

Convivial Agriculture: Evolving Food and Farming Activism in South China

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ABSTRACT: The Chinese community-supported agriculture (CSA) movement is notable for advocating a revival of peasant farming and food sovereignty. For the emerging food politics in China, the main focus is the promotion of “ethical” food in the context of food scares. Currently this promotion often relies overwhelmingly on an emphasis of ethics of trust through certification of food by intermediaries. Yet, there is controversy among CSA activists, who question whether a certifying practice can improve the relationship between consumer and producer. This paper will present an emerging alternative approach within Chinese CSA circles that focuses on strengthening participatory culture within the consumer-producer nexus. To do so, I will shed new light on the experience of food and farming activism in South China since the late 1990s. The main focus is an empirical study of Chengxianghui (CXH), an organisation that operates various consumer-led action groups in Guangzhou. In order to conceptualise the approach by the activists, this paper outlines a normative framework referred to as “convivial agriculture” that is based on the Guangdong-based practice of the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS). The framework aims to recognise and negotiate responsibilities among different actors caring for the “agricultural commons.”

KEYWORDS: commons, conviviality, community-supported agriculture (CSA), ethical consumption, ethics of care, technique, alternative food network, Participatory Guarantee System (PGS).

A recent dispute over “ethical” food within Chinese CSA circles

It is noteworthy that in times of seemingly omnipresent food scares, a local food movement known as community-supported agriculture (CSA) has emerged in China. The CSA movement combines three core elements. First, it promotes the consumption of healthy, local, and seasonal food. Second, the movement aims to improve the relationship between consumers and producers as well as the one between humans and the environment. Third, it advocates the support for rural communities in their efforts to generate a sustainable form of development (Si *et al.* 2015). Since the mid-2000s, members and organisations belonging to the movement have conducted numerous activities such as visiting farms that follow CSA guidelines, initiating farmers’ markets and buying clubs, or promoting farmer cooperatives. In sum, the movement consists of rather heterogeneous initiatives in terms of geographic focus, consumer-producer networks, and the promoted farming techniques. This diversity often leads to debates over the choice of specific approaches and strategies among its members (Si and Scott 2016: 1095). Within the CSA movement, the perception of food safety and quality is often based on what some scholars call “participatory” and “ethical” certifying practices that aim to create mechanisms to generate trust between consumers and producers (Shi *et al.* 2012; Si *et al.* 2015; Kurl and Ho 2017). The adoption of the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) by the Chinese CSA-movement in 2014 is such a mechanism of grassroots assurance of food quality through a certification of producers. PGS is based on active stakeholder participation and emphasises the need for a

foundation of trust, social networks, and knowledge exchange (Kirschner 2014). Yet, a recent dispute surrounding the use of PGS has brought a long-standing debate over the consumer-producer relationship within the Chinese CSA circles to the surface.

Green Fingers, a renowned CSA initiative with the slogan “Foodies save the Earth!” released a PGS inspection report in 2020 and subsequently suspended a year-long partnership with a fruit farm. On-site inspection as well as laboratory tests had proven that this farm had violated fertiliser and plant protection standards.¹ Consequently, its foodie consumers praised the site, leaving compliments such as “strict gate-keeping,” “conscientious,” “responsible,” and “trustworthy,” while at the same time demonising the producer who failed to meet the standard. However, the report also aroused controversy within Chinese CSA circles, which I have been following for three years. While one called it an excellent example of social surveillance for assuring food quality, another was more doubtful:

But, wait, doesn’t the case look like dealers checking their suppliers? The dealers fail the job of monitoring food quality, and when they discover a problem, they quickly cut ties with suppliers. In this case they even use CSA and PGS terms to make a big fuss... (Anonymous poster on a Chinese CSA WeChat group, 9 July 2020)

1. Green Fingers 綠手指, “綠手指對山東洛嘉果園基地進行PGS檢查結果及相關事宜的公示” (Lv shouzhi dui Shandong Luojia guoyuan jidi jinxing PGS jiancha jieguo ji xiangguan shiyi de gongshi, Announcement of Green Fingers’ PGS Inspection Results and Related Matters on Luojia Fruit Farm, Shandong), 7 July 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/yXTPBR3DyCehlr8EUb70-g> (accessed on 20 July 2020).

This criticism implies that Green Fingers was following a “dealer-supplier” rationale, similar to that of commercial organic supermarkets (for example, Hema and Walmart). Those commercial operators would also sever relationships over violations of organic production protocols instead of assisting producers facing difficulties to maintain farming standards. For some, the action taken by Green Fingers contradicts the “participatory” culture assumed by the CSA movement. The Green Fingers’ dispute further leads to questions surrounding the current implementation of PGS, which leaves little room for “negotiations between consumers and producers” on production processes and food safety protocols. The dispute indeed continues the decade-long debate within Chinese CSA communities on how to facilitate closer and complex connections between consumer and producer that go beyond a focus on generating trust. Thus, this article will proceed with this question: What does “participation,” defined as collaboration in sustainable agrarian production of food, mean to food activism within the nexus of production and consumption?

To study consumer-producer relationships, I bring in the nascent experience of food and farming activism in South China, which so far has received little notice in the literature on Chinese agrarian change. This article will contribute to the debate in this special issue in several ways. It will first discuss how the capitalist market reforms have contributed to a chaotic food system in China. Widespread food scares, in part related to this transformation, have convinced a set of very different actors of a pressing need to improve and induce new public trust in the quality and safety of food consumption. Whereas the state employs food safety governance with the aim to restructure consumption-production relations, CSA groups instead take the food safety crisis as an opportunity to engage consumers and to promote eco-friendly and community-based production. The article will then proceed to discuss the CSA movement and its efforts to reshape rural-urban relationships through the introduction of the PGS mechanism. The third part will then present the two-decade-long development of the so-called agrarian renaissance movement in South China. By examining the ethics of conviviality and the commons, which are derived from the works of J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) and Mara Miele (2011) on human-ecology interdependence, this article then offers the normative framework of a “convivial agriculture” based on PGS. At the core of convivial agriculture lies the assumption that “relational ethics” (Gibson-Graham 2006) are necessary to create and negotiate responsibilities of caring for the agricultural commons among different actors. This article is based on six months of participatory ethnographic research in the Guangdong area. I visited relevant groups in Guangzhou and conducted more than 50 interviews with consumers, community organisers, and producers – all of whom are associated with the CSA movement. Besides conducting face-to-face interviews, we carried out various activities together such as cooking, eating, tilling, and chatting, to reveal the active participation of consumers.

The context and dominant politics of food scares

As one of the most pressing issue for the Chinese food system, the recurring food safety problem has constituted a “new, urgent, and multifaceted risk to Chinese people, society and the state and put[s] forward social distrust beyond those issues of food safety, nutrition, and health” (Yan 2012: 725). These issues have proven powerful enough to impact the culture of consumption (Jackson and Everts 2010). Food scandals have become widespread since the 2000s, the subjects range from infant milk formula to mundane goods such as rice, vegetables, and meat (Chen 2016).

Food anxiety permeates everyday life and deepens the public’s distrust in local food chains. It pushes people to confront the significant questions of health and safety, product reliability, and ecological pollution that have accompanied the rise of China.²

Arguably, the food safety problem has been rooted in the transformation of food markets since the beginning of the economic reforms in the 1980s. As Yan argues, some profit-oriented entrepreneurs tried to increase their profits by adding harmful chemicals during food production and processing, resulting in various forms of “poisonous food.” These dynamics differ from food safety issues in the socialist period, which were more likely to be the result of unhygienic conditions during food preparation at workplace canteens and at home. The food itself was mostly produced with organic methods (Yan 2012: 707-10). By tracing the chaotic food chains, Veeck *et al.* argue:

[In] today’s China, the debate seems to centre on the risks of a privatised economy, in which some farmers might attempt to improve crop yield by applying dangerous levels of pesticides, some factory managers might eschew sanitary practices to save production costs, and some private retailers might sell counterfeit or tainted food to unsuspecting customers. (2010: 233)

As these scholars suggest, the rural-urban paradigm is central to the Chinese food safety context. Chinese urban consumers usually want fresh, locally-grown food and expect the assurance of quality and safety provided through a professional distribution system. This concern for food safety among Chinese urban consumers has led to calls for “a climate of strong consumerism and effective regulation” and arguably encourages activism. Alternative food networks (AFN), for example, press for different food production practices to transform the relationships of consumers and producers in response to food scares.

The new interest in food safety has also been noticed by the Chinese state: “In the new era, the Chinese people are more concerned with their nutrition and health, from having enough food to eat to eating well and safely” (State Council 2019). For the Chinese authorities, food safety governance focuses on safeguarding and controlling food safety and quality by restructuring the “chaotic food chain” (Veeck *et al.* 2010), i.e. the web of production, distribution, and consumption sectors, via new rules and technologies. The new food safety law, for example, aims for a holistic surveillance mechanism to manage and supervise food inspection. It aims to remediate food hazards by including safety standards, a labelling system, recall and notification schemes, and even civilian reports on violators (Chen 2016). Yet, smallholders – a key group in organic food production and in the efforts to address food safety concerns – tend to reject the new and more stringent food standards (including labels for hazard-free food, green food, and organic food) due to the high registration costs (Scott *et al.* 2014). Research has shown that certification fraud is so pervasive that consumers are confused by food labels and often do not trust them.³ The effects of the state’s legislative efforts, however, appear to remain weak. For example, “what society lacks now is trust,” Mr. Li, a retailer selling licenced organic vegetables in a middle-class marketplace, told me. “My consumers often question how this or that is grown, by whom and with what method” (interview, Guangzhou, January 2019).

2. Daren Shi-chi Leung 梁仕池, “北京為何對澳洲農業亮劍? 地緣政治背後的中澳農貿難題” (*Beijing weihe dui Aozhou nongye liang jian? Di yuan zhengzhi beihou de Zhong Ao nongmao nanti*, Why Does Beijing Shed Light on Australian Agriculture? The Sino-Australian Farm Trade Problem Behind Geopolitics), *Initium Media*, 9 June 2020, <https://theinitium.com/article/20200609-opinion-china-australia-agriculture-conflict/> (accessed on 20 June 2020).
3. Xiu and Klein (2010); Connolly *et al.* (2016); Zhong *et al.* (2020).

CSA: Limitations of the ethical model of “certification by intermediaries”

In response to concerns over food safety and in contrast to the narrow focus of the state, an emerging group of diverse CSA initiatives is reflecting on the broader social and environmental value of food. Notably, CSA activists promote a voluntary form of group certification and inspection that would constitute an entirely informal trust-based mechanism between consumers and producers, in contrast with the official organic certification (Scott *et al.* 2014). Kurl and Ho argue that these group certification practices offer low-cost, stakeholder-based models in which the risks and benefits of producers align with the interests of consumers. As a result, the CSA movement may improve the local environment through remediation of agricultural production processes (e.g. removing pollution and contaminants). These alternative forms of farming may also enhance the social and economic value of farmland for smallholders and thereby help to slow down the expansion of non-farming usage for urbanisation and industrialisation (Kurl and Ho 2017: 844). In this way, a kind of bottom-up food activism brings together food safety and rural revival in the promotion of ecological agriculture against the state-led technocratic discourse of agricultural development and modernisation (Scott *et al.* 2018).

In regard to the significance of sustainable rural development, the AFN literature in China refers overwhelmingly to the arguments of the New Rural Reconstruction (NRR) movement, whose advocacy for un-exploitable and reciprocal rural-urban relations is famously inspired by the legacy of rural intellectual activism from a century ago (Pan and Du 2011; Wen *et al.* 2012; Day and Schneider 2017). The voices of NRR intellectuals such as Wen Tiejun and Shi Yan, who have held leading roles in the Chinese CSA Alliance (*Zhongguo shehui shengtai nongye CSA liangmeng* 中國社會生態農業 CSA 聯盟) since 2010, dominate the main narrative of the Chinese CSA movement. As Shi Yan suggests,⁴ the Alliance sees “information inconsistency between consumers and producers” as the greatest difficulty for producers, and suggests that food activism should fix this through the creation of intermediary platforms (such as Green Fingers) between consumers and producers. The Alliance has also attempted to promote the CSA certification scheme to improve production standards. After the adoption of PGS, this was rephrased as a system for “socialised participatory supervision” (*shehuihua canyu jiandu* 社會化參與監督). Its ultimate goal seems to normalise “an alternative” to the state’s food labelling system by making it part of the market.⁵ Like a producer association, the Alliance can bring together individuals and cooperatives to address environmental, social, and food safety issues in rural China: in 2015, there were more than 300 CSA-certified farms, mainly established in the northern parts of China, and the number is still growing (Cook *et al.* 2015).

However, the practice of certification may underestimate the CSA consumer’s potential to improve consumer-producer relationships. As the debate over PGS shows, the success of certified food in China may rely heavily on the ethics of consumers. Yet, an emphasis on the “ethical” rhetoric of “foodies save the Earth” tends to overshadow the related problems farms face, such as the lack of alternative and support to sustain organic farming (Guthman 2004). Over the years, the focus of value-based representation of consumers, either in practical or theoretical terms, should be understood as a “consumer-driven” practice with “strong evidence of food healthfulness and nutrition, but weak representations of social and political elements in terms of reconnection, social justice, and forms of political association” (Si *et al.* 2015: 303). However, this model – which is not completely different from

the state’s food labelling strategy – may undervalue the diverse range of consumers’ caring practices and competence (Miele and Evans 2010: 176).

This focus on “certification by intermediaries” has become popular within the Chinese CSA movement. The attention on the diverse voluntary practices of participation by consumers in CSA remains based on building trust with the producers (Schumilas and Scott 2016: 310). This tends to reduce differences in geographical significance of consumer-producer networks and diverse farming practices to a technical issue, and ignores the reasons why some food activists think and act differently within these networks (as demonstrated by Si and Scott 2016). For example, Chang Tianle, who leads the Beijing Farmers’ Market and is experienced in consumer organisation, rejects the goal of only enhancing certification practice:

While the CSA emphasises a strong connection between the consumer and the producer, the certification feature does not nurture that relationship, and even makes it less necessary. Because of the certification, consumers can read the label and stop caring so much about what is actually going on at the farm. (Interview, Guangzhou, March 2018)

The representational method that promotes a less-exploitable “dealer-supplier” relationship only caters to so-called “self-concerned” consumers (Si *et al.* 2015). Chang suggests that it fails to incorporate those “who are often not satisfied just to purchase but are eager to give their support in the form of volunteering [in relation to farming and supporting farmers], as part of their pursuit of a fair and sustainable society.” To reclaim the CSA movement, activists such as Chang insist that there must be “a search for different ways to take those consumers in,” e.g., to make them part of the food production process (interview, Guangzhou, March 2018).

Agrarian renaissance in South China: CSA, community, and commons

In this section, I will briefly discuss another pillar of the CSA movement in South China that I call the “agrarian renaissance.” The term refers to a variant of an endogenous regenerative agricultural movement that focuses on the revival of peasants’ indigenous knowledge (*xiangtu zhishi* 鄉土知識)⁶ and respects peasant’s livelihoods and the environment. Here, I mainly refer to the work of the Partnership of Community Development (PCD), a Hong Kong-based organisation that has acted as an incubator for the CSA movement in Mainland China over two decades and is a key actor of the agrarian renaissance.⁷ Based on funded collaborative programmes (e.g. internships in CSA initiatives), conferences, and publications, PCD has

4. Shi Yan 石嫣, “中國緣何興起 PGS?” (*Zhongguo yuanhe xingqi PGS? Why Does PGS Rise in China?*), 2 December 2015, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/L3CJ2qOKop04RlzfPZPug> (accessed on 28 April 2021).

5. *Ibid.*

6. He Jun (2007) defines *xiangtu* knowledge with a socio-material approach to identify the traditional farming techniques resulting from peasants’ local experience and struggle. He is concerned with how these techniques have evolved from the shifting social organisation of rural society in the post-Mao countryside.

7. In the early 2000s, PCD’s participatory action research projects collaborated with local individuals and NGOs (e.g. working on environmental conservation, indigenous knowledge research, rural social work, etc.) to explore the revitalisation of traditional farming, in addition to the documentation of peasants’ oral history in five provinces of South China – including Yunnan, Guangxi, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangdong (PCD 2005, 2007). In support of those farming projects, PCD then launched a flagship programme of CSA internships; it was planned in 2003, launched in 2006, and has continuously incubated many young activists (e.g. Chang, Rao) and related CSA initiatives (PCD 2008: 8).

supported the development of the CSA movement through documenting people's "exploration, practice, and evaluation [of community-based, regenerative, or sustainable agriculture]" (PCD 2019: 10). The data collected by PCD documents grassroots attempts in sustainable rural development that simultaneously consider rural livelihood, rural social integration, and sustainable production (Yan and Chen 2013: 964).

The agrarian renaissance movement firstly addresses concerns related to the agrarian reforms of the 1980s, in particular the introduction of high-yield hybrid rice. This rice required the intensive use of fertiliser and herbicides, which the movement argues gave rise to a middleman market system that exploited small peasants. Over the years, "those modern technologies wrecked the local farmland, resulting, for instance, in collapsing terrace fields due to soil erosion," according to Angus Lam, whose long-standing observation has grounded his leading role in PCD (as a programme coordinator) and his work with China's Greenpeace (1997-2007) (interview, Hong Kong, February 2019). Arguably, this transformation has also led to a loss of traditional farming knowledge that is often regarded as useless.⁸ Yet, if "traditional" farming is being revived, it may bring back what old peasants had learnt from the production teams of the Mao era,⁹ ranging from mastering a variety of organic manures (PCD 2007: 55-6) to collective forms of labour (e.g. irrigation) (*ibid.*: 67). One of the best examples that combines different aspects of such knowledge is the "fish-duck-rice-paddy" (*yuyadao* 魚鴨稻), a well-known symbiotic method of pest control that also preserves indigenous rice and rotates with green manure. The potential of such alternative forms of farming is the reason why the promotion of "eco-rice" (*shengtai dami* 生態大米) has become important to food and farming activism in South China (PCD 2008: 17, 2013: 157-8).

CSA-related groups then attempt to incorporate practices such as the "fish-duck-rice-paddy" described above into a new type of community economy (*shequ jingji* 社區經濟) for organising smallholders.¹⁰ This is done in contrast to the state-promoted farmers' cooperatives, which activists see lacking "a culture of cooperation," states Edward Chan, another PCD programme coordinator (interview, Hong Kong, August 2018). "Why these early CSA projects are interested in community economy," Lam continues, "is because the valuable traditional knowledge preserved by the collective effort can create the 'commons' (*gonggoncai* 公共財) for humans and the nature" (interview, Hong Kong, February 2019). His usage of the term "commons," going beyond the focus of property rights, denotes a particular understanding among activists that a maximisation of efforts to protect "shared interests and values" (Gibson-Graham 2006: 237) from peasant communities, for example, traditional farming skills, local varieties, and irrigation, would help them withstand the rural crises that resulted from the fragmentation of rural communities in the reform era.¹¹ This idea of a commons is based on the post-capitalist perspective of community economy by J.K. Gibson-Graham, suggesting a relational thinking for "the quintessentially ethical concern (...) of how [we are] to live together" (*ibid.*: 82). "Commons" is defined as a process of commoning by which diverse economies should be sustained in the ways of negotiating and recognising "our interdependence with other humans, other species, and our environment" (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013: xix). Based on CSA practices of organising consumers' knowledge and labour with farms in Australia, Jenny Cameron (2015: 56), following the lead of Gibson-Graham (2006), argues for an "agricultural commons" that consists of "biophysical commons," such as the soil, water, seeds, insects, and microbial life to support producers in working with the land (particularly via the use of organic rather than industrial techniques), and "knowledge commons," which support producers' livelihoods by avoiding

the loss of knowledge of farming practices. An ethics of the commons, as noted by activists of the agrarian renaissance movement, thereby points to their understanding of commitment that there is a need to focus on "how to balance the responsibility to care for commons among different actors" (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013).

Introducing CXH: Activism within the nexus of production and consumption

Chengxianghui (城鄉匯, CXH) is an organisation based in Guangzhou that connects rural producers across Guangdong Province and beyond to consumers. It was founded by a group of previous interns of PCD in 2010 and is rooted in the early struggle for a consumer-producer reconnection. Due to the 2002 scandal of mercury-laced rice, promoting "eco-rice" in Guangzhou in the mid-2000s often met with public suspicion, as ordinary consumers worried about the safety of food without a food label or a certification.¹² Poor sales of CSA products in urban areas threatened the sustainability of the farming projects of many CSA initiatives in southern China. Huang Yajun, an organiser of an NGO in rural social work, was concerned about organisational capacities: "We were not strong in organising urban consumers [to buy our products]... because we did not have related resources and experience" (interview, Guangzhou, February 2019). In late 2009, in an effort to organise urban consumers, the group hired Rao Qihong, a former intern of PCD who then became one of the founders of CXH and is the current director. Rao aligned with other like-minded CSA activists and organisations with similar difficulties: "We were each thinking of ways to promote eco-food without labels, so we began to organise a small farmers' market in an urban community."¹³ CXH was initially known as Cantonese Farmers' Market. "To practice sustainable living in urban and rural areas together," in the words of Rao,¹⁴ CXH aims to create an alternative food network based on the "S-E-E" principle: a Sustainable form of economic exchange that supports small-scale farming and its community (S); an Ecological culture, and local knowledge of food centred around seasonal eating and farming (E); and Ethical practices in both production and consumption (E).

For a decade, with steadily increasing numbers of growers and consumers, CXH has extended its food-related activities from the farmers' market to a variety of other activities to promote its mission. This includes farm visits, urban farming, cooking workshops, food talks, and recently, buying groups that enhance consumer-producer communication (online and offline, tangible and intangible), which transcends rural-urban boundaries. Regarding these activities, Rao has highlighted the crucial role of urban stakeholders in shaping the activism of the organisation:

In the past, when we relied on a small group of organisers to play it safe, we found that we had our limitations, and it was difficult to make

8. Chu Ming (PCD 2008: 13); also see Dominelli and Ku (2017).

9. This attention to Mao-era peasant knowledge changes the impression of "cultural deconstruction" or "cultural homogenisation" (PCD 2007: 72, 94). It also challenges the NRR narrative that tends to see the contemporary experience of rural communities as simply destroyed by the radical political movement (Pan *et al.* 2017: 797).

10. Buesgen (2008); Ting and Chen (2012); Wen *et al.* (2012); Dominelli and Ku (2017).

11. He (2007).

12. Interview with Rao Qihong, Guangzhou, March 2018.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Rao Qihong 饒琪弘, "城鄉匯一五發展回顧2011-16" (*Chengxianghui yiwu fazhan huigu 2011-16*, The Five-year Review of CXH's Development 2011-16), 20 December 2016, <https://www.pcd.org.hk/zh-hant/content/%E5%9F%8E%E9%84%89%E5%8C%AF> (accessed on 20 January 2018).

any progress. Then, we learnt to position ourselves as an open platform. Various “action groups” (*xingdong xiaozu* 行動小組) were formed with different focal points. The agency of more people with common ideas could be further mobilised to enrich the exploration of “rural-urban interaction” (*chengxiang hudong* 城鄉互動) in Guangzhou.¹⁵

These “action groups” transformed CXH into an inclusive and participatory space in which consumers can become volunteers, interns, and even organisers. Haze, a consumer who has volunteered since 2016, comments that “urban people always misunderstand village people and regard them as low quality, backward, and un-knowledgeable. CXH is putting an end to this misconception” (interview, Guangzhou, May 2018).

Joining these action groups, I was able to experience what participants call the spirit of “living together” (*gongtong shenghuo* 共同生活) – which is, in Rao’s words, “to practice sustainable living in urban and rural areas together” (interview, Guangzhou, April 2018). In the city, we learnt to make food with new recipes, learnt organic farming with recycled waste, and even consumed local food in various places. In the countryside, we visited farms for inspection as well as for rural tourism. I shared meals with consumers, producers, and sometimes both. The “making of explicit civilities of living together” builds on a type of relations that Elspeth Probyn calls “conviviality.” These relations concern how individuals come to care for themselves, others, and the environment (2017: 41). As Probyn refers to Ash Amin’s *Land of Strangers* (2013), conviviality in this paper is defined as an idea that highlights the everyday interaction of a multicultural society as not based on epistemological categories (e.g. an insider-outsider binarism). As Amin analyses, this focuses on forms of everyday convivial negotiations of difference through a “collective endeavour” built on “relational practices out of which are forged new shared identities” (2013: 4). The “habit of negotiating multiplicity” (Probyn 2017: 41) is the spirit of such collective work, like what I engaged in my fieldwork. As a concept, conviviality compels an analysis of “the ensemble of relations between humans, between humans and the non-human, between work and leisure, and between temporal and spatial relations” (Greg 2013: 22), in order to explore what Rao has called “rural-urban interaction” (interview, Guangzhou, April 2018). I will argue below that CXH’s conviviality practices lead people to develop a different set of knowledge, skills, and techniques for questioning food quality and how it “intrinsically is bound to the rich and varied context of production” (Murdoch and Miele 2004: 721). This goes beyond mere concerns for food safety.

Activist reflections on farm certification and the difficulties for the agricultural environment

Since 2012, rural trips to visit CXH production partners have included products tasting, inspecting farms and their surroundings, and even more important for some, listening to the personal stories of producers.¹⁶ After returning from the field, an informal inspection report would be shared with the public and followers of CXH via social media. This was done to generate trust between consumers and producers. Emotional and touching stories of aspiring ecological farmers often succeed in creating added value for local food and lead to good sales. For example, Yingyi, a consumer (since 2012) as well as a volunteer in the farmers’ market, was more willing to buy rice for 10 RMB per *jin* here – double the normal price of 4 RMB per *jin* – because she “is often emotionally moved by this presentation of a connection between producers and food” (interview, Guangzhou, April 2018).

“Without sufficient knowledge [of the consumers],” Rao reflects on her decade-long experience in food and farming activism, “those previous farm visits [of CXH] unavoidably would become a kind of farmyard entertainment or homestay tourism (*nongjiale* 農家樂).” This reflection – along with the criticism that “certifying is superficial” – has been crucial for her focus on the agency of consumers:

Because we don’t know what problems are happening on the farm, we can’t help by offering suggestions and assistance to the producers. Also, because those small-scale farmers who try to adopt ecological farming are precarious and are the most in need of improving their farm-management skills for their survival, both in terms of quality and quantity (...) even though we often speak of “companionship” (*peiban* 陪伴), we may fail to accompany those growers in a precarious situation [and in their struggle to transit from conventional to organic farming] (...). As a community, we may fail in the very process of “negotiation” (*xieshang* 協商) between consumers and producers to solve problems. (Interview, Guangzhou, February 2019)

Rao explains sympathetically that several producers who were passionate about ecological farming before, and had joined the farmers’ market from 2012 to 2015, opted out because of “poor skills of [agro-economic] management” (*ibid.*). A recent survey has listed some of the reasons for this move, such as high operational costs, difficulty in hiring local workers, low revenue, a polluted environment, insecurity of rented land, and so on (Kurl and Ho 2017). Rao and others worry that neither trust nor sales could render visible the precarious material conditions these producers face. Farm visits continuing as a type of group certification would shut down any room for negotiating consumer responsibilities to “accompany” the related growers in their living struggles. In effect, they suggest that if consumers want healthy food, they need to better sustain and support those who produce it by going beyond just paying adequate prices.

Based on this realisation, CXH sent some volunteers to attend the 2014 PGS training camp, organised by the Beijing Farmers’ Market in cooperation with the International Food Movement Organisation (IFMO). Food and farming activists with a decade-long experience of consumer organisation, such as Rao, aim to adapt and implement PGS in a convivial way:

First, both consumers and farmers’ market colleagues must be trained in organic farming if they want to make quality farm visits. Second, a system that facilitates farmers’ participation in visits to each other’s farms and effective communication and learning in the process will help everyone’s agricultural standards improve. This would create a virtuous circle of agronomic improvement and regulation in place. These two things are exactly what PGS can do: it’s not all about “certification” and “monitoring,” but it also focuses on supporting producers. “Convivial learning” (*gongtong xuexi* 共同學習) is the mechanism for the PGS community to support itself. (Jiang 2016: 16)

Activists such as Rao and Chang claim that “the previous CSA farm visits [resemble] PGS at its infancy” (interview with Chang, Guangzhou, March 2018). What they mean by this is that they aim to continue the work

15. Interview with Rao Qihong, Guangzhou, March 2018.

16. Interview with Huang Yi, a former consumer who became the 2013–2016 director of CXH, Guangzhou, May 2018.



Figure 1. On-site training using PGS's evaluation sheet. Credit: Photograph taken by the author.

to transform PGS from a system focused on just building trust between consumers and producers into one that is able to improve collaboration between the two groups. These activists argue that a new approach to learning for consumers is necessary. This paper aims to offer such an approach with a normative framework that I refer to as “convivial agriculture.” It refers to the creation of a participatory technique for urban consumers to engage with sustainable agrarian production in the countryside. The term stands for the search for a better approach to care for and protect the agricultural commons (e.g. knowledge and biodiversity) within the context of a consumer-producer nexus in agrarian production. It captures the actions that go beyond food safety governance as narrowly defined by the state, to transform the “places devoid of power [that now] emerge by people filling them through their presence” (Gronemeyer 2015: 79).

To conceptualise this approach, I employ techniques of visibility outlined by Mara Miele (2011, 2017) to explore the possibilities of how humans can engage with the life of non-human others that become our food. In her seminal study on “happy chickens,” Miele moves beyond the ambiguous representation of animal rights via labels. She narrates how techniques of visibility should be used to translate and qualify farmed lives and existing farming skills and conditions. This technique for rendering living matters into food produces “what Morgan Meyer [2010: 123] has defined as ‘broker knowledge,’ which is ‘knowledge made more robust, more accountable, and more usable; knowledge that ‘serves locally’ at a given time, knowledge that has been de- and reassembled” (Miele 2011: 2077). For Miele, applying the brokering shows how the relational politics of food with its different social effects and underlying power structures (e.g. new forms of ethical guidance in shopping or mobilisation for bridging production and consumption) produce “different modes of relating to, and enacting of, issues of animal welfare” (*ibid.*: 2087).

Therefore, by using convivial agriculture as a term, I refer to the creation of knowledge, care, and responsibility for sustainable agrarian production among different actors (including organisers, consumers, and producers). In line with Miele, I will use convivial agriculture to render visible the agricultural commons and how participants turn PGS into an ethical model of “negotiated companionship,” instead of seeing PGS as an ethical model of “certification by intermediaries” as suggested by AFN literature. This ethnography based on a relational approach also offers new insight into the literature on the practice of PGS in the Global South (e.g. Mexico and Brazil, see: Kaufmann *et al.* 2020; Sacchi *et al.* 2015).

Narrating PGS as techniques for conviviality

In 2015, CXH also transformed farm visits to incorporate a PGS inspection team. In late 2017, it helped forming the coordination group of Guangdong-based PGS practitioners, bringing together the region’s CSA organisations. In this group, CXH, as Rao insists, hopes to “bring in the consumers’ voice and responsibility” into the discussion (interview, Guangzhou, March 2018). The motivation here is to change farmers’ thinking that PGS is only a solution to improve their farming skills and to assist in the promotion of their products. In the first half of 2018, a working committee for the coordination group came into effect, in which I participated and thereby followed CXH consumers through joint PGS activities such as meetings, intensive technical workshops, farm inspections, and so on. The four-day intensive PGS workshop was held at an eco-farm in Conghua District of Guangzhou City. In contrast to other parts of Guangzhou, this is a rare non-industrial, mountainous district with both commercial organic and CSA-based organic farms. The workshop brought together about 40 participants, and some of the organisers were well-known figures in CSA circles mentioned earlier. The participating producers were mainly new farmers rather than smallholders. The consumers were all affiliated with CXH. During the daytime, participants received training about the specifics of running an ecological farm, with on-site inspection trials. At night “consensus meetings” (*gongshihui* 共識會) were held, to discuss issues relating to PGS’s mission, rationale, administration, and its future development (Figures 1 and 2). In the following, my narration will show PGS as a method for evaluating organic farms based on stakeholder participation.



Figure 2. A “consensus meeting” about PGS at night. Credit: Photographs taken by the author.

Technique (I) for rendering agricultural commons

The first training section teaches participants how to use PGS evaluation sheets to inspect the production environment. This section on how to conduct on-farm inspection was to train participants to assess the material condition of farming. This requires them to acquire inspection skills, for example, how to observe and interview. This acknowledges the difficulties of on-farm inspections due to differences in knowledge and experience. In a conversation, consumer-participants complained that “the knowledge required for an inspection [was] way too difficult,” while a farmer-participant who was learning about organic farming exaggerated, “Only if one can comprehend all of it can one manage a farm well” (interviews with Deng and Haze, Guangzhou, March 2018).

The matter of biophysical commons interlocks the definition of ecological farming with the principles of life cycle and biodiversity. Farm management of soil health, plantation, and pest prevention is grounded on the very methods of soil improvement by human labour that cares about humus, microbes, and organic matter – the soil food web is regarded as “a good home for biodiversity” by participants. Peng Yueli, a technician from Nature Land (*Wotu gongfang* 沃土工坊), an organisation that is part of the agrarian renaissance movement in South China, has been fine-tuning evaluation sheets to fit Guangdong’s specificity. Peng explains to all the participants, “If we mystify organic food production, we can’t engage with the [process of] changing the health of the soil” (interview, Guangzhou, March 2018). As a scientist focusing on the relationship between the natural environment and agriculture, she aims to debunk the mysticism of “plant alchemy” often promoted by organic food proponents. Peng further deconstructed the soil with its physical, biological, and chemical properties, using jar testing and meters (Figure 3). As an activist, she draws on the experience of actively taking care of soil and points to the importance of compost. She even compiled the experience of peasants conducting experiments based on farming practices during the Mao era. This was followed-up by an on-farm demonstration of Guo and Weipen, both very experienced new farmers, to show the making of healthy soil, illustrated by their skilful practice of compost production and application.¹⁷ This part teaches participants how to observe the biophysical commons via looking for healthy soil on the one hand and the knowledge commons via the skilled farming labour (by Guo and Weipen) on the other.



Figure 3. Checking soil health via a jar test. Credit: Photograph taken by the author.

For these reasons, composting is particularly listed on the farm evaluation sheet before a wide range of other items, from disease control to farming labour. Comprehending the relationality of compost helps trace a socio-metabolic linkage between humans, biodiversity, soil, and the environment. The investigation of compost significantly helps consumers understand the circular approach from production to consumption to waste. For convivial agriculture, this is the first set of techniques to render visible the related precarious matters within the agricultural environment. This technique allows the use of PGS to present the grower as a carer (*zhaoguzhe* 照顧者) whose labour and knowledge is a skill-full practice brokering the knowledge commons and biophysical commons. It transforms the moral notion of local food and relates consumers to the required skilful practices. Finally, it tells a story of the struggling farmer seen as the carer of the local environment rather than solely a supplier of local, safe, quality food. After all, the assessment of knowledge and skills of ecological farming can circulate among producers and consumers via the practice of PGS by Guangdong-based CSA activists.

Technique (II) for recognising companionship

After hours of “consensus meetings,” participants at the Conghua workshop reached a shared vision for the use of the PGS system in the future. Rao’s terms of companionship were raised as a means of transforming information asymmetry in commercial agriculture between food producers and consumers. Huang, a committee member of a Guangdong-based coordinated group that employs PGS, says “PGS, in the long run, is about collective belonging” (interview, Guangzhou, March 2018). Consequently, consumer-participants should take it as a long-term commitment to “hold the producers’ hands” while they go through the difficulties of transiting toward ecological farming. As a result, their consent to being companions (*peibanzhe* 陪伴者) of producers shifts the aim of a PGS evaluation in three important aspects:

- a) not to focus on a given product, but on the wholeness of the farm;
- b) not to focus on the recent conditions of the farm, but on the farm owner and any challenges they face;
- c) not to focus on their business success, but on their mentality and vision.

This decision to recognise the farm as a whole contrasts with the common certification practice that renders consumers and producers as two disconnected poles without much mediation. This version of PGS allows producers to work as independent entrepreneurs in seeking and obtaining organic standards. It even fits the state-led technocratic discourse of a modern peasantry, e.g. the reformist vision of transforming the rural population from “backward peasants” to independent and entrepreneurial farmers (Day 2013: 14). However, the participants at the workshop were critical of notions such as entrepreneurial independence. They rejected food quality as a solely individualist message, based just on an individual’s resources or managerial skills and unrelated to other necessities within the larger socio-metabolic context. Instead, their convivial thinking considers how consumers and producers can become “interdependent” and even mutually beneficial to one another.

17. For the practice of composting, as farmers shared, rapidly biodegradable compost for fertilisation is based on animal manure, and slowly biodegradable compost for soil improvement is based on plant manure. To cultivate a loamy soil without nutrient imbalance, both types must be skilfully applied along with mulching and rotation.

The participating consumers in the workshop further added several suggestions to the enactment of companionship in an improved PGS: a) to replace the term “certification” with “recognition,” b) to add a section of the grower’s story into the scope of the inspection, and c) to create non-professional roles within the inspection team to be more inclusive for new consumer-participants in PGS. PGS as a system of recognition – rather than a system of certification – would bring together different actors in a convivial space and allow for an ethical dialogue. The focus on revisiting the relationship between consumer and producer is an important pillar of convivial agriculture.

Telling a “companion-carer” story

I argue that two main convivial techniques are brokering the consumer-producer relation and the rural-urban relation: one technique allows caring for agricultural commons to be more visible, sensitive, and accountable by calling the producers “carers” [of the land]; the other, in parallel, renders visible the negotiation of responsibility, producing consumers as companions. PGS thereby may become a system of recognition, as it calls for a convivial technique that brokers the companion’s engagement of responsibility and the carer’s skilful ways of dealing with precarious conditions and nature. In short, it tells a “companion-carer” story, a particular narrative of activism that aims at reimagining rural-urban interaction.

This story calls for neither a simple approach with a handy solution, nor a naive politics with a guarantee, e.g. representational politics and its moral rhetoric of “foodies save the Earth.” It would require PGS participants to use evaluation sheets and reports that “translate” the given agricultural environment growing ethical food for consumers (Miele 2017). Following some PGS farm visits in 2018 and 2019, I found this practice of PGS inspection innovative. Some experienced consumers and producers tried various ways to observe the makeup of the farming environment (Figure 4). Less experienced consumers such as Ren, a new 19-year-old volunteer, interviewed the farmer and then took charge of the rural storytelling part – e.g. presenting the farmer’s passion and values in regard to farming. It is this storytelling that lets consumers associate the work of producers with food and is often found in food talks at farmers’ markets. The new style of CXH farm visits now vividly depicts the agrarian environment in addition to a technical report of the farm.



The convivial agriculture performed by CXH is remarkable for being open to including other activities, i.e. the so-called action groups. A recent example is the PGS farm visit to a farming household in northern

Guangdong that had experimented fish-duck-rice-paddy and wanted to be a production-partner of CXH. The PGS team gave some technical suggestions for farm improvements, recommending that “under current conditions, only one season be planted according to this new approach. This would give [the farmer] more time to work on the water recycling system for irrigation, which could be done through breeding [ducks], composting, and planting green manure.”¹⁸ Other action groups followed up after this visit. For instance, a buying group organised a collective purchase, and volunteers introduced the eco-rice produced by the farming household to the farmers’ market. CXH even connected this farmer with others whom he could learn from. All of these food activities are collective actions under the heading of conviviality and provide a glimpse of the effect and power that PGS could have in bringing a moral commitment to consumers through companionship.

In line with Miele (2011: 2087), such activities of brokering, performed via PGS, have achieved important results for CXH, allowing the organisation to bring together consumers willing to volunteer and farmers with various needs of assistance. The renewed practice of PGS has also demonstrated its power to allow different modes of perception, inspection, suggestion, and support to occur within a food network. The underlying ethical model of “negotiated companionship” provides for a more socially engaged and ecologically concerned relationship between consumers and producers than the one based on the certification by intermediaries propagated by the CSA Alliance.

Conclusion: Collective challenges for rural-urban reimagination

This paper explored how food and farming activism in South China evolved in response to collaboration between rural farmers and urban consumers along the two-decade-long experience of the agrarian renaissance movement. Arguably, the existing literature does not recognise the significance of PGS within the Chinese CSA movement. The study presented here examined a particular form of stakeholder participation in organic and sustainable food practice, centred on the ethics of conviviality and commons. The paper argues that this practice helps us to reveal a complex set of ethical considerations in an attempt to reshape the relationships between consumption and production, between the rural and the urban, as well as between humans and the environment. My normative framework of a convivial agriculture takes all these relationships into account. Overall, the difference between the imaginary of “companion-carer” and the imaginary of “dealer-supplier” urges us to look beyond the disputes surrounding the use of PGS as only a tool for certification, such as in the Green Fingers dispute mentioned earlier. Rather, following CXH’s practice for a system of recognition, the dispute allows us to grapple with contradictory claims about different ethical practices within Chinese CSA circles. Furthermore, it may promote the cultural, social, environmental, and even political qualities of food and agriculture.

Relational ethics is helpful for rethinking food politics, especially the aspect of consumption. It rejects binary thinking on alternative food systems that sees consumption practice merely as a statement in which buyers vote with their forks or chopsticks. Rather, consumers are seen as actors who can be brought together by a different mode of relating to, and

18. 城鄉匯 (Chengxianghui), “PGS: 解甲歸田農場探訪報告” (PGS: jiejiatun nongchang tanfang baogao, PGS Farm Visit Report), 11 July 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/tLUN3vpg0kOSHc7R_SblHA (accessed on 20 July 2020).

enacting issues of, agricultural commons. This is an important imaginary of the Chinese food and farming activism presented in this paper. While the “dealer-supplier” story relies on the effort of mediated trust to avoid tensions between consumers and producers, the “companion-carer” story challenges activists to draw them together and turn the tensions into a productive, participatory method to grow a food network. Last but not least, although I have outlined two sets of ethical practices in bridging the gap between consumer and producer, I am not simply suggesting that either one should replace the other. What I suggest is that the popular representative method that sounds effective in respect to food scares should further consider adding “participatory space” as a relational method. The use of PGS in the Guangdong experience has shown us the possibility of producers and consumers working together as they search for ways to produce knowledge and to open up a convivial space at the same time. In sum, the term convivial agriculture brings forward a new perspective on the relationship between consumption and production and may thereby provide a window into a pluralistic agrarian future.

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