

Back to the Land “Peasant-entrepreneurs”: The New Actors of Chinese Peasant Agroecology

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyses the framing processes at play in the re-definition of “peasant agroecology” in contemporary China. Based on the study of “new-farmers” who have emerged in the networks of organic peasant agriculture, it interrogates the ambiguities of food ethics as the cornerstone of alternative food markets. The research explores the emergence of “peasant-entrepreneurs” (1) through the transmission of values and skills in processes of cultural heritage enhancement, (2) through the establishment of “trust” in the market relationship, and (3) through the negotiation between producers and retailers in a quality market for singular goods.

KEYWORDS: new-farmers, peasants, entrepreneurs, capitalism, agroecology, food ethics.

Peasant farming movements and young entrepreneurs in contemporary China

Chun Ge and Ah Dai are looking at the valley.¹ The Guangxi mountains are lost against the still black sky, and the two men grumble and resign themselves. It's 4:30 in the morning, and as the shadow of the mountains does not lift from the horizon, the weather will once again be too wet for cane sugar extraction. It has rained all winter, so Chun Ge hasn't been able to begin producing sugar, but during this week of January 2019 the farm will welcome a dozen young people from all over China to observe the process of making red sugar. In a word, in a gesture, Chun Ge gives orders anyway. He wants to demonstrate his work, even if this round of production may not be good to sell. Invited to help, I join them in cutting and crushing the canes and storing the bagasse in a dry place for the coming year. Last year's bagasse is burned under the vats where the sugarcane juice starts to boil, becoming denser and denser until it forms caramel, which is then moulded into small cubes or chopped into powder. At 7 a.m., the first visitors emerge from sleep. Each one, smartphone or camera in hand, goes around the installations to admire the farmers' know-how and immortalise the production process. The photographs will fill the pages of the sales platforms they run or those of newspapers on Chinese peasant agroecology and short supply chains. The young people watch the men and women at work; they may even give a hand, and above all, they get together to share their experiences as “returned youth” in the renewed market of peasant products.² Later, sitting around a coal stove, they discuss the difficulties they have encountered in carrying out their activities in Beijing, Suzhou, Hanzhong, Nanning, or Guangzhou. They seek advice from the President of Long Live Farmers (LLF), an association that has pioneered the revival of Chinese peasant agriculture since its foundation in the mid-2000s, who has hung under his awning a poster with the words: “Eating is an agricultural act.”³

Through their pictures of boiling caramel, their selfies with Chun Ge, their stories sparkling with rural knowledge and peasant anecdotes, the “returned youth” are contributing to the shaping of a new representation of peasant agriculture in China. For the past 15 years or so, on the fringes of rural development policies, alternative agri-food networks (AAFNs) have been contributing to political and economic change in the Chinese countryside (Si, Schumilas, and Scott 2015; Si and Scott 2019; Guo 2020).⁴ They are giving rise to a new form of young entrepreneurs, who promote an ethics of “peasant agroecology” to develop urban markets for “safe” farm products. Short supply chains contribute to the emergence of economic transactions that put the direct relationship between producers and consumers back at the heart of the exchange through farmers' markets, eco-shops, local catering, green tourism, etc.⁵ They give prominent place to the recognition of local crafts in peasant farming as a culture associated with agricultural and food practices.⁶ In the context of agrarian transition and food crises marked by the repetition of large-scale scandals – crises of confidence both in food companies and in organic product certification labels – some of the “alternative” networks invoke the persistence of subsistence peasant

1. The names of the actors in this article, as well as the Long Live Farmers association, have been anonymised.
2. “Returned youth” or “back to the land youth” (*fanxiang qingnian* 返鄉青年) play a key-role in promoting “peasant agroecology.” Going back and forth between town and country, they are the main actors of the construction of alternative agri-food networks.
3. The President adopted these words from the “Slow Food Manifesto for Quality,” <https://www.slowfood.com/about-us/our-philosophy> (accessed on 20 October 2017), a quotation by Berry (2018).
4. AAFNs are “operating at the margins of mainstream industrial food circuits” and promote “quality” food through economic transactions based on local embeddedness and trust. See Goodman (2003).
5. Various economic transactions are related to short supply chains, understood as a sales relationship with zero or one intermediary between the producer and the consumer and without geographical limits: for example, short supply chains in CSA (community supported agriculture) (Tan and Du 2015), direct sales (Xu and Zhou 2016), or nested markets (van der Ploeg, Jingzhong, and Schneider 2012; Ye, Ding, and Wang 2012).
6. On the social link through short supply chains, see for example Chiffolleau (2019).



Illustration 1. Back to the land "new-farmers" discussing "alternative" networks with the President at Chun Ge's farm. Credit: Photograph taken by Ah Li.

agriculture and promote the return to the land of self-proclaimed "new-farmers" (*xin nongren* 新農人).⁷

This article contributes to the study of the political economy of capitalist transformations in China's agri-food system (Zhang and Donaldson 2010; Yan and Chen 2015; Trappel 2015). The general political context of agrarian change attests to the demise of the Chinese peasantry as a class (Sargeson 2016). Agricultural modernisation through central and regional policies, discourses, subsidies, or tax-incentives has led to the vertical integration of small-scale farming and rural differentiation (Zhang and Donaldson 2010; Gürel 2014; Ye 2015; Schneider 2015; Gong and Gürel 2019). Structural dynamics underline de-peasantisation and the systematic dismantling of non-market-oriented economies. The modernisation drive has also jeopardised alternative pro-peasant movements such as New Rural Reconstruction (Yan and Chen 2013; Day and Schneider 2018). Rural initiatives for comprehensive cooperatives or alternative forms of rural communities have turned to more capitalist or market-oriented trade modes (Hale 2013; Gürel 2014).

Alternative agri-food networks are nevertheless on the rise in China as public concern is growing toward food safety (Yang and Wang 2017; Guo 2020; Klein 2020). The figure of the "small peasant household" (*xiaononghu* 小農戶)⁸ is appearing again on the public scene, in official Party texts,⁹ through academic experimentation,¹⁰ and through initiatives of international development organisations¹¹ or of collectives and commercial companies. Some academic research invokes the international influence of the Japanese Teikei and North American community supported agriculture (CSA) on the Chinese movement (Yang and Wang 2017), while NGOs participate in pro-peasant international networks, such as La Via Campesina, Slow Food, or Urgenci. The national and international contexts lend institutional legitimacy to "alternative" networks and individual "peasant" entrepreneurial initiatives. From this perspective, AAFNs also constitute a way to question the political economic change in rural areas, whether analysed through the agrarian change perspective as "a poor consolation prize to the loss of comprehensive cooperatives" (Day and Schneider 2018), through the scope of public policy and food sovereignty (Yan, Bun, and Xu 2020), or from the perspective of negotiation with the state (Lammer 2017).

At the margin of these structural changes, torn between political, caritative, and academic initiatives, the peasant subsistence economy remains a source of dynamic actors and activities. This article argues that the "returned youth," who shift between the spheres of subsistence, contribute to the vitality of the margins and may constitute a counterpoint from below to injunctions from above. The "returned youth" are struggling between political mobilisation and market-oriented development. By promoting farm products as "quality" food with high market value, they adopt a pragmatic approach to struggle against agribusiness transformations. They create food short supply chains to bypass institutional mediation and go against market-based stratification, but also re-establish other forms of rural differentiation. From this perspective, this article contributes to the study of Chinese agrarian change through the scope of AAFNs new actors that connect spaces of peasant farming, based on a subsistence economy, to urban safe food niche markets.

The returned "new-farmers" act as rural entrepreneurs in different ways. By creating outlets for smallholders' products, they stand for social entrepreneurs that contribute to rural development. By condemning agribusiness and advocating food ethics based on local agroecological production, they act as moral entrepreneurs (Becker 1966). By developing short supply chains and safe food market niches, they become commercial entrepreneurs, independent or cooperative-based. The notion of "entrepreneur" refers, in various traditions of rural studies, to the opposition between producers as peasant smallholders and entrepreneurial farmers in modernised agriculture (Mendras 1993; van der Ploeg 2014). This article shows the emergence of entrepreneurial actors within the frame of small-scale peasant agriculture: "back to the land youth" who engage in small-scale farming after periods of urban life, often as students or as unqualified workers. As pivotal figures in alternative networks, these young people, born in the 1980s and 1990s, refer to themselves as "peasants" through various denominations: youth returned to the land (*fanxiang qingnian* 返鄉青年), students returned to the land (*fanxiang daxuesheng* 返鄉大學生), new-farmers (*xin nongren* 新農人), half-peasants-half-X (*bannong banxia* 半農半X), agroecology practitioners (*shengtai nongye shijianzhe* 生態農業實踐者), or social entrepreneurs (*shehui qiyejia* 社會企業家). They redefine "peasant agroecology" by promoting small-scale farming as an ethical and entrepreneurial choice against the negative image of peasants as ignorant and backward (Schneider 2015). They contribute both to the renewal of production practices – that brings together local craft and ecological or permacultural principles – and distribution methods – with a dominant place given to short supply chains in e-commerce (Ye, Dou, and Zhang 2018).

7. Appearing at the beginning of the 2010s, the word "new-farmer" refers to young and educated people who practice organic farming, often promoting ecological values and selling products through connected social networks (Du 2015).

8. While the terms recall the fundamental historical forces behind the founding of the PRC, in this context *xiaonong* 小農 or *xiaononghu* 小農戶 refer to economic households and not to the vocabulary of the social classes of poor and middle-poor peasants in the New China (*pinnong* 貧農 and *zhongnong* 中農).

9. See for example the Central Committee Document No. 1 for 2018 and 2019, the "Five-year Plan for Rural Revitalisation (2018-2022)" (*Xiangcun zhenxing zhanlve guihua* (2018-2022 nian), 鄉村振興戰略規劃 (2018-2022年)), and the "National Programme for Sustainable Agricultural Development (2015-2030)" (*Quanguo nongye kechixu fazhan guihua* (2015-2030 nian), 全國農業可持續發展規劃 (2015-2030年)).

10. These are almost all related to the "New Rural Reconstruction" movement, among others: Little Donkey Farm supported by Renmin University, Shared Harvest by Tsinghua University, Green Roots by Yunnan University and Sun Yat-sen University, and Farmers' Seed Network and Participatory Plant Breeding Projects by the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

11. Among others, Oxfam HK, Partnerships for Community Development (PCD), World Vision, Greenpeace East Asia.

The “peasant agroecology” movements blur the definition of peasant farming. On the one hand, peasant agroecology refers to a subsistence economy understood through smallholding agriculture, family labour, and limited market participation. The smallholders consume most of their products and sell the surplus as income on the side. “New-farmers” then retail the “peasant products” to urban consumers. On the other hand, “new-farmers” also create farms and directly take part in the production process. It may be family-based production, but they sometimes also employ wage labour. The latter is anchored in national market networks, and production constitutes the main income of the farm. From this perspective, “peasant agroecology” includes both very remote and very connected production modes.

At the interface between different sales platforms, and between ecological and development networks at regional, national, and international scales, “new-farmers” set themselves up as spokespersons of a peasant culture to be protected and valued – whether ancestral or ethnic, agricultural, culinary, or social, or even completely renewed by its insertion into a globalised culture. As members of commercial enterprises or agricultural cooperatives, “returned youth” act as an interface between the farms and the urban market, contributing to a transfer of skills and raising the issue of economic and political autonomy of producers. Their return to the land renews the definition of peasant agriculture through “market work” at the intersection of production, processing, marketing, and sales activities.¹²

This article argues that, behind the institutional context, young “peasant-entrepreneurs” contribute to a framing task that redefines “peasant agroecology” through the eyes of the young graduated generation. It takes roots in both subsistence farming and international social and ecological norms. Institutional and individual actors of the AAFNs establish and disseminate the “quality” criteria of both products and networks in “food ethics”: locally based, ecologically and economically viable, socially equitable, and aware of the social and environmental implications of the act of eating.¹³ They define the new peasant agriculture as social agroecology (*shehui shengtai nongye* 社會生態農業).¹⁴

The emerging “social agroecology” showcases “model entrepreneurs,” often university graduates, but also brings to the forefront other categories of young people of peasant origin, who participate at least as much in the construction of the “alternative” networks. Despite the “ethical” relations that take place in the interactions between elite graduates and agricultural practitioners, persistent inequalities reveal the reproduction of power relations. From this perspective, “peasants-entrepreneurs” hold a contradictory position. They are advocates of small-scale, household-based, and ecological agricultural production and at the same time also capitalists exploiting the labour of farmworkers and maintaining a knowledge-based and network-based hierarchy over the ordinary peasant households that they work with.

Based on the study of “new-farmers” who have emerged in the networks of organic peasant agriculture, this paper interrogates the ambiguities of food ethics as the cornerstone of alternative food markets. From a Goffmanian perspective of constructivist sociology (Goffman 1991), the following pages analyse the framing processes at play in the re-definition of “peasant agroecology” in contemporary China. The research explores the emergence of “peasant-entrepreneurs” through the transmission of values and skills in processes of cultural heritage enhancement and through the negotiation between producers and retailers in a quality market for singular goods. It argues that (1) “new-farmers” promote peasant agroecology and prevent agribusiness-led vertical integration, (2) they re-establish trust in the market

relationship, (3) but they also reproduce capitalist exploitation in production relations.

Long Live Farmers: From Guangxi’s remote mountains to international food forums and back

This article focuses on a Guangxi-based association, Long Live Farmers, that promotes subsistence farming, local craft, and indigenous cuisine. LLF is one of the first associations in Mainland China to rethink urban food supply through the development of regional short supply chains. Since 2003, a core group of about ten people around the “President,”¹⁵ the founder of the association, has been experimenting with short supply systems through smallholder markets, family farms, and agricultural comprehensive cooperatives. They first tried to collect “quality” food – i.e. locally grown, without chemical inputs or fertilisers – for themselves through a trade relationship that would be economically fair for the producers. The President was contacted by the NGO Partnerships for Community Development (PCD)¹⁶ in 2006, which convinced him that his city-countryside retailing activities were a type of CSA, and that LLF should take part in national and international networks. The President participated in international events in China and Europe, with much admiration for Slow Food, for example. For a few years, LLF received “trainees” from PCD in Guangxi. The association worked together with other development NGOs and academic research groups on comprehensive cooperatives. At the end of the 2010s, it became a reference institution within the Chinese peasant agroecology networks. Since 2015, the association has slowly refocused on the regional scale. For example, it doesn’t host PCD trainees anymore, but focuses on supporting local youth returning to peasant farming.

Nowadays, through an online platform and several *terroir’s excellence* restaurants and shops in a metropolis in the centre of Guangxi, they distribute products to an urban population in the form of boxes of vegetables and meat, ready-made meals, or processed products. Long Live Farmers is not registered as an association; it is an informal collective acting under the commercial umbrella of the restaurants.

I joined the association during fieldwork in 2017 as part of my doctoral research, presenting my approach from a sociological perspective. During my three years of intermittent fieldwork with the association, the ethnographic method began with *in situ* observation in farms, mountains, restaurants, tours of new-farmers’ initiatives and village fairs, and national and international congresses and seminars. From November 2018, the observation became participation through a research-action group on Chinese local products, developed around the LLF association, to which I was invited as a researcher. The observation periods included a series of interviews with 40 members of the network and the study of online interactions, selling groups and platforms, and the public accounts of entrepreneurs’ social networks, in order to analyse the marketing “trust” strategy of the latter.

12. “Market work” partly refers to “‘market professionals’ whose task is ‘to work on the market,’ i.e. to construct it, move it, organize it, manage and control it – in short, ‘agencing’ transactions” (Cochoy and Dubuisson-Quellier 2013).

13. On food ethics, see Tassin (2020).

14. Which is of the most used translations for CSA, among others: “community supported agriculture” (*shequ zhichi nongye* 社區支持農業), or “city-countryside mutual help networks” (*chengxiang huzhu wangluo* 城鄉互助網絡).

15. In the circles of work and friendship, the founder of the association is only called by his title of President.

16. Partnerships for Community Development is a Hong Kong-based development organisation. It focuses on sustainable practices, including CSA.

This article is based on a selection of cases from this fieldwork.¹⁷ They mostly took place in Guangxi, in restaurants, farm networks, and meetings organised by LLF. But they also refer to farms outside the province (Yunnan, Shaanxi, Guangdong) that contribute to the creation of a specific market, and to international congresses where the actors carry out networking (Chengdu, Beijing). The entrepreneurs and farmers featured in this article are all part of the LLF network. They sometimes also integrate into other local, regional, or national networks of peasant agriculture. They constitute an almost homogeneous group of men¹⁸ born between 1984 and 1989, of rural origin, who returned to the family land after obtaining a university degree. Other actors are not university graduates, but are still essential in the networks, including women farmers in a comprehensive cooperative¹⁹ and migrant-returnees. Every interview quotation and ethnographic description in this article is taken from my empirical work.

From the uncultivated peasant to the peasant-entrepreneur

Long Live Farmers association puts forward a market-oriented way to support peasant farming. According to its President, a good way to recognise the high value of subsistence farming and local craft is to buy their products at a higher price. This pragmatic approach, although strongly embedded in an ecological and social idea of peasant agroecology, tends to recognise entrepreneurial skills as a major dimension of sustainable rural development. LLF insists that market viability is crucial for local farmers. In a way, market ties bring subsistence products out of local consumption and may bring capitalism into the village economy. But on the other hand, this approach prevents more capitalistic forms of subcontracting or wage labour. The President declares, between amusement and spite:

I am told I am a capitalist because I encourage them to make a profit; very well, if they say so, but there must be an economic motivation for production. Social or ecological goals only work when producers can get by economically.²⁰

The implication is that development, academic, or NGO approaches tend to present successful projects, to embellish the results of their activities, and to make producers speak in the terms expected by funders – in line with the international language of ecology and peasant autonomy.²¹ As a counterpoint, the association tries to develop a market that ensures a regular income for producers. It claims that peasant agriculture is economically viable, and encourages “returned youth” to improve the family farm’s resource base through pluriactivity, including in-farm food processing and online retailing. It aims first of all to enhance smallholder living conditions, and second to open market opportunities, while preventing too much market involvement. The President considers it essential to reverse the relationship between supply and demand: “If they [the producers] comply with the demands of a restaurant or the market, I think it can’t work. (...) You have to meet your own healthy food needs first.”²²

This pragmatic approach paradoxically prevents the risks of conventionalisation. It underlines (1) that peasant agriculture is household-based or cooperative-based, (2) that it is built on the local perception of needs in subsistence agriculture, and (3) that the diversity of cultural practices is as necessary as biodiversity and local varieties. In this sense, it places the locality at the heart of the food ethics. The return of young people to the family village reactivates and legitimises the social and economic role of subsistence farming.

Lan, born in 1989, graduated in automobile design and then returned to his home village to gather smallholders into a cooperative based on local practices of raising ducks in rice fields.²³ Lan benefits from two strong bases: the knowledge and technical support of the President, and two “golden pots” – as he calls the income from two former entrepreneurial activities – both of which he has invested in the cooperative. Apart from a fence at the end of the stream that runs through the village, the ducks live and breed freely in the rice fields, participating in rice cultivation by feeding on pests and weeds, and are the main source of protein in the village diet. Black rice is planted alternately with sweet potatoes. The organisation of the cooperative for the production of food resources reduces dependency on foreign trade – retail purchases of wild badian, pinewood, and sweet potatoes noodles. The resumption of an ancestral ecological culture helps to strengthen the autonomy of the cooperative by freeing it from the market of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Before the farmers’ cooperative, the norm in the village, as in the surrounding areas, was the cultivation of hybrid rice for sale. At the same time, scattered plots of ancient indigenous rice were maintained for local consumption. The ecological system of joint cultivation of ancient rice and ducks, supplemented by crop rotation with sweet potatoes, has transformed producers’ relationship to the market. When he took me on a tour of the rice fields, Lan was delighted with this ecological practice:

The truth is that when you grow crops like this, you don’t have to spend money on seeds, you don’t have to buy fertiliser, you don’t have to buy pesticides. I think it’s great. You can raise ducks for weeding, you don’t have to bother.

Subsistence agriculture advocated by the cooperative aims at “food self-sufficiency” (*ziji zizu* 自給自足) while reactivating disused agrarian practices. Within three years, the cooperative, initially made up of a few households, officially brought together 20 of the village’s 60 households, and all of the farming households abandoned hybrid cultivation in favour of ecological crop rotation. Recognising the economic success of this model, several neighbouring villages have begun similar transitions.

In the most remote mountains, Lan’s experience underlines the resilience of subsistence farming.²⁴ It goes against a general trend of the disappearance of small-scale farming under the injunctions of modernity and social progress (Zhang and Donaldson 2010). Unlike the former villagers’ generation, Lan benefits from his experience in urban entrepreneurship and the help of LLF to rebuild the cooperative. He uses the tools of standardised rural revitalisation policies – such as the Law on Agricultural Cooperatives and its revisions since 2007 – to allow the development of local resources and the restructuring of the common management. In doing so, however, he diverts these policies from their aim of promoting cooperatives in order to ease investment and land transfer. The cooperative thus has a unifying

17. Four interviews among a total of 44 and four specific fieldwork sessions in April 2017, October 2017, November 2018, and January–February 2019.

18. Married to women of various professions: working class, housewives; some with one or two children.

19. Women, older, impoverished and nongraduates.

20. Interview with the President, 5 November 2018.

21. On the language of mobilisation, see Trom (2001).

22. Interview with the President, 10 February 2019.

23. As with the other cases, these example and analysis come from my ethnographic fieldwork: fieldwork note, 11 February 2019. For further understanding of farmers’ cooperatives, see Song *et al.* (2014); Yan and Chen (2013); Day and Schneider (2018).

24. The road to Lan’s village was paved at the end of 2018, two years after the cooperative was founded.

social effect: by recognising the agroecological value of local craft in the rice field, it mitigates the disappearance of the economic and social integration frameworks that previously structured social relationships.

Young returnees offer a new understanding of local practices, based on ecology and the mobilisation of locally available resources. They are a privileged interface for the transmission of skills, especially through the practice of negotiation in a capitalist context. They participate in a heritage of knowledge and ethnic craftsmanship, and in the gastronomic development of local cuisine. Adopting the perspective of LLF food ethics, returning youth mobilise entrepreneurial skills meaning to benefit the local population. In a way, entrepreneurial skills are turned into tools that protect peasants from a more capitalistic use of both land and culture. “Returned youth” appear as new actors in the Chinese city-countryside relations, which I call “peasant-entrepreneurs.” They do not necessarily work the land themselves, but their primary socialisation is based on interactions with smallholders. They do not seek to extend the land they inherit, but they define – within the frame of small-scale farming – high-quality products to be sold on a specific market. They disseminate the idea that intensive agriculture may cause various social and environmental risks, and the significance of a food ethics, according to which every step from production to consumption belongs to an interrelated process.

Chun Ge, born in 1971, returned to peasant farming in 2008 after 20 years as a freight truck driver. From an early age, he produced red sugar every winter in the family workshop and mastered the traditional processing. Contacted and encouraged by the President, he spent several months in 2007 at a well-known agroecological farm in Malaysia to teach the peasant practice of cane sugar production. On his return, he founded an agroecological farm with his wife Chun Sao, supported by a contract for the distribution of his products by LLF. In about ten years, the farm became one of the most recognised in Mainland China among alternative food networks, especially thanks to the sale of its red cane sugar to numerous intermediate platforms throughout the country.²⁵ The production model is household-based and ecological. Chun Ge and Chun Sao are not in charge of distribution, which is handled by LLF. Chun Ge and the President say they “grew up together” talking about their common relationship to peasant agroecology. The two men taught themselves through a mutual exchange of skills in terms of practices and views on agroecology. The President, born in 1969, had worked in advertising before dedicating himself to maintaining peasant agriculture, and after his transition, he continued to mobilise the cultural and social capital of his previous activity to promote Chun Ge’s products among others. At the same time, Chun Ge began to sell his products to other platforms of alternative networks, ensuring economic autonomy from LLF as well.

The President ironically says, talking about him and Chun Ge: “I am a capitalist, he is a capitalist: I am an urban capitalist, he is a big landowner!”²⁶ The President makes this joke in response to critics about the way the association has been perceived. The association explicitly aims to produce profits from the sale of peasant products, and the President encourages the young people who join them in the peasant farming approach to prioritise their economic stability and autonomy from state or association subsidies. It is also effective in relation to LLF: “It is essential that they are autonomous (*zizhu* 自主), in case the association ever collapses,”²⁷ the President confided to me in a period of economic uncertainty. Associated with the idea of autonomy, the President categorically rejects any form of shareholding. Clients frequently offer the association investment in market shares, which has been systematically refused. The restaurants and the association operate solely on the investment funds of those who work there.²⁸ Through the



Illustration 2. Cane sugar processing. Credit: Photograph taken by the author.

association, negotiation skills circulate following food ethics, where the act of eating is part of the political ecology to maintain peasants’ “autonomy” and “subsistence ethic” (Scott 1976, quoted in Bernstein 2015).

The sharing of negotiation skills has contributed to the formation of a collective consciousness that places land rights at the heart of peasant agroecology.²⁹ Through the collective, “returned youth” may prevent the risk of land transfers to agribusiness enterprises that are supported through state subsidies and fiscal incentives (Yan and Chen 2015). We observe the formation of “social” entrepreneurs who participate in enhancing the resource base and autonomy of local populations (van der Ploeg 2014). In an exchange of WeChat messages with Lan that the President sent me, Lan asks what the President thinks of a proposal made by a company to rent out plots of mountain land on which the agricultural cooperative is growing pine and badian trees. The President replies that he had heard about a similar experience in Chun Ge’s village:

Near Chun Ge, there’s a landowner who’s got government subsidies. He left the sugar cane to the villagers to cut and sell to sugar companies. Clearly, they had no ambition to use government subsidies to develop sugar cane. If you participate, they will erode the mountain with chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and weed killers, your rivers will be polluted, there will be more disease. (...)

The Badian [Tree Project] is the greenest local economy project; don’t believe them. Instead, take this opportunity to encourage everyone to develop badian [trees]. You have to be sure of one thing: when they’ve made enough money, they’ll leave you with a big mess. That’s the way it was with eucalyptus.³⁰

25. The economic success of the farm has directly led to the question of social recognition of peasants through the return to “profitable” peasant agriculture. Chun Ge’s return was marked by the shame of his “failure” as a migrant worker, and he was disregarded by the villagers. He now welcomes qualified entrepreneurs and local political representatives. Other farms imitate his practices, even borrowing his name when selling their products.

26. Fieldwork note, 12 October 2017.

27. Fieldwork note, 5 November 2018.

28. Everyone who works there can invest in the company and receive a wage. The association thus prevents the pursuit of self-interest and relations of domination. See Sayer (2001) cited in Goodman (2003).

29. On the back wall of one of the LLF restaurants is painted in large characters the expression “land justice” (*tudi zhengyi* 土地正義). In reference to the Hong Kong-based Land Justice League and the Taiwan-based Rural Front, it claims that the agrarian land should be granted to local farmers first.

30. Chat history between Lan and the President, 27 March 2019.

The company proposed to rent the space of the Badian Tree Project for a 30-year lease, during which time it offered to employ local farmers on the site.³¹ The President's response is built on a threefold understanding of the problem in terms of ecology, economic investment, and land justice. According to him, the land transfer does not lead simply to a temporary lease, but to radical resource exploitation that drastically reduces any possibility of economic or ecological resilience. Lan has found allies in the LLF network to negotiate with agribusiness companies. By doing so, he has strengthened the cooperative's activity according to the food ethics of peasant agroecology, which constitutes the new frame of reference for these peasant-entrepreneurs in Guangxi.

The LLF association creates new outlets for products of subsistence farming and thus brings market economy and capitalism into the village. This process may lead to a transformation of peasant farming into production-oriented farming, but it prevents more intrusive forms of agrarian change – through vertical integration as land transfer or subcontract farming. However, “alternative” markets for peasant agriculture forge a bond between opposite worlds: remote mountain villages and new ecological spaces of urban consumption. Returned “new-farmers” act as intermediaries between these spaces. In a context of mistrust toward peasant products (Schneider 2015), their role consists of re-establishing trust in the market relationship. This key role underlines the contradictory position of “peasants-entrepreneurs,” who are both advocates for peasant agroecology and agrarian capitalists in an emerging niche market.

Trust relationships and economics of quality: Peasant support through “quality” markets

The economic initiatives of “returned youth” increase the presence of farm products on urban local markets and build distribution channels to major Chinese cities through online markets. Li Yangchao has returned to the land after higher education and years of teaching in a middle school. He joined with his brother and a cousin to found a honey-retailing platform called New Educated Youth³² (*xin zhiqing* 新知青). Once or twice a week, they travel in a 4x4 truck to the remote Qinling mountains to collect wild honey with isolated beekeepers.

Li promotes a product and a production method that are endangered.³³ The short supply chain platform has opened up a distribution channel for around a hundred households that he cooperates with. Since 2011, the number of traditional beehives has increased sharply in the mountains, along with the resurgence of wild beekeeping. As the only intermediary between beekeepers and clients of his platform, Li reduces logistics costs and considerably increases producers' income – from 8 *yuan* per kilo in 2011 to 60 *yuan* per kilo in 2017 at the producer's purchasing price.³⁴

Li is developing a short supply economic system based on trust with both producers and urban consumers. Walking towards the beehives on mountain trails after two hours on bumpy roads, Li explains to me that he publishes stories online on WeChat, Weibo, Taobao, and Douyin public accounts. Through online marketing, he displays himself as an expert in peasant agroecology and a guarantor of food ethics in both his professional and personal practices: the production chain promotes respect for bees, by taking only half of the honey production; respect for cultural diversity through local craft; and respect for producers through a fair redistribution of sales income. The stories also engage Li's personal life as a good father, who cares about providing organic farm products to feed his children; as a good son, who returned to his hometown to



Illustration 3. Beekeeper and traditional Chinese hives. Credit: Photograph taken by the author.

care for his sick mother; and as a young graduate who, while receiving higher education, was able to put his new skills to work for a community “threatened with extinction.” Finally, the ecological relationship – a direct, “mystical” relationship between the beekeeper and the bees – leads to natural regulation of production: one can't breed more than 60 swarms in the same place. The limited supply of mountain flowers would affect honey production. The geographical location thus maintains regulation of production and justifies the rarity of the product. Those criteria – ethics, ecology, rarity – allow for a higher price than conventional market honey. Liu is charging 200 *yuan* for a kilo of honey and 280 *yuan* for a kilo of honeycomb.

Beyond the entrepreneur's stories, the relationship of trust is based on his anchoring in networks that allow his activity to be apprehended among other similar approaches. As a representative of Long Live Farmers in Shaanxi, Li shares the national reputation for quality that the association enjoys. His participation in Chinese national congresses and international forums on peasant agriculture brings him visibility within circles of mutual recognition. During these public events, he sometimes introduces a privileged beekeeper who testifies to the methods of honey harvesting, taking on the role of an adjuvant in the establishment of a relationship of trust. “Returned youth” meet in these events and share their experience in practicing organic small-scale agriculture, building up sale platforms, and marketing farm products. They get to meet entrepreneurs who set themselves up as “self-made peasants” and take on the role of models for their social and economic success.³⁵ Through participation in these networks and events, Li has become and is perceived as an expert in organic farming who in turn organises

31. The company's argument, very briefly, is to propose that, for the same work, farmers should be paid a worker's wage and a rental income. This subcontracting arrangement is a common form of contract farming (Gürel 2014), even in some of the most recognised farms of Chinese peasant agriculture.

32. This is a direct reference to the “sent-down youth” (*zhiquing* 知青) movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Without having the opportunity to develop this concept further here, the communist anchoring manifests itself in several forms in the peasant agriculture and rural reconstruction movements, notably in the “back to the land” (*fanxiang* 返鄉) and “neo-rural” (*xinnongren* 新農人) labels, which also echo the movement to send urban youth to the countryside (*shangshan xiaxiang yundong* 上山下鄉運動). In the same way, the binomial small farmers/poor peasants (*xiaonong/pinnong* 小農/貧農) could be the subject of an interesting sociolinguistic study.

33. From the 1960s onwards, this practice was lost in favour of hive frames.

34. Fieldwork note, 4 October 2017.

35. For example, the “new-farmer” Shi Yan and her team, who have organised annual national CSA conferences since 2009.

events such as the “red sugar” tour at Chun Ge’s farm, mentioned in the introduction.

Mobilising these various networks and training courses, Li invited representatives of peasant products’ sales platforms to Chun Ge’s farm in the first “red sugar” tour.³⁶ Seventeen³⁷ young entrepreneurs met in Guangxi in January 2019 to observe the manufacturing process of a product that they sell or plan to sell on their platforms. The “red sugar” tour was a showcase for a specific product. Sugar cane is a widespread and state-subsidised crop, and red sugar is a common product in southern China. But Chun Ge’s farm is ecological – no chemical inputs, non-motorised, based on seasonal cycles and the use of compost – and the production of red sugar is artisanal and respects an “old-fashioned” manufacturing process. The visiting entrepreneurs construct a “trust relationship” through the trip. They sell the authenticity of the product through photographs on their online platforms and the authenticity of the relationship of trust with Chun Ge through the staging of their experience on the farm, unmoulding sugar or weighing compost – in this sense, it is equally important that the pictures were taken in person and not passed on by the farmer or other platforms.³⁸ Under these conditions, the red sugar produced by Chun Ge is not sold locally – the same amount of red sugar can be bought for a third or even a quarter of the price on a local market. The “red sugar” tour tends to assert the “quality” of the product: it is ecological, fair, and certified by a personal judgment system.



Illustration 4. Personal judgment system and trust relationship: Entrepreneurs documenting sugar cane processing at Chun Ge’s farm. Credit: Photograph taken by the author.

For red sugar, as for wild honey, (1) the ecological relationship between the producer and his environment, (2) the ethical relationship between the intermediary, and the producer, as well as (3) the personal and impersonal relationship of trust established between the producer, the intermediary, and the consumers, all contribute to the creation of a specific market. It is part of an “economics of quality” in which judgement mechanisms prevail as a means of allocating resources, and the social organisation of which integrates networks and trust (Karpik 1989, 2010). It opens up economic opportunities for singular products.

From this perspective, “peasant agroecology” is an emerging ethical label that opens pluralist entrepreneurial opportunities. The labelling process recalls the idea of conventionalisation, defined as the ways “agribusiness is finding to (...) industrialise organic production” (Buck, Getz, and Guthman 1997). The role of the intermediaries, between expertise and mobilisation of

personal resources, leads them to concentrate their efforts on the marketing work of entrepreneurs of ethical consumption (Cochoy and Dubuisson-Quellier 2000). At the same time, they convince consumers of the benefits of peasant agroecology in general and of their products in particular, in a network of competing reputations. The multiplication of trust mechanisms in Li’s marketing seems to give evidence of his ethics. On the other hand, the prominence given to personal trust in the movements for alternative peasant farming may act like a marketing screen that obscures the reproduction of inequalities denounced on capitalist market relations. Ethical consumption entrepreneurs are confronted with the limits of their ethics when facing economic growth. As in organic farming “conventionalisation” processes, it questions the ways of maintaining fundamental values through or despite economic growth (Lamine, Egon, and Bui 2016).

In the same movement as that of “cultural” products, everyday food products become “unique” and “singular” through ethical peasant farming. Their commercialisation requires specific marketing work that subtracts benefits from their producers. The figure of the entrepreneur, highlighted and set as a model in social entrepreneurship congresses and competitions, becomes the sole guarantor of this peasant agroecology. It focuses on the marketing and the staging of quality when workers are employed to produce it. As in some cases of rural cooperatives or “family farms,” the commercial instrumentalisation of the food ethics associated with peasant agroecology may then limit its development to an imitation of agribusiness food production or subsumption to capitalism (Yan and Chen 2015). In this sense, the “new-farmers” also directly or indirectly participate in capitalist agrarian change.

“New-farmers” as firm managers: A “quality” market that increases rural differentiation

The conventionalisation-like process sheds light on the ambiguity of food ethics as the discursive product of a graduate class, possessing the cultural capital and mobilising an international language of ecology, which participates in the construction of a depiction of farmers, sometimes with them and often in their stead (Bourdieu 1977). During an interview, an entrepreneur, Wang, born in 1986, explains to me the role of the “returned youth”:

The Chinese peasant has just a few *mu* of land. So, what do they need? There has to be someone to bring them together, who forms an alliance, who organises them into a farm. But who can do that? A peasant can’t do that. So only a young person who came back to the land can do this, whether it’s a student, or a youth who went to work in the city, a lively type with a good head. There, with this ability (*benling* 本領) to bring peasants together, they can do the job. This is why CSAs in China today are mostly founded by young people who have returned to the countryside, and not by peasants themselves.³⁹

36. The tour was a first attempt that may be replicated on other dates or with other products. It is based on an idea of the President.

37. Seven women and ten men, with an estimated average age of 33; platforms located in Beijing (2), Guangzhou, Zhongshan, Nanning, and Suzhou.

38. Chun Ge is used to it; he laughs on the pictures, but the reactions of the other farmers are rather annoyed. Chun Sao, for example, refuses to be immortalised as “dirty” and “tousled” from working. The pictures of “dirty” farm work participate in the framing task of an “authentic” agroecology.

39. Interview with Wang, 9 April 2017.

The entrepreneur becomes the indispensable intermediary in the economic transaction. Speaking for himself instead of a fictitious employee, Wang creates a positive image of his own role while denigrating the skills of "uncultivated" farmers.

But do they want to [work the land], the migrants?

— In reality, we can't say that they want to. It's more like... "I'm a farmer, I have no education (*mei you wenhua* 沒有文化), director Wang is a university graduate, if he starts working in the fields, it's because there's an outlet." That's the way it is, so simple, so they come to work.⁴⁰

Wang, a "returned youth" in Yunnan whose tomatoes supply LLF restaurants in summer, has a dual farm management activity. He employs migrant workers (*nongmingong* 農民工) as wage labourers on his farm to cultivate land he rents. He also collects products from local farmers, which he sells on his online platform. The products' prices have increased threefold through his platform and the "peasant agroecology" labelling. The clients become members of a "community" by paying an annual fee that allows them to access products on the online platform. Wang says he doesn't make any profit on the smallholders' collected products, for which he charges around 10% of the retail price. His farm's profit comes from the products grown on his farm: the employees are paid less than the minimum wage and he himself benefits as the owner (*zhuangzhu* 莊主) of the higher price of his singular "peasant" product. On this basis, Wang accumulates an economic capital with which he expects to expand the farm. In a process of conventionalisation and capture, he extracts the surplus-value of the products at the expense of those who physically produce them.⁴¹ By reproducing a capitalist model of exploitation, he is flouting one of the principles of peasant agroecology, according to which the profit from production essentially goes to the producer. While Wang builds a relationship of trust with the peasants from whom he gets his supplies – market regularity, local conviviality, consumer participation through a system of PGS⁴² – he nevertheless reproduces on his farm a symbolic domination over his employees, based on his cultural (Master's Degree) and economic (owner) capital. Beyond the management skills he promotes, his legitimacy is based on the creation of local jobs and is affirmed by a paternalistic attitude towards his employees:

If you look at the monthly salary, they may earn more by working in the city, maybe around 4,000 [*yuan*] per month, whereas here we're only at 2,000 or so. But at the end of the year, they have saved, they save more on my farm. Do you know why? They're out of town, they don't have any expenses. In town, you go out with your friends, you spend much more.⁴³

This interview with Wang reveals a deviation from a given standard of alternative networks. Wang has been trained in agroecology through internships within New Rural Reconstruction cooperatives. He has mastered the principles of the "peasant agroecology" he's promoting ("An actual CSA is when a farmer can get a higher salary," he tells me) without considering that his practice goes against one of them.

The creation of market-oriented "peasant agroecology" networks contributes to the marketing of farm products but sometimes obscures the persistence of various subsistence agriculture – the practitioners of which are not necessarily peasants themselves, but grow their own garden

in addition to other social or professional activities. Farm products become quality goods when they have been through the marketing processes of "new-farmers," whether they are artisanal food production or collected from smallholders. In Wang's case, the support given to smallholders when collecting their products is also a way to legitimate his capitalist farm as community supported agriculture.

The conventionalisation of alternative networks questions the possibility of maintaining food ethics during commercial development as well as the role of different network actors in the negotiations around their objectives. The conventionalisation process thus underlines the capacity of capitalism to feed on its critics (Boltanski and Chiapello 2011). The competitive relationships between alternative initiatives – particularly those induced by the extension of short supply chains on a national scale and the dematerialisation of exchanges on online networks – favour this process of accelerated conventionalisation of some of them. It also underlines the contradictory position of "peasant agroecology" entrepreneurs, both advocates of small-scale organic production and farm managers that reproduce capitalist relations of production.

Conclusion

"Peasant-entrepreneur" market work shows a continuum between forms of prevention against capitalism and forms of reproduction of capitalistic exploitation. The "new-farmers" working with Long Live Farmers association allow the persistence of subsistence farming through agroecology as a niche that may act as an alternative to vertical integration into agribusiness farming. The role of "returned youth" is crucial in the re-establishment of trust between production and consumption areas. However, through conventionalisation, agroecology marketing, or power relations, "new-farmers" directly or indirectly contribute to rural differentiation. Whether they are more "peasant" or more "entrepreneur," their peregrinations take part in the re-definition of peasant agroecology as a growing network and transform the frames of mobilisation around small-scale agriculture.

The undertaking of peasant-entrepreneurs participates in agrarian change, as they explore the different ways by which subsistence farming adapts to capitalist transformations, but also the flaws of social mobilisation to protect peasant agriculture. The study of "new-farmers" and "social agroecology" reveals market "ecological spaces" at the interface between subsistence peasant economy, caritative rural development, and green capitalism.

The "returned youth", whether migrants or graduates, call themselves half-peasants-half-X (*bannong bancha* 半農半X). This article believes the X is related to entrepreneurship in one way or another: social, market, or moral entrepreneurs. Through their return, through the constitution of agroecology networks, a peasant-entrepreneur figure emerges, that counterbalances the peasant-worker (*nongmingong* 農民工) figure. These two migrant figures refer to the populating (de- and re-populating) of the countryside: the massive phenomena of deserted villages and children left behind are responded to by movements for the social recognition of peasant work and indirectly of the populations who have remained in the village or who have returned to perpetuate locally transmitted craft.

40. *Ibid.*

41. On capitalist dynamics and wage labour within rural cooperatives and "family farming," see Zhang and Donaldson (2010); Gürel (2014); Yan and Chen (2015). On accumulation, see Tsing (2017).

42. The Participatory Guarantee System, where consumers visit the production areas to check compliance with specifications.

43. Interview with Wang, 9 April 2017.

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