safety Law – which made public the misbehaviour of individuals and organisations (Zhang et al., 2016: 278). Attempting to reduce the 'knowledge deficit' of consumers with these measures has not been successful, despite providing 'extra information' to the consumer. For example, China's multi-tiered organic labelling scheme with its various tiers of 'hazard free', 'ecological' and 'organic' has for example left many consumers confused and / or dismissive of these labels (Zhang et al., 2016: 276). Undermining trust too, is the uncertainty consumers have regarding the extent of transparency that the government and corporations are actually allowing concerning food safety information (Wang et al., 2015). Wang et al. (2015) have also argued that this lack of government successes in availing food safety concerns due to the barrage from media coverage and social media on food safety issues (often negative towards the systems of institutional trust), which is beginning to frame consumers perceptions towards food and labels negatively. The emergence of AFNs in China in recent years is partly therefore, a reflection of this mistrust consumers have in the institutions that safeguard the standards behind the label - especially in the wake of food scandals. Consumers are now looking to develop forms of personal trust with producers in order to alleviate their concerns.

The personalised trust possible with AFNs results from the process of direct exchange between producers and consumers i.e. a process which requires face-to-face and proximate networks to function. While this personalised aspect of trust is not to unique to AFNs (for example, tenders in open-air markets meet the same consumer regularly) they are generally uncommon in a food system dominated by agri-industry. Crucially, as noted by Wang et al. (2015), personalised forms of trust have two different forms:

1) **Direct reciprocity**, where producers have direct personal interactions with consumers. In China, this personal exchange is often aimed at producers reassuring the consumer that their produce is of good farm quality and that the producer is not focused on short-term profits – for example, venders, online or at farmers markets, typically invite consumers to visit their farm in order to develop direct reciprocity.

2) **Indirect reciprocity**, when consumers use the trust or relationships formed by a third party to inform their decision to participate in AFNs. The key aspects here are information and the 'reputation' of the AFNs, which becomes third-hand knowledge via word of mouth and social networks – largely facilitated by social media. In China, indirect reciprocity is a pertinent factor as Chinese society is structured along informal 'personal networks' (*guangxi*) of which 'quality' or 'reputation' (*suzhi*) plays a huge part, and influences consumer behaviour accordingly. For example, both positive and negative information is disseminated along these networks, potentially pushing consumers away from 'untrustworthy' vendors and pushing producers to cultivate indirect forms of reciprocity in order to create a robust, wide-ranging and long-lasting consumer base.

This division between direct and indirect reciprocity is crucial as it begins to unpack the headline claim of AFNs that trust and novel relationships are an outcome of direct exchange. For example, the notion of indirect reciprocity complicates how trust operates in AFNs and highlights specifically that: 'AFNs do not exist in isolation but are based on existing social structures and members of AFNs are related to the food system in numerous ways as media users, as citizens, via friends and family, which are also important and influence their trust towards AFNs' (Thorsøe & Kjeldsen, 2016: 160). It is this recognition that there are two forms of reciprocity, direct and indirect, that points towards the complexity involved in how people relate to the food system and emphasises that trust is less an outcome than a requirement for AFN engagement.

Importantly, institutional forms of trust are not exclusive to conventional forms of food provisioning and, likewise, personal forms of trust are not exclusive to alternative food networks. In the same way that AFNs and conventional food networks are not binary opposites, with both forms displaying wide variety of forms and indeed, overlapping (Holloway et al., 2007), the same can be said of the forms of trust involved in these networks. For example, conventional wet-markets in China utilise personalised forms of trust - with consumers often using the same vendors - and similarly AFNs, especially those of considerable size, require versions of institutionalised systems of trust to operate. Wang et al. (2015: 6), for example, highlight how Beijing's farmer market utilises forms of

'organizational trust' that is based on behaviours of altruism and a 'participatory guarantee system'.[38] The role of institutional forms of trust in AFNs should not be underestimated; indeed, AFNs which involve over one hundred members would have to utilise some forms of 'institutional' or 'organizational' trust due to the impossibility of maintaining 'deep' personalised relationships with all the AFN members. The critical difference, then, between AFNs and the mainstream food system regarding institutional levels of trust, becomes the potential *capacity* for a more personalised form of trust between member and farm to develop in AFNs, should the consumer or producer require it.

For Chinese AFNs - due to poor consumer confidence in food labelling and the unpractical realties of maintaining 'deep' levels of personalised trust with all members and consumers - the process of developing trust has depended on creating reputable brands (Little, 2014; Liu et al., 2013). For example, Chinese AFNs commonly use CSA in their branding practices (and other similar ecological enterprises) as a 'marketing buzzword' and yet ecological principles or producer-consumer risk sharing can be entirely absent (Si et al., 2014: 7).[39] This focus on branding, as a means to create reputable products, also requires organic enterprises to become large scale – often up to and over 300 acres (Little, 2014). Thus, the 'entrepreneur-activists' who have successfully expanded and created their ecological-agricultural enterprises tend to be aiming to create 'the Whole Foods of China' (Little, 2014), as opposed to developing a 'transformative' food politics as envisioned by Western AFN proponents. Smaller-scale AFNs - with a perhaps more transformative agenda - by contrast, often suffer for this, lacking the economies of scale to achieve brand confidence. One new farmer I interviewed, who manages a large scale ecological farm, told me his advice to aspiring 'new farmers' was not to become distracted by notions of 'ideals' as it would inhibit the potential of small AFNs to reach the size necessary to inspire consumer confidence ('new farmer', 2017, #20).

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[38] The Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) is a peer review scheme whereby farmers and vendors visit each other farms to ensure organic methods are being employed, and to give advice on how they can be improved further. PGS is a scheme commonly adopted by small-scale farmers who cannot afford official organic certification.

[39] In Chinese CSA's community is often translated as *shequ* which refers to a urban residential neighbourhood – which may have few households signing up for the same box delivery scheme – not a reference to a community of farmers and city people (Klein 2014: 138).

This struggle to establish a brand is common issue for all small-scale AFNs and lies partly with China's condition of 'compressed modernity'. Issues like food safety, for example, under 'compressed modernity', are not associated with or linked to the process of rapid industrialisation and scientific advancement that China has recently experienced. So, while these rapid processes of modernisation may have unknowable (health) consequences, that modernisation is still highly, and often uncritically, valorised in China, the recent industrialisation of the food system is not often associated with food safety issues. In practice, the issue of food safety in China has tended towards a doubling down on trusting the famous 'modern appearing' brands, which only large, and seemingly reputable, companies can establish – which, in turn, often leads to an increased distrust of smaller-scale farms (Veeck et al. 2008).[40]

This point concerning brands and appearing modern became especially apparent during my fieldwork regarding a story I heard about two differently sized AFNs that had encountered the same problem with different responses. Both these two AFN-type enterprises had ordered cherries from the same producer in order to supplement their box scheme. Both AFNs were then accused of selling cherries with pesticides based on a 'funny' smell coming from the cherries. The larger more established branded farm could weather and control the criticism and outrage that occurred on their social media platform, whilst the smaller AFN had to invest in expensive equipment to prove the quality of their cherries in order to maintain and reassure their member base. The cherries were proved to be organic and the smell attributed to the plastic containers of the cherries which had started smelling due to exposure in the sun. This example of 'cherrygate' inverts Western expectations that would generally expect members to show solidarity with the smaller-scale, more personable AFN.[41] Yan (2015: 281-282) argues that this focus on blaming individuals, manufacturers and government regulatory bodies in China, as opposed to modern 'branded' companies, lies with the 'Holy Grail' status given to modernisation. In contrast, modernisation in the West was never actively pursued, it 'gradually arrived even before people found a name to call it' (ibid).

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[40] Although this perception may have shifted since to some degree due to the 2008 melamine milk scandal (the largest of its kind in China) which involved a highly reputable company (see Yan, 2015).
[41] Many thanks to fellow researcher Abigail Boc of Yale University for sharing with me her 'Cherrygate' story (2015).

In sum, the constitution of trust in AFNs is especially illuminating in a Chinese context (see Wang et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2016) largely due to the intense form of trust pressure that Chinese AFNs have to operate under. The key insights regarding trust in AFNs can be summed up in four points:

- Direct exchange between producers and consumers in AFNs only has the *potential* to encourage a more novel and trusting relationship (Mount, 2012).

- Personalised and institutionalised forms of trust are neither positive or negative, nor are they mutually exclusive within food networks - i.e. AFNs and conventional food networks may utilise both personalised and institutionalised forms of trust (Wang et al., 2015).

- 'Indirect reciprocity' is an often neglected aspect of understanding how AFNs operate but highlights the myriad of ways people can relate to the food system (ibid).

- Although institutional forms of trust in China regarding food safety has been 'shaken' somewhat, this has not resulted in a mistrust of modernisation. Instead, it has fostered a mistrust of smaller ('unmodern') organisations, which are seen as lacking the capacity or willingness to maintain organic or ecological standards.

In culmination, these four points infer that trust must not be seen as the defining aspect of the producer-consumer relationship, but rather as a prerequisite for the relationship to form. In other words: 'for the analysis of AFNs…trust should not be perceived as the objective of AFNs, but rather it should be perceived as a mechanism which enables the network to function and analysis of AFN should focus on qualifying how the networks function' (Thorsøe & Kjeldsen (2016: 171). I suggest in the following section that for trust to function and enable the operation of AFNs the materiality of food plays a key role.

The Materiality of Food

The notion of a food 'materiality' links food with the themes of embodiment and sensuality, suggesting food itself can produce effects. A focus on the materiality of food is therefore an emphasis on the taste, freshness, gustatory pleasure and nostalgia that food can induce (Turner, 2014). These material qualities, which are multi-sensory and aesthetic, affects our attitudes and behaviour towards food accordingly. This materiality of food is also

emphasised by Roe (2006: 118), who argues that food only becomes food after passing through these connecting embodied and material practices. She highlights that 'the plants and animals that become our food are tested through our powers of smell, touch, taste and sight and it is only after passing these tests does the food, through digestion, become integrated into our bodies.'

These material aspects of food have generally been under-emphasised in AFN research, in comparison to themes of ecology, health or local economy, despite the importance of taste as a consumer motivation (Turner, 2014). In her empirical work with AFNs in Australia however, Turner (2014) has argued that it is the material qualities of the food that is produced by AFNs that provides the core basis for the 'alternativeness' of AFNs (see also Turner & Hope, 2015). Indeed, for Turner, it is the materiality of food that the human centred relations - which are currently predicated on exchange of capital - can be altered and adjusted.

Picture 4. Fresh produce at the farmers market.

In my fieldwork, these material qualities emerged as a predominate theme and appeared to be central to the trust and the 'novel' relationships formed between consumers and producers. In other words, this emphasis on food and its qualities paves the way for its revaluing, as people respond to the material qualities of food in various ways: by

experimenting with recipes; recognising the seasonality of food; and through displays of

abundance and banqueting (Turner 2014). The WeChat transcripts between members and their AFN, for example, commonly refer to the excitement of trying new foods, discovering potential recipes and developing food storage/preparation strategies (see Appendix 3). These conversations, and the ideas they generate, tend to stress and accentuate the material qualities of food. In some cases, the entire producer-consumer relationship was wholly dependent on the perceived material qualities of the food:

Member: Do you really use organic fertilizers?
FSS (Four Season Share): Of course! I suppose you haven't been to our farm yet?
Member: No, I haven't.
FSS: Come for visit when you have time and you will trust us after your visit
Member: Its ok. I will know it when I taste it.
(WeChat Transcript Extract, 2016)

This significance of the 'material' qualities of food as proof of authenticity was also apparent at the Farmers Market, which often had a lunch break allowing buyers to try the free the food on sale. During the lunch-break, the qualities of the food are put on a display on a large dining table displaying an aesthetic of exuberance and bounteousness. As highlighted in my research diary:

It was the time everyone had been waiting for. Over the past fifteen minutes people had been finding excuses to walk over past the lunch table to check if the venders were ready with the buffet. Now, it was just after 12, the pretence of just walking past was over, people had begun to crowd around the table - two people thick in most places - with disposable plates and chopsticks in hand. However, everyone refrained from attacking the food just yet, it was photo time. Despite the limited attention to the presentation of the food from the venders, it was still worthy of photographing –it was organic after all. When the children lost patience and begun grabbing, the carnage began between vendor and customers alike. The sound of eating was eclipsed only by the talking and the laughing – it seemed like everyone knew each other and was having fun. (Research Diary 23/10/2016)

My experience of the tasting activity highlights how the perceived material qualities of the food is what shapes the behaviour of the participants and the outcome of the relationship between buyers and sellers.

Picture 5. Banquet at *ChengXiangHui.*

Material qualities, however, are not always positively perceived by customers. In the case of the food having 'unusual' qualities, the farm would pre-empt this potentially off-putting characteristic in order to assuage their members concerns. In one example regarding strawberries, a fruit that has been frequently implicated in food scandals, the farm pre-empts its surprising taste:

FSS: Sure. We will deliver every Thursday. The strawberries we have this year are a bit sour, does your kid like it? Has he tried them yet?

Member: Yes! As long as it has no pesticides.

(WeChat Transcript Extract, 2016)

However, the farm is not always successful in this management of consumer expectations regarding the material qualities of food. In this next example, the member unsubscribed from the farm after due to a negative perception of the food's material qualities:

Member: It's so difficult to wash the Hangzhou cabbages. There are many black spots left even though I washed them 6 times.

FSS: I will check today, it's probably aphids.

Member: Yes, there are some black bugs. The cabbages taste good, but they're too dirty.

FSS: *That's aphid. We have many aphids in the field now, we tried using pepper spray to get rid of them but it's not very effective. It would be easier to wash it with vinegar.*

Member: *We used vegetable wash powder, there are many bug bite holes on the leaves.*

Member: *[pic of damaged vegetable]*

 (WeChat Transcript, 2016; see Appendix 2)

In this exchange, the subsequent un-subscription was a result of the food's material qualities, which did not fulfil consumer expectations. Material qualities can therefore also cause a reduction of trust and a broken producer consumer relationship, suggesting that this trust, when based on material qualities, is somewhat precarious. Indeed, whilst taste and other material qualities are core to the functioning of AFNs, 'taste' alone does not drive AFN participation. Blind taste tests, for example, have shown how difficult it is for consumers to discern between organic and conventional produce. Often taste and associated material qualities have to be co-constructed with other elements if they are to alter the daily habits, behaviours and ideals of consumers (and producers) in ways that challenge the conventional food system.

The particular food safety and trust pressure context in China has often meant that Chinese AFNs have to 'construct' the material qualities of their food alongside other strategies in order to negotiate consumer anxieties adequately. For example, Chinese AFNs are especially focused on highlighting that their farming techniques are free of pesticides and chemical fertilisers. At 'Four Season Share' they stress the technical innovations they use that allow them to farm without utilising chemical inputs - frequently sharing on social media or highlighting these innovations on weekend farm tours. For example, they display to vising members the inventive biological traps they use instead of pesticides (e.g. 'bug stickers'), their large 'hoop houses' (which act as greenhouses that allow the farm to produce out of season food) and the variety organic fertiliser techniques they utilise. The CCTV cameras dotted around the farm are also noticeable on the farm tours, which allow the members access to a livestream of farming practices when they are at home. This presence of CCTV, whilst a reminder of China's 'trust pressure', also serves to reassure members of the material qualities they can expect when produce is grown without chemical inputs. In other words, these tactics, which give transparent evidence of the ecological

methods used, form trust by reinforcing the expectations of consumers concerning the material qualities of food.

Picture 6. Bug Stickers, which are used for pesticide control at Four Season Share.

Managing the consumer expectations of the material qualities using these additional strategies is crucial because, as mentioned before, material qualities are not necessarily received as positive, hence the sometime necessary display of technical innovations to verify the authenticity of the ecological or organic material qualities. As with the 'cherrygate' story mentioned previously, it was the smell of the cherries which led to suspicion and forced one AFN to buy the necessary equipment to verify the authenticity of the produce. In other words, it is not just the produce's material qualities articulating its 'constructedness', it is further accompanied with other means – i.e. social media, technical innovations, online newsletters etc. – creating a complex articulation of its framing.

Novel relationships between consumers and producers that centred on the material qualities of food emphasise that the 'alternativeness' of AFNs, or their transformative potential, lies in its reframing of food as a commodity – not as a result of a potential trusting relationship developing between consumers and producers. Turner & Hope (2015: 160) reach a similar conclusion after focusing on the role of material qualities in their study of Australian based Farmers Market: 'food in this [AFN] context is not simply a commodity for exchange—instead, there seems to be an openness to its material qualities and a desire

to better understand the human and non-human inputs that lead to the great-tasting produce. In this way, this form of exchange facilitates a revaluing of the product that extends beyond its 'commodity value'. This reframing of food away from its commodity value is important as it fosters a taste for difference and curiosity rather than standardisation, the benchmark of the conventional food system.

In China, the dominance of wet markets for food procurement has perhaps already pre-empted consumer expectation towards 'difference' as opposed to 'standardisation'. In wet markets, at least to some degree, food presentation seems to be focused more on abundance as opposed to appearance, perhaps easing the pressure on Chinese AFNs to produce perfectly looking food. This influence by wet markets on shaping the appearance of produce - and other material qualities – will likely become more salient as AFNs are able to develop, increase economies of scale, and market to those less wealthy. Currently, the clientele of AFNs are those with higher incomes, who do tend to shop in supermarkets and thus expect standardisation in regards to appearance.

Picture 7. Presenting Produce 'abundantly' at a Chinese Wet Market

In mainstream food networks, consumers trust in produce because it is the 'same' every time. However, as organically produced foodstuffs are often quite variable in regards to taste and appearance, trust in AFNs depends on managing the consumers' expectation of the sometimes 'unusual' material qualities of food. As put by Krzywoszynska in regards to an AFN in France selling 'organic' wine (2015: 500): 'a market structured around an open taste,

a taste for uncertainty, depends on the cultivation of consumers who choose ecologically embedded products not *in spite* of their variability, but *because* of it (emphasis in original)'. Thus, food in AFNs is not simply being re-fetishised to maximise sales of organic or safe produce - a problematic contention if the goal of AFNs is to overturn and overcome commodity fetishism (i.e. the mainstream food system) - but is, through its material mediating qualities, developing in parallel with consumer-producer relationships. In other words, consumer interest in food is coproduced (i.e. increasing the consumers awareness of the labour processes and seasonality involved in food production etc.) alongside trust. Simply put, the trust relationships formed in AFNs are impossible absent 'good food', and so too vice-versa.

This process of refetishisation via food's material qualities underlines a crucial process if AFNs are to impact and challenge the mainstream food system. Conventionally, scholars of AFNs argue for farms to defetishise their products in order to differentiate from the mainstream food system and to encourage transparency in regards to the production process. However, arguments have been made that the process of defetishisation is, in practice, a new form of commodity fetish that is only 'mask[ing] the harms of capitalism by convincing society that the harms of capitalism can be rehabilitated with the commodity form itself' (Gunderson, 2013: 109). Furthermore, scholars have noted that refetishisation can be a desirable goal if the purpose of AFNs is to move organic food into the mainstream, as a means to increase awareness concerning biodiversity or consumer health etc. (Clarke et al., 2007: 227). In other words, if the refetishisation process is coupled to the producer-consumer relationship, and by extension the material qualities of food, refetishisation can be essentially desirable as a process that subverts the typical notion of commodity fetish - without being forced into the problematic position that is advocating defetishisation.

The celebration or management of food's material qualities is therefore key for AFNs if they are to subvert commodity fetishism, hence why social media technologies have become so important to AFNs worldwide. Whilst social media is necessary for AFNs to increase their visibility and facilitate another 'space' for participatory engagement that go beyond physical direct exchange (Bos & Owen 2016; Press & Arnould, 2011), most importantly they celebrate the unusual material qualities of organic produce. This latter point is crucial as it generates trust (that couples consumer interest and awareness with the

commodity), which in China becomes especially necessary due to its 'trust pressure'. In Zhang & Zhang's (2012) research on the 'Little Donkey' farm - China's first CSA initiative - they highlighted the importance of micro blogging in establishing a more personal form of communication. Since micro blogging is 'convenient', 'instant', 'accessible' and 'embedded' in a form of social networking (ibid), it facilitates a viable and immediate platform to foster the necessary (i.e. 'trusting') producer-consumer interaction for AFN projects to work – a crucial factor when considering the distances sometimes involved between consumer and producer.

The majority of AFNs I visited in China depended on the use of the social media app 'WeChat', which was used to maintain an almost 24/7 contact with their members. At Four Season Share there is an office of approximately nine staff tasked with maintaining this online relationship with their members. Through this medium, practical information is often communicated to the consumer: concerning what produce is available; the time by which orders need to be made; information on how to use website; and possible recipes. However, its key role is to facilitate continuous direct exchange with the member, usually regarding the 'material' qualities of food (and the farm) that may have been recently received (or experienced) by the member. Producers can assuage consumer fears over the unexpected 'qualities' of the food produce, often with pictures, to explain why produce is 'sub-standard' that week, can be done conveniently and instantly via social media (see appendix 1, 2 & 3). This process is crucial for the mediation of the Chinese trust pressure. Likewise, social media also facilitates the positive and trust-reinforcing aspects created by the material qualities of food, often via exchange of ideas and recipes (appendix 1, 2 & 3). This can develop deeper relationships between the farm and its members or create pathways for members to increase their participation with AFNs, in a transformative direction (Bos & Owen 2016).

The Materiality of Ecological Civilization

The materiality of food, through its various forms, is motivating the participation in AFNs based on mundane reasons (i.e. taste) whilst simultaneously, involving abstract projections and imaginaries (e.g. nostalgia). This traversing of scale by material qualities is crucial for the operations of AFNs and Ecological Civilization. Both imply a sense of

'grandness' in their designs - AFNs through their 'alternativeness' and Ecological Civilization in its sense of scale – and yet both projects are also ruthlessly tied to brute realities of everyday life. As argued by Su and Haynes (2018: 15), organic food promoters in China must recognize:

 'that there is no significant alternative, healthy, ethical, environmental lifestyle difference for organic food marketers to tap into but rather what characterizes organic food consumers is an additional emphasis on family, tradition, freshness, cooking skill and focus on established food rituals'.

Similarly, Ecological Civilization will lack any sense of substance beyond its use as a party slogan unless it able to animate and coalesce the collective and individual projects of the Chinese people into tangible outcomes. In other words, Ecological Civilization will not reflect a Confucian understanding of civility in which a Confucian ruler governs purely by setting a moral example, having his virtue radiate down to the people. As argued by Campbell, in regard to tackling corruption, (2015: 5):

"…while Xi Jinping pays lip service to Confucian values, he knows full well that they are too soft and volitional to effect the fundamental changes he is seeking to achieve, and that rooting out the cancer of <u>corruption</u> requires harsh prescriptive measures, not soft moralizing speeches and exhortations."

Corruption could be changed here to 'pollution' and would suggest that appealing to volitional will alone is not enough to create meaningful 'ecological' change. Ecological Civilization therefore has to evolve through already established lifestyle practices as opposed to expecting a population (and one the size of China's) to undergo a sudden shift into an alternative and 'ecologically minded' lifestyle.

However, in contrast to authoritarian 'harsh prescriptive measures', material qualities may work as a more effective mediator between the ordinary mundanities, like a concern for family health, traditional food practices, the weather, and the grander blueprints of food system transformation or a larger 'ecological awakening'. Participants of AFNs for example, relate directly to the material qualities of food as it resonates directly with the more mundane ethics of family health and lifestyle choices:

"When my child got critically sick from eating unsafe food, that was it, we knew we had to do things differently, so we went to …back to nature, to grow our own tasty food" (Farmers Market Vendor, 2016)

There were two reasons for me to get to the organic food. The first one is because of some friends, who open the organic nature house, I mentioned before. I often went to her place. The house has many kinds of products and I became interested in this organic product after smelling and tasting them. This was the first time I got to the organic world, and I have been using it since then. The other reason is the health issue of my family. Thinking it was good for my family's health, I started to use organic products (Farmers Market attendee, 2016, #2).

At the same time as resonating with ordinary motivations, informants also responded to material qualities of food for more abstract reasons, including nostalgia and 'human-nature' harmony:

The texture and taste is the same [at the Farmers market] as what we had in our childhood. I've been looking for that taste of childhood. You know, without pollution. (Farmers Market attendee, 2016, #7)

I grew up in very good natural environment and I was very lucky that I could have anything tasty from nature as I was born in the rural area. At that time, we could have good food, later I missed the [tasty rural] food but realized I could not find it in the city. So how can I find it back? [I started a CSA]. (New Farmer, Four Season Share, 2016, #1)

Actually, why we start the organic maybe not just for the taste, we also need to protect our environment. We need to build the harmony between the soil, and trust between the farmer and consumer. (New Farmer, Beautiful Garden Farm, 2016, #2)

This sentiment regarding food nostalgia and subsequent future imaginings was a common theme throughout my interviews, with many informants articulating a sense of nostalgia and abstract imaginings after outlining practical reasons for engaging with AFNs. That material qualities are able simultaneously to resonate with both mundane and abstract motivations links to Mark Swislocki's (2008) writings on the historical and cultural primacy of China's culinary tradition. He argues that food in China 'evokes images of the ideal society and, in its absence a model for either establishing one, or for understanding the sources of its want' (ibid: 4). In contemporary China, then, food absent of chemical pesticides and

fertilisers is at once a fond reminiscence of society past, and a perceived positive direction for the future.

The path towards Ecological Civilization will also likely become dependent on 'material' qualities - which will not just involve food but other entities like water and air - as there is no clear sense of what Ecological Civilization is, but rather a keener sense of what Ecological Civilization is not. In other words, imagining an Ecological Civilization will require an expectation of certain material qualities often without 'pollution', i.e. clean water, fresh air, tasty food etc. Arguably, it will be this dynamic between material qualities and various other assemblages (policy, media, technical innovations etc.) that will drive and mobilise actors to envision and enact Ecological Civilization.

Social media will likely be one critical assemblage as the immediacy it lends can highlight, justify, reassure and celebrate the material qualities as is necessary. Already social media is playing a crucial role with environmental activism in China (Geall, 2013; Riley et al., 2016; Brunner, 2017) and is informing the population of the quality of certain bodies of water and air– often by amateur scientists and civilians who are relying, in part, on material attributes like 'freshness' and 'cleanliness' to produce their results. In the same way that AFNs in China have had their development centred on WeChat, due to its immediacy in articulating concerns and reassurances regarding the material qualities of food, Ecological Civilization may also depend on similar social media-based innovations. This would help mediate the relationship between state and society, activists and government (whilst in a context of severe trust pressure) when realising a grand cultural project like Ecological Civilization.

Chapter 5

Chinese Alternative Food Networks and their Middle-Class Subjectivities:
A Pathway to Ecological Civilization?

Tension 2: What are the actual motivations, values and ethics of those involved in AFNs?

Introduction

The texture and taste [here] are the same as what we had in our childhood. I've been looking for that taste of childhood. You know, without pollution. (Farmers Market Customer, 2017, #16)

My main aim was to get money by starting an organic farm, but now I'm also just happy to work in nature. ('New Farmer', 2017, #4)

The motivations and values of AFN participants often express a variety of sentiments which are sometimes contradictory and are not necessarily 'moral' as deemed by lefty Western liberals. A commonality across most AFN participants, however, is a strong middle-class sentiment. The two opening quotes of this chapter, for example, suggest that AFN participants have the spare time and wealth to pursue 'nostalgia', start-up an ambitious business, reconnect with 'nature' and have awareness of food safety issues – and are necessarily propelled by the desire to create a sustainable and 'just' food system. These motivations and values complicate the positive 'headline' claim that associates AFN strategies with an emerging 'moral economy' of food (Jackson et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2006) or a 'collective subjectivity' (Levkoe, 2011) that goes beyond a middle-class fetish. This 'moral economy' or 'collective subjectivity' perspective of AFNs highlights how they are often building a fairer, healthier, more environmentally sustainable and democratic food system, characterised by transparency, trust and reciprocity. Furthermore, engagement in such a moral economy or collective subjectivity is also a move away from individualised 'ethical consumerism', or 'voting with your fork'; it recognises that consumer agency also lies within the realm of cultural and community relations. Thus, those who are involved and participating in an AFN supposedly 'exhibit values and motivations which are radically different from, or in opposition to those associated with mainstream food systems' i.e. maximising profit, environment degradation, social injustices and individualism (Tregear,

2011: 243). However, evidence suggests that participants of AFNs exhibit motivations, values and ethics which are also associated with both an instrumental subjectivity, that is orientated towards a market perspective, as well as a wider and more 'collective' and community engaged subjectivity.

Chinese AFNs appear to exaggerate this tension as they exhibit characteristics that appear even further removed from a notion of a 'moral economy' or 'collective subjectivities' due their rather instrumental formation in the wake of reoccurring food safety scandals (Si et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2014). However, to assume that the capitalism market economy is not also 'moral' is problematic. 'Capitalism' has, and depends upon a moral economy too – just not one that many (Western left-leaning scholars especially) deem 'moral' on their understanding of the substance of morality (see Graeber 2011). Exploring AFNs in a Chinese context, where this view equating a non-morality with capitalism is far less prevalent, aids a perspective that is seeking to develop a more deferred approach to AFN research.

Taking direction from Nick Clarke et al., (2008: 221), and Kate Soper (2004; 2007) this chapter seeks to highlight that AFNs are less about forging new subjectivities and more about developing practices that can mobilise a diverse range of motivations, incentives and desires into a larger form of collective action. It is from this perspective that the emerging subjectivities from Chinese AFNs are explored, and are shown to convey complex dispositions, which while arguably are instrumental, individual and reflect forms of neoliberalism, they also show a capacity for developing what might be considered progressive or 'alternative' attributes. In particular this chapter draws upon the concept of 'alternative hedonism' (Soper 2004; 2007), that allows both a consumerist self-interest position to exist alongside a wider concern for sustainability or society.

Due to the prominence of middle class participants in Chinese AFNs, the motivation, values and ethics involved in AFNs are inevitably tied to Chinese middle class subjectivities. Whilst the Chinese middle class is still novel in the context of China's historical class configuration, it is also the chief driving force for China in terms of culture, economics and social-techno innovation that is dictating China's general trajectory of development (Li, 2010; Tyfield et al., 2016; Tyfield, 2018) – and by extension Ecological Civilization. On the one

hand, the subjectivities of the Chinese middle class may not appear radical (to the Western gaze at least), due to its general preoccupation with modernity and neoliberal material-led development. On the other hand, the condition of compressed modernity (Chang, 2010) and its particular challenges – of which ecology and food safety are significant, is forcing this 'class' to adjust its aims, wants and desires accordingly. Thus, their subjectivities provide apt examples of alternative hedonism, which over the long-term, will reflect the type of societal changes - attitudes and perceptions - occurring in China.

In the context of Ecological Civilization, these emerging dispositions from AFNs actors are a reflection on how China is attempting the bridge this cosmological rift that is occurring between nature and society. Indeed, the middle class participation within AFNs is in some sense a response from anxiety that has its roots in a deepening awareness of this 'rift'; a rift which is becoming explicitly apparent with the increasingly visible and health threating consequences of environmental degradation, and its clear connection with modernisation (i.e. air pollution). China's project of Ecological Civilization, which is an attempt to acknowledge and negotiate this rift, will likely rely on these new forms of subjectivity emerging from China's middle class. While the subjectivities on display may not represent Western expectations of 'collectivism' or 'morality', they are perhaps a good place to understand how this 'rift' is maybe being confronted in China.

The chapter will first present an outline of Tregear's (2011) AFN 'impasse' or tension concerning the values and motivations of AFN participants, before applying its relevance to the Chinese example. The subjectivities emerging from Chinese AFNs are then explored in three parts. First, they are examined in relation to 'alternative hedonism' (Soper, 2007) that recognises the developing middle class taste for 'nature' and 'the alongside 'modernity'. Second, the 'pragmatic idealism' being exhibited by those who manage the AFNs - the 'new farmers' (*Xinnongmin*) – are explored. Third, the subjectivities displayed by consumers are explored with attention to how dispositions can develop gradually from an instrumental stance to a more community-orientated approach. To conclude, the chapter links these subjectivities to Ecological Civilization, arguing that they allow for the necessary friction that allows this tension concerning values to become productive. When scaled up, this friction reflects a possible potential for bridging this rift between human development and ecological limits.

Exploring the 2nd Tension

This tension concerning the motivation, value and ethical persuasions of AFN participants comes through with accounts of AFNs in Western literature that have both celebrated and critiqued the positive aspects of AFNs regarding the motivations of the participants. On the on hand, scholars have noted the positive links between AFNs and: community cohesion (Baker, 2004; Levoke, 2006); exchanges of culinary and agricultural knowledge (Saldivar-Tanaka & Krasny, 2004; Turner, 2011); and effective citizenship (Travaline & Hunold, 2010: 587). Large surveys involving CSA participants have also found nascent links between prolonged participation and an increasing awareness of food sources and agricultural issues (Allen et al. 2003; Ostrom & Jussaume, 2007) that also foster forms of co-production (Dobernig & Stagl, 2015). It is through this forging of social linkages that Lyson (2004: 2) argues AFNs not only 'meet consumer demands for fresh safe, and locally produced food, but create jobs, encourage entrepreneurship, and strengthen community identity' in the form of a 'civic agriculture'. Indeed, Saulters et al. (2018) write that participants of AFNs are also keenly motivated by notions of bringing a 'fairness' to the food system, which, they feel, is largely absent in the current conventional system. Going further, recent AFN literature has equated AFN involvement with the development of an ecological ethic towards non-human others (Turner & Hope, 2015; Hayden & Buck, 2012).

On the other hand, further studies have also cast doubt about the efficacy of the moral economy/ civic engagement argument from both the producer and consumer perspectives. These critiques are inevitable, to some degree, considering that AFNs are operating within a neoliberal-dominated economy (McClintock, 2014). On the producer side for example, studies have shown that the motivation of vendors (at Farmers Markets) to engage in alternative markets is predominantly to increase profit margins (Morris and Buller, 2003; Kirwan, 2006); and that only 25-30% of vendors sell exclusively through alternative channels (Brown & Miller, 2008). Ilbery and Maye (2005) similarly reveal how producers often use both conventional and alternative networks to source ingredients and sell produce - often a necessity to maintain economic viability (see also Renting et al., 2003). Furthermore, to automatically suppose that producers who engage in direct exchange to sell produce will also utilise organic /non-intensive production methods is a misnomer (Winter, 2003).

From the consumers perspective, AFN studies have also problematized the extent to which AFN 'members' embody motivations and values different to those associated with the neoliberal economy and its prevailing individualised consumer subjectivity. For example, in La Trobe (2001) and Bentley et al. (2003), studies on consumer participation in Farmers Markets suggest that it is more the access to reasonably priced, quality, and fresh food then notions of altruism that is dictating their behaviour. This concurs with a study by McEachern et al. (2010) that emphasised how consumers who regularly used Farmers Markets would often waive their loftier principles if they needed to save time and or money.

Additionally, participation in CSA farms - often seen as the most likely AFN initiative to instigate transformation (Guthman, 2004) - often involve those of a citizen activist persuasion and those who might be labelled as passive consumers (Cox et al., 2014; DeLind 1999). In Pole & Gray's (2013) survey of CSA members for example, they notice an almost complete absence of community-based values driving their participation. A recent study by Zoll et al. (2017) found that a diversity of motives and rationales exist concerning consumer participation in CSA's - ranging from self-oriented values up to and including values at the community and societal level - and that this variety of motives hampers AFNs from emerging as a force for societal change.

Underpinning these contradictions or tensions regarding the values of AFN participants is the issue that AFN participants are predominantly middle class. Indeed, food scholars have highlighted that those involved in AFNs tend to be only those with the time and wealth to pursue this form of food procurement, not those who have been marginalised from mainstream food systems (Holloway & Kneafsey, 2000; Guthman, 2003; Kirwan, 2006; Slocum, 2006; Jarosz, 2008). Therefore, the motivations, values and ethics involved in AFNs are originating almost solely from the middle class, which suggests that AFNs are not transforming the food system, only affecting change for the privileged few.

For proponents of AFNs, these critical findings are problematic, especially if AFNs are ultimately aimed at 'transforming' the conventional food system. The perverse tendency of neoliberalism to harness and constrain the free energy of non-capitalist and self-organising enterprises - enabling it to offset its own entropy and facilitate its continuation (Biel, 2012; 2016) - means that even if AFNs did not display neoliberal tendencies, they would still be

undermining their own transformative project. In this formulation, initiatives like AFNs 'fill the gap' as the Keynesisan welfare state is rolled back and often furthers the neoliberal disposition of self-help and entrepreneurialism (Guthman, 2003; Allen & Guthman, 2006; Guthman, 2008). Put another way, AFNs have been argued to act as middle-class safety valves, releasing the pressures built up by the internal contradictions of capitalism and then creating a façade of accomplishment for middle class progressives.

The Motivations and Values Driving Chinese AFNs

This middle-class critique appears to carry further weight in a Chinese context as AFNs are arguably more middle class dominated then their Western counterparts. Studies which have begun to profile AFN participants in China have highlighted how the 'new farmers' (the managers of AFNs) tend to be urban professionals, 70% of whom are under 40, have bachelor's degrees and a non-agricultural *hukou* (Yang, 2016). On the consumer side, those involved in AFN-type enterprises are firmly within middle income groups, with 50% of the members household monthly income being more than 15,000 RMB, and families whose income is more than 10, 000 RMB accounting for 21% of AFN participants (Yang, 2016; see also Shi et al., 2011).

Quantifying China's middle class however is a difficult undertaking. Far from a homogenous group, the middle class in China is still being defined, its range, multiplicity and its eventual trajectory as a social category unclear (Goodman, 2008; 2015; Therborn, 2012). This ambiguity is reflected in survey data that has between 44% and 85% of Chinese people self-identifying as middle class (Miao, 2017: 630). When based on objective categorisations, this figure also fluctuates widely, suggesting that China's middle class lies between 3% and 25% of its population (ibid: 630). By some accounts (based on income averages), China's middle class comprises 23% (and increasing) of its population, which is still in excess of most Western country's entire population (Lu, 2010 in Shi et al., 2011: 555). However, whilst an undefined social category, the Chinese middle class still has a certain primacy that goes beyond its simple weight in numbers. Indeed, the Chinese middle class will likely shape China's overall development trajectory (and by extension the globe's) due to crucial role it plays in driving innovation and economic growth in China (Li, 2010; Tyfield et al., 2016).

The productive power of this class has meant that, especially in a condition of 'compressed modernity', the middle class in China is responsible for both the positives and negative outcomes associated with China's rapid economic growth over the past three decades. As put by Tyfield (2018:158):

'It is…again the middle class (in all its breadth and diversity) in particular that is confronted with this essential tension such that they are increasingly forced to take on system bads, and what thereby transpires to be the 'unnecessary' extent or profligacy of their production, as their personal problem.'

In the context of the food system, this 'essential tension' is reflected by the intense enterprising efforts of the middle-class, which has led to the unsafe, fragmented, race-to-the-bottom, poorly institutionalised and unregulated food system, and yet they are also the segment of society most invested in securing alternative, safe and healthy means of food provisioning. Given the increasing weight and scope of China's middle class, this 'essential tension' will likely increase, stimulating the growth of AFNs, and related initiatives, in an attempt to resolve the 'system bads' – as reflected by China's poorly regulated and high-input farming system.

This middle class 'tension' regarding the food system has been referred to in the current literature of Chinese AFNs. Scott et al., (2014) notes that the formation of Chinese AFNs is a reflection of the middle class mistrusting the ability and capacity of state-led institutions to regulate and certificate food adequately (see also Wang et al., 2015). Klein's (2009) work with Chinese consumers of ecological produce in Kunming (Yunnan province), also emphasised the primacy of safe food in their motivations for AFN participation. His study of a Chinese environmental NGO whose project is the reduction of pesticide and fertiliser use, found that 'messages of 'health' and 'food safety' to be more effective than 'farmers welfare' or 'environmental degradation' in persuading urban households to purchase novel and expensive food (ibid: 87).

This concern over food safety also comes through with my own informant's interviews. For example, the 'new farmers' I spoke to, all well-educated city professionals, were all returning to the 'farm' in some sense in a response to the perceived 'system bads' concerning food:

"At that time [1970s] *we could have good food, later I missed the food when I realized I could not find it in the city. So how can I find it back? Also, it's because of food safety. I'm a foodie and enjoy good food, but when I realized the food safety problem, I knew I had to get involved."* (New Farmer, Four Season Share, 2016, #1)

"Why I started natural farming: I was born in the countryside and grew up in a natural environment. Yet our hometown has changed dramatically with a lot of pollution which mainly comes from domestic waste and agriculture; I lived in the city before and found that domestic waste in the city is not properly dealt with and has polluted our water, which made me reflect on city life and wonder if this is the life we want; third, of course, it's because of food safety problem." (New Farmer, Beautiful Garden Farm, 2016, #2)

These 'new farmer' quotes highlight the range of values - environmentalism, nostalgia, taste and business opportunities - motivating urbanites to return to the countryside and to begin an AFNs. Whilst these reasons significantly varied with emphasis across my informants, a common denominator central to all the 'new farmers' I spoke to, was the 'food safety problem' i.e. the system 'bads'.

This emphasis on safe food suggests AFNs in China are being driven by a much more essential, basic and perhaps primal desire for health that is on a different level of urgency to the West. Indeed, Chinese AFNs are clearly not utopian in their construction - despite their proprietors often subscribing to ecological, social justice and progressive politics (Si et al., 2015). They are better understood as a reflection of the middle-class's increasing orientation towards liveability - i.e. creating conditions good for living in, not just for doing business in - of which access to safe food is central. In this light, Chinese AFNs therefore complicate the common middle-class centred critique of AFNs that depicts these initiatives as 'a small unrepresentative group [that] decides what is "best" for everyone and then attempts to change the world by converting to everyone to accept their utopian ideal' (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005: 360). AFNs, especially in China, are primarily underpinned by a sense of pragmatism, and perhaps a deep-seated desire for safe food, with any utopian ideal becoming somewhat secondary.

For example, Klein's (2014) work on ecological food in Kunming highlights that the desire of urbanites to be involved in novel food networks was foremost 'access to safe tasty

foods embedded in local, seasonal cycles, not a better lot for farmers or a sense of urban-rural community.' The romanticizing of the rural by urbanites, in this context, came from an association of 'backward' areas inhabited by primitive ethnic minority peoples - who were too poor to afford pesticides – able to grow pure unaffected, green and ecological foods (ibid). This is a contrast to earlier work done by Jankowiak (2004), who suggested that the growth of traditional, local and ethical restaurants reflects a grander motivation of Chinese consumers to develop community and rural-urban relations. For Jankowiak, the market reforms of the late 1970s and 1980s - which facilitated more geographic mobility and social interaction between the rural and urban populations of China - have expanded the 'moral horizons' of urban Chinese, involving a 'newfound empathy' for the hardship of the country's farmers' (see Klein, 2014: 117). However, when urbanites were motivated to support AFNs, or similar schemes, for more 'utopian' reasons like the improvement of rural areas or increasing farmers' wellbeing, Klein found it was more likely to occur from a discourse of fear then an altruistic desire. The logic of improving the countryside via AFNs for consumers tended to originate from a worry of farmers flooding into cities a result of rural conditions deteriorating, which would increase job competition and reduce wages in the city (ibid).

From a Western perspective, there is a case to be made that Chinese AFNs are 'weak' alternatives (see Watts et al., 2005), as they are underpinned by motives for procuring quality and healthy food, not for altruistic reasons regarding community or environmental values (Sirieix et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2014). This would suggest that Guthman's (2003; 2007) criticism of organic food and AFNs providing 'yuppie chow' is more applicable in a Chinese context, as consumer involvement in AFNs tends to reflect only an increased interest in 'knowing where your food comes from' and not a wider engagement with the 'historical and structural conditions that have led to contemporary inequalities and ecological exploitation' in the food system (Levoke, 2011: 691). I suggest however, that abstract notions beyond a concern with the origin of food are also driving AFN participation in China, and that the middle-class dominance of these AFN projects does not necessarily inhibit their transformative potential.

The potential for middle class subjectivities to incorporate more abstract and 'ideal' motivations for AFN participation lies with their evolving anxiety vis-à-vis the cosmological

rift- an anxiety which is caught between a motivation for economic prolificacy and the perusal of liveability. In other words, this anxiety reflects a changing middle class identity, particularly in how identity is cultivated and performed through consumerism (see Klein, 2015). In the context of food, this cultivation and performance has translated into the purchasing (and then passing on as gifts) of ecological foodstuffs. In China, such practices have emerged as a sign of having 'quality' (*suzhi*) or levels of advancement (*xianjin*) (ibid: 246). This suggests that '*suzhi*' - i.e. being middle class - in contemporary China is now requiring an awareness of wider 'global' issues. As a described by Tyfield (2018: 156), this shift in *suzhi* or 'middle classness' reflects a:

'*move away from flashy brands flaunting sheer monetary gain to a more explicitly normative concern for the 'good of society' and of 'the planet'. The latter lends itself in turn to a further qualitative elevation in the quasi-universal moral standing of the middle class vis-à-vis the collective interests of Chinese society as whole; a crucial element of any possible hegemony.*'

If China's middle class can be defined, it becomes evident though forms of cultural aspiration. As also argued by Miao (2017: 643), it is 'only those with money to spare that can pursue the cultured aspect of middle class experience, which is distilled into one's *suzhi,* as an aggregation of beliefs, attitudes and behaviour'. The purchasing of quality ecological produce reflects how this notion of *suzhi,* that includes both luxury and practical necessity, extravagance and ethical behaviour, is evolving to encompass new associations.

 This emerging middle class identity - that is centred on *suzhi* - and the particular (global) weight of the Chinese middle class, points to an incredible potential for significant future participation in AFN-type enterprises. In this framing, the middle class bias associated with AFNs, which is perhaps more accentuated in China than in Western contexts, arguably becomes a strength. The potential for initiating a structural change regarding the food system is therefore possible in China through AFNs, and this is not despite the middle-class dominance of these initiatives, but rather because of their dominance.

 In the following section, I explore the subjectivities of the middle class involved in AFNs and highlight how, as a negotiation of their anxieties, they display both pragmatic and abstract motivations and values. Using the lens of 'alternative hedonism' (Soper, 2004; 2007) I suggest that these 'conflicting' subjectivities are also a source of productivity.

Hedonistic Subjectivities

Central to this tension regarding consumer subjectivities in AFNs is the distinction made between being a 'citizen' or 'consumer'. Although research has sought to elide or collapse this dualism, it nevertheless reasserts itself (Soper, 2007). For example, an ethical consumer may purchase fair trade and environmentally-sourced products, but this can be easily framed as an example of 'bad' consumerism. For this 'ethical' consumer is paying a premium - in terms of money or time - for being a consumer with a conscience and is arguably failing a consumer 'duty' to select the affordable and best product or service available. The dualistic framing reasserts itself as he or she then becomes a 'citizen' in this context who is concerned with the 'common good', not a consumer per se. Likewise 'citizens' who participate in 'ethical' consumerism in order to mitigate the destructive aspects of basic consumerism and preserve a 'quality of life' for the future can also be framed as an exponent of consumerism. In this case, it is presented as a form of 'ethical' consumption that can be also understood as a self-interested act that is preserving the local environment for the consumers own pleasure, or as an act that acquires status or distinction. In other words, the dualism reappears again, as the citizen becomes a consumer. Similarly, the tension regarding AFN participation emerges as it can be framed as either an example of citizenship - i.e. a form of collectivism - or as a self-interested act of consumerism.

Soper's (2004; 2007) notion of 'alternative hedonism' however, allows for the possibility of consumer and citizen being simultaneous dispositions. 'Alternative hedonism' gives voice to changing 'consumer' motives 'that derive from the more negative aspects for consumers themselves of their high-speed, work-dominated, materialistic lifestyle, and are fed by a sense that important pleasures and sources of gratification are being lost or unrealized as a consequence of it' (Soper, 2007: 211). In other words, an altruistic concern for wider issues can emerge as a corollary to taking pleasure in 'consumer' activities that occur outside mainstream consumer convention. For example, it is possible to ride a bike hedonistically for the intrinsic pleasures not found whilst driving a car, and by extension, for this also be a decision not to add to congestion, noise and pollution (ibid).

In China, alternative hedonism is being articulated through notions of 'quality' (*suzhi*). Shifts in middle class tastes have meant that *suzhi* is not just a reflection of good personal

health or displays of wealth (Miao, 2017; Jacka, 2009), but has come to suppose an interest in wider societal or planetary concerns (Tyfield, 2018). In the case of purchasing ecological and safe foodstuffs, which in China is central 'for the health, happiness and identity of the family' (Klein, 2013: 387), has also led to the middle class procuring ecological food for reasons beyond personal safety. For example, in Klein's (2014: 129) discussion on urbanites from Kunming 'seeking out the "natural" foods associated with "backward" regions in the countryside', it was also an opportunity for 'having fun'.

Empirical evidence for this shift in *suzhi* has also been shown with general middle class consumer habits (Wang et al., 2016), with 44% of Chinese respondents willing to pay more for food products that have environmental benefits (Garnett & Wilkes, 2014: 95). This is a marked progression from Klein's (2009: 77) and Sirieix et al., (2011) empirical evidence that suggested food consumers in China had limited wider-ethical motivations shaping their purchasing habits. This suggests that alongside the procurement of ecological foodstuffs for health and status reasons (Klein, 2015), the Chinese middle-class is developing a more normative concern for wider issues through forms of alternative hedonism.

This form of alternative hedonism concerning ecological food denotes a form of pleasure seeking through gustatory enjoyment, whilst at the same time, embodying a concern for broader societal issues like the environment. Indeed, in my own fieldwork, many of my informants, whilst much occupied finding a reliable source of 'safe' food, were also developing a larger passion for the natural world:

It brings out the earthiness and the most sincere self in you. It's not just physical. You see the bright side of things. You feel everything's purified. When you eat, you can actually taste. Taste the taste of nature and it just feels wonderful. (Farmers Market vendor, 2016, #11)

The affluent consumption (and production) of 'alternative' food on the one hand stems from sensual pleasure of consuming differently, whilst also meeting the consumer interests (often regarding safety and health). Again, the material qualities of food (see Chapter 4) are important here with taste and the discovery of fresh, new and stimulating produce. At the same time, this enjoyment provokes a reconsideration about what constitutes 'the "good life" as a result of its less enjoyable by products (noise pollution, danger, stress, health risks, excessive waste and aesthetic impact on the environment)' that is prompting consumers to

consider wider concerns (Soper, 2007: 211). In the words of Mrs. Tang, a farmer's market attendee, she highlights how an involvement with organic food can translate into wider societal concerns:

People, who are concerned with health, society and the environment, know the importance of organic food. They find the land (AFNs) and consult with the local farmers. Actually, they also subsidise these farmers [by becoming a member of their AFN]'. (Farmers market attendee, 2016, #8)

Mrs. Tang notes how, as a consequence of AFN participation, members are also likely to developer a concern for producers and the environment. Purchasing produce for food safety reasons may have been the initial motivation but has also translated, non-contradictorily with altruism.

The hedonistic element of 'alternative hedonism' in AFNs is particularly apparent with 'farmhouse fun' (*nongjiale*). An emerging popular family-orientated pastime in China 'farmhouse fun' involves family visits the countryside, often during weekends and holidays, to stay over in rural homesteads. Visiting 'ancient' villages, picking wild fruit and learning about rural life are the typical activities associated with 'Farmhouse Fun'.[42] The common denominator with all these activities is often centred on food, the eating of an ecologically grown produce in rural restaurants. All the AFN-type enterprises I visited had some degree of 'Farmhouse Fun' facilities with the aim of displaying their ecological growing techniques whilst providing an opportunity for a family day out (see Jiang, 2017). Observing and speaking to families during a weekend at a 'farmhouse fun' farm suggested that, along-side risk aversion, these families were engaging in 'alternative hedonism'. Talking to one participant, the chance to visit a farm and experience 'nature' became an enjoyable experience:

A lot [I visit AFNs], I love nature. It's oxygen for me. Talking about this, it reminds me of the view full of green I saw yesterday. For me, it's not simply view, but also a part of my life. In places like that, the nature, you can be purified inside your body. I remember in the mangrove forest, there is blue sky and birds above, and some crabs and fish below. The

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[42] More recently activities like white-water rafting, horse riding and paintballing have also been adopted and branded as farmhouse fun activities.

whole zoology there is vertical. I feel I am a part of the peaceful zoology (Farmhouse Fun participant, 2016, #13).

Picture 8. 'Farmhouse Fun' at Four Season Share.

Participants also expressed that 'farmhouse fun' as an opportunity to escape urban life and appreciate 'nature'. AFNs provide an opportunity and to introduce their children to the rural outdoors, spaces which are considered 'safe' and 'relaxing' in contrast to urban cities. The families I spoke to mentioned that when visiting these AFNs they could enjoy themselves without having their guard-up, without the fear of being 'cheated' and having a 'a break' from the intense rat-race of the city. Indeed, one CSA farm I visited ('Beautiful Garden Farm' – Pic 9) was built entirely around this notion of creating a beautiful garden, free from the stresses of urban life, as a means to attract members to the farm (see also Jiang, 2017). On one level then, these displays of 'alternative hedonism' is an awareness that other forms of gratification i.e. living in the city, driving, eating conventional food, have become compromised by side effects (Soper, 2007). This in turn reflects a recognition of the 'pleasures' being missed when participating in the mainstream consumer lifestyle (ibid).

Alternative hedonism in AFNs is also notable in how it allows for an appreciation of both modernity and 'nature'. Indeed, none of my informants were particularly critical of modernisation or urbanisation whilst being appreciative of 'nature', the 'natural' the

'countryside'. So, while 'farmhouse fun' maybe only 'superficial' in their attempts to connect participants 'with 'human-nature harmony' and [in] encourage[ing] people to live closer to nature' (Scott et al., 2014: 165), they do represent a starting point towards a hedonistic subjectivity towards 'nature'. Indeed, this fetish of 'nature' without an antagonism towards 'modernity' could develop into a productive disposition, despite its contradictory form, facilitating the development of AFNs and related initiatives.

The discourse of *suzhi* plays a key role in this form of alternative hedonism occurring in AFNs as it attributes 'civility' towards a moral aspiration; what Soper describes as, 'a moral form of self-pleasuring or a self-interested form of altruism' (2007: 213). In other words, to be middle class and civilized in China, requires a sensibility in which consumerism cannot be simply consumerism for material gain, but has to involve a moral aspiration even if it entails self-pleasuring (see Miao, 2017). In an Ecological Civilization, this moral aspiration often takes a green twist (Liu et al., 2017) and, as emphasised with AFNs, is realised as an enjoyable and self-interested experience that is not in overt opposition to mainstream forms of consumerism or aspects of 'modernity'. In the following sections, I explore how 'alternative hedonism' is playing out in China specifically, with first the producers / 'new farmers' of AFNs, and then with their consumers / members.

Picture 9. 'Beautiful Garden Farm'.

Producer Subjectivities

The 'new farmers' alternative hedonistic subjectivity revolves around their simultaneous position as both an 'ecological' practitioner and an entrepreneur. As a result, their motivations and values are able to be both abstract and pragmatic. This framing affords a 'remoralisation' of capitalist entrepreneurialism that subverts the notion of the 'moral economy' as being independent of a neoliberal economy. For example, when asked 'why they do what they do' the 'new farmers' often invoke a sense of accidental destiny (*Mingzhongzhuding*);[43] accidental due to the absence of a precise goal outside of growing safe and tasty food, and destiny because they feel like they have 'grown' as people as a result.

"Actually, I am totally not doing this because of a kind of belief, it's kind of chance and coincidence…but it was meant to be. It's destiny. I mean how come I knew the problem so early while others didn't, even now people still don't know. Don't you think its destiny?" (New Farmer, Four Season Share, 2016, #1)

"On the one side it's my life experience [involvement in environmental NGO's] and the other, it's the self-development of my heart and soul" (Farmers Market Vendor, 2016, #6)

"Yes, something like it seems accidentally, but actually its destiny." (New Farmer, Beautiful-Garden farm, 2016, #2)

When invoking this version of 'destiny', the 'new farmers' appear to be merging happenstance with a sense of purpose; a subtle contrast to upholding an explicit belief that may contain a radical or political edge. In other words, it imagines a form of progression without the elements of transcendence or utopianism, allowing for a flexible combination with other values like pragmatism or entrepreneurialism.

This flexibility in terms of beliefs is important, as profitable economic returns are an important long-term goal of AFN creation for many of the 'new farmers'. Most of the 'new farmers' I spoke to mentioned the potentially lucrative market for organic produce, due to the emerging food-anxious middle-class. They highlight how 'business' is a key part of their

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[43] The 'new farmers' similarly used 'Heavens will' (*tianyi*), alongside *mingzhongzhuding,* to also explain their circumstance.

identity as 'new farmers'. Indeed, what makes 'new farmers' 'new', is that they are also entrepreneurs or business people, not just farmers.

Picture 9. 'New Farmer'- A Maverick Entrepreneur?

The image of being an entrepreneur is important for the 'new farmers' as it separates them from the 'backward', 'uncultured' and untrustworthy association often made with the rural peasants (see Lai, 2014). This differentiation is crucial when society ills are often blamed on a lack of 'modernisation' (Yan, 2015). Indeed, respectability and trust are far more likely to be associated with a businessperson, as opposed to a farmer in contemporary Chinese society - especially from the perspective of China's new middle class who are the primary clientele for these AFNs. Indeed, when AFN members visit farms, they tend to interact with the 'new farmer' as opposed to recognising and meeting with the hired labour (Si et al., 2015). In addition, from the perspective of the state –and the media, it is the entrepreneur who is supported and championed, whilst those with a more social or overtly political agenda are more likely to be censored and restricted (Hale, 2013). In fact, the 'new farmers' who manage larger scale farms are 'renting' large areas of land via government policy that encourages land consolidation through various mechanism, one of which is by encouraging individual entrepreneurs to make investments (Hornby, 2016; Gürel, 2014).

Underlining this commitment to pragmatism and entrepreneurialism is awareness of wider issues concerning ecological farming. While many 'new farmers' become initially

involved in the Farmers Market or a CSA-type farm through practical or mundane reasons, a common gripe with many of the 'new farmers' I spoke was the lack of consumer awareness of issues like ecology, social justice, rural development and the connection between safe food and small-scale 'ecological' farms. This point goes two ways, either the 'new farmers' are desperate for an increased market share and are thus keen for more members to join their scheme for any reason; or 'new farmers' have a genuine care and worry for the larger picture which involves issues of sustainability, rural development, dietary health etc. However, there is no reason that both cannot be true and exist simultaneously as a motivation for the 'new farmers'.

Also merging this 'pragmatic idealism' of 'new farmers' with entrepreneurialism and sustainable practices is the concept of '*qinghuai*'. This uniquely Chinese idea describes a noble quality you can be said to possess if you have 'a non-utilitarian state of mind that values a willingness to overcome difficult challenges'.[44] According to my informants, 90% of new larger-scale AFNs fail, and many 'new farmers' have to rely upon savings or other business enterprises to cover their farms shortcomings.[45] This struggle, to become viable or moderately 'successful' as a 'new farmer', explains why many of them relate to this concept '*qinghuai*' - and recognise it as a quality they have:

Four Season Share: "[The eggs from] Small Straw Hat farm are laid by free range hens raised by a group of young people with qinghuai…" (Wechat Transcript Extract, 2016).

In other words, the 'new farmers' are precisely 'noble' because their sense of idealism requires no firm outcomes or goals – whereas a typical Western analysis of AFNs seems to expect ecological, political or social outcome (Clarke et al., 2008). This positioning of Chinese AFNs tends to emphasise that AFNs generally are less a specific project but more a disposition - albeit one that generally presupposes a certain degree of postmaterialist priorities (see Inglehart, 2007). In other words, *qinghuai* – if you have the time and

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[44] *Qinghuai* translation provided by my fieldwork translator Chloe.
[45] The high rate of failure with ecological/organic agriculture is often attributed to the high initial investment costs and the delayed recovery of these costs. These high costs occur especially if the farm needs to clean-up contaminated land, which has to be 'clean' for three years before gaining certification. Furthermore, state-owned banks prefer to give loans to larger farms that employ chemical methods of farming that yield bigger profit margins, so entrepreneurs can find it difficult to get start-up capital for smaller ecological-based farms (See O'Meara, 2016).

resources to cultivate it (as with 'quality' (*suzhi*) - seems to reverberate with a Chinese work ethos that somehow gives hard graft an honourable quality, even if the hard graft is in vain. In my discussions with the 'new farmers' for example, the chief aim of AFNs typically is to become practically viable as an entrepreneurial venture which can be then positioned towards a certain ethically-informed aims. There is a fine line of success however, for this pragmatic idealism to work. In the case of 'Four Season Share' for example, this is the manager's third attempt at creating a working and profitable CSA farm, and many other early AFN start-ups have to rely on other enterprises for survival.

Thus, the pragmatic idealism of the 'new farmers'- and their enterprises - forwards a perspective where it is possible to conceive of a profit-led organisation that also subscribes to a disposition that perhaps reveals shortfalls in the typical Western framing of neoliberalism. A Chinese alternative hedonistic lens seems to suggest a remoralisation of entrepreneurialism is possible, wherein one can 'do well' and 'do good'.

Consumer Subjectivities

The strong consumer orientation of Chinese AFNs (Scott et al., 2014; Si et al., 2015), hints that involvement in AFNs is an individualised form of participation, absent a collective dimension. However, by using Clarke et al., (2007) work on fair trade participation in the UK, which reveals how an altruistic element of consumerism can arise through the engagement of sociable practices, this section will explore how Chinese AFN participants evolve their engagement in AFNs beyond discrete and individualised purchasing activities. In other words, revealing how 'pleasurable' social activities, in conjunction with instrumental consumption practices, can develop AFN participation beyond a consumer rationality. As put by Clarke et al (2007: 587) 'even the most individualized and consumerist of these [fair trade] activities is…connected to a broader range of actions'. This is not a unique approach to AFN analysis, Cox et al. (2014: 78) have also argued that AFNs 'prompt and/or support individual movement from passive consumers to informed citizens' due to the networks and relationships they create between members (Cox et al., 2014: 78). This mediation between organisations and coalitions enables AFNs to create spaces that, in the long term, are potentially able to make claims on a larger scale - affecting the state and larger corporations

and institutions. Thus, opening a 'pathway', from individualized action to more collective modes of participation (Clarke et al., 2007: 591). This section explores how this 'pathway' is still being opened in an overtly instrumental Chinese context.

Guangzhou's organic Farmers Market, which is hosted by the platform *'chengxianghui'*, appears primarily instrumental in its function. It allows its patrons to access 'safe food' without having to drive long distances to rural villages or AFNs, and acts as an authentic 'middle man' in the place of certification. As put by frequent Farmer's Market attendants:

 'Before, when this market wasn't open, we would drive all the way to the countryside to shop, but with this market, it's much more convenient. So whenever there's an event, we will come and make a purchase. As you can try the food before you buy it, you know if it tastes good or not.' (Farmers Market attendee, 2016, #14)

'It's difficult for people that produce /grow food in the countryside to deliver their produce straight to the consumers. They need a middleman. There should be restrictions and regulations for these middlemen to follow. It has to be healthy products that they target. It's through them that we get to know the farmers production condition. Here lays the matter of trust and reputation. I mean what if the middlemen cheat/lie. We need them to help teach and inspect farmers on growing organic food. This is why I go to 'Chengxianghui' (the farmers market).' (Farmers Market attendee, 2015, #8)

This role of 'middle-man' being fulfilled by the platform, has allowed the platform to develop beyond its instrumental purpose, becoming the critical link that develops new connections. In other words, by fulfilling the role of certification / authentication, by hosting events like the farmers market, tasting activities, and presentations etc. the platform is also creating a space wherein vendors and shoppers can potentially create relationships.[46] This is not to claim that they automatically do so, indeed many shoppers will come in serendipitously off the street, browse and buy some ingredients without developing a

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[46] Between the vendors as well the platform fosters community due to the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) scheme they are involved in. Most AFNs at the farmers market do not have official organic certification and so the platform has implemented a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) scheme to ensure that the products being sold are authentically ecological / safe. PGS is a peer review scheme whereby farmers and vendors visit each other to ensure ecological methods are being employed, and to give advice on how they can be improved further.

dialogue with the vendor. Nevertheless, the sense of the place, in which dialogue and communication is common and tacitly encouraged, is enough to lend authenticity to the produce's quality *and* create a possible route towards increase participation or developing a community-orientated form of subjectivity.

'Consumers' who visit the platform and then go on to participate in ways that go beyond consumerism suggests they are also active community participants. By taking advantage of the concentration of venders and likeminded shoppers in the farmers market, the platform also hosts certain events that facilitate community building. Often this has come in the form of regular 'educational' lectures, which are free to the public and are orientated around themes of ecological agriculture, farmer welfare and rural development. Speakers from around the world are invited to present on these themes and they usually involve a lively Q & A session. Recently, the platform is also experimenting with adding additional activities to their farmers market. For example, they have begun moving the farmers market to different locations in city and have plans to supplement it with activities like fishing, to provide screenings of independent cinema films and provide pedagogic resources. Frequent newsletters via social media are also encouraging members to express their support for 'chengxianghui'.

Picture 10. Educational Presentations at *ChengXiangHui*

In practice, the platform '*chengxianghui*' is not simply a farmer's market, but acts as hub where the peri-urban AFNs of Guangzhou can bring food and ideas to the city centre and develop direct relationships with 'consumers'. In other words, the success of the farmers market depends not on its utility but rather from the 'pleasure' and interest, it generates. As argued by Chen & Scott (2014), a farmer's market success depends on 'creating positive social interactions' in order to enhance the consumers 'perceived embeddedness' that occurs from the direct exchange occurring between consumer and producer. Whilst this positive social interaction increases sales (ibid), more importantly it helps forms community relations and a capacity for participants to have a deeper engagement with the AFN. The farmers market is therefore instrumental from a self-interested consumer point of view but nevertheless, is also seducing the participants into developing a wider awareness of social and / or environmental issues.

The platform '*chengxianghui*' is able to develop the participant's awareness of wider issues through the wide-range of activities they offer, which creates an opportunity for different forms of contact to occur between the participants at the farmers market. That diverse and varied forms of contact between consumers and producers are occurring at '*chengxianghui*', suggests that more than just consumption is taking place in these spaces. Often this contact between participants is mundane, not centred on 'grander' aims and values. However, these mundane types of contact can develop into forms of collective activism. For example, the same person who buys from the farmers market, may also use the opportunity to take part in Participatory Guarantee System, or become a member of a CSA farm, or donate money and / or attend meetings that have a local agenda etc. This potential to move from a consumerism towards activism is portrayed by Mr Luo, who initially visited the organic market to buy food, and now - after purchasing a plot of land with friends on the city outskirts - has become a regular vendor at the market:

'The organic market. It's great. I joined this platform for maybe 3 or 4 years ago. At first, I'm just a customer, I buy their product. Then gradually, I get more and more involved and now I'm a vendor here.' (Famers Market Vendor, 2016, #6).

In another account, Mrs. Wang highlights how buying from the farmers market has developed into an opportunity to help with farmers based in the countryside:

I come here for the tasting events too, the quality is so good….but I've always noticed that life isn't easy for the villagers. They sell their products into the city at a very low price and they have a low income. It's nice to help them out sometimes. There was an event here last time when a group of people from the countryside came for a visit to see that their efforts have been recognized, which is quite nice. They deserve a higher income for the efforts they've made. I think more people tend to have a higher acceptance in terms of price. At least with my own income level now I can accept high priced products instead of looking for cheap stuff as I used to do. (Farmer Market attendee, 2016, #7)

These participants accounts reveal how increased involvement with ecological food and the platform suggests that growth and community building often originates from a more basic or ordinary form of involvement (i.e. procuring safe food). This initial pragmatism potentially then grows to involve an environmental, social justice, or an economic / entrepreneurial layer.

The owner of 'Four Season Share' echoes this sentiment of becoming involved in AFN-type initiatives for initially mundane or practical reasons. His desire to start a CSA farm began with relatively ordinary concrete concerns – a wish for quality and tasty food and the enjoyment for farming in traditional chemical free manner. He describes his introduction to organic farming in the following way:

"In the process of doing it [running a CSA] you come to understand some things, and so we hope we can share the good things we have with everyone." (CSA movement video, 2015)

His participation in ecological farming has been born out of practical experience and it is from 'the process of doing it' that there are corollary effects – that might involve community building, environmentalism, rural development aims and/or entrepreneurialism. Importantly, this initial commitment to ecological food is usually absent of larger ethical pressure. Nor is it motivated by loftier ideals of 'consumer power'. Involvement instead, as with fair trade participation, 'tends to follow as an adjunct of thicker forms of identification and modes of sociability' (Clarke et al., 2007: 596).

The pathway from consumerism to collective activism at *'chengxianghui'* appears to be subtle and gradual, occurring as a reproduction of the already established social

networks and everyday practices of the participants. Take for example this account of how Mrs Lin, a regular Farmers Market attendee became more involved:

'Actually, I was influenced by people around me. After, I took this kind of lifestyle, I still keep it, and become part of it gently. It's not like they kept telling me how good organic food is, you should do it, like preaching. But just because I am in this circle of life, I was affected by them automatically.' (Farmers Market attendee, 2016, #8)

Mrs Lin quotation reveals that the development of c*hengxianghui* has orientated around a process of appealing to and incorporating their participants based on their own social network, as opposed to a simple enrolment of customers. As with Fairtrade participation in England, the growth of *chengxianghui* is dependent on extending their participants 'commitments into their consumption habits and channelling their energies into recruiting friends, family, work colleagues, or fellow parishioners' (Clarke, et al., 2007: 593).

There are similarities here between the pragmatic involvement with Chinese AFNs and the sustainable food self-provisioning practices in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe which have been framed as 'quiet sustainability' (Smith & Jehlička, 2013). Smith & Jehlička note that the motivations for the participant's involvement in this form of provision 'derive from a range of feelings about food, quality, capability and family and/or friendship' and significantly, represent 'unforced forms of sustainability' (ibid: 148). Intriguingly, Chinese AFNs seem to demonstrate how a Western model of sustainability i.e. CSA farms, is arguably more workable when 'quiet' about loftier ideals like sustainability.

For example, in the following WeChat extract between a member and' Four Season Share' (FSS) CSA farm, illustrates how an initially instrumental relationship can develop into something that encourages community building and engages consumers with the cultivation of food.

FSS: I am very touched these days. It's been raining these days, but you didn't refuse to take our vegetables, and other members have been sending me photos of them drying/hanging vegetables at home. Thank you so much [for the advice on how to hang and dry vegetables].

Member: It's all right.

Member: You don't ask for the rain.

Member: We have an old saying that we eat on the mercy of the sky. We had a situation yesterday [regarding food], you helped a lot. We help each other.

FSS: Thank you for your understanding! (emoji)

This ethical process, that links the instrumental relationship with eventually something more reciprocal, has been termed as the 'graduation effect' and suggests that participation in (ecologically-informed) agri-food practices, be it purchasing or growing, influences and refines ethical decision-making (Dowler et al. 2009). This occurs in both lifestyle choices and other consumption patterns (Cox et al. 2008) and leads to certain forms of care and community building (Cox et al., 2015).

Community formation through the procurement of safe food importantly creates the opportunity to raise issues on topics that go beyond the purchasing of safe food. In the following WeChat extract, a sub-political discussion emerges concerning the state of ecological/organic farming in China, GM crops and how can the government provide support:

FSS: Hi, Mr. Ding. I have disagreement about the article you shared on the WeChat.

Member: Good! I like your opinions. I'm glad to see that you guys can find some different opinions and reply to them.

FSS: Thank you, Mr. Ding organic agriculture is left unnoticed (by the government) for now. In order to survive, the organic agriculture needs more support from the consumer. We hope that there will be more people understand and support organic agriculture. The goal of organic agriculture is living in harmony with nature, animals and plants.

Member: In my opinion, I hope that people could pay more attention to the discussion about the agriculture. It concerns me because of the safety of my friends, general citizens, and my folks eat food. More attention, more questions. With this extra pressure, you need to display more evidence to prove its advantage. It's good for everyone.

FSS: Yes, I understand that. Thinking about it for the sake of consumers, it's difficult to pick up healthy food in present situation. Thanks for choosing us. We will do our best to offer you the most healthy and safest food.

Member: Hope you guys as confident as Cui Yongyuan,[47] defending the future of the organic agriculture. I got your back.

In these AFN-type communities, members and 'new farmers' inform each other on the latest issues concerning the ethical and political aspects of ecological farming. Interactions

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[47] Cui Yongyuan is a celebrity figure in China known for campaigning against GM food and promoting ecological / organic food.

like this become important in raising the communities' general level of awareness, which could be considered as political practice in and of itself.

While many of these examples infer a sense of collectivism, they also highlight the consumer orientation of these networks and the uneven power relations between the members and the 'new farmers'. In many of the WeChat extracts, the CSA staff appear 'desperate' to please, apologising and making concessions when debating with members concerns about the quality of the products (See Appendix 2). The 'trust pressure' (see chapter 3) Chinese AFNs are under, reveals the presence and importance of hierarchy in maintaining these alternative food *networks*. From a Western perspective, this issue of hierarchy is in tension with an imaginary of AFNs that is focused on universal equality and emancipation – and now includes 'nature' not just all humans. This concern regarding hierarchy is heightened in China due to the especially deferential relationship between AFNs workers and their members under this trust pressure. However, this concern may say more about Western expectations then the (Chinese) reality. Namely, that the relational and practical ethics being cultivated - that is creating trust - can only work by acknowledging and working with asymmetrical and uneven power relationships with their customers.

Crucially, this absence of egalitarianism, or explicit goals to this effect, does not inhibit the cultivation of a collective-based ethic. Indeed, the exchanges shown by the social media transcripts suggest that collectivism is possible despite the unequal power relations. Schumilas & Scott (2016) have similarly noted that some of the communities within these AFN platforms are beginning to develop reflexive practice and become aware of their deficiencies. In one example, they highlight an internal debate concerned with how to increase the benefits for peasant farmers in AFN-type initiatives (ibid, 307). Either way, through both the positive and negative exchanges of dialogue, the networks and relationships being formed between farm and member, suggest that AFNs are becoming more than just a source for safe food.

In sum, the research informants display aspects of both consumer instrumentalism and collective activism whilst participating in AFNs. In fact, AFN involvement appears to coalesce and extend around established everyday practices that are already integrated with practices that may already be community or politically orientated. At the same time, these

practices are not necessarily 'progressive' and are often sustained by hierarchical structures. Nevertheless, when articulated by mundane forms of contact, social networks and intermediary organisations they are enjoyable or hedonistic in some sense, and yet they are productive in how also they develop the AFNs. Thus, these AFNs have a capacity to foster and provide a route towards a more collectivist subjectivity, which is evolving from interactions that are initially mundane.

Subjectivities for an Ecological Civilization?

Chinese AFNs make explicit the tension that participants involved in AFNs display values and motivations pertaining to notions of both neoliberal and collective subjectivities. However, a nuanced analysis of the subjectivities involved in Chinese AFNs from a perspective of alternative hedonism highlight, on a more exaggerated scale than perhaps in Western equivalents, how (supposedly) conflicting forms of subjectivity (i.e. a hedonism towards both nature and modernity, pragmatism and idealism and instrumentalism and collectivism) can exist simultaneously. In other words, how supposed tensions can work productively and point towards significant, and perhaps 'transformative', changes regarding the food system in the future. That the presence of CSA projects in China are largely a symptom of consumer demand - due to the expanding urban middle class, their raising levels of income and their willingness to pay more for 'safe' 'green' foods - does not negate its success in providing new experiences, ideas and practices to consumers and producers.

The subjectivities on display here in these Chinese AFNs are not reminiscent of a return to ancient Chinese ideals regarding Confucianism, man-nature harmony or holism, nor are they centred around engaging cultural criticism and achieving radical political change – debates often ascribed to China's Ecological Civilization project (See chapter 2). Conversely, AFN subjectivities in China are centred on pragmatic realities that can develop pathways into more ambitious goals. Thus, they provide a starting point for imagining how subjectivities may emerge in China's future Ecological Civilization. Indeed, they are projects happening now and involve China's most active and dynamic part of society, its middle class.

The subjectivities of Chinese AFN participants involve certain tensions (from a Western perspective) which entail both market-led entrepreneurialism and a preoccupation with a grander set of ideals. These tensions are negotiated with the emergence of three forms of subjectivity or disposition. Firstly, the subjectivities of the 'new farmers' point towards a pragmatic idealism based on solving problems i.e. creating profitable niches whilst remaining largely apolitical. In other words, the growing awareness from the middle class of the increasing 'bads' within the system (and their own role in causing this) and the increasing pressure to then mitigate them, often occurs through entrepreneurial efforts (see also Tyfield, 2018). This suggests that 'new farmers' express subjectivities which are both entrepreneurial (profit orientated, problem solving) and idealistic (altruistic motivations). Secondly, the tendency of AFN consumers to gradually progress from purely instrumental functions into emerging examples of community-orientated subjectivities also reflects a possible path for an emerging ecological civilisation subjectivity based on community. While participation is based on ordinary and often self-interested values, AFN participation can lead to an increased participation as awareness of key issues are raised, and as tighter knit and sustainability-focused communities are formed.

Interpreting these subjectivities as forms of alternative hedonism suggests a connection between utopian-based ideas and enjoyable practices. If the hedonistic experiences on behalf on AFN participants are somewhat tangible and retrospective, nostalgic or utopian, then 'maverick' entrepreneurs and self-interested collectivist consumers may galvanise 'new forms of intergenerational dialogue and social solidarity' (Soper, 2007: 223). Critically, these new forms of dialogue and solidarity may also offer a more rational economic solution to issues (Ibid: 222). Making ecological / organic food more accessible, providing small-scale 'new farmers' more opportunities and support, is perhaps more effective and pragmatic approach to resolving food system issues then it is to (re)regulate the fragmented and unwieldy Chinese conventional food sector.

These alternative hedonistic subjectivities are by no means guaranteed to emerge as significant Chinese dispositions in the future - as the dynamism and size of the Chinese middle class sharing them is still yet to fully evolve and its trajectory still uncertain. As argued by Shapiro (2012), China's vision for sustainable development (i.e. Ecological Civilization) will depend largely on how China defines its national identity, a process which is

continually evolving and is anchored closely to Chinese concepts like '*suzhi' 'wenming'* and '*qinghuai*' - which are heavily influenced by the changing middle class (Shepheard & Yu, 2013; Liu et al., 2017). Similarly, these middle class subjectivities, as highlighted by AFN participants, may also develop in tandem with Chinese notions of hierarchy, creating AFNs which - discomforting the critical Western gaze - do not emphasise or confront issues of social justice. In fact, the subjectivity that becomes most associated with Ecological Civilization may be largely independent of notions of equality and the flattening of power relations.

Importantly, neither of these AFN subjectivities emphasised in this chapter are unique to China. Western literature of AFNs have also alluded to and illustrated them in various ways (Turner & Hope, 2015; Clarke et al., 2008; Holloway et al., 2007; Smith & Jehlička, 2013; Cox et al, 2014). However, in China, the tensions inherent to AFNs - concerning the motivations and values of AFN participants - exaggerate these subjectivities in ways that make them more explicit. And in the process of doing so, subvert or add more nuance to terms like 'moral economy' or 'collective subjectivity'.

In sum, the subjectivities that will come to define China's project of Ecological Civilization are likely to lie with China's middle class, and how it attempts to square the circle of neoliberal development and ecological limits. As put by Tyfield (2018: 157-158),

'it is how the middle class themselves, in their very orientation to liveability, are currently being forced to confront the essential paradoxes of the clash of their growing material consumption and aspiration and the realizability of clean, attractive, mobile city-living they increasingly desire.'

In other words, the paradox or tension central to AFNs reflects a much larger rift in the current order of the cosmos between human development and ecological realities. This rift, which Ecological Civilization is an attempt to come to terms with, is perhaps more palpable in China than in any other location – hence the increased friction being caused by the tensions present in the motivations of AFN participants. These evolving AFN subjectivities therefore, hint at how utopian imaginaries are becoming tied to 'feelings' that question the 'capitalist' sense of utopia - i.e. more consumerism, more accessible desires - due to both its tangible undesirable by-products and a nostalgia for the experiences capitalism omits.

The resulting 'alternative hedonistic' subjectivities emerging might then, provide some insight into how China (through Ecological Civilization), and on a larger scale humanity, could navigate the cosmological rift the planet is facing.

Chapter 6

Ecological Civilization as Rural Cosmopolitanism? Alternative Food Networks and the Wider Region

Tension 3: How do AFNs interact with, and affect, wider systems and economies?

Introduction

"What we have now, CSA, encourages all citizens to get involve, people from different backgrounds come together, so it will help right? It will develop a group that will pursue organic life[styles]. In this way, local farmers interact with consumers. In the past, not many people came to this village. It was very quiet. Since we came, people come here every day, it's lively." ('New Farmer', Four Season Share: 2016, #1)

"Agriculture is a truly difficult business, but it doesn't have to make you uncultured or bitter." (CSA movement in China, promotional video: 2015)

These opening quotations point towards an increasing diversity of populations in rural / peri-urban China, and the increasing interconnections between the city and the countryside as a result of enterprises like CSAs. By bringing urban populations into the countryside, AFNs are recasting the rural as spaces associated with advanced enterprises (involved in both production and services) ecological protection, beauty and refuge from the city. This is a move away from contemporary understandings of the rural as sites of drudgery and backwardness, inviting instead a more cosmopolitan framing of the Chinese countryside. Using AFNs as examples of an emerging rural cosmopolitanism, this chapter explores the tension that questions the capacity of AFNs to instigate rural development.

AFNs have often been celebrated and promoted as initiatives that go beyond increasing the viability of small-scaling farming into acting as tools for rural development (Renting et al., 2003). Empirical research, however, has begun to question the extent to which AFNs do improve farmers' livelihoods (Kneafsey et al., 2013), and to highlight that AFNs are perhaps more a product of, rather than a driver for, rural development (Tregear, 2011). This tension between the two perspectives is in many ways fundamental to AFN research, which is predominantly occupied with how AFNs might 'scale-up' in ways that would challenge, and ultimately transform, the globalised mainstream food system. If AFNs

are not economically viable, nor able to create a wider-systems impact, they would be for many redundant enterprises. Indeed, scholars have noted the limitations of AFNs for initiating structural change or foster political engagement (Guthman, 2007), and how they are failing adequately to resist or transform the larger-scale politics of globalism. I argue, through the lens of 'rural cosmopolitanism' however, that AFNs can simultaneously be both a product of, and driver for, wider regional development that has a potential to go beyond a neoliberal logic.

Taking direction from Michael Woods (2018: 11) recent work on rural cosmopolitanism in Ireland, cosmopolitanism here is understood as 'an individual property of actors who transcend different cultural worlds; as a collective property of communities embracing difference; and as a normative project to promote open and cordial relations between cultural groups.' That cosmopolitanism can be rural also suggests that cosmopolitanism is not a 'property' solely in the possession of the 'elite' or the 'city', and can be 'ordinary' or 'vernacular' in its form (Woods, 2018; Dunn et al., 2016). A rural form of cosmopolitanism also infers that cosmopolitanism is not necessarily complete or ideal in its formation, but is a quality that can be uneven and imbalanced (Woods, 2018; Skrbis and Woodward, 2007). Based on my fieldwork, I suggest that Chinese AFNs, due to their precariousness, are forced to engage in outward-looking strategic interventions to survive, which in turn, fosters forms of rural cosmopolitanism. At the scale of Ecological Civilization, this rural cosmopolitanism I suggest resonates with a more encompassing or 'cosmological' notion of the cosmopolitan as articulated in the work of leading sociologist Ulrich Beck (2002; 2010; 2015).

Relative to the Western critiques of AFNs, which have tended to warn of AFNs becoming examples of a 'defensive politics of localization' (Hinrichs, 2003; Allen et al., 2003), associating AFNs with cosmopolitanism is perhaps counter-intuitive. Whilst Western AFNs have been critiqued for reifying the local, the rural cosmopolitanism on display in Chinese AFNs shows how they can be at once a product of regional development and also drive regional development in interesting and novel ways. Put another way, the cosmopolitan perspective sidesteps the conventional debate regarding the ability of AFNs to foster wider development. Instead, cosmopolitanism 'puts the negotiation of contradictory cultural

experiences into the centre of activities: in the political, the economic, the scientific and the social' (Beck, 2002: 18).

This wider perspective of cosmopolitanism also resonates with the notion of Ecological Civilization. As revealed by Immanuel Kant, there are numerous dimensions to 'cosmopolitanism' – i.e. being a citizen of two worlds (the *cosmos* and the *polis*) - which ultimately 'revolutionizes the very coordinates, categories and conceptions of change itself (Beck, 2002: 18-19). What this new conception of change entails, or, as put by Beck (2002: 19): 'what the 'cosmo-logic' signifies'...is its thinking and living in terms of *inclusive oppositions*' (including nature into society etc.) and rejecting the logic of exclusive oppositions' (emphasis in original). This form of 'thinking and living' is similar to the analysis of Ecological Civilization in Chapters 4 and 5 which, vis-à-vis the tensions of AFNs, emphasises how exclusive oppositions (i.e. tensions resulting from seemingly contradictory forces) – can be resolved as productive measures when framed as inclusive oppositions. This chapter uses examples of rural cosmopolitanism as evidenced in AFNs to argue that Ecological Civilization is mobilising a ruralisation of global capitalism, creating a unique Chinese form of cosmopolitanism.

In making this argument for Ecological Civilization as cosmopolitanism, I rely on my own fieldwork observations of AFNs and also the recent research on 'Xiedao Green Resort' (Yang et al., 2010; 2014; 2016) - an enterprise that might be referred to as a mega-AFN or a 'agro-tourism park'. The chapter is therefore structured as follows: First, an overview is provided of this third AFN tension regarding their effect on regional development, detailing how both optimistic and pessimistic accounts can occur simultaneously. Second, I summarise how AFNs, in the Chinese context, are precarious enterprises due to particular political, social, environmental and economic constraints. Third, I explore the strategic interventions utilised by the AFNs in my fieldwork, as a response to their precariousness, to suggest they enable a form of subtle institutional critique. Fourth, these strategies are then assessed in relation to a mega AFN, 'Xiedao Green Resort' that demonstrates how this institutional critique led by pragmatism can instigate a systems change. Fifth, this chapter identifies how, through engendering rural cosmopolitanism, the tension concerning AFNs and their effects on wider systems works as an iterative productive force. Finally,

connections are drawn between these strategic interventions and Ecological Civilization, with the suggestion that AFNs could emerge as cultural project engendered by a ruralisation of Western capitalism.

Exploring the 3ʳᵈ Tension

This tension has arisen in the literature as empirical accounts have identified both optimistic and pessimistic examples regarding the capacity of AFNs to improve farmers' livelihoods and affect wider development (Tregear, 2011). Research has shown, for example, how AFNs have been able to increase profit margins for farmers, creating opportunities for entrepreneurship, encouraging farm diversification and build-up of new skill sets in general (Pretty, 2002; Lyson, 2004; Higgens et al., 2008; Kneafsey et al., 2013). Crucially, the spill-over effect of this added economic dynamism benefits the wider community via the 'multiplier effect' – which provides extra employment, alternative non-agricultural income sources and tourism in the surrounding area (Ilbery et al., 2004; Henneberry et al., 2009; Roep & Wiskerke, 2010; Pearson et al., 2011). These positive economic effects have therefore marked AFNs out as possible tool for rural development in general (Renting et al., 2003; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005). From the consumer perspective too, empirical work has emerged to suggest that AFNs provide healthier and more nutritional food, often at a reasonable price, thus benefiting the local economy and the community in terms of general health (Wakefield et al., 2007; Little et al., 2009). These positive features are often contrasted with the conventional food system, which is associated with rural exploitation and food of a poor nutritional quality.

Simultaneously, empirical accounts of AFNs have also begun to suggest that AFNs do not necessarily have positive local economic impacts (Goodman 2004, Watts et al., 2005) and have to rely on conventional networks to remain viable (Renting et al., 2003; Ilbery & Maye, 2005). Empirical work has also found examples of animosity aimed towards AFNs that have had state support and undermined the competitiveness of other local outlets (Ilbery & Maye, 2006). There is also a question surrounding the direct exchange occurring between producers and consumers in AFNs, which asks if producers are capturing a larger share of the produce's value, as the additional time, resources and energy required to facilitate this

direct exchange might not result in net gains (Milestad et al., 2010). Kneafsey et al. (2013: 31), in their review of AFNs, similarly note that the economic advantage of AFNs does not 'translate into higher average profits in all cases', which would impact their ability to have a positive wider regional influence.

The notion that AFNs are apt tools for rural development initiatives has also been questioned. Empirical work by Ricketts Hein et al. (2006), for example, has suggested that areas concentrated with many AFNs tend to be rich in resources already and possess a diverse agricultural base (see also Kneafsey et al., 2013). Watts et al. (2005: 28) also explains how AFNs are inherently weak as a tool for rural development as they are dependent on differentiation in order to sell their products, meaning 'producers of protected and speciality foods may end up competing for each other for finite niche markets'. This questioning of AFNs' ability to foster rural development has prompted scholars to argue that 'AFNs are a product, rather than a driver, of socio-economic development in a region' (Tregear, 2011: 422).

This tension regarding wider development has also been reflected within the nascent Chinese AFN literature. Si & Scott (2016) for example, have argued that Chinese AFNs have potential to converge, and become integrated, with rural reconstruction and rural development movements. They write that AFNs in China have become a 'powerful tool to boost the practices of rural development initiatives', and that AFNs are not just active in creating new economic linkages between rural and wider society but also in opening-up new spaces for the development of 'civil society' (ibid: 1094). Under the auspices of China's New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM), they argue AFNs in China have a unique opportunity to converge with diversity, through a dynamic interaction of 'knowledge sharing, collaboration and competition'. This connection between AFNs and the NRRM offers an example of how AFNs can scale-up – a widely recognised larger goal for AFNs – and impact the current food regime at a significant level (ibid: 1087).

Conversely, Day and Schneider (2017) have argued critically that the emergence of AFNs as the NRRM flagship enterprise for rural development reflects a narrowing of transformative alternatives. Instead of acting as a vehicle for food system transformation, AFNs, for Day & Schneider, are a signal of China's commitment for neoliberal-based

solutions towards rural issues. They reach this conclusion in part by highlighting how in the Hu-Wen era, between 2003 and 2012, there was a period of rural experimentation - hence the rise of the NRRM – and that the co-operatives that were formed in this period were far more alternative and progressive then present-day AFNs. Day and Schneider suggest that this turn towards AFNs is reflective of the CCPs decision, around 2008, to accelerate and fully commit to rural modernisation (industrialization, urbanisation, rationalisation & capitalisation) and thus 'depeasantisation', which has enabled the spread of entrepreneur-led AFNs. The market-based vertical integration that the modernisation process entailed dismantled the horizontally integrated rural households, increased class differentiation, encouraged intra-village competition and prompted village elites to 'privatise and profit from village resources' (Day & Schneider, 2017: 15). In other words, rural modernisation has undermined the NRRM and related initiatives that sought to form 'cooperative forms of organization, rais[e] the level of village organisation and strength[en] social bonds' (ibid: 14).

In this framing, AFNs are projects of wealthy urban entrepreneurs aimed at, and designed for, urban consumers, and are examples of villages relying on more powerful outside economic agents in order to maintain economic growth. This process has ultimately exacerbated, or at least reproduced, existing inequalities - namely that between the rural and urban populations. Day & Schneider's (2017) arguments against Chinese AFNs fall into the wider critique that suggests AFNs and similar initiatives are approaches that perpetuate neoliberal rationalities in which social problems are solved by the market and are creating or deepening unequal power relations (see also Biel, 2016; Alkon & Mares, 2012).

Whilst this critique is powerful, it forgets that, in practice, AFNs are hybrid food networks (Holloway et al., 2007; Mount, 2012; McClintock, 2014). In other words, by being located *in situ* in a conventional network, AFNs must exist and compete within the very fabric of what they are attempting to be alternative to, hence their inevitable, uneven and partial, adoption of conventional food network characteristics. By definition, AFNs are *alternative,* which requires that the conventional aspect of food network is encompassing of the 'alternative' food network. In this light, AFNs are a direct result of the wider effects of the conventional food systems that influence both producers and consumers.

From the production angle, for example, the system dynamics engendered by neoliberalism and the conventional agri-food industry are forcing small-scale farms to seek alternatives to remain viable. They become 'alternative' as a strategy to add value to their enterprises, by diversifying (agritourism), experimenting with new economic models (CSA farms) and developing high-quality niche products (Renting et al., 2003). In addition, the same system dynamic forces AFN-type initiatives to also utilise infrastructures of conventional networks when necessary, as 'any viable alternative must necessarily address this [economic] shortfall and offer significant incentives as well as reassurances' (Mount, 2012: 111).

Similarly, consumer interest in AFNs is also a consequence of the conventional network. For example, the conventional network alienates consumers from their food by provoking concerns of food nutrition, food safety, food miles and taste (Sage, 2007). At the same time, 'the benefits of conventional food systems - including variety, low prices and convenience...have had a fundamental impact on consumer priorities' (Mount 2012: 111; see also DeLind 1999; Miele, 2006).

AFNs, and similar initiatives, are therefore just as much a 'reaction to', as they are an 'outgrowth from' capitalism, their 'rise as part of a protective counter-movements as well as its opportunistic expansion' (McClintock, 2014: 161). In the following section, I explore this ambiguity within the context of Chinese AFNs. I highlight first how they are protective and precarious enterprises, before identifying how AFNs make certain strategic interventions in order to expand.

Chinese AFNs as Protective and Precarious Enterprises

On a financial level, Chinese AFNs are generally operating in tougher conditions than their Western counterparts. The increased financial difficulty lies partly with the cost of conventional food in China, which is extremely cheap. Vegetables often cost 45p a kilo in China and, typically, ecologically produced vegetables on a small-sale farm would need to sell at £1.60 a kilo in order to be viable - a cost that would appear 'extortionate' for the average consumer. This issue of pricing is compounded when considering that consumer awareness about safe food or organic food is relatively restricted to a young and educated

middle-class (Liu et al., 2013), limiting the scope of 'aware' people 'willing-to-pay' extra for more expensive organic food.

Furthermore, consumers in China are widely sceptical of any produce that claims to be ecological or organic, despite having certification (Liu et al., 2013). Therefore, the decision to invest in costly certification may not necessarily add significant commercial value to the product as consumers doubt certification as a measure food quality. The added expectation consumers have when paying high-prices – in terms of food presentation and home delivery – further increases the financial pressure on the producer. Nor can the producer rely on consumer notions of 'goodwill' or 'ethical consumerism' to reduce this pressure as these sentiments are largely absent in China (Scott et al., 2014). In sum, to develop a brand and consumer base of sufficient depth is a long and arduous process for Chinese AFNs.

Also undermining the potential of AFNs to become viable are certain environmental constraints. AFNs and similar initiatives worldwide would all tend to state that the weather or pest control are the most significant challenges facing them when adopting ecological or organic techniques. In China, these environmental issues are compounded, due to the recent historical (over)use of pesticides / fertilisers at intense levels, and the near disastrous levels of water and soil pollution (Lu et al., 2015). The quality of the land the 'new farmers' initially invest in is often too degraded to produce ecological or organic food as it was - quite likely - previously used by farmers who used chemically-based farming techniques. 'New farmers' are therefore often required to spend additional investment, and time (usually three years), in order to 'clean' the land to prepare it adequately to produce ecological produce (O'Meara, 2016; Little, 2014). Furthermore, there is the problem of cross contamination if neighbouring farms are using pesticides and fertilisers. Thus, in the interim, AFN initiatives often have to rely on the additional enterprises and past savings.

Politically too, there are also telling constraints on AFNs in China. Whilst AFNs in the West are typically 'alternative' in the social and environmental values they create alongside their 'quality' produce (Whatmore et al., 2003), in China, 'alternativeness' cannot be valorised in the same way. Take for example China's NRRM which began in 2005 and is aimed at developing China's countryside through bottom-up solutions. Hale's (2013)

empirical work on NRRM projects has indicated that when rural co-ops attempted to construct non-profit activities based around developing aspects of civil society, funding would be severed, and peoples/organisations shut down. In contrast, money-making market-orientated rural enterprises are tolerated and often encouraged. Joseph Cheng - professor of political science at the City University of Hong Kong – similarly notes that rural development in China is encouraged by the CCP, 'in the sense that as long as you don't challenge the authorities, you are safe to keep making money – as long as you keep quiet.' (Wainwright, 2014). For rural co-ops and related initiatives, then, the balance between achieving legitimacy and offering an alternative to conventional commercial form and content is a precarious one - and suggests that having a 'loyalty to the Party' in China, is achieved - somewhat ironically - by having a 'loyalty to market'.

There are also certain social pressures inhibiting AFNs in China. One of the consequences of 'compressed modernity' (Chang, 2010) is that occupations associated with the pre-modern age are culturally looked-down upon. While traditionally a noble profession, farming in China is now, through the lens of rapid industrial development, a profession associated with being 'backward', 'unrefined' and 'unmodern'. 'New farmers' are thus under pressure from parents, grandparents and in some cases spouses, who view the agricultural business as a step backwards, one which undermines the previous generation's efforts to escape farming and the countryside. In the words of 'new farmer' Peter Pan (#4): 'my parents think I'm a little crazy, but my grandma…in fact it is difficult to visit her these days. My girlfriend also lives in the Guangzhou, so it's difficult'. Issues regarding children, and of raising and educating them in the countryside, also came up in discussions regarding the social and intergenerational challenges of being a 'new farmer' in China.

It is also imperative that AFNs have the necessary social capital (i.e. connections or *guanxi*) in order to liaise with local government and village councils smoothly (Si et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2017). Indeed, AFNs and similar-type rural initiatives depend on good organisational, marketing and communication capacities, aspects that are sometimes lacking in small-scale ecological co-ops (Yang et al., 2017). These attributes are essential if AFNs are to develop a wide membership base and are able to deliver produce over long distances (Shi et al., 2011) and can be developed through good *guanxi*. However, many rural

and peri-urban enterprises are unable to train or attract people with the necessary skills to reach out to their urban consumer base (Hale, 2013).

Another key issue identified by Yang et al. (2016) as a barrier to growth is the difficulty that 'new farmers' or entrepreneurs have in acquiring or consolidating land, especially on a smaller-scale. While government policy is beginning to make this an easier process for a 'new farmer' to lease land in a village, they still require consent from every smallholder involved. For example, leasing 7-8 hectares for twenty years could require up to 80 different signatures from smallholders (this was the case for Peter Pan's farm), creating a long, complex and onerous process.

Picture 11. New farmers (back row) with hired local villagers (front row) at Peter Pan's farm.

Whilst depicted as a barrier to peri-urban development, this complexity regarding land ownership also holds some key advantages. The onerous process of renting land for new farmers allows for local input in the 'new farmers' project, thus increasing the potential for an emerging reciprocal relationship between the two parties. This reciprocity could happen in the form of knowledge sharing regarding ecological techniques ('new farmers' seeking out village elders, who used to farm without chemicals, for ideas and villagers learning about the dangers of pesticides from the 'new farmers'). That land consolidation requires the 'new farmers' to integrate, understand and develop key connections with the

village is generally a positive outcome. Indeed, many of the 'new farmers' I talked to were at least discussing methods in which local labour could become more autonomously invested in the AFN. Peter Pan, for example, was trying to design a management model for his farm wherein the locals themselves had an invested interest in seeing the farm succeed using ecological principles. Whilst there was an awareness that the farmers would work 'harder' if they were personally invested, there was also a genuine empathy on the behalf of the 'new farmer' (Peter) to increase the livelihood of the local labourers.

Given the challenges Chinese AFNs face, which are typically more intense than in the Western example as just illustrated, it is understandable that (according to my informants) up to 90% of new AFN ventures are likely to fail. This, in turn, highlights how my fieldwork sites are outliers in terms of such success. 'Four Season Share' CSA farm, for example, has 1600 regular members – the most in China – and is the manager's third attempt in creating a working ecological-CSA initiative. These high barriers constraining Chinese AFNs explain why, alongside the very real and practical need for safe food, AFNs in China have emerged with a strong pragmatic focus. This precariousness of AFNs has forced them to make key strategic decisions in order to become more viable, which often foster forms of rural cosmopolitanism.

Chinese AFNs as Opportunistic and Expanding Enterprises

The particular stresses on AFNs in China has meant they have to be pragmatic, almost ruthlessly so, in order to remain viable. This pragmatism reveals itself in the strategic interventions made by Chinese AFNs, which are often aligned with the Chinese state interests, as opposed to emphasising 'alternativeness'. From my fieldwork, I have highlighted four forms of strategic interventions that AFNs in China have utilised:

- Taking advantage of government rural infrastructure investment
- Utilising government spatial planning projects
- Adapting to 'trust pressure'
- Exploring public procurement opportunities.

In practice, adopting these strategic interventions also often fosters forms of rural cosmopolitanism, which develops the Chinese countryside without resorting to traditional 'modernistic' forms of development that emphasise urbanisation.

The CCP's recent focus on investing in rural infrastructure has enabled AFN development by providing 'new farmers' the basic material means to invest in ecological agriculture. The Chinese government has been increasing its commitment to peri-urban and rural infrastructures significantly from 2006. This year marked the commencement of the 11th Five-Year-Pan (2006–2010), which shifted policy away slightly from an urbanisation focus towards 'new countryside construction' which saw an increase in rural investment (Lin et al., 2016).[48] Currently, rural investment in China lies at 3.4 trillion yuan ($495.2 billion) and has to be spent between 2016 and 2020 (Xinhua, 2017b) - a significant increase from the levels of rural investment 30 years ago. As a result, the Chinese countryside has improved on many fronts, including access to internet (Li, 2017), paved roads (Wong et al., 2013) and clean water (Yue et al., 2017). This has opened up the countryside for entrepreneurs and 'new farmers' to invest and create AFNs. With this infrastructure in place, many of the logistical and operational challenges AFNs face have been alleviated, especially in regards to connecting the farm to major city centres, their key markets. The importance of regional infrastructure for AFNs has been recent emphasised with Swedish AFN research, which has highlighted a positive correlation between an AFN's dependency on regional infrastructure, and their ability to scale-up (Aggestam et al., 2017: 71).

Government 'spatial planning' policies are also fostering rural-urban connection, by opening up opportunities for entrepreneurs to invest in rural development. As Ecological Civilization has emerged as a key government strategy, alongside its sister concept 'Beautiful China' (Xinhua, 2017a; Wan, 2013), a host of state-led initiatives, often focused on spatial designs, have also followed. AFNs have been able to take advantage of these strategic opportunities in a variety of ways that have encouraged a mixing of rural and urban populations.

The 'Greenway System' in the Pearl River Delta (Guangzhou) area, for example, is a network of high-quality bike and pedestrian pathways connecting nine cities in the region

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[48] This 'new countryside construction' is also often referred to as the 'New Socialist Countryside Movement'.

(Qiu, 2011). More than a scenic bike-route, the Greenway project is 'a set of top-down technological standards in managing urban and rural areas, landscape features, natural ecology and cultural resources' designed to reverse, or at least mediate, urban sprawl (Xu & Yeh, 2012: 397). These features enable local departments to collaborate with, and adapt planning regulations for, non-state actors in the construction of relevant facilities and infrastructure that also adhere to these standards – as peri-urban eco-agriculture enterprises have been able to do (Yang et al., 2016; Pic 12). In other words, if CSA farms can add to the beautification and development of the countryside, there is an opportunity for them to forge partnerships with certain local government projects. 'Four Season Share', for example, has been able to take advantage of this top-down provincial government-level Greenways project to navigate planning permissions in the village more easily, to acquire land at a cheaper rate, and to align itself with local government interests.

Picture 12. Tourism at Four Season Share.

Another example of CSAs strategically aligning with spatial projects is by working alongside 'Beautiful Village' projects. 'Beautiful Village' is one of many rural gentrification projects in China – which often take the phrase 'beautiful' or 'ecological' in their title – and are aimed at developing village industry, ecological remediation, ensuring agricultural efficiency and creating heritage and leisure facilities (see Lincoln & Madgin, 2018). Guangdong was one of the pilot provinces for the 'Beautiful Village' project, which began in 2013 and has now involved up to 89 peri-urban villages (Zhong & Gan, 2016).

Many rural village councils, however, have lacked the skills and know-how to apply for and implement such projects. Taking advantage of the skills of the 'new farmers', who may have recently invested in village land, villagers have been able to work with them to

create interesting partnership opportunities. With the 'Beautiful Village' funding, for example, acquiring investment for inns, restaurants and hiking/cycling trails in the village can help both the AFN, by attracting more members to the farm, and the village in general, by providing more employment opportunities and other economic activities in the area. In my interview with 'new farmer' Peter Pan, he spoke of plans to work with local village leaders to acquire 'beautiful village' status. Similarly, one of the owners of 'Beautiful Garden Farm' highlighted how, through the local government of the region and their designs on acquiring 'Beautiful Village' status, they were able to aid the government in the application process:

'*We were able to get some funding transferred to this village [where the AFN was located] to build additional roads, canals and power cables...the farm is bringing wealth and also culture [to the village]. Everything in fact. Because if they build a 'beautiful village, the citizens will go there.'* (New farmer: 2016, #2)

From a perspective of rural cosmopolitanism, such infrastructure development and spatial planning policies have enabled more movement between urban and rural populations, creating the potential for communities to be exposed to difference and for cordial connections to occur between China's rural villagers and urban-originating 'new farmers'. Given that AFNs often require delicate negotiations with between 'new farmers' and villages regarding land and labour, this suggests that achieving a form of 'rural cosmopolitanism' is crucial for the viability of AFNs in the long term.

There is however, a darker side to this form of cosmopolitanism that has undertones of 'bigotry'. Sometimes the 'new farmers' express sentiments suggesting that they view 'cosmopolitanism' as a one- sided exchange. This notion fits within the larger picture of Chinese 'civil society', which is governed by notions of a persons' *suzhi* (quality) (see Chapter 2). From the perspective of the CCP, *suzhi* is a reflection of a person's 'development' that entails physical, mental, and moral aspects (Jacka, 2009). As Shepherd & Yu (2013: 39) point out, in terms of economic development, this discourse of *suzhi* means there is no contradiction for the CCP to preserve rural areas (as heritages sites) and also promote development – i.e. AFNs, 'Beautiful Village' or mass tourism projects - in the same place. For the Chinese state, tourism will not only 'boost material development in areas that lack

resources other than culture. But it will also boost spiritual development by bringing higher quality urban residents into contact with the rural inhabitants of heritage sites. By serving as models of proper civil behaviour, this new class of consumer elites will guide rural residents toward a modern sensibility' (ibid: 39). In other words, 'cosmopolitanism' in China is an explicit state tool, which aims to cultivate rural subjectivities on a biased (and very questionable) understanding that urbanites i.e. 'new farmers' uphold a superior form of *suzhi.*

Many of the strategic interventions made by AFNs in China are also a response to the 'trust pressure' (see chapter 4) AFNs have to operate in. This 'trust pressure' has prompted AFNs to invest in strategies that depend on employing a diverse range of staff in order to develop a trusting relationship with the consumer. For example, AFNs have had to invest heavily in developing their social media capacity in order to maintain a personal relationship with their members.   At 'Four Season Share', they have a computerised office on the farm with about nine white-collar workers, who use social media to engage with the farms members. And this hi-tech aspect is only accelerating: whilst I was visiting 'Four Season Share', the manager of the AFN was planning to expand the ICT section of the farm to develop a dedicated farm 'app' for smart phones - which would require the hiring of specialist technical staff. This need for a variety of diverse skills, beyond farm labour, was also evident in the consistent development of technical strategies on the farm required to overcome the difficulties of organic farming – i.e. pest control, weeding, weather variabilities etc. – prompting the employment of graduates with degrees in agro-ecology.

This requirement to manage both the production (farm labour, organic techniques), distribution (the logistics of sending regular vegetable boxes to the city whilst keeping the food fresh) and the service elements (hosting family visits and 'farmhouse fun' (*nongjiale*) events) encourages AFNs to involve a wide range of employees. The mixing of populations that results from the diversity of participants involved in an AFN encourages rural cosmopolitanism to occur. This mix of people - migrant farm labours, the local villagers and the 'urban' staff of the farm - all have to work together in close proximity for the farm to operate effectively.

Public procurement as a strategic intervention is currently under-utilised in China but has great potential for widening the impact of AFNs. One CSA farm I visited (Peter Pan's farm), early in its development and struggling to create a stable member base, had begun to pitch its produce to local government departments and their associated canteens and restaurants in a nearby third-tier city to significant effect, and thus opening-up an unexplored market. Writing about public procurement opportunities in a Western context, Matacena (2016: 57) argues: 'through food procurement…city institutions can favour small-scale, local and ecological food suppliers, with the dual effect of providing healthier meals to individuals (especially to those most exposed to health risks, such as kids at school or hospital guests) and to distract money from mainstream global system, thus reinforcing the local economic fabric and strengthening relations between regional producers and urban areas' (see also Aggestam et al., 2017). A similar potential also exists in China, which could be potentially fruitful for both AFNs and the local governments themselves, as the latter will come under increasing pressure to display their 'ecological' credentials to Beijing.

These strategic interventions, which are aimed at making AFNs economically viable, highlight how Chinese AFNs emphasise pragmatism as opposed to notions of 'alternativeness' or ideology. The pragmatism of AFNs, both in terms of motivation and execution, emerges as a necessity, due to the omni-present challenges of pursuing ones 'strategic project' or self interest in China. In fact, the precariousness that these self-interested strategic projects have to cope with, suggests that 'their deftness in managing the scale, pace of change and complexity of contemporary China' (Tyfield, 2018: 117) must be celebrated. Indeed, the emphasis on pragmatism in AFN projects emphasises that 'alternativeness' alone - i.e. unique business models and maverick entrepreneurs - cannot sustain AFNs. Developing strategies that also stimulate consumer demand and create collaborations are also crucial (Aggestam et al., 2017: 70) - strategies which often foster forms of (rural) cosmopolitanism

This overtly pragmatic and instrumental focus of Chinese AFNs has, however, prompted some scholars to suggest that Chinese AFNs 'face [increased] genuine threats of incorporation and subordination within conventional food provision channels' due to their absence of 'alternativeness' (Si et al., 2015: 12). Indeed, AFNs that have been able to overcome the challenges of the initial start-up years have sometimes been able to develop

into successful, and even lucrative, ventures in the long term (Little, 2014). The resulting scale of some of these more successful AFN ventures has meant that, from a Western perspective, they may not be classified as AFNs - often-commercial growth is often equated to compromising the initiative's alternativeness (see Nost, 2014). In China, Luo & Gliessman (2016: 11-12) have noted however, that eco-agriculture 'has a more flexible meaning [than in the West], as it can include both big farms and small, local farms and commercial farms, self-sustaining farms and low-input farms'. This point, that 'small is not always alternative and big is not always conventionalized' is also gaining traction in Western AFN literature (Le Velly & Dufeu, 2016: 181). This is a perspective that recognises AFNs can be transformative even if they are large and commercial successful - largely due to the cosmopolitan aspects they can foster.

Picture 13. Four Season Share: Too large to be 'alternative'?

Taking this understanding of an AFN as a hybrid entity - between a precarious counter movement and a strategic opportunist enterprise – and as a flexible scalar organisation forward, this chapter will now turn to 'Xiedao Green Resort', a private enterprise that could be considered as a mega-AFN. Whilst not one of my fieldwork sites, Xiedao is recognised here for containing attributes similar to my fieldwork sites, albeit on an extended scale. Thus, this section will explore how AFNs on larger scales have made

strategic interventions and to highlight more visibly the forms of rural cosmopolitanism that AFNs can encourage.

Xiedao Green Resort – A Driver, and a Product, of Peri-Urban Development?

The example of Xiedao Green Resort in Beijing illustrates how strategic AFN positioning, when used effectively, can have increasingly cumulative impacts at larger scales. Since its establishment in the late 1990s, Xiedao has gradually grown from a small AFN-type initiative into a large 180ha agricultural complex involved in agricultural production, food processing and tourism (Yang et al., 2010).[49] Xiedao has since emerged in the literature as a leading example of peri-urban agriculture in China, for its success in growing the local economy, creating rural-urban synergies, maintaining its profitability as an organic farm, and for creating an area of ecological and agricultural vitality in a rapidly growing urban area (Yang et al., 2010; 2014; 2016). To reach this level of size and success, Xiedao has taken advantage and exploited fully the strategic opportunities presented that expanded as the market for agro-services developed (Yang et al., 2010). The opportunity for Xiedao to engage in its strategic interventions is partly a consequence of being located in Beijing's peri-urban area; as China's capital, Beijing is a megacity that is both severely water-stressed and (air) polluted, whilst also containing a sizeable middle class. Hence, the market for safe or organic food in Beijing is arguably the most developed in China due to the presence of a large food-safety-aware population.

Importantly, Xiedao's rapid growth has occurred 'without support and regulation from the government', instead being 'purely driven by the market' (Yang et al., 2010: 376). Thus, Xiedao fits the model, as outlined in chapter 2 (see table 2), of a disruptive innovation which retrospectively had government investment (in the form of technology) and support. This retrospective support came about ultimately as the state saw its own strategic interests being fostered by Xiedao's development trajectory. These state interests were being fulfilled in variety of ways, involving economic, environmental and social aspects.

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[49] 90% of the Xiedao's land is used for agricultural production and processing, 10 % for tourism - with the latter bringing in 72% of the revenue (Yang et al., 2010).

Economically, Xiedao was appealing for state investment as it is consistently increasing its employments opportunities – with decent wages – providing jobs for both local and migrant labour (Yang et al., 2010: 380). Xiedao is able to generate an economic multiplier effect for its local community, by providing forms of indirect employment and through supplying local markets with their own organic produce, which in turn allows the local markets to charge customers at a higher premium (ibid).

Environmentally, Xiedao is also lauded; its 2002 investment in a sewage-treatment facility allows the farm to treat all its agricultural and tourism waste - including the waste of nearby communities – and recycle it for resources later (Yang et al., 2010). Extensive solar and geothermal energy is also used to generate electricity alongside Xiedao's strict use of organic farming methods, preserving green spaces and agricultural land in a rapidly growing city.

On a social level, Xiedao is recognised for integrating urban-rural development which, through its model of agri-tourism, is amenable to protecting and promoting local culture, reducing the pressure for migrant employment in urban areas and providing short-distance tourism for both low-income (under 1000rmb a month) and high-income earners – thus improving multiple aspects of social life (Yang et al., 2010).

The sum of these productive outcomes of Xiedao is an amplification of the rural cosmopolitan factors identified with the smaller AFNs. The diverse range of staff required to operate the farm coupled with the wide spread of interested visitors has meant that Xiedao has emerged as an increasingly cosmopolitan area of peri-urban Beijing (Yang et al., 2010; 2014; 2016).

The success of peri-urban projects like Xiedao has meant that local governments, in this case the Beijing municipality (since 2006), have begun to facilitate and integrate local peri-urban agriculture initiatives into city-planning zoning strategies. The form of development that these types of peri-urban agricultural-based enterprises tend to encourage is recognised by the state as being able to support key policy objectives:

(1) improve food quality for the growing urban population; (2) maintain social stability by creating rural employment and increasing rural income; (3) improve rural and urban

environments by reducing dust and the heat island effect; (4) establish an effective water management and recycling system; and (5) integrate agriculture into urban planning to use urban and peri-urban land more efficiently. (Yang et al., 2016: 231).

Particularly important, from both a Chinese government perspective and that of the pragmatic 'new farmer', is wheather the above aims can be successful when framed by the logics of modernisation. In other words, the task of peri-urban agriculture is to not only to change meanings and processes behind agriculture, but to also improve the competitiveness of agriculture as an industry against the urban functions provided by other peri-urban developments (see Yang et al., 2010; 2014; 2016).

The example of Xiedao reflects again a core ambiguity of AFNs, as an enterprise that has both 'counter-movement' and expansionist aspects, and emphasises how this ambiguity can be a productive force for AFN development. On the one hand, the diversification of Xiedao, to involve farming with leisure and tourism, is a 'survival strategy…[that] caters to the new consumption requirements of urbanites, who are increasingly concerned with food quality and the social and environmental values of peri-urban rural areas' (Yang et al., 2016: 228). On the other hand, through its commercial success, Xiedao has been 'able to create jobs and improve the living stands of peri-urban communities and simultaneously provide high quality open spaces and recreation opportunities for urban people' (Yang et al., 2010: 375). This tension does not operate as an impasse but instead fosters a pragmatic approach which 'plays the game of capitalism' - albeit with Chinese characteristics – and opens up the potential to go beyond it. And this can be achieved through a strategic alignment with the state, even if the state is pursuing a neoliberal agenda and if explicit support from the state is only adopted retrospectively. That Xiedao was able to prompt state policy in accordance with its interests suggest that Xiedao acts as real driver that is affecting the development of the wider region.

In sum, this model provided by Xiedao outlines a possible similar trajectory for the smaller AFNs used as case studies in this PhD. Indeed, as China's middle-class develops and cities beyond the first tier in China become increasingly cosmopolitan, similarly scaled enterprises to Xiedao have already emerged and are driving peri-urban development and cosmopolitanism accordingly. Indeed, this is the case already in the areas surrounding

Tianjin, Wuhan, Chengdu, Zhengzhou (Yang et al., 2010), and with the cities located in the Pearl River Delta.

Can AFNs be Transformative on a Regional Scale?

AFNs in China are still able to provide a critique of the mainstream food network despite the particular intensities of the economic, environmental, social and political pressures they are under and their emphasis on pragmatism. Whilst absent an emphasis of 'alternativeness' in a Western sense, this critique is not completely passive or flexible; it is conditioned by certain factors that are influencing its impetus and direction. These conditioning factors largely stem from food safety issues, the material qualities of food (Chapter 4) and evolving middle class subjectivities (Chapter 5). As noted in this chapter this critique of the mainstream food system also expresses itself in how AFNs adopt strategies for expansion; strategies that, while not overt in opposition, are able to prompt policy changes in their favour retrospectively. In other words, the critique on offer by Chinese AFNs occurs passively.

Although this pragmatic approach within AFNs is passive, it is not however completely politically neutral. The issue of food in China has always been inherently political to some degree, as a central tenant of legitimacy for Chinese governance is the adequate provision of sustenance for its people (Bell, 2008). In many ways, then, AFNs are an implicit suggestion that the state, via the conventional food network, is unable to adequately provide (safe) food. The capacity for food issues to become politicized has been noted by Yang (2013), for example, who has hinted that the online activity around safe food is becoming volatile enough to provoke increased state vigilance over the issue. Klein's (2009; 2013) ethnographic work on food safety issues in Kunming similarly highlights the politics of food provisioning by highlighting how concerns over the quality of foodstuffs is, behind closed doors, provoking state criticism. This political edge regarding AFNs, whilst not overt, shapes the direction of this 'quiet' form of critique.

At the scale of Ecological Civilization, the direction of this pragmatic critique is guided, to some degree, by the CCP itself. For example, in terms of political language,

government slogans can be utilised by AFN practitioners to acquire legitimacy for their own projects, despite these slogans often meaning 'whatever the state needs them to mean at any given time' (Schumilas, 2013: 172). Although CCP slogans' like Ecological Civilization are often interpreted by participants – and those who are involved in environmental movements, co-ops and AFNs - as 'meaning everything and nothing', their ambiguity also allows activists and AFN organisers to align themselves with government-led strategies (ibid: 172). Put another way, the CCP is providing activists with the means to subtly shaping policy on their own behalf:

"The reform policy of the country leads to the detachment of peasant from villages and we are trying to help them solve this, but some might worry about gathering of people together at the farmers' market because it could lead to unrest. It can't get too big. On the other hand, we think the government could be brought to support this. So to fit in we stay with the government and use their words so they will see us as allies." (AFN organiser cited in Schumilas, 2013: 173)

This quotation is reflective of the political shrewdness and intelligence of the participants who recognise that their 'alternative' activities or civic movements need to be aligned with those of the state in order to maintain a productive relationship. This strategic approach, which is based on appeasing the state, allows AFNs to escapes censorship.

From a Western perspective, this form of passive critique can be missed. For example, whilst Day & Schneider's (2017) argument that Chinese AFNs are reflecting a neoliberal logic rings true, it fails to recognise that as AFNs 'become increasingly institutionalised and recognised by the mainstream, [they] may appear more reformist than radical, but nevertheless represent[s] a paradigmatic shift' (McClintock, 2014: 166; Andrée et al., 2015). Indeed, returning to Hale's (2013) empirical work on NRRM projects, due to the censorship of overtly 'alternative' projects, the best-case scenarios he highlighted were the rural initiatives that combined typical market-orientated commercial activities with the development of cultural activities. These hybrid examples should not however, be considered as a poor second place, but rather an example of business-as-*unusual* appearing as business-as-*usual*. This kind of oversight, that Western critical thought is particularly

liable to make, occurs because this hybridity or incremental shift only becomes viewed as an example of radical system change in hindsight.

To avoid this tendency, famed feminist geographers Katherine Gibson & Julie Graham (known for their participatory-based research agenda) for example, frame their research by asking the question of 'what can we learn from things that are happening on the ground' now, as opposed to leading with 'what is "good" or "bad" about these things that informs so many investigations' (Gibson-Graham, 2011: 11). In other words, their framing of issues refrains from judging the immediate positive or radical capacities for change. When applied to Chinese AFNs, this framing highlights how a pragmatic outlook is not mutually exclusive to radicalism, especially if a longer-term perspective is taken. Indeed, the potential of such incremental developments, in aggregate and over decades, to yield titanic and qualitative change is now in abundant evidence, as this is the whole history of China over the past 40 years - and is arguably the greatest story of the age.

Evidence for the 'business-as-unusual' dynamic that is emerging through this pragmatic form of critique is the evolving forms of rural cosmopolitanism emerging in concert with AFNs. This rural cosmopolitanism is visible with China's AFNs that have developed around a larger strategic opportunist vision which is encouraging an increasing mix of rural and urban populations. This population mix is an especially visible phenomenon in China, a country that has a uniquely marked and formally defined urban-rural divide. In these AFN spaces, the local indigenous people of the area, the hired migrant labour who often originate from different Chinese provinces, agro-ecology graduates, urbanites, highly skilled IT technicians and the highly educated, well-connected managers that own the farm, are often mingling and interacting on a daily basis (see for example the 'CSA movement in China' video). An international element is also becoming associated with Chinese AFNs, with Schumilas & Scott (2016), revealing how AFNs in China are beginning to cultivate ties with influential social movements that are global in scope. The result of these interconnected interactions, evolving understandings, and the changing practices - that such a mix of population brings - encourages the people populating AFNs, and the nearby region, to remake themselves in a cosmopolitan fashion.

Whilst there are barriers to cosmopolitanism in rural areas, unequal power relations and instances of 'bigotry' and prejudice, the reshaping of communities and individuals through the interaction of diverse population can still occur (Krivokapic-Skoko et al. 2018: 10). In other words, the potential for a cosmopolitan-informed renegotiating of the rural and regional places that AFNs inhabit can productively transform China despite the rural cosmopolitanism being uneven and partial in some instances. Thus, going beyond the Chinese peasant-based stereotypes of the rural, AFNs are populating rural and peri-urban China with cosmopolitan communities that suggests AFNs can have a wider impact on the region - even if these regions are already considered developed.

From a historical perspective of Chinese (rural) cosmopolitanism, the current urban-rural divide of a 'modern' city and a backward countryside in China is arguably an anomaly. Throughout China's long agriculturally dominate history, cosmopolitan aspects have always been present in China's rural sphere (Lovell, 2006), except in modern post-Mao China. China's famed painting *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* for example,[50] captures the levels of high urbanisation in ancient China (Song dynasty) and the fluidity of mobility between town and country. The painting hints at the variety of different economic activities occurring in both the urban and rural sections of the picture, with the latter presented as the more desirable site for living. From a historical perspective then, AFNs are a rejuvenation of (rural) cosmopolitanism, which signals against China having an essential propensity for a radical or violent urban/rural dualism.

Picture 14. Along the River During the Qingming Festival

Source: www.artisoo.com
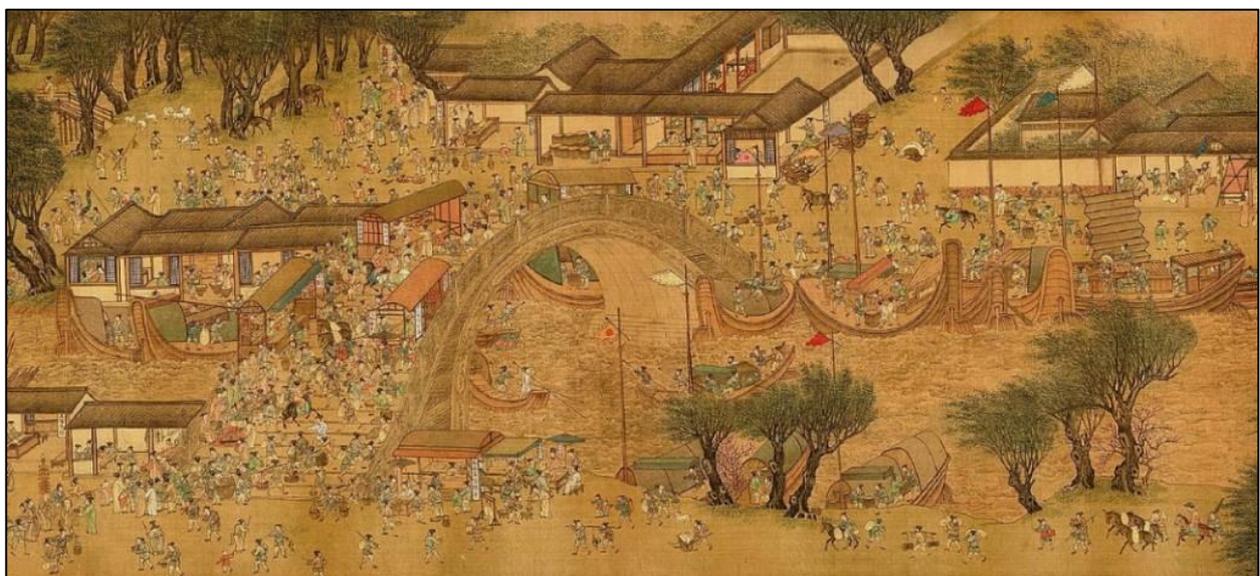
This idea of rural China as a historical cosmopolitan space resonates with Gibson-Graham's (2006) work that highlights how local economies are sites of radical heterogeneity and are populated by an array of capitalist and non-capitalist enterprises. Rather than affording capitalism the totality and power that many other critical thinkers have, Gibson & Graham have made normative interventions at the interstices of capitalism that have done much to displace its assumed dominance. They argue that there is a potential to create a tapestry of alternative (non-capitalist) landscape uses, thorough the development of experimental-orientated enterprises. These enterprises could coalesce and 'develop a whole new urban and regional sociality, spatiality and mode of belonging' (Gibson-Graham, 2011: 11) whilst still being governed by a capitalist regime. The development of AFNs and similar pragmatic and experimental projects - in China's Ecological Civilization - could similarly be framed in terms of sociality, spatiality and belonging - particularly in how they recast rural-urban relations and prompt forms of cosmopolitanism.

This phenomenon of 'a whole new form of urban and regional sociality' is perhaps most manifest in the emerging mega-AFN enterprises, like 'Four Season Share' and Xiedao. These AFNs have been successful as 'environmentally friendly' economic-multipliers that can add to social life and are recasting the rural-urban divide. Notably both Xiedao and my case studies began without state support but were able to exploit the strategic opportunities indirectly created by the state in order to foster later and increased growth. At the largest scale (Xiedao), the accomplishments of the AFN led to direct government policy that would subsequently promote and encourage the development of similar peri-urban agricultural enterprises. Put another way, the tension concerning the effect AFNs have on the wider region is a misnomer, as AFNs can emerge as both a driver and a product of regional development due to the circular and iterative processes - between state and society - involved.

Similar to Lacour & Puissant's (2007:743) concept of 're-urbanity', AFNs are also a process that attempts to 'squar[e] the circle' by searching for the 'urban countryside' or the

'city in the countryside.' By focussing on the pragmatic strategies of AFNs, Chinese farms and Chinese culture are evidently influencing each other continuously in co-production in search of a similar aim. This process of co-producing rural cosmopolitanism which, as with 're-urbanity', 'yesterday, could have been a joke, or thought to be utopian, is [now] becoming a great expectation for many people who are less sensitive to definition and dichotomy and more keen on new ways of life and uses of spaces' (ibid). Equally, Ecological Civilization will amount to an amalgamation of these co-productive practices that are fostering new forms of cosmopolitanism, new uses of spaces, and evolving lifestyles.

Ecological Civilization as Rural Cosmopolitanism

Under the policies of Ecological Civilization, and as a result of institutional critique through pragmatic means, AFNs have been able to develop forms of rural cosmopolitanism. In practice, this rural cosmopolitanism occurs as a ruralisation of global (Western) capitalism. This ruralisation is not explicit or pre-determined, but a result of China fully modernising, whilst maintain it 'peasantry' or rural indigenous culture (See Wen et al., 2012). This dynamic of ruralisation, whilst formulated as a plan of new 'urbanization', occurs differently to traditional urbanization approaches. China's latest Five-Year-Plan (2016-2020) policy of 'balancing urban rural development', for example, has been described in white papers as shifting 'to a new urbanization approach seeking for high quality of urban life and human-centric Ecological Civilization' (Lin et al., 2016: 3). In peri-urban areas however, this typical urbanisation-centric policy has led to the restructuring and repositioning of agriculture as an industry. For example, changes have occurred in relation to: a) the urban market, which is seeking green spaces, healthier food, and tourism; b) technological inputs, in the form of smart farming techniques and advanced ecological recycling systems; c) the self-upgrading of management structures, which has to adopt a modern business management structure in order to accommodate the different sectors (farming, processing, catering, services); and d) how the farms adapt, align and influence new policy ideas and aid sources that are attempting to 'modernise' the rural (see also Yang et al., 2014). In other words, these new forms of peri-urban agriculture are a departure from the typical one-sided relationship that conventional farms tended to have with a more dominant urban sector. Indeed, the urban

sector has traditionally dictated to the rural sphere, confining it to only the distribution and production of food (Yang et al., 2014: 637).

So whilst masked as a typical urbanisation policy, in reality Ecological Civilization marks a move away from a development orthodoxy that argues 'agrarian development should give way to industrialization as soon as famines and sustained hunger are no longer being experienced' (Dixon & Richards, 2015: 200). The emerging amalgamation of agriculture with 'new farmers', ecopreneurs and eco-businesses - often utilising 'smart' farming techniques – for example, has led to high-tech forms of farming that uses soil sensors, smartphones, climate-controlled shipping containers and drones to apply computer-formulated doses of fertiliser (Bloomberg, 2017; Little, 2014) alongside forms of agri-tourism (Yang, 2012; Yang et al., 2010). This is a move away from a typical industrialization process, in which peasants become petty commodity producers in large mechanised farms. China's AFNs and similar ecological farming initiatives are enhancing the interactions between agriculture and urban economies. This is helping restore agriculture as an autonomous industry, due to the increasing 'inputs of technology and inter-relationships with other industries, such as various service sectors, strengthening the profile of agricultural development' (Yang et al., 2014: 637). My experiences at Four Season Share, for example, were more reminiscent of a hi-tech start-up then a conventional farm, due to its consistent attempts at innovation, especially in their designs to create an app for (organic) farming, whilst nevertheless being situated in rural setting surrounded by tradition villages.

What this era of Ecological Civilization and AFNs suggests is that the agricultural and non-agricultural activities of the 'new farmers' are becoming more valued by governments, business and civil society. This increase in 'value' is reflected by: policy changes slowly being made by the state (often retrospectively) in favour of rural and peri-rural initiatives; the increasing market opportunities for ecological produce; and the evolving middle-class subjectivities which helps facilitate the emergence of projects like AFNs (chapter 5). Thus, agriculture has an emerging new dynamic, which is involving industries like hotels, tourism, food processing, research and development, technology services as well as the conventional industries of grain products and animal feedstuffs (Yang et al., 2014). By alleviating the dependence of farms on agricultural production, AFN and similar initiatives - agri-tourism (Yang et al., 2016; 2014; 2010; Sanders, 2006) and eco-tourism (Newton & Franklin, 2011) -

have been able to scale-up and recast rural-urban relations (Marsden et al., 2011; Lin, 2002). Together, these enterprises are reducing the rural sector's dependence on the urban agricultural demands.

This recasting of the rural is also evolving outside of agriculture, with Chinese 'artists' also returning to the land. As an interesting parallel, their return to the land is occurring both as a result of Xi Jinping's 2014 edict - which declares 'that artists, film-makers, and TV personalities' need to be 'sent to live among the masses in rural areas to "form a correct view of art"' - and also of their own accord (Wrainwright, 2013). As Chinese cities have grown to epic scales, and so to have the problems of urbanisation – pollution, overcrowding, stress – many have become disenchanted and are looking again towards a rural idyllic as places to live - often with a desire to also help rejuvenate rural areas (ibid).

This rural resurgence in China may be termed as a ruralisation of Western modernity, one that is altering the traditional rural-urban relationship model underpinned by capitalist forms of market exchange. This process is distinctly Chinese, and is a different experience to that which the US, Australia or colonial Africa had regarding agricultural development. As hinted by the manager of 'Four Season Share', the rural-urban relations in China are not comparable to the US model:

This issue [of mega-farms] doesn't exist in China. Large scale farms won't work here; there won't be big companies like that. The Americans extinguished the natives. How can the Chinese do the same? It will cause social conflicts. How did America solve the land issue? War. They got rid of the native Indians. And the land became private. This can't happen in China. China doesn't have vast lands like America either. We only have 7% of the world's [arable] land yet our population makes up 19%. How many native citizens are there here? 400 to 500 billion. What are you going to do with them? If you fight with them, what happens to social stability? (New farmer: 2016, #1)

The manager's notion of 'social stability' ultimately stems from a recognition that the social fabric of China has a significant rural element to it. The countryside has a much stronger and a different personal and cultural significance in China than is the case in the Western world. Substantial levels of China's population are still considered as 'rural', or if urban-based, they still have strong ties to an ancestral rural hometown. Thus, the dualism between agriculture

and city, rural and urban that is reflected the US, in which entire continental landmasses are fashioned for agricultural use in order to accommodate rising megacities, is not a framework that applies to China.

Therefore, the dualism behind China's rural-urban divide, characterised by the household registration (*hukou*) system and the stereotype of the 'backward peasant', is perhaps more a manifestation of China's encounter with the alien system of (Western-dominated) global capitalism, than an example of indigenous development (He et al., 2015; Sit & Wong, 2013; Wen et al., 2012). To put another way, China had to 'play the game' of capitalism, at an incredibly accelerated level – hence 'compressed modernity' (Chang, 2010) – in order to match Western levels of development and thus adopted a (enhanced) dualistic rural-urban relations to achieve this. However, as China's urbanization process achieves a modicum of 'self-propelling' momentum (which under Mao and Deng Xiaoping was forced), there is now the reciprocal dynamic in which a new and now-distinctively-Chinese process of rural/urban mutual influence is emerging. Unsurprisingly then, a rising China would be one that is beginning to develop a different, and more endogenous and possibly 'balanced', relation of urban and rural – albeit with a long way to go. This is precisely one of the goals of the NRRM, which is arguing for an alternative form of modernity that has a distinct rural basis (Sit & Wong, 2013; Wen et al., 2012).

In this light, a ruralisation of Western capitalism is therefore essential in order to mitigate the periodic episodes of crisis that are endemic to global capitalism and have frequently destabilised China in the recent past (He et al., 2015). Indeed, it is for this reason China was able to weather the 2008 financial crisis better than the Western world, due to the capacity of rural China to reabsorb those who were temporary left out of work in the cities - thus preventing national unrest. The next crises, economic or ecological, which would likely severely affect the coastal cities of China, could again prompt a sudden migration event, from urban to rural areas, at an increased and far more significant level. In such a scenario, forms of rural cosmopolitanism would be critical, increasing the capacity of rural China to absorb such a shock and, in turn, ruralise capitalism.

This alternative and rural Chinese modernity, characterised by the development of AFNs and 'farmhouse fun' in China's countryside, is also a reaction to the recent memory of

famine and political violence. Indeed, a key tenet driving the intellectual thought behind the NRRM is the notion that rural China – in the absence of colonies - has operated as a 'sink' for the external crisis resulting from global capitalism (He et al., 2015; Wen et al., 2012; Pan & Du, 2011) and so rural China has to function as a site of 'resilience' against global crisis (Sit & Wong, 2013: 164). It is as a site of resilience that rural China's potential to 'ruralise' global capitalism with Chinese 'cosmopolitan' characteristics emerges.

The role of Ecological Civilization during this process, that has global capitalism being ruralised, is to ensure rural cosmopolitanism occurs without the upheaval, political radicalism or potential famine this process could instigate. Ecological Civilization resonates then with what Beck (2010: 258) describes as a 'cosmopolitan imperative' that has emerged alongside the challenges of global environmental change:

'…the anticipation of climate change sets a fundamental transformation in motion in the here and now. Ever since it has ceased to be disputed that the ongoing climate change is man-made and has catastrophic consequences for nature and society, the cards in society and politics have been dealt anew – worldwide. That's why climate change by no means leads directly and inevitably to apocalypse; it also affords the opportunity of overcoming the nation-state narrowness of politics and of developing a cosmopolitan realpolitik in the national interest.'

As environmental change is ultimately ambivalent on a global scale, cosmopolitanism (in the form of global cooperation) is forced, for all humanity is dependent on a functioning biosphere. In this context, Ecological Civilization is providing a politically legitimate language of 'ecology', as tool for Chinese citizens and organisations to articulate Beck's (2010: 258) 'cosmopolitan imperative' without pushing for revolutionary change. In other words, Ecological Civilization is giving legitimacy to China's citizens to 'culturally transcend' from an 'industrial civilization' into a different 'world' – without letting loose on its more radical implications. So whilst there is an underlying urgency to this 'cosmopolitan imperative', pragmatism is still emphasised over radicalism with this form of Chinese 'cosmopolitanization'. This pragmatic form of cosmopolitanization, in the fashion of Ecological Civilization, just might be a productive response to the 'cosmological rift', for it

allows China to only 'glance' into the abyss without being paralysed or overwhelmed when the abyss stares back.

Chapter 7

How is Ecological Civilization able to do Productive 'Work' as an Idea or Concept?

In this final chapter, I conclude the thesis in three ways. First, an overview of Ecological Civilization is provided within the specific context of China. In this section, I explore how it works as a tool of governance and add nuance to the common Western projections of Ecological Civilization. Second, Ecological Civilization is discussed in the context of the three key tensions associated with AFNs in the West. I argue that in China these tensions act as productive forces that reveal insights about the nature of Ecological Civilization. Finally, I bring Ecological Civilization and AFNs together to suggest Ecological Civilization is a pragmatic project with an ambiguous end goal that works effectively as a mobilising strategy for local projects like AFNs.

Within the context of China, Ecological Civilization is foremost a political slogan of the CCP that acts as a guiding directive for policy. Its role and 'effectiveness', therefore, can only make sense when taken alongside China's unique developmental trajectory. Since 1978, this developmental trajectory has faced significant and arguably unprecedented complex challenges, exaggerated by China's experience of 'compressed modernity' (Chang, 2010; Han & Shim, 2010). The question of how to govern China adequately - a country that has a diverse population over 1.4 billion, has increasing levels of economic inequality, a large urban rural divide, systematic corruption and is under significant environmental pressures - is fundamental to understanding the purpose of Ecological Civilization as a policy. Furthermore, the implementation and formulation of all national policies in China must not only accommodate these above challenges, but also harness the sometimes-contradictory forces of tradition, socialism, development and global engagement to achieve some modicum of stability (Jing, 2017). This balancing act requires deft co-ordination on behalf on the CCP as, in the context of climate change, they are unable to simply cut emissions abruptly because the political costs of a fall in economic growth would be too high (Li, 2009: 1056). Thus, to prevent China failing as a state, the non-radical imaginary of Ecological Civilization serves as a valuable tool that can accommodate China's cultural forces, whilst also balancing the imperative for growth and the fast-approaching ecological limits.

China's transition towards Ecological Civilization is perhaps the most complex challenge the CCP has faced. Since the opening up period, China's relationship with global capitalism has continued to deepen, increasing the complexity of Chinese society manifold (Tyfield, 2018). This complexity has reached a point where the challenge of circumventing vested interests whilst also negotiating the interconnectedness of public issues is proving to be increasingly difficult in China, with Xi Jinping recently suggesting China has reached peak incremental reform (Jing, 2017: 41). In this regard, Ecological Civilization has far more 'work' to do than its predecessors of 'Material', 'Spiritual' and 'Political' civilization. The 'experiments and partial reforms' in contemporary China for example 'are less meaningful' then they were in the past as a response to past challenges and have far higher 'experimental costs' than before (ibid). Indeed, these past civilization narratives - which attempted to stimulate economic growth, reduce inequality and tackle corruption – were facing minor challenges in comparison to Ecological Civilization, which is attempting to approach this cosmological rift regarding human development and ecological limits.

The complexity underlying Ecological Civilization suggests it will emerge as a project that has the potential to foster ecological disaster as much as it has the capacity to transition China successfully away from an 'industrial' civilization. The contradictory accounts of China's environmental record reflects this uncertainty: at the same time China is being lauded globally for its ambitious environmental policies and climate leadership, China also makes the news as the world's top emitter of greenhouse gases, whose emissions increased again in 2017 (Wong, 2018); in the same breath that China is developing the world's largest floating solar farm over a defunct coal mine (Chow, 2017), China's rivers are also turning red from the dumping of toxic waste (Kirkpatrick, 2014).

The complex scale of China's increasing environmental problems - air, water soil pollution, desertification, biodiversity loss, cancer villages (see Shapiro, 2012) - are far beyond the abilities of the Chinese state alone to manage. Ecological Civilization is therefore required to mobilise and animate society as a whole in this endeavour. Simultaneously, however, the potential for ordinary people to overthrow the CCP is not lost on the state (Hilton, 2013) - with China's history of revolution, famine and the unrest of 1989 centred on Tiananmen Square still within living memory. Thus, Ecological Civilization is also required to serve as a mechanism that can negotiate this tension between economic aspiration and

environmental degradation, whilst also avoiding revolutionary sentiment. In other words, Ecological Civilization is not a 'call to arms' against polluting industry in the same way the Cultural Revolution was a call against 'tradition'. In Ecological Civilization, 'industry' is not being demonized, rather 'green' economic growth is highlighted as a path to a form of moral superiority, in which 'dirty' industrial development is singled out as the key symbol of a discontented civilization.

The emerging transition towards an Ecological Civilization has therefore given economic development in China a green twist. Deng Xiaoping's famous 'cat' analogy, for example, which outlined China's ideologically-free form of economic development - 'it does not matter if a cat is white or black as long as it catches mice' - has been adjusted to emphasise that now only 'green' mice can be caught (Hu, 2014). Similarly, Zhang Xinsheng, the elected president of International Union for the Conservation of Nature has said, in a 2016 interview, that Ecological Civilization 'implies a transformation of civilizations that does not eliminate the commercial civilization because these two are mutually reinforcing' (Hansen & Liu, 2017: 323). These sentiments appear to echo the dominant Western discourse of 'green capitalism', which suggests the planet can be saved by extending market relations to 'nature', i.e. creating forms of 'natural capital' (Hawkins et al., 1999). Whilst these above sentiments seem congruent with 'green capitalism', Ecological Civilization is not a replication of this approach as advocated by many in the West. Indeed, not only is it highly contentious whether a green form of capitalism is even possible (York & Rosa, 2003; Sullivan, 2009; Foster et al., 2011), China is not a capitalist system (in the Western sense) with a democratically elected government. Therefore, green capitalism would not 'work' in China as it would in the West, and from the perspective of the CCP it has to 'work' in some sense, as the CCP's legitimacy depends on providing capable governance.

Although commentators have used specific Chinese case studies to highlight features of green capitalism (Mathews, 2014) and its sister concept of ecological modernisation (Mol, 2006; Zhou, 2015), equally scholars have also used China to highlight alternative examples of environmental governance. China, for example has also become associated with 'environmental authoritarianism' (Beeson, 2010; Gilly, 2012), alongside contrasting examples of productive environmental activism (Geall, 2013) that are capable of organising into effective mass protests (Yeh et al., 2013). For many Chinese intellectuals, particular

those of the NRRM (Wen et al., 2012; He et al., 2015), Ecological Civilization is entirely opposite to 'green capitalism' and represents an alternative and a necessary 'fall back' in anticipation of global economic (and climatic) crisis. Ecological Civilization therefore is clearly more than a form of 'green capitalism', reflecting instead a constellation of models that often warp and distort each other. Indeed, 'environmental development' in China is shaped by the often contrasting top-down and bottom-up governance processes interact (see Moore, 2014; Lo, 2015). That there is a variation of different models being applicable at once in China suggests that 'if there is a 'China model', its most outstanding feature is the willingness to experiment with different models' (Dirlik, 2012: 277).

This complexity regarding 'the China model' is especially manifest through the lens of innovation. For example, a core critique of the green capitalism discourse, recently asserted by American sociologist Jesse Goldstein (2018), is how the transformative potential of socio-technical innovations in the West is ultimately neutralized in order to create short-term financial gains. In other words, entrepreneurial solutions to 'save the planet' attempt to do so by using technologies which create 'non-disruptive disruptions' which then deliver 'solutions' that essentially ignore the core causes of the underlying problems (ibid). In a Chinese context, however, this critique is not as valid due to China's unique constellation of forces and models. As shown in chapter two, the process of innovation in China is profoundly different from that of the West and occurs as an unintended result from a 'unique combination of forces at macro- and meso-level' (Tyfield, 2018: 108). The resulting innovation 'spin-offs' from these forces are not necessarily 'hi-tech cutting edge', but more likely pragmatic, 'low-cost, personally customized and/or easier-to- use and/or – repair offerings of ever-improving quality' with a potential for immediate 'mass manufacturing' (ibid: 107) - characteristics which are arguably, far more favourable to instigating form of low carbon transition (ibid: 118).

Counter-intuitively (from a Western perspective and that also of the CCP), it is precisely the CCP's 'authoritarian top-down focus on (and popular, bottom-up distaste for) social disorder' in conjunction with the structured uncertainty / fragmented authoritarian style of governance, that is fostering the productive, disruptive and widely utilised form of innovation in China (Tyfield, 2018: 118). This innovation process not only prompts socio-economic change, but also legitimises the CCP as it emerges indirectly, as a productive force

for the benefit of many. Take for example the recent rapid take-up of mobile payments in China like 'Ali-pay'. Whilst a transformative innovation in itself that has moved China towards a cashless society, it is also the resulting spin-off innovations like the car ride-hailing app 'Didi' and the overnight explosion of bike-sharing start-ups like 'Mobike' and 'Ofo' that have gone on to significantly transform China's social and economic life. These innovations, whilst once small-scale and niche in use, have in an incredible short space of time affected change not only at the level of wealthy urban elites, but also for those in the margins of society who have modified these innovations to their own advantage i.e. Taobao villages (see chapter 2).

In the context of Ecological Civilization, there is a call for this innovation and experimentation to involve a 'green' dimension that extends beyond the state and state-owned enterprises; to include entrepreneurs wishing to innovate with green(er) businesses (Tyfield, 2018), and to those in rural villages, who are wanting to protest against pollution (Hansen & Liu, 2017). Crucially, this potential for 'activism', 'innovation' and 'experimentation' in the green sphere - under the auspices of Ecological Civilization - remains, despite the clampdown of the Xi administration that has begun to increase authoritarian control. The mobilising rubric of Ecological Civilization allows for forms of protest and activism to occur if they are compatible with the government aims. As highlighted in Table 2 (Chapter 2), the successful experiments that do emerge will be an unintended result of state *and* non-state actors and may attract explicit CCP support retrospectively (Chapter 6).

In the context of agriculture, AFNs are an example of this Ecological Civilization–based experimentation between state and non-state actors. How these actors adapt and responds to the challenges - i.e. tensions - of AFNs provides a microcosm of the challenge represented by the cosmological rift. Thus, how these tensions are 'managed' in AFNs reflects in part how China, through Ecological Civilization, will attempt to negotiate the cosmological rift. In the following, I summarise how each AFN tension, as explored in the thesis's research questions, reflects on Ecological Civilization.

Research Question 1: *How is 'trust' constituted in Chinese AFNs? And what does this reveal about the constitution of Ecological Civilization?*

The tension related to this research question is based on the conflicting evidence for the capacity of AFNs to foster novel or trusting relationships between consumers and producers. For the tension regarding 'reconnection' to appear paralysing, AFNs must be framed as depicted in Figure 2. The framing in this figure assumes that participants are partaking in AFNs for either socio-political, environmental, community or local reasons, which, from an optimistic perspective, automatically creates trust between the consumers and producers - thus establishing a form of 'reconnection'. This 'reconnection' then leads to a co-production of 'embedded' values occurring via direct exchange - which is centred on an appreciation of quality produce. Pessimists argue and give evidence that trust and reconnection is not necessarily occurring as a result of participation, thus inhibiting or preventing the exchange of embedded values between producers and consumers.

Figure 2. Typical 'headline' framing of trust process in AFNs
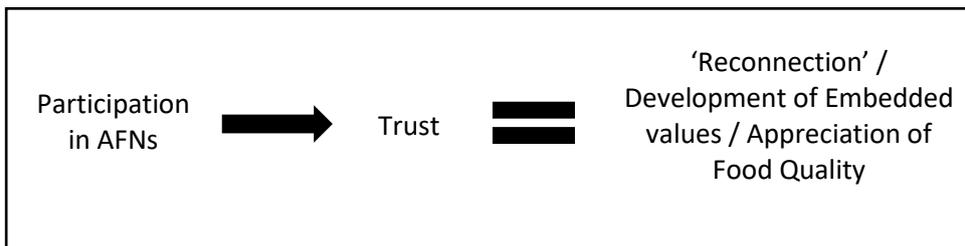
Alternatively, if one recognises that trust and reconnection is not an inevitable outcome of AFN participation, as AFN literature is beginning to suggest (Mount, 2012; Thorsøe & Kjeldsen, 2016) then the framing of AFN processes regarding participation and trust is different (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Revised framing of AFN Trust Processes
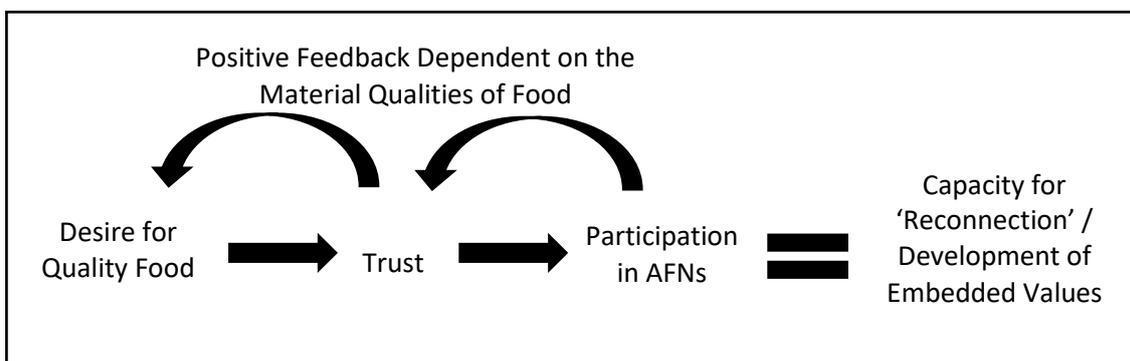
In this third figure, the initial motivation for becoming involved in AFNs is presented as the opportunity to procure 'quality' or safe food, thus turning the process on its head. Trust in this framing is dependent on participant engagement with the produce, i.e. its material qualities, which then facilitates (increased) AFN participation if the engagement is positive – a process emphasised in China due to 'trust pressure'. It is only after trust is firmly secured that a potential for deeper participation emerges. This deeper participation or 'reconnection' has the capacity then to lead towards the development /awareness of community-orientated / social-political values. In this formulation, the key process is how food serves as a mediator towards increased consumer participation. I argue that this mediation occurs via the materiality of food, which is coproducing a trust relationship between producers and consumers. Thus, the (re)fetishisation of food in AFNs (often via social media newsletters), whilst centred on maximising sales of organic food per se, can only work in *parallel* with a working trust relationship between producer and consumer. In this light, whilst appearing commercially orientated, AFNs are able to unsettle the conventional relationship between consumer and commodity, as the fetishisation process is co-produced with the consumer and their engagement with the material qualities of food.

The processes highlighted in Figure 3 that suggest a productive framing of the tension can also be extended to Ecological Civilization. For example, Figure 4 assumes that the motivation driving Ecological Civilization is an awareness shared by state and society that continued economic prosperity requires a renegotiation of (the worsening) environmental issues. This desire is then given direction with the imaginary of Ecological Civilization and reflects a type of trust between the CCP and Chinese citizens as both parties are invested in its formation. In practice, the slogan of Ecological Civilization prompts a form of trust, as it legitimises Chinese society to promote 'green' development through a state-provided lexicon. This allows Chinese society to 'imagine' and 'practice' Ecological Civilization whilst remaining within the boundaries of an authoritarian government. In other words, multiple parties and individuals have been given a mandate, by the discourse of the CCP, to heighten their environmental 'consciousness' and improve environmental 'behaviour'- opening-up new doors for environmental activism and experimentation. This participation in Ecological Civilization, when developed incrementally over a long period of

time, creates the capacity for a workable accommodation with environmental issues to emerge.

Figure 4. Ecological Civilization construction

Positive Feedback based on the Perceived
Material Qualities of Ecological Civilization

| Desire for Ecological Civilization | → | Trust between State and Society | → | Participation in Ecological Civilization Construction | = | A Capacity for a form of Sustainable Development to Occur |
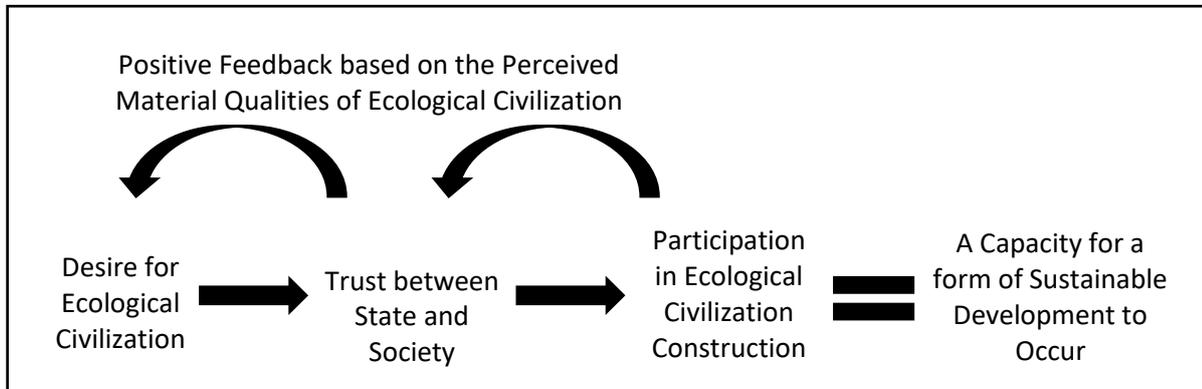
Figure 4 highlights that the key process to explore is the link between the 'desire for Ecological Civilization' and its intersection with the state-society dynamic — in other words, how state policy and the bottom-updevelopments from society can create spin-off initiatives / trajectories of development (see Chapter 1, Table 2). This process is influenced in part by the expectations of certain material qualities Ecological Civilization should espouse, which is informed by the tactile and visceral experience of the 'environment' i.e. 'fresh' air, 'clean' water, 'birds chirping', alongside tangible benefits like 'green' jobs and revitalised countryside. Projects that reproduce these 'positive' aspects help create a positive feedback loop, often via retrospective state support, that gives substance to the project of Ecological Civilization over time.

Research Question 2: *What do the developing dispositions of AFN actors reveal about the emerging subjectivities that may come to characterise Ecological Civilization?*

This second research question arises from the tension concerned with the motivation and values behind AFN participation. In my Chinese case studies, whilst AFN participants displayed both self-interested and altruistic subjectivities, these were not oppositional forces. Using a lens of 'alternative hedonism', these seemingly paradoxical attributes instead suggest evidence of an *evolvement* of actor's dispositions that combine abstract utopian imaginaries with pragmatic realities. These dispositions were often middle

class in form, as they reflected a perusal of quality life that is also becoming increasingly aware of the system 'bads' (Soper, 2008; Tyfield, 2018). Furthermore, it is the middle classes that have the material wealth and time to pursue 'alternative' or 'gratuitous' forms of pleasure that is required to avoid (or at least mitigate) the negative by-products of the mainstream system. This contradictory set of middle class motivations is arguably productive because they are in tension with each other, allowing participants to have both an instrumental and a deeper engagement with AFNs, which brings a pragmatic sensibility to their transformative potential.

These 'opposing' subjectivities of AFN participants enhance the potential of AFNs as they imply a pragmatic response to the cosmological rift (as it is reasserted in food systems), not an unresolvable impasse. Whilst a snapshot of participant's motives and values may not reflect how this tension regarding motivation becomes productive, recognising how, over time, subjectivities can evolve through participation reveals how the subjectivities of actors involved in Ecological Civilization experiments may eventually consolidate. Already, with the case of food and AFNs, this change in subjectivity is occurring. Klein's (2009: 77) study, for example, showed that AFN participants have little or no interest in issues outside the opportunity to procure safe food (see also Sirieix et al., 2011), whilst Garnett & Wilkes (2014, and Wang et al., 2016) later research, suggests that those who procure organic food are now engaging more with issues like seasonality, food's production processes and with environmental issues. Schumilas & Scott (2016) also highlight an example of a Chinese AFN beginning to tackle issues of social justice and migrant rights, a notion absent in their earlier 2012 fieldwork (see Si et al., 2015). In the context of the historical challenges and trends at play here, this is arguably an extremely rapid change.

There is a tendency however, in local or alternative food literature to put consumer subjectivities into firm categories in order to comment on their transformative potential. For example, a recent study of German AFNs by Zoll et al. (2017) classifies AFN participants into three fully formed, stable subtypes, despite recognising that consumer motives are mixed. This forces them to conclude that AFNs are unlikely to have a broader societal impact, due to participants having different motivations that hampers collective organisation. However, by categorising consumer motivations instead of emphasising how motivations evolve, this misses how AFNs may *develop* the capacity to affect the broader system in the long term.

The transformative capacity of AFNs does not lie in participants having homogenous altruistic values, but rather in how 'values' emerge and change *because of* participation. Initial participation may be dependent more on a more self- interested form of ethics, but this can 'evolve' into an increased awareness of wider and salient issues. Dowler et al. (2009) have described this notion of participant's values evolving into something more altruistic as a 'graduation effect'. Clarke et al. (2008: 225) describe this as a process in which 'forms of ordinary virtue ethics prioritise the awakening of enlightened self-interest…particularly through everyday habits and practices that permit virtues to be learned' – which leads to a care for the other.

Underpinning this notion of 'graduation' or an 'awakening of enlightened self-interest' are the ordinary and mundane forms of contact between participants, rather than an engagement with grander ethical notions or idealism. The findings of Moraes et al. (2012), based on a study in the UK, found that ethical and altruistic values, whilst having the capacity to influence organic food consumption positively, are not the primary reasons for people to 'consume' organic food. Instead, it is for the more mundane forms of ethics, like family care, taste and health, that ultimately what shapes AFN participation, not the 'spiritual or ideological blueprints for action' engendered by social, environmental or political reasoning (Clarke et al., 2008: 223).

Case studies in China in particular emphasise this point of 'graduation', as China is 'a market context where organic food is perceived to be an alternative not because it is a *response* to traditional food consumption but where being alternative is derived from being perceived as a *means of addressing* modern food trends' (Su & Haynes, 2017: 3 emphases in original). Put another way, the narratives associated with organic food in the West, i.e. ethical food consumption, environmentalism, alternative lifestyles, carry even less traction in China. Thus, for Chinese AFNs to be successful, they tend to emphasise more overtly that participation in organic food consumption is connected to traditional values and standards – freshness, traditional sense of family, security and self-fulfilment (ibid). Many of these aspects resonate more congruently with notions of 'alternative hedonism' due to the sense of pleasure they can invoke. In other words, transforming the food system is almost never an overt goal for AFN participation; it has to emerge slowly, through a process of seduction, and as an unintended side effect.

The 'seduction' process involved in AFNs participation relies on the mundane aspects of AFNs, not grander ethical designs. This idea resonates with the notion of 'quiet sustainability', a term coined by Smith & Jehlička (2013) for recognising that practices without explicit sustainable aims may still have valuable sustainable outcomes. Based on research in Eastern Europe with AFN-type initiatives, they argue that these initiatives are perhaps better positioned – by being practical, socially inclusive and often exuberant - to meet certain national or international environmental goals due to their unforced nature and orientation around every-day life values. From this perspective of 'quiet sustainability', the overtly pragmatic formation of Chinese AFNs is an advantage, and is indicative of how relational, practical and ethical sensibilities evolve to work effectively under 'trust pressure' conditions.

Similarly then, the productive value of Ecological Civilization will likely also rely on the 'mundane' values potentially *becoming* grand, through initial participation at an ordinary and pragmatic level. In fact, Smith & Jehlička's (2013) argument that government policy should be structured around fostering the values inherent to 'quiet sustainability' (or in the language of Soper (2004; 2007), 'alternative hedonism') – as opposed to quelling them – is, in a roundabout way, showing signs of potential fruition in China under the mass-mobilising rubric of Ecological Civilization. Even though 'quiet sustainability' and 'alternative hedonism' may resonate in some sense with the abstract, nostalgia or utopian ideals, they often provide a more pragmatic or economically rational solution to the issues at hand - in comparison to conventional approaches (Smith & Jehlička, 2013; Soper, 2007; 2008). In other words, the grand challenges of the cosmological rift may be best approached by the subjectivities that are based on the mundane and quiet aspects of everyday life – which are being developed, in some cases, with the experiments (i.e. AFNs) of Ecological Civilization.

Research Question 3: *What does the emergence of rural cosmopolitanism alongside AFNs mean for the capacity of a) AFNs to affect the wider region and b) Ecological Civilization to affect a transition away from an 'Industrial Civilization'?*

The background issue concerning most AFN literature regards the problem of how to scale-up these initiatives (which rely on forms of direct exchange at a local scale) to a point

where they can affect the conventional food network at a significant level in order to begin a process of systems transition. Underpinning this issue of scale is the tension that questions whether AFNs are able to affect wider systems and economies. Cosmopolitanism is an apt lens to explore this tension as it positions contradictory cultural experiences onto the centre stage (see Beck, 2002). The cosmopolitanism of AFNs manifests in the way these initiatives require a diverse range of capabilities and skillsets and thus encourages a mix of populations to inhabit their rural spaces. Indeed, Chinese AFNs demonstrate that this cosmopolitizing process - as the creation of bridges between rural and urban China on which Chinese AFNs depend – requires, as a necessity, logistical management, ICT skills and advanced ecological farming techniques (see Shi et al., 2011). Furthermore, the strategic interventions made by Chinese AFNs in order to expand as enterprises often enhance the cosmopolitanizing features of AFNs, which is prompting a recasting of China's rural areas. Whilst this transformation appears as a continuation of business-as-usual, it is nevertheless business-as-*unusual*. For what this change fostered by 'cosmopolitanization' represents is a redefinition of what 'change' is (Beck, 2015).

Framing AFNs as agents of cosmopolitanization recognises the reality that AFNs are neither alternative nor conventional, but hybrid enterprises. This hybridity is evident in how they are fulfilling Beck's (2015) notion of 'emancipatory catastrophism', in which the increasing 'side effects' of the conventional system (i.e. system 'bads' like food safety issues) have become dangerously potent, forcing the adoption of survival strategies like AFNs to emerge as offshoots from the conventional food system which has nevertheless framed and birthed them. At the same rate the side effects of modernisation, the system 'bads', are dismissed as being inevitable and unfortunate, there is a reflected increase of survival strategies like AFNs. In the context of China, mega-AFNs like Xiedao have emerged as the visibility and presence of system 'bads' is so extreme that it has forced the emerging 'survival strategies' to be larger in scale. This increased size is not necessarily as a result of 'selling out' in order to scale-up, but an equal reaction in response to the scale of the issue. The size of some of China's AFNs reinforces Clarke et al.'s (2008: 221) call to 'deconstruct the perceived yawning gap between supposedly "authentic" and ethical organic food which comes from small scale idyllic countercultural farms, and the supposedly "mainstream" and

less then ethical organic food supposedly produced on industrial, corporate but environmentally responsible farms'.

Although a critical Western perspective on Xiedao might be sceptical of its credentials as an '*alternative* food network', due to the perceived incompatibility between size and 'alternativeness', its positive effects - which range from the economic to the environmental to the social and cultural - hint at a sizable and wider transformative process. For example, both Xiedao and my case study example of 'Four Season Share' highlight how - through enterprises like AFNs - agriculture has become less dependent on the logics of urbanism (i.e. producing produce for an urban demand) and is developing its own standalone economy through an engagement with other services and industries (Yang et al., 2014). Crucially, this form of rural development has not led to a 'simple' urbanism of countryside. It reflects instead a re-ruralisation with cosmopolitan and high-tech characteristics. Both Xiedao and 'Four Season Share' can be characterised as agricultural-dominated enterprises that are also 'modern', in the sense that they employee a diverse range of staff, use the latest forms of technology, subscribe to 'green' issues and produce a 'quality' and branded product.

These examples of AFNs, and their capacity for cosmopolitanization, provide a lens through which to understand Ecological Civilization, suggesting it can be characterised as a process of 'metamorphosis'. As described by Beck (2015: 78) 'metamorphosis is not social change, not evolution, not revolution, not crisis, not war. It is a mode of changing the mode of change.' Understanding Ecological Civilization this way explains how it becomes a baffling concept for 'Western' commentators (see Chapter 2), who tend to be concerned with change as a radical process (see Barnett & Bridge, 2013) and often paint China's Ecological Civilization as mere greenwashing. Instead, Ecological Civilization, as a process of metamorphosis, is reflecting a mode of change that has had little theorisation and will unlikely reflect a sudden moment of socio-political upheaval that has aims of universal emancipation and democracy. More likely, Ecological Civilization will be characterised by the cultivation of new relational, practical and ethical sensibilities, alongside experiments like AFNs, that operate within the current – and flexible - socio-political co-ordinates of China.

Shaping China's social political co-ordinates, as explored in chapter 2, is China's unique long-lasting and mutable 'civilization' factor, alongside its increasing engagement with global capitalism. Ecological Civilization has emerged with this as its backdrop and its eventually construction will be shaped by how these two forces have interacted. An important feature of this interaction lies with how China has retained much of its rurality since its engagement with global capitalism (Wen et al., 2012). This has allowed China to accommodate and absorb the forces of capitalism somewhat and in turn, reshape it. In practice, this entails a ruralisation of capitalism that is preparing for the increasing and potentially eruptive system 'bads', a notion articulated in particular by intellectual /activists of the China's New Rural Reconstruction Movement (He et al., 2015; Sit & Wong, 2013; Pan & Du, 2011). Ecological Civilization, as a mobilising imaginary or animating intuition for this rural-cosmoplitanization, is arguably encouraging new forms of sociality, spatiality and belonging in China's countryside, which is a moving away from its past configuration of an industrial civilization. In this regard, the type of transformation engendered by Ecological Civilization may become a viable response to the impending consequences of this 'cosmological rift' between human development (i.e. global capitalism) and immovable ecological limits.

Conclusion

In food systems, the cosmological rift refers to the continuation of chemically intensive and highly mechanised system of farming which will render the land infertile and cause food production to collapse. To avert this collapse requires a revolution of both social and technological norms, and yet issues regarding food cannot wait for these necessary 'revolutions' or societal transformations to occur that would also disrupt the current vulnerable food system even further (Biel, 2016). It is likely that the only tenable response to such a conundrum is a pragmatic approach to agriculture that allows for 'hybrid' food systems. In this vein, Quilley (2004: 343) argues that the nations most likely to instigate such a food system are China and India since they have the necessary 'technological capacities, state-regulatory systems and socio-economic need' required to do this (2004: 342). However, whilst Quilley envisions a combination of ecological /organic farms that are

environmentally sustainable alongside the hi-tech (GM) intensive vertical farms, the agricultural vision of the future as hinted at by Chinese AFNs is perhaps more plausible, since its vision of hi-tech is less ambitious and more accessible to small-scale 'new farmers'. Either way, if implemented thoroughly enough, a pragmatic and hybrid approach to the food system could fillip a 'genuine ecologising civilising process' (ibid: 343).

Chinese AFNs are arguably a step towards this eco-civilising process as outlined, because of the role of material qualities, emerging subjectivities and cosmopolitanization in these initiatives. However, the processes of change underpinning AFN development may be easily misunderstood from a typical Western critical perspective because of its assumptions regarding political change. Indeed, Quilley (2004) has already begun to highlight the unusual and counter-intuitive alliances an authentic 'ecologising' process might entail - e.g. animal right activists and food corporations able to produce meat synthetically - hence why aspects of a Chinese Ecological Civilization might also be considered surprising or uncomfortable for a Western audience. The key insights of this thesis similarly suggest that, unlike Western notions of 'sustainable development', 'radicalism' or 'environmentalism', Ecological Civilization will be characterised by:

- The central agency of the Chinese middle class - with all of its emerging anxieties and its exponential capacity to innovate. This suggests Ecological Civilization will evolve far beyond official government policy as it is the dynamism of the middle class, in response to emerging system 'bads', that will predominantly shape Ecological Civilization.
- Its pragmatic focus. Driving Ecological Civilization development will be a set of mundane and ordinary ethical issues, informed partly by 'material' qualities - i.e. fresh air, clean water, tasty food – that is based on self-interest and a sense of what Ecological Civilization is not (i.e. dirty, unsafe, polluted etc.).
- A form of relational and practical ethics. These ethics are unlikely to orientate themselves around universal equality or emancipation and asymmetric power relations in China's Ecological Civilization are likely to be inescapable. This then poses questions about how to be 'ethical' within asymmetrical power relations.

- Subjectivities that resonate with both an 'industrial' / 'commercial' civilization and a more 'ecological' civilization. Whilst seemingly a contradiction, in practice this ambivalence is precisely what makes these dispositions productive.

- Inverting the Western expectation that grassroots sustainable projects must be idyllic and countercultural in form. Indeed, Chinese AFNs may be 'mega' and industrial in size and still be 'alternative' in critical aspects. In other words, 'business-as-unusual', as engendered by Ecological Civilization, may appear as 'business-as-usual'.

- A renegotiation of China's urban-rural divide. Ecological Civilization experiments, which have resulted as a spin-off from government policy and grassroots energies, entail a recasting of the rural (or peri-urban) that often reflects a form of 'cosmopolitanization'. This cosmopolitanization will be characterised by hi-tech services, technical innovation, new forms of enterprises and diverse forms of labour.

- A process of co-production between state and society, policies and grassroots/entrepreneurial dynamism - that has unintended outcomes. Whilst Ecological Civilization experiments may not have explicit support from government, they are not radical and align themselves to government policy as necessary. If successful, Ecological Civilization projects will often receive retrospective support from the government and encourage a change in government policy after the fact. Thus, Ecological Civilization is not a grand thought-out plan of the CCP but reflects a process which is also changing the state, albeit incrementally and subtly, in response to society and entrepreneurial dynamism.

These insights point to Ecological Civilization as a project that enables a shuttling between the everyday world of institutional innovation and infrastructural development with an overarching principle that is attempting to amalgamate 'socialism' ('with Chinese characteristics'), harmonious development and sustainability. The result is an 'animating intuition' that allows activism and grassroots projects to legitimise their environmental actions and responses, alongside local government aims and larger state projects. Ecological Civilization thus becomes a substantive and material project 'within the stronger national urge to become "ecologically civilized" without disturbing social stability' (Hansen & Liu, 2017: 17). In other words, Ecological Civilization is a grand framework for the future of

Chinese politics and society, and its power or potentiality lies in it being both sufficiently well-defined and sufficiently ill-defined - i.e. sufficiently defined enough for given pragmatic purposes. This allows for a multiplicity of `actualizations' in that it has just enough cultural, ethical and political `substance', or `value' that it can be drawn upon by grassroots actors to legitimate their practices and innovations. Similar to Barnett and Bridge's (2013) framing of the 'all affected principle', Ecological Civilization is therefore best conceived as an insight, serving as a kind of atmosphere in which a more pragmatic politics can emerge and sustain itself, without being coupled with a formulated and foundational truth.

In the context of the cosmological rift, and how it is reasserted through food systems, the utility of China's Ecological Civilization project lies in its ability to offer the goal of a societal transformation whilst *simultaneously* inspiring a pragmatic mobilisation towards it. Put another way, for an Ecological Civilization to 'work', the goal of Ecological Civilization has to be ambiguous enough to include a significant majority - and their pragmatic innovative activities - to motivate them towards this end, whilst not being too ambiguous that the resulting mobilisation has no form or direction. Thus, the CCP (albeit unwittingly) ends up putting the horse (of active production by engaged self-motivated individuals and groups) before the cart (of a clearly formulated 'dream'). This is a contrast to Western approaches towards 'sustainable development' that legislate the utopia first and then, almost inevitably, find that reality does not match it, thereby just producing something else (to critique) instead. This way around, the process provides Ecological Civilization with actual substance over time, so that it becomes a reality and not just a disappointed dream. It is mobilised as a side effect of everyday practices, across all levels of institutions and organizations that permeates into everyday life almost unknowingly.

This process, of side effects and unintended outcomes, that is subtly shaping everyday life towards a form of Ecological Civilization, becomes apparent in AFNs regarding their tensions. For example, the novel and 'trusting' relationships formed in AFNs are not a result of AFN participation, but a *by-product* of the material qualities of food co-producing this relationship. The seemingly contradictory subjectivities of AFN participants likewise are a *side effect* of mainstream consumer life, which is fostering a slow process of seduction towards a wider awareness and appreciation of social and environmental issues (Soper, 2007). The affect AFNs have (or do not have) on the wider region is not an explicit goal as

such; rather it occurs *unintentionally* through the cosmopolitanizing effect of their strategic interventions. Scaled up to the level of Ecological Civilization, these side effects could culminate into a project that develops without fanfare.

This account of ecological enterprises and Ecological Civilization is based on the successful AFNs I visited in China. It is important to note that the development of this sort of agriculture is still in its infancy and that many AFNs 'fail' as initiatives in China. This notion of a ruralisation of global capitalism is therefore only fledging at the moment, and is not guaranteed. This PhD has only identified the potential capacity for AFNs, and by extension Ecological Civilization, to evolve into a project able to begin approaching the cosmological rift. However, I would argue that the evidence presented here suggests that this trajectory towards a viable Ecological Civilization represents more than a tenuous hope.

This 'positive' framing of Ecological Civilization and its associated experiments resonates with how leading feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz (2011) has reframed 'freedom'. For Grosz (ibid: 60), 'freedom' is a 'positive condition for the capacity of action' i.e. a 'freedom to', which is not defined in the context of external constraints and coercion (i.e. a 'freedom from'). Ecological Civilization similarly frames social change as a positive process that is not focused on what it is leaving behind and invites antagonists to build and work together without denouncing the sources of existing 'un-ecological' civilization. This conceptual shift, from 'from' to 'to', opens up the foundational terms of 'autonomy, agency and freedom' - which are used to define subjectivity or politics - to new interpretations (ibid: 59). This is perhaps why Ecological Civilization (and Chinese AFNs) tends to confound Western critique. The different context of 'social change' occurring in China's Ecological Civilization is one that infers a different form of politics and subjectivity, which inevitably confounds a typical (Western) analysis.

When taken amidst the current cosmological rift between human 'being' and 'nature', this alternative understanding of Ecological Civilization, with its associated forms of politics, subjectivities and cosmopolitanization, may prove useful in humanity's attempts at cosmological reconciliation – by offering much-needed alternatives to the limited attempts informed by Western discourses (Mathews, 2016). Scholars from outside of China have already identified this notion of a Chinese or Confucian form of (rural) cosmopolitanism as a

possible means to confront the crisis of global environmental change. Tyfield & Urry (2010: 289), for example, argue that 'a specifically Chinese cosmopolitanism could gain momentum and just possibly might provide some of the conditions necessary for a low-carbon future to emerge'. Similarly, South Korean scholars have also begun to merge Confucian thought with cosmopolitanism, using concepts like *tianrenheyi* to develop new cosmopolitan perspectives that are pertinent to the challenges of the present era (Han & Park, 2014).

In the context of the cosmological rift, the contribution of Ecological Civilization to the world might be a new form of cosmopolitanism which engages explicitly, through a pragmatic politics, with knowledge and human practice. Such an approach would avoid the baggage of a radical post-Enlightenment politics – with its commitment towards a highly epistemic conception of truth, 'the good life' and politics – that is arguably exacerbating the current rift between human 'being' and 'nature'. The actual politics of China's Ecological Civilization, therefore, would also require Western-based theorists actively to engage with their Chinese counterparts, in order to 'have the greatest chances of coming to shared understanding of the much more pragmatic paradigms of both their Chinese research objects and collaborators' (Tyfield, 2016: 307). This call for cross cultural-collaboration mirrors that of Chinese philosopher Zongsan Mou who believed that through a profound dialogue with Western philosophy, Confucianism itself could be rejuvenated, revised and revived, prompting an ontological fusion between the transcendent and immanent dimensions of human life (Billioud, 2011). This ontological endeavour may be absolutely necessary if 'we' are to adequately begin approaching this cosmological rift.

Afterword

In this afterword, I wish to reflect on how my research experience of Chinese AFNs could inform future AFN research. I consider some possible limitations that can arise with a Western framing of AFNs, particularly with the concept of 'reflexive localism'. Reflexive localism is a conceptual term that is used in the majority of AFN analysis and is notable in this PhD for its relative absence.

The potential for a food systems transformation in the form that is being articulated by Chinese AFNs, vis-à-vis Ecological Civilization, is not exclusive to China. Indeed, the literature based on Western AFN case studies has already pointed towards the insights and findings made in this thesis regarding AFNs and how they subtly prompt food systems to drift towards a transformation (Clarke et al., 2008; Mount, 2012; Smith & Jehlička, 2013; McClintock, 2014; Turner & Hope, 2015; Thorsøe & Kjeldsen, 2016). The Chinese context, however, - due to factors like 'compressed modernity', 'trust pressure' and the heightened urban-rural divide - emphasises and takes these insights further. In other words, the characteristics of China add an increased visibility to the form of change AFNs might engender. There is no West-East binary as such, but rather the typical (Western) frameworks used for understanding AFNs are perhaps dismissive of certain elements, particularly with regard to what counts as 'alternative' and as 'change'. It is only when applied in a foreign context that the limitations of Western framings are likely to be revealed (Maye & Kirwan, 2012).

The concept 'reflexive localism' is a key term in AFN literature and is used in the majority of AFN analyses, even in contexts outside its Western origins (see for example Bellante, 2017). I suggest, however, using my experience of AFN analysis in a foreign Chinese context, that there are significant limitations to its framing. Coined by E. Melanie DuPuis & David Goodman in 2005, and later elaborated in their seminal book *Alternative food networks: knowledge, place and politics* (Goodman et al., 2012), 'reflexive localism' was primarily adopted to prevent AFNs from becoming dogmatic in regard to their aims. It is through 'reflexive localism' for example, that AFNs are encouraged not to develop as defensive local projects but as an 'open, process-based vision' that has no set values and is able to recognise that the politics of scale is one dimension of a broader notion of spatial

politics (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005: 369). In this framing, understandings of the local are relational and open to change, allowing the politics involved to move beyond an 'either-or' scenario regarding the global and local scales (Harris, 2010). For many Western scholars, the recent development of 'Food Policy Councils' and associated 'Urban Food Strategies' in North American cities are examples of reflexive localism being put into place by AFNs (Matacena, 2016). By acting as hubs that provide AFNs with open and processual systems of governance across the food chain, they can promote practices that develop AFNs whilst avoiding the reinforcement of inequalities and the danger of being 'captured' by corporate interests (ibid: 56, see also Andrée et al., 2015; Marsden & Franklin, 2013). As put by Tregear (2011: 420): 'reflexive localism is a vision of localism whereby the processes of political decision-making are constructed to give the best possibility for democratic outcomes, for example by maximising open, respectful dialogue between participants.'

Reflexive localism is undoubtedly a powerful conceptual tool, enabling AFNs to work towards a transformative food politics, whilst also providing a framing that can navigate the potential pitfalls that often inhibit projects that have radical ends. Exploring AFNs in a Chinese context, however, open-ups AFN theoretical orthodoxies to alternatives, due to the certain limitations reflexive localism has in regard to its understanding of politics and participant subjectivities. In the following, I highlight three specific issues that may limit reflexive localism as a framing concept of AFNs: first, its vulnerability towards positing a tautological account; second, its implicit pedagogic requirement of participants; and third, its overt attention to the 'political'.

The danger of reflexive localism becoming tautological lies with the implicit assumption that AFNs, by default, have a tendency to be inward looking in the face of corporate capture. Tregear (2011: 425), for example, notes how food scholars are tempted to assume that AFNs have to navigate conflicts – i.e. against corporate capture or in avoiding the adoption a capitalist dynamic – as they attempt to 'transform' the food system, and that their success in this struggle will reflect the degree to which the strategies of reflexive localism have been utilised. The 'success' of AFNs is then often defined by how adept the AFN is in using reflexive localism instead of judging the transformative capacity of the AFN on its own 'contextual' merits. In China, due to the emphasis on pragmatism in their AFNs, this critique is accentuated as Chinese AFNs are restricted in how they articulate

their 'alternativeness' due the authoritarian environment and the precariousness of their position. The issue here is not so much that reflexive localism has an emphasis on (managing) conflict /disruption in the transition from capitalist forms of exchange into communities of practices, but rather how reflexive localism will 'ascribe specific goals to AFNs' and 'make increasingly hypothetical versions of the desired systems the main preoccupation' (Tregear, 2011: 425).

With Chinese AFNs, 'conflict' or 'disruption' is rarely the defining process of this transition towards a community-based food economy from one defined by market exchange. Reflexive localism tends to assume that competing intentions, clashing interests, and uneven power dynamics inevitably define this transitional process. Without reflexive localism therefore, to negotiate this disruption effectively, the transformative ends of AFNs could be lost. The AFN examples in my fieldwork, however, have shown how, through strategic interventions in approximate alignment with state initiatives, transitioning can occur in a way that is relatively conflict free. Although there is the pertinent question of to what extent 'mere' survival or even flourishing actually adds up to a significant transition, reflexive localism tends to foreclose from the outset the potential of a subtle and less antagonistic transition.

A second limitation of reflexive localism also accentuated by Chinese AFNs is the pedagogic transformation that reflexive localism implicitly requires of AFN participants. Tregear (2011), for example, notes how reflective localism places an undue pressure on corresponding actors to enact a more idealised form of localism; one that requires 'a heavy if not unrealistic burden of pre-conditions and responsibilities upon participants in terms of skills, aptitudes, dispositions, etc.' (ibid: 425). Under this burden, AFNs are faced with a never-ending process of 'self-improvement', through experimenting and negotiation, in order to escape capture by political elites or the subsuming effects of capitalism. Take for example the charge of 'defensive localism', sometimes applied as a critique of Western AFNs for being local initiatives that turn inwards in the face of a globalised food system (Hinrichs, 2003). Adopting 'reflexive localism' is often presented as a solution to this critique (Harris 2010). However, when framed by a more pragmatic perspective, 'defensive localism' may be less a conservative, illiberal reaction to globalism and instead a reflex of AFNs to

become more economically viable i.e. the necessity of emphasising locality for marketing purposes.

In this light, the response to the challenges inherent to AFNs should be perhaps less reflexive localism and more strategic interventions, which engage with opportunities outside the AFNs locality. In other words, 'defensive localism' from a long-term pragmatic perspective is not an issue, as the growth and development of the AFN would likely become severely limited if it remained confined within its locality. Thus, food-systems change is perhaps just as reliant (if not more so) on AFNs taking advantage of strategic opportunities (see chapter 6) as opposed to encouraging a form of pedagogic transformation of participants to occur that aims to develop farmers into politically adept actors and to cultivate 'politically aware' consumers. Arguably, by de-linking or loosening the relationship between AFNs and this requirement to establish a 'correct' notion of reflexive localism - i.e. certain forms of political action, practice and mobilisation - there may be more scope for a productive progressive intervention in the long term. In other words, by avoiding a rarefied and idealised vision of localism that puts too much pressure on AFN participants, AFNs have more space to develop realistic and grounded aims that may be better positioned to challenge the mainstream.

A third issue regarding reflexive localism is the emphasis it has on opening-up the political. This extending of the political reflects a wider issue that exists within a prevalent strand of Western critical social science, especially human geography (Barnett, 2008; Joronon & Hakli, 2017). For example, a central tenet in human geography is to expose 'politics' that is otherwise hiding in plain sight. This makes visible political relations, highlighting instances of inequality and unequal power relations and opening them up to democratic participation. This form of inquiry is understandably framed as a necessity, as it allows the first step towards emancipation. However, as scholars have begun to point out, this continuous expansion of the political 'risks projecting a totalising account of the political' that could potentially dissolve the idea of politics to a meaningless expression that includes any form of change (Joronon & Hakli, 2017: 569).

Reflexive localism in AFN literature similarly fits this form of inquiry that seeks to expand the political. Indeed, reflexive localism is generally welcomed as an intervention

that advances the politics behind local food systems beyond a framing that can sometimes position AFNs simply as local 'resistance' against global capitalist 'logic' (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005). A critical component of reflexive localism lies in how it forces an imaginary of the political in which 'locales are seen as interconnected sites where the multi-scalar politics of globalisation are embedded and contested' (Levkoe, 2011: 698). However, whilst opening politics up to more forms of solidarity between locales, the danger of such a politically open stance is how 'it becomes difficult to maintain which human or non-human acts, events or processes are *not* political in a given situation' (Joronon & Hakli, 2017: 570 emphasis in original). Similar to the issue highlighted by the burden of pedagogic transformation, there is a danger that the political becomes too open-ended, requiring in perpetuity the anxiety of constant negotiation and experimentation, which is absent of a clearly defined political end-goal. In other words, the political – as not just the sole or primary locus of (social) value but also permanently and a priori unachievable – becomes simply insupportable.

This isolation of the 'political' from actual worldly concerns is not uncommon in contemporary human geography food literature. For example, food scholars often assume that 'food (in)security today…is *ultimately* a matter of different political views and values' (Wald & Hill, 2016: 207, emphasis added). Although food (in)security is undoubtedly in many ways and profoundly a matter of politics – and so seeing this issue as political is a crucial opening up to political possibility and responsibility that is otherwise occluded – it is not 'ultimately' a matter of politics. For food politics also, and no less importantly, involves a matter of multiple forms of recalcitrant materiality too. This includes the different and more or less hostile (and uncertainly changing) environments around the world for growing or transporting food, and producing food of particular nutritional quality, and all in ways that support (improving) socio-economic livelihoods and, at planetary level, that aggregate to form planetary boundaries etc.

A simple example that highlights the tension with this 'ultimately political' claim is evident with the inherent logistics of AFNs. Bringing fresh produce from the farm in the countryside to a member in the city before the produce 'spoils' is a logistical challenge for AFNs worldwide. However, even if all the politics involved in this logistical exercise were transparent and egalitarian, there would still be the evident challenge of physical geographical distance to overcome with all its different facets. This tension, which occurs

when the political becomes all-consuming, becomes manifest when AFNs are assumed only to be 'alternative' in how they oppose, or are different to, the globally industrialised food system. For Watts et al. (2005), this emphasis on 'alternative' politics is crucial, and allows AFNs to be differentiated between '*alternative* food networks' and 'alternative *food* networks', with the former referring to 'strong' AFNs and the latter 'weak' AFNs. Chinese AFNs, which are overtly orientated around a pragmatic approach that makes strategic interventions in order to remain feasible as business ventures, would, in Watt et al.'s typology, be considered as weaker 'alternative *food* networks'– and damned as such in terms of their potential for effecting significant food system transition (Martindale et al., 2018).

Exploring AFNs in China, which tend to emphasise pragmatic rather than a Western 'utopian' understanding of place (Schumilas 2014), highlights the limitations of a Western (reflexive localism) framing. Indeed, Chinese AFNs invite a consideration of what constitutes 'political' or 'alternative', suggesting that for future AFN research - both Chinese and Western – a theoretical approach focused on pragmatism can perhaps reveal alternative pathways for AFNs to become transformative. The value of a more pragmatic approach lies in how it opens up a different temporality and the possibility of working at multiple strategic temporal registers. In other words, it is maximally enabled and flexible to work with the constraints of the existing situation as it presents itself, but not thereby simply accepting it as it is forever (Harney et al., 2016). In its short-term flexibility, pragmatism is also maximally enabled to push change of the system itself, in the background, and over the longer term.

In sum, this pragmatic approach suggests that in the larger picture, AFNs are much more than a response to consumer anxieties concerning personal health or environmental degradation. They are also more than a continuation of business-as-usual in a sense of global capitalism. Viewed as being more then sum of their parts, AFN processes are arguably the beginnings of a much longer-term process of resurgence of the 'rural' that is not only encouraging a trajectory towards a more ecologically sensitive approach to farming but fostering forms of rural cosmopolitanism that is able to recast China's rural-urban relationship. In other words, Chinese AFNs are not paralysed by their lack of radical intent nor are they impeded by their failure to fulfil the 'headline claims' of AFNs as defined in Western literature. Instead, there are enough instances and moments of transformation

occurring in Chinese AFNs, despite them being subtle and pragmatic, to suggest that initiating a food system change is well within their capacity.

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Appendix 1

<u>Extract from translated WeChat transcript (No. 17)</u>

Between 'Four Season Share' CSA farm (FSS) and a member.

_____

9th March 2016

Mr. Chen: I've heard that you're not doing very well (with sales) at the moment. I'm concerned.

FSS: That depends on if your friends want it or not. I will collect more information tonight. Thanks 😁

Mr. Chen: It should be helpful😁 Take a picture of my agreement [the 'contract' between Mr. Chen and FSS to be 'shared' as a picture on social media]

FSS: ok😁

Mr. Chen: Encourage your customers to help you advertise on WeChat moments [similar to Facebook's 'wall'] and use mine as a sample.

FSS: Thank you. I've got things ready to post:

This picture is the source of water used in the farm, national second-level standard source of drinking water, Jixinshi Reservoir: [PIC]

This picture is the fertilizer in the farm. Biogas digester. Fermentation and compost: [PIC]

This is the vegetables in the farm. Above are solar insecticidal lamps and sticking cards: [PIC]

Chickens on the farm: [PIC]

A panorama of the farm taken from the reservoir: [PIC]

My WeChat QR code [contact details]: [PIC]

Do I need the authorization certificate?

Mr. Chen: Good. It's enough.

And a picture of packaged vegetables.

FSS: Will this be enough to attract your friends. We don't want to over advertise. If people don't want to order, we can't push them.

Mr. Chen: Have a look. I've posted it.

FSS: Cheers. 🌹 Someone did add me.

Mr. Chen: Ask your customers to do the same. Help you post on WeChat. And if they get 30 likes, they can have free vegetables.

FSS: Good idea😝

Mr. Chen: I'll help you find customers😁

FSS: How? Usually, the members bring their friends to the farm to experience. Yep. I should encourage the old members to post on their WeChat moments.

Mr. Chen: Yes. Use mine as a sample. Offer free vegetables for WeChat likes.

_____

14th Mar.

Mr. Chen: How are the sales going?

FSS: It will take some time at the beginning. A lot of people still don't know the farm well yet, so they find it difficult to trust. But when they see what I post on WeChat and gradually they start to trust us.

_____

16th Mar.

Mr. Chen: Another friend asked me for your WeChat today 😄

FSS: But why are they not making any orders?

Mr. Chen: Well, that's your job now.

FSS: ok. 😄 It means opportunity now that they have added my WeChat.

_____

20th Mar.

Mr. Chen: I will make an order for my friend today. Delivery address: Shenzhen…. Please remember to deliver it to him, not to me. He's your potential customer 😁

FSS: Cool, thanks a lot 🌹

Mr. Chen: Done. 😄 Don't forget to deliver.

Appendix 2

Extract from translated WeChat transcript (No. 8)

Between 'Four Season Share' CSA farm (FSS) and a member.

_____

Member: It's so difficult to wash the Hangzhou cabbages. There are many black spots left even though I washed them 6 times.

FSS: I will check today, it's probably aphids.

Member: Yes, there are some black bugs.

Member: The cabbages taste good, but they're too dirty.

FSS: That's aphid. We have many aphids in the field now, tried using pepper spray to get rid of them but it's not very effective.

FSS: It would be easier to wash it with vinegar.

FSS: Add some vinegar into the water.

Member: We used vegetable wash powder, there are many bug bite holes on the leaves.

Member: [pic of damaged vegetable]

FSS: Mrs. Zheng, regarding your feedback that the Choy Sum is blooming, I've just checked the warehouse yesterday, I don't think it affects eating.

FSS: I'll ask my colleague in product department again, please hold on.

Member: They're very old If have bloomed to this extent. The flower bit would taste bitter if we really fried and ate it. Maybe your colleagues have special/good taste buds

Member: The quality of the vegetables is too bad for my family and really affects eating/consuming.

FSS: Maybe it's the problem is only with the one bag delivered to you. Other colleagues in our office were afraid that the vegetables were too old, so picked some and tasted themselves; they all said they were not bitter, so I didn't try myself. Can I send another bag/replacement to you and you give it another try?

_____

Member：Hi, are you there?

FSS：Yes.

FSS：Is there any problem with the vegetables?

Member：Yes, can I unsubscribe please?

FSS：Why? Is it about the Choy Sum?

Member：Yes. Your vegetables are too old and aren't suitable for my family.

FSS：What kinds of vegetable that you think are too old?

Member：I don't want to talk about the details.

FSS：Mrs. Zheng, the Choy Sum did bloom. The temperature was low a while ago, so we chose the type of vegetable that is suitable to grow under a low temperature; However, the temperature went up recently, when it reached a certain degree, it bloomed ahead of time. Can we compensate you? We can send you other types of vegetables. The Hangzhou cabbage, Shanghai cabbage and spinach are all good.

FSS：And the aphid problem is inevitable since our organic food is pesticide-free.

Member: Maybe it's because we have different assessment standards towards vegetables. We also tried crown-daisy chrysanthemum yesterday. They were too old. And the celery, spinach that we tried in the past were all too old. I'm really sorry but we can't get used to the tasting of these old vegetables

Member: Don't we agree that we don't ask for the reasons of unsubscription? Let's stop talking about the details.

FSS: Mrs. Zheng, you chose us for the sake of the safety aspect of organic vegetable. I'm so sorry that so many problems occurred right at the first (several) delivery (deliveries). How about I pick up the vegetables by myself for you next time? If you still think they're too old, I will refund you immediately.

Member: Let's save the troubles, thanks.

FSS: OK. I'll apply for the refund today. Thank you all the same for your support these days. And for the health of your family, I do hope you can stick to organic vegetables. You can try other farms.

Member: Thanks, I will. We have always been eating organic vegetables.

Appendix 3

<u>Extract from translated WeChat transcripts (No. 11, 7, 5)</u>

Between 'Four Season Share' CSA farm (FSS) and its members.

_____

FSS: Hi, Mrs. Wei, we presented you some organic peanut oil, soy sauce, soy and aged vinegar today!

FSS: I forgot to tell you the reason 😝. Miss. Peng who you recommended to us ordered a family of five plan for a whole year. Thanks for your support and your recommendation. We presented you a gift bag of organic flavours.

FSS: Plus 5 gift certificates. We will give you next time you order.

Member: Thank you. You don't need to do that. I recommend you to my friend and my family because your quality. Now there are many families choose you in my neighborhood. As long as your vegetables are organic, we'll choose you.

FSS: Thank you so much, Mrs.Wei. This little gift is a token of our regard. Now, we have no need to advertise our product. Thanks to your support, we get where we are today.

Member: You guys are so thoughtful. Thank you 😊 .

FSS: You're welcome 😉 .

_____

FSS: Hi, Mr. Member. The traffic is very bad today, so the vegetable might be delivered 1 hour late.

FSS: And there is a bag of Oyster mushroom grown by ourselves for you to try for free (emoji)

Member: Thanks!

Member: I'm so touched!

FSS: Haha, now I can laugh and stop crying.

FSS: It's been raining in the farm these days (so the vegetable is wet), you'd better take out the vegetables from the packaging as soon as you get them, otherwise they might go bad easily.

Member: I know that

Member: Last time [I made mistake with vegetables] I set the temperature in the fridge too low.

Member: [pic]

FSS: Yes, the green onion and the Chinese chives we recently picked are too wet. We even used fan to dry them.

FSS: I'm not sure if the vegetable would go bad tomorrow by drying in this way. Contact me if it does and we will send a new bag as a compensation on next delivery.

Member: It won't go bad

Member: I am good at preserving vegetables.

FSS: We need to ask our members to learn from you. Haha, How long do you hang them? One night?

Member: Yes, do not use fan, just hang them naturally

Member: Half a day is enough in summer.

FSS: Why can't we use the fan?

Member: We hang your vegetables every time. We cover them with white paper or cotton cloth before putting them into the fridge.

Member: The water on the vegetable can be easily absorbed.

FSS: I see. Thank you! We have been using the wrong way. I'll ask the warehouse to stop drying the vegetables with fan.

_____

FSS：Here is the cookbook. I just send to you online, Ok?

Member：OK, thanks!

FSS：You're welcome.

Member：Hi, good morning! I found out some brown rice I bought last year. There are some bugs in it. Can I raise brown rice by myself?

FSS: Sorry for late reply. I lead some of our visiting members to plant some vegetables.

FSS: Are there many bugs?

FSS: If the brown rice is seriously damaged, it may not be raised.

Member: Just a few bugs. I'll try.

FSS: Do you use the Fuku electric cooker?

Member: No, I use the Medie electric cooker.