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### Citation for published version

Zhang, Joy Yueyue and Barr, Michael (2018) The Transformative Power of Commoning and Alternative Food Networks. *Environmental Politics*. ISSN 0964-4016. (In press)

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2018.1513210>

### Link to record in KAR

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# **The Transformative Power of Commoning and Alternative Food Networks**

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## **Abstract**

A commoning framework offers a critical lens to fully appreciate the scope and impact of alternative food networks (AFNs). Fieldwork from an AFN in southern China is drawn upon to show how commoning enacts changes in how members contextualise and anchor their social relations to one another with regards to sourcing food as a commons. A commoning framework gives a fuller picture of how the constitutive effects of AFNs reside not in their introduction of a new uniformity but in their navigation of the multiplicity of the social through its proposition and co-construction of a new ‘cognitive praxis’.

**Keywords:** the commons; commoning; alternative food networks (AFNs); social mobilisation

## Introduction

The term ‘the commons’ is ubiquitous. One consequence is that it has come to mean different things to different people. Here, we emphasise that the commons are best understood as a verb – that is, we refer to the shared set of practices of *commoning*, the community building required to create systems of sustainable resource management. As such, the transformative power of commoning examined here lies in how commoning a shared resource reshapes social relations among individuals. We link the practice of commoning to alternative food networks (AFNs), a prominent feature in agri-food scholarship. As AFNs attempt to ‘redistribute value through the networks by aligning against bulk commodity production’, (re)building trust between food producers and consumers and articulating new forms of association (Whatmore *et al.* 2003, p. 389).

By demonstrating how the commoning framework can be applied to the study of AFNs, we extend debate in both areas. Drawing on fieldwork from Wuhan *Natur*, an AFN in southern China, we argue that commoning offers a critical lens through which to appreciate the scope and impact of contemporary food movements. As we demonstrate, a commoning framework helps to make visible how AFNs such as *Natur* introduce a new ‘cognitive praxis’ that helps to reflect, revise and revalorise people’s sense of duty and ownership in the procurement of reliable food. Eyerman and Jamison (1991, p. 3, p. 45-65) employed the term ‘cognitive praxis’ to refer to a ‘package of ideas’, ranging from organisational ideology to knowledge of specific socio-material issues, that render both the social space and collective identity necessary for individuals to (re)orient their social relations and actions. This concept enables better insight on how social mobilisation takes place (Jamison 2006). In a similar vein, by examining *Natur*’s organisational rules and how it restructures social relations in the local food system, we demonstrate how people (re)connect with each other and to food as commons, and how collective action can be sustained in practice. It helps us understand how the concept of commoning can be applied to the growing alternative food movement.

The structure is as follows. In the first section, we review the literature on the commons and on AFNs. After discussing our methodology, we examine the case of *Natur*. Particular focus is given to the rationale and reception of *Natur*'s six organisational principles. We demonstrate how the study of AFNs expands our understanding of what constitutes the commons and illuminates how commoning acquires legitimacy and normative influence. In the final sections we argue that treating AFNs as a commoning process rather than a 'closed' apparatus allows for a more incisive understanding of their latent social and political effects.

### **The commons and alternative food networks**

The term 'commons' can refer to a resource, those who are entitled to use the resource, or to the governance arrangements designed to manage it (De Moor 2011). Much of the work on commons in the social sciences remains indebted to Elinor Ostrom and her team who, following a new institutionalist framework, described self-governing, bottom-up arrangements with well-defined access rules to manage resource systems. Ostrom showed how well informed individuals could undertake collective action to protect communal resources without causing irreparable degradation, or requiring the intervention of the state or private property rights (Ostrom 1990). Much of the critique of Ostrom's work has derived from her reliance on models of rational choice decision-making and methodological individualism (Sandström *et al.* 2017). Recent work on the commons emphasizes, for example, that institutions that govern resources are just not rules and laws but social and natural relationships, imbued with inequities and power relations which impact whether and how an individual chooses to participate (Singleton 2017, Nightingale 2011). Thus, an emerging concern in studies of the commons is how Ostrom's approach can be augmented through attention to the affective relationships and alternative rationalities that govern an actor's behaviour at different times.

As Ryan (2013) has argued, the transformative power of the commons lies in its introduction of an alternative set of social relations. Some have drawn attention to the relational aspect of the

commons by turning the term into a verb (Sandström *et al.* 2017). The practice of *commoning* is used by those who wish to draw attention to the social practices behind the commons – acts of mutual support, conflict, negotiation, and experimentation that are needed to create systems to manage shared resources. Commoning draws attention to the subjective process involved in ‘making common’, a product of collective performativity. As we illustrate, the global emergence of alternative food networks (AFN) as a collective resistance to capitalist agro-business and food safety scandals is an excellent example of commoning. It is acknowledged that the socio-political significance of AFNs is not limited to the revolution it brings to our dinner tables or to the production chain. Rather, it ‘involves the cultivation of a civic “we-ness”’ (DeLind 2011, p. 279), which transforms the quality of relation in the food system.

Food as a type of commons, rather than commodity, remains a very marginal subject (Vivero-Pol 2017). This is despite the growing popularity of food commons outside of academia<sup>i</sup>. The application of a commons framework to AFNs is even more scarce. Even within the handful of studies that specifically focus on food as commons, the discussion is often oriented towards normative debates on rights and social justice associated with food (Rundgren 2016). The commons are seen as a useful descriptive framework but their analytical potential, much less the practice and implications of commoning, have been largely overlooked by AFN studies.

AFNs in China are particularly informative for the study of the commons, for they represent a collective (re)configuration of the local food system in response to ineffective government regulation<sup>ii</sup>. While many AFNs in the West were established to oppose the globalized industrial food system, in China AFNs largely stemmed from food safety scares (Si *et al.* 2015, Yang 2016). This is similarly the case in Wuhan *Natur*, which began in response to the 2008 baby milk scandal in which melamine was added to milk and infant formula to artificially inflate protein levels. Given this background, many AFNs in China provide an antidote to a weakening of institutionalised trust.

AFNs permit more personal contact and face-to-face provision of food, allowing individual and organizational trust to help mitigate safety concerns (Zhang 2018, Krul and Ho 2015, Wang *et al.* 2015). As previous studies have pointed out, trust in AFNs is often not a reflection of the properties of the product, but an endorsement of the configuration of social relations within the network (Thorsoe and Kjeldsen 2015). The creation of new social bonds among otherwise detached social groups is arguably the most important constituent power of any social movement.

The scope of many of the ‘local’ food movements in China, for example, is not confined to a specific geographic proximity, but involves contributions from committed providers and activists across municipal, provincial and even national borders (Zhang 2018). To some extent, the food commons created by AFNs ‘reterritorize’ the bonds and boundaries of the food system (Holloway *et al.* 2007). Similarly, the constituent effect of social movements is not constrained to single issues. Rather they often exert latent but multi-faceted influence in the organisation of the social. AFNs are often a synthesis of global experience; the socio-political changes they have brought cannot be easily reduced to a single category, such as anti-capitalism or food security. What is needed is a framework that can preserve the multiplicity and complexity of AFNs to understand how grassroots actors from diverse social backgrounds are able to come together and co-produce and sustain new norms in the consumption and production of food (Raynolds 2002, Levkoe and Wakefield 2014).

## **Methodology**

Although AFNs are transnationally related, there is no ‘universal’ description of them. The best way to comprehend and assess the impact of a local food movement is to study it as a ‘system’, providing ‘contextual analysis’ (Dahlberg 1993, p. 77). Thus the analytical focus of our paper treats *Natur* as a collective becoming with multiple perspectives (e.g. *Natur* staff, consumers, producers and documentation).

As we have discussed elsewhere (Zhang 2018), currently AFNs can be found in at least 20 major cities in China. While these grassroots AFNs share the aim of establishing a more socio-ecologically responsible food system, there is no hierarchy of command among this group of closely networked but independently run grassroots AFNs. Residents of Wuhan, the provincial capital of Hubei province, share the same concerns as the rest of China over deteriorating food quality as a consequence of aggressive industrialisation and agri-chemical farming. Wuhan *Natur* is a not-for-profit AFN, established in 2008 by Chen Feng, an overseas-returnee from Germany. *Natur*, the German word for nature, is one of the earliest initiatives to seek reliable food production in China and has been highly successful in building a cohesive food community. It has over 1400 registered members. As of 2015 it required a 200 RMB (approx. US\$31) annual membership fee. Like many Chinese AFNs, *Natur* started as an urban middle class ‘buying club’/community supported agriculture partnership which organised seasonal farmers’ markets (Si *et al.* 2015). Although the daily operation of *Natur* (e.g. accounting, organisation of events) is managed by Chen and a handful of salaried staff, as we later demonstrate, key decisions (e.g. pricing and choice of suppliers) are discussed through collective consultation in weekly online meetings and an annual convention open to all members. *Natur* has built a network of reliable farmers, mostly but not entirely from Wuhan, working with academics to test soil and water quality/toxicity levels. It runs an education programme of workshops and local excursions on topics such as eco-farming techniques, environment protection and fair-trade.

We visited *Natur*’s main office and distribution centre three times between 2016 and 2017. Data used here draws on two 90-minute focus groups (of 6 participants each) with *Natur* members and four semi-structured in-depth interviews with 2 senior staff members, including the founder, and 2 providers. The interviews provided, in total, 11 hours of recorded data. All data collection was carried out in Mandarin Chinese. We also undertook participant observation of one of the annual membership conferences as well as informal conversations with additional members and providers,

and kept field notes from site visits. Each focus group was made up of participants with varying length of *Natur* membership, so as incorporate diverse opinions based on varied levels of experience. The length of membership of respondents ranged from 1 year to 8 years. The average age of participants was 42. The groups had a 5:1 female to male gender ratio. This is not surprising, as in China women generally manage family meals and food shop. In addition, as specified in the next section, *Natur* prioritises the needs of families with children, which further attracts urban mothers.

Written consent was obtained from interviewees and focus group participants. Data were recorded and transcribed. The focus groups were carried out by two researchers, one acting as facilitator and one taking notes. Coding was established through two phases. Initial coding consisted of descriptive typologies that helped to map out empirical elements of AFNs (such as ‘goals’, ‘strategies’, ‘outcomes’) and the commoning process (such as ‘rules’, ‘resources’, ‘relations’). Then axial coding was developed to further dimensionalise the data and establish analytical links between these categories. Our study should be read in the tradition of other small sample case studies of food movements (Holloway *et al.* 2007, Paddock 2014). It aims to elicit the becoming of the commons embedded in the complexity and diversity of everyday life. Our findings are not intended to be representative of all AFNs, but to be illustrative of how viewing AFNs as a process of commoning can deepen our appreciation of both the contemporary food movement and of the commons.

### **Commoning a food commons: performative (re)ordering of the social**

In October 2017 we visited *Natur*'s 9th Annual Members' Convention in Wuhan. More than 100 people attended although, we were told, the number would have been much higher had they not been able to provide an online live stream of the proceedings, which included reports on membership rolls, financial issues, delivery routes and producer updates.

When *Natur* was founded, it did not automatically win public recognition. In fact, one of *Natur*'s earliest members recounted that, in the aftermath of a series of nation-wide food scares in

2008, his family were actively looking for alternative food sources. *Natur* was one of a number of options available to them. He remembers that Chen was still ‘desperate’ to win supporters.

‘[Chen Feng] would visit people door to door and explain how he saw a food community should work... He’d give you samples for free and try to convince you. To put it simply, he was desperate!’ (FG-1, P1)

This ‘desperate’ start of *Natur* was also reflected in the fact that, for the first three years, it was in deficit and largely depended on Chen’s family savings (Hu 2013). Replacing agro-industry with a socially and ecologically sustainable alternative is not enough by itself to constitute a food commons. There is no commons without commoning, without shared values and mutual participation in managing a resource. What made *Natur* a local success was not so much the concept of an AFN itself, but its commoning approach.

The *Natur* staff and members we talked to all emphasised that locating food sources that were healthy and produced in an environmentally safe way was the cornerstone of any AFN. Thus a number of people mentioned that in the first two years, Chen and a few collaborators spent a lot of time visiting villages around the country in their attempt to draw a ‘clean food map’ for China. Their research was not limited to identifying appropriate places to grow unpolluted food; it was also a process of finding human resources, that is, farmers and other suppliers (such as bakeries and food factories) who were willing to produce safe food (Interviewee 2). *Natur* does not enforce a singular production method as long as the practice is not associated with chemical farming or excessive food processing. To help ensure compliance, *Natur* set up a ‘safety inspector system’, in which trained volunteers make unannounced inspections of potential suppliers. For *Natur*, it normally takes 4 months to vet a new producer although some may take as long as one year to be accepted (Wen 2015).

On recounting how her food factory went through the vetting process, one director shook her head and laughed, ‘Oh for food processing, they [*Natur*] had lots of dos and don’ts, sometimes almost pedantic!... Occasionally, they would ask me to forward them a detailed list of the ingredients used in each batch of (handmade) cookies... Fortunately I am from a military family and I’m always well organised and quick to respond [*laughter*]’ (Interviewee 3).

But Interviewee 3 added that in 2012, she actively sought to become a *Natur* supplier, because after observing *Natur* for a year, she concluded that ‘*Natur* did not follow the same marketing principles, they have their own rules... and I am impressed by their rules.’

As this factory director noted, apart from the technical requirements of safe food production, the daily operation of *Natur* evolved around six ‘basic principles’ to foster orderly cooperation among diverse members (Chen 2011). Chen Feng explained that he authored these six principles in 2011 based on a series of consultations he had with core members. The point was to set foundational rules for *Natur*. These principles are as follows:

1. To refuse any form of value preaching within the community
2. ‘Participation is procurement’
3. Fair trading for both producers and consumers
4. Environmentally friendly production and consumption
5. Prioritising needs of families with children
6. Provision of only essential and not luxury foods with a maximum of 3 producers for each food product

The six principles can be grouped into three clusters.

Principle One sets the nature of the food commons as a form of resource. *Natur*’s official blog further specified that ‘value preaching’ includes ‘the promotion of any ideological, political and religious beliefs and the promotion of any health benefits of a particular diet or lifestyle’ (Chen

2011). This does not mean that *Natur* is devoid of values or normative implications. As demonstrated later, a core latent effect of *Natur* lies in its transformative impact on people's value judgements. Rather, this rule highlights that *Natur* is primarily a community for (safe food) resources, rather than a community shaped by ideological commitments. This is unsurprising given the Chinese political environment and the need for civic groups to avoid suspicion of the authorities (Si *et al.* 2015). However, as we have shown in previous work, grassroots/civil society initiatives often do have significant social impact, despite government control (Zhang and Barr 2013). As demonstrated later, *Natur* is a cohesive community bounded by food resources, not just a group of 'like-minded' people.

Secondly, principles Two and Five set the roles and expectations of members. The idea 'participation is procurement' is not only the most frequently mentioned 'ground rule' among *Natur* members, it is also a very effective commoning tool. 'Participation', as one member explained, 'is a wide concept. I can participate by making a purchase, by being a volunteer, by visiting a farm. Participation doesn't mean that one literally has to take part in the labour. It's about your contribution to the making of a community (FG2 P4)'.

In the first years of *Natur*, Chen would send monthly newsletters to update members on farm visits and the daily running of the organisation. This was later replaced by a weekly virtual meeting using the popular social media QQ (akin to MSN Messenger), during which time *Natur* staff and providers take turns to answer members' queries. The factory director cited above did a one hour online Q&A during their Wednesday virtual meetings. She was overwhelmed by the intense interest *Natur* consumers had in her job:

Once the session started, they start shooting all kinds of questions: how do you ensure this in your factory, how do you ensure that... questions just kept popping up [*laughter*]. I was never so overwhelmed before. I had to tell them 'I'm slow at typing, please be

patient' [*laughter*]. But it was a good experience. It helps to build mutual trust. (Interviewee 3)

To some extent, 'participation is procurement' is a reflection of the essence of the commons. According to Lipietz (2009), the word 'commons' can be traced back to the Latin term *munus*, which has the dual connotations of 'gift' and 'duty'. By highlighting the connection between personal participation in the development and maintenance of the food network and deriving membership benefits from it, the idea 'participation is procurement' creates a sense of duty as well as a sense of ownership. Although neither the farmlands nor the food factories were commonly owned as 'properties' by *Natur* members, they were nonetheless a common 'resource' in the sense that information on relevant practices of these properties were made commonly accessible and assessable.

This dual sense of duty and ownership has in turn become a source of social innovation for *Natur*. One example was that *Natur*'s members have voluntarily organised into a distributive network within different areas of the city. That is, members form self-selected small groups based on geographic convenience and set a rota for each member to collect fresh produce from *Natur*'s head office twice a week. This has not only cut down the handling time of fresh produce, but has also significantly reduced the delivery cost of the food. Thus, despite the fact that national food prices in China have gone up over recent years, *Natur* has been able to cut its price, which helps allow lower income families to join the group (FG-2 P2).

Principle Five also sets out expectations, favouring families with children. It dictates that in case demand is higher than supply for a particular food, *Natur* would not simply sell its product on a 'first come first serve' basis. It encourages members to act as a collective that 'cares for each other and shares together' (Chen 2011). In the case of a supply shortage, *Natur* would cap the quantity per order and prioritise orders from members with children. Both staff and members of *Natur* we talked

to agreed that this Principle was a collective choice, connected to the origins of *Natur* in the wake of the national baby milk scandal in 2008.

The third cluster of principles (Three, Four and Six) outline how *Natur* governs the diverse resources, both material and immaterial, urban and rural, that make up the food commons. Similar to other AFNs, environmental sustainability (Principle Four) is at the core of the system. More importantly, *Natur* recognised that to achieve this, it needed to establish a new set of parameters both for consumers and producers. One example is *Natur*'s restriction of only three providers on similar products (Principle Six). This not only gives the community some flexibility in food choices, but also tries to minimise competition amongst providers allowing them, *Natur* hopes, to focus on quality.

More importantly, a balance between making quality food affordable and maintaining a good income level for producers is essential to a sustainable food commons. In the promotion of 'fair trading' (Principle Three), following its 'participation is procurement' practice, *Natur* renders its pricing system to a process of collective decision-making, an example of which is the pricing negotiation at the Annual Members Conventions. As one member explained:

*'Natur* has a powerful idea 'participation is procurement' [*nodding from other group members*] which means we are all contributing to this... it's about interaction and communications between people...I remember a few years ago we set the price for rice at the Annual Members' Convention. We were told to negotiate a price with the farmers. I distinctly remember it was set at 6.9 RMB<sup>iii</sup>'. (FG1 P5)

Facilitator: Sounds like an extremely precise pricing!

*'Because we haggled! [laughter]*. Chen Feng laid the ground rule that 'we do not exploit the farmers, but the farmers should not exploit us either'. Thus we [the urban consumers] and the farmers went back and forth with *Natur* staff keeping track of our offers like an auction-

eer. One farmer marketed his rice at 9 RMB and reasoned that similar eco-friendly grown rice could be sold at more than 10 RMB in east coast cities like Shanghai, and potentially could sell for more than 100 [RMB] if given proper advertising and packaging. We argued that rice is a staple food and we must keep it affordable for every day consumption... Finally we agreed on 6.9 RMB and made a bulk advance payment for the following year's crop'. (FG1 P5)

This active negotiation of 'fairness' is an important and transformative aspect of commoning. Collective reasoning of what was 'fair' not only enhanced mutual understanding and respect for each party's concerns, it is also enabled a process of illumination. The commoning process – the negotiation, or as the respondent put it, the haggling, with the understanding that rice was a resource that belonged to everyone – made visible social configurations that were intrinsic to the translation of natural materials into shared properties (as well as shared risks). Whereas producers represent a reliable source of stable food, consumers represent a sustainable source for stable livelihood for farmers. We can push this argument further. That is, the subject of commoning is not simply about a (natural) resource that is 'out there', or *external* to the social world. The very process of commoning brings *internal* change in how we contextualise and anchor our social relations to one another vis-a-vis the use of natural resources. We discuss this further in the following section.

So what can *Natur* inform us about the commons? Firstly, a closer examination of the development of *Natur* highlights the significance of commoning in the formation of an AFN. The food commons should be conceived as a 'performative ordering (always in the making), rather than systemic entities (always already constituted)' (Whatmore and Thorne 1997, p. 289). Yet when we study AFNs, it is easy to slip into the discussion of what they are, rather than treating them as collective becomings. For example, it is easy to see how, given China's increasing food safety concerns, *Natur*'s success was predictable for it 'made sense' given the need for safe food. But in fact,

nothing was taken for granted in the emergence of *Natur*. An idea, or an ideal, itself is not sufficient to establish a commons, however urgent it seems. *Natur* still had to compete and ‘win’ public support and commitment through a skilfully crafted commoning process. It does this, in part, by promoting a bottom-up construction of rules through the idea of ‘participation is procurement’ (Principle Two).

Relatedly, the development of *Natur* echoes the point that the commons constitutes not only material but also immaterial resources (Ryan 2013, Guthman 2002). *Natur*’s principles of ‘participation is procurement’ and negotiated fair trade are commoning mechanisms that simultaneously install new order to both the human interaction with the natural world and the social. As the idea of individual roles in the food system changes, the idea of ‘fairness’ and sense of ‘duty’ are not given but have also become a result of reflexive interactions among different individuals. We argue that commoning includes internalised changes in individuals’ own sense of subjectivity. Being a ‘commoner’, then, is to assume a performative identity.

Finally, the analysis of *Natur* sheds light on how commoning strategies establish legitimacy and subsequently confer a binding power on relations between different actors. As pointed out earlier, while *Natur* repudiates any imposition of value debates upon its community, its operation and list of principles are clearly not value-free. They tap into a number of values that are arguably ‘universal’ for AFNs, such as environmental awareness (Principle Four) and fair trading (Principle Three). But they also openly embrace values that speak to its particular context, and, when lifted out of its social milieu, may seem odd, such as prioritising families with children (Principle Five). Yet these are values that speak to its members. More importantly, through the Annual Members’ Convention and virtual meetings, *Natur* provides a platform in which collectively agreed norms are iterated, repeated and interpreted by each member to make visible and intelligible these values. These reiterative actions by individual members transforms shared value commitments into normalised

practices and become a constitutive part of a person's identity. It creates 'circles of recognition' which not only emphasizes existing shared value commitments but also cultivates circles of shared bonds and belonging (Polletta and Jasper 2001).

### **Food commons beyond food: The constituent effects of AFNs**

Broadly speaking, studies of social movements fall into two main camps. One is the North American tradition which treats social activism as a form of mobilization, a central aspect of political contention (e.g. Tilly, Tarrow); the other, embraced by many European studies, focuses on the formation of collective identities in these alternative networks (e.g. Touraine, Melucci). Researchers in both traditions recognise that social groups are never monolithic and have diversities and disputes among their members. Yet the analytical focus on collective action and outcomes diverts the interpretative effort away from understanding how solidarity is reconciled with an irreducible intra-group multiplicity and complexity. It is not an issue-specific solidarity, but rather how it has been adopted and adapted into individual diversities that have allowed key values of specific social movements to be carried into other social realms (Graeber 2004). Here, by examining how *Natur* members interpret the role of the AFN in their lives, we demonstrate that the commoning framework can be a helpful lens through which to fully appreciate the latent effects of a social movement. It also enables us to more fully appreciate AFNs' capacity to preserve social diversity.

A telling example of *Natur* as a cohesive community is that our two focus groups were held on the same day as one of *Natur*'s weekend family events. Thus a number of respondents had their young children with them. In order to participate in the focus group, they left their children in the care of *Natur*'s volunteers. When the issue of trust came up during the discussion, participants all agreed that *Natur* had cultivated a high level of trust by referring to this:

FG-1 P3: I guess eating *is* [original emphasis] a very important aspect of life. Well, at least it is the most fundamental one, to keep you away from hunger, but it changes your circle, the way you interact with people and many things in your life start to change subconsciously.

Facilitator: What do you mean by changing the way you interact with people?

P1: Look, I don't know the real name of that volunteer out there currently looking after my boy, but I am comfortable enough to entrust my son to him and not to worry about it.

Several participants: That's right, that's right [*nodding*].

Facilitator: Why? Where does this confidence in strangers come from?

P3: Because we eat the same food! [*laughter*]

P1: It's an affinity forged by radish and tomatoes! [*laughter*]

Whilst the bond 'forged by radish and tomatoes' seemed to be strong, it would be wrong to deduce that *Natur* members must be 'like-minded' people. In fact, although *Natur* could be described as a middle-class led organisation and its members are mainly urban professionals, the organisation does not target any particular group. Rather, it welcomes members from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Our own participants' education levels ranged from master degrees to junior college diplomas. The average monthly expenditure was 8,800 RMB (approx. £1,030), with the lowest being 3,000 RMB (approx. £350), and the highest 15,000 RMB (approx. £1,760), a range respectively equivalent to the monthly income of a blue collar worker to a white collar specialist. To put these numbers in perspective, the national average monthly spending for a middle-class family was around 5,500 RMB (approx. £640) (China State Statistics Bureau 2016). Even on food-related topics, these participants did not always agree. For example, while members draw on the same source of raw food, they have very different views on the structure of a 'healthy' diet and thus they make their individual purchasing choices and prepare the same food quite differently. Our second focus group had polarised views on whether genetically modified food was 'intrinsically' bad for

health or for the environment, and whether they would mind adopting GM food into their diet.

Eventually, the participants agreed to disagree.

Thus while group solidarity on seeking quality food was evident, the intra-group social-cultural disparity was also evident. But seen through the lens of commoning, this is not a contradiction, for commoning is not a process to reduce the multiplicity of life; it is a method for how to work with it. To seek common ground amongst its diverse members, *Natur* strategically adopted the mindset of rooting its community in the basics. This point is reflected in Principle Six, in which *Natur* sets its own parameter as a food commons to the consumption of everyday foods rather than luxury items. Chen explained to us that this self-limiting rule was a pragmatic recognition of the multi-layeredness of modern life as well as an expression of respect for intra-group diversity:

The reason more than a thousand people from different walks of life came together is just about the mundane matter of everyday cooking, that's it! They are not here for an argument, to be educated or patronised. It's just about one aspect of life. (Chen Interview)

The deliberate restriction to the 'mundane' simultaneously simplifies and signifies the social-material dimension of commoning, that is, how the recognition of a food commons plays in its members' lives. More importantly, in striking contrast to its modest ambition (i.e. provision of ordinary food), fieldwork data suggests that the impact of *Natur* on its members goes beyond the issue of everyday diets. Arguably, the ability to bring otherwise 'not-like-minded' people to contribute to the same food commons is itself a testament to the transformative power of *Natur*.

Despite their divergent tolerance of different food technologies, all members we talked to pointed out that in contrast to market mechanisms, *Natur* provides a more reliable structure in sourcing and monitoring the production of non-contaminated quality food. In other words, what drew people with diverse social and educational backgrounds into a cohesive community is *Natur*'s vision of what a

social and environmentally sustainable food system should look like. For example, in the discussion cited above, the Facilitator challenged participants' 'radish and tomato theory' about trust:

Facilitator: But you are also eating the same food as other consumers in your local supermarkets and you wouldn't trust your boys to the care of a stranger in the supermarket, would you?

FG-1 P4: No, because that sense of connection requires a process.

P6: One starts off [their membership in *Natur*] as a consumer, and very soon, you feel you are one of the collective.

P4: We are a family! [*laughter*] We often chat together, don't we? Every Wednesday everyone has the chance to join the online meeting and exchange ideas or ask questions... I feel it's comparable to if you always go to the same five-star hotel for dinner, and you'd always encounter the same strangers. After a while, the dining experience may become a formative part of your worldview, and perhaps the same dining experience will shape other customers' worldview as well. Since you are all repeatedly drawn back to the same dining hall, and you have similar taste in food, you'd speculate that you must have something in common.

FG-1 P4's analogy to a five-star hotel highlights the fact that although *Natur* only focuses on the provision of 'mundane' food, it offers something more that gives its members a sense of exclusiveness, or an adherence to a particular sets of standards, which can implicitly 'become a formative part of [one's] worldview'. This point was echoed in the second focus group:

FG-2 P6: By enacting the idea of 'participation is procurement', you'd find that participation itself has opened a new circle for you. So what is *Natur* actually selling? I'd say it's a different life attitude....

P4: I feel that gradually *Natur* is not just about a group of people, but it has become a sentiment.

Facilitator: Sentiment?

Multiple participants: 'It's like a family', 'Like a close circle', 'Yes, yes'

P6: It has permeated into all areas of your life. It became no longer just about eating. Well eating is very important, but it's also about 'taste' [*laughter*].

When discussion focuses on 'outcomes', or on the status of things, it is easy to attribute group cohesion and trust as a result of eating the same 'radish and tomatoes' (FG-1 P1). By eating the same food members build trust between themselves and the producers. But this does not fully explain why sharing the same food source has an additional bridging effect among different social groups in a food commons but not elsewhere (e.g. in supermarkets). It also fails to appreciate the transformative innovation social movements bring to society.

When viewing *Natur* through the lens of commoning, that is, as 'a process' (FG-1 P4), then how a food commons transforms collective norms becomes visible. The underlying vision of social and environmentally sustainability becomes a constituent part of a shared 'sentiment' (FG-2 P4) or a collective norm, which is not limited to food itself, but 'permeated into all areas of [one's] life' (FG-2 P6). *Natur*, as many other local food movements, resembles what David Hess calls 'alternative pathways' that may 'not have an explicit or self-conscious goal of fundamentally changing society' but may nevertheless, signal what is feasible in social transformations (Hess 2007, p. 4). In other words, through the creation of an alternative food system, ideas such as 'participation is procurement', shared knowledge and appreciation of how 'radish and tomatoes' are sourced, and agreed organisational norms weaved 'into an integrative cognitive praxis to provide an important part of ... "collective identity"' (Jamison 2006, p 47, Brunori *et al.* 2011). This in turn enables

*Natur* members to attach new meaning and content to their performative roles and how they relate to one another in their food commons.

So how can the analytical lens of commoning help provide further insights on AFNs? Firstly, it allows a more nuanced appreciation of what AFNs are. For both producers and consumers, ‘the reasons for joining an AFN are multiple’ (Thorsoe and Kjeldsen 2015, p. 171) and should not be reduced to a single issue. In fact, despite an exceptionally high level of cohesion among *Natur* members, for which both focus groups perceived *Natur* as a ‘family’, they still preserved their fundamental differences, even on food-related topics. The success and impact of a social movement may not necessarily lie in the establishment of an all-encompassing ‘we’, but in the creation of new ways of conceptualising and performing social roles and connections. This leads to a further point.

Secondly, the commoning lens helps to make visible the ‘constituent power’ of social movements (Broumas 2015, p. 15). Practices such as ‘participation is procurement’, virtual meetings and the collective negotiation of food prices, promote not a simple reciprocity but a mutual conditioning effect of an individual and their natural and social environment. The transformative power of AFNs such as *Natur* lies not only in how it transforms the sourcing of food. Rather, it resides in how commoning (i.e. the process of having a shared stake in questioning and negotiating the operation of the food system) generated new narratives and relational infrastructures in the food regime, which enabled ‘the exercise of a new kind of power in food networks’ (Raynolds 2002, p. 122, Brunori *et al.* 2011). In the words of one focus group participant, ‘one start[ed] off [their membership in *Natur*] as a consumer’ but soon became a constituent and contributive part ‘of the collective’ (FG-1 P6).

### **Conclusion: understanding the transformative power of AFNs and commoning**

To some extent, one could argue that the food safety crisis in China is a ‘tragedy of the commons’. In addition to severe water, air and soil contamination, there is an over-exploitation of

natural resources and a food system ruptured by aggressive industrialisation of food production. But it could also be argued that the food safety crisis is a result of an ignorance of the importance of ‘commoning’.

We have demonstrated how a commoning framework can enrich empirical understanding of AFNs. The production and consumption of food is imbued with symbolic meanings (Guthman 2002). As such, the (re)commoning of the food regime, as exemplified by *Natur* and other AFNs, is a process of articulating, arbitrating and reconfiguring these values and meanings. More specifically, there are two aspects that we argue help to illuminate the transformative effects of AFNs and commoning.

Firstly, tracing the development of AFNs helps to decipher how the commons establishes and sustains its performative (re)ordering of the natural and the social. The success of *Natur*'s commoning practice is not only exhibited in its growing membership but also in its ability to attract producers, such as Interviewee 3, to gear their production to standards set by *Natur* members. It is consumers' and producers' joint negotiation of and compliance with the terms and conditions in managing natural and social resources that constitute the act of commoning. The early struggle of *Natur* shows that an idea itself is not enough to establish or to sustain a commons. Rather, it requires ‘nesting’ intricate rules in the local context, which enables continuous input from different social actors (Dietz *et al.* 2003, p. 1910). Our analysis here deepens the theorisation of the role of rule-making in the commoning process. That is, what makes *Natur*'s rules effective was that they rendered clear value-orientation and sensible guidance to concerned individuals so that certain forms of social deliberation (along with the values they embody) can be embraced and reiterated. While some of *Natur*'s rules are characteristic of AFNs (e.g. fair trade, sustainability), some rules may not have universal appeal (e.g. prioritising children's needs). Yet these non-universal rules are nevertheless important for they are emblematic of a social particularity (i.e. a series of child-related

food scandals) in which individuals are ‘mutually vulnerable, and thus, effectively mutually accessible’ (Broumas 2015, p. 20). The intimacy and immediacy of reforming the food system is thus translated into a dual sense of duty and ownership. As such, commoning is not just about the identifiable natural and social resources that are ‘out there’, but it also brings *internal* change in how one contextualises and anchors their social relations to one another. Being a commoner, thus, does not imply passive inclusion in an established circle, but is an active espousal, critique and development of a performative identity. In this regard our work extends critiques that argue that the commons must be seen as more than an institutional design (Singleton 2017, Nightingale 2014, Sandström *et al.* 2017).

Secondly, a commoning framework gives us a fuller picture of the constitutive effects of social movements. AFNs contest conventional state-society relations. The changing attitudes of food production and consumption in different localities brought with it symbiotic social and political change. Yet similar to the study of other social movements, AFNs are often seen as collectives made up of ‘like-minded’ people. The condition and scope of this ‘like-mindedness’ is often under-investigated, which in turn prevents a full appreciation of the latent effects of AFNs. Both the organisers and the members we encountered concurred that there were evident disagreements among *Natur* members over general issues about food. But at the same time, *Natur* appears to be a highly cohesive community, with many members describing the AFN as ‘a family’, the formative influence of which ‘permeated into all areas of life’. Conventional political mobilisation and collective identity frameworks may find this puzzling, for it is hard to pin down any shared discontent or ‘collective’ belonging beyond the issue of food safety. But a commoning lens helps to illuminate AFNs as collective becomings. It allows the examination of how a shared purpose and co-construction of organisational rules helped form a new ‘cognitive praxis’ in individual actors, which in turn transformed the ordering of things (e.g. resources, communities) as well as the way to imagine and deliberate those orderings (Jamison 2006, Brunori *et al.* 2011). In this way, *Natur* is a successful experiment in

how bottom-up initiatives can introduce new social relations while promoting an environmentally sustainable source of food.

The commons are not merely resources that are owned or accessed by the collective. They are also the nexus of place, intricate social relations and collectively defined norms and interests, what Sandström and his colleagues refer to as the ‘socio-ecological adhesive’ that helps constitute communities (Sandström *et al.*, 2017). Here, we have tackled two under-theorised and often implicitly taken for granted areas of socio-political inquiry: how commoning is enacted and sustained in the development of the commons; and unpacking the seeming singularity of AFNs. We draw particular attention to the internalised performative nature of commoning and the embodied multiplicity of AFNs.

### **Acknowledgments**

This work was supported by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/L009803/1].

### **Disclosure Statement**

The authors have no potential conflict of interest.

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<sup>i</sup> See for example: <http://www.thefoodcommons.org/> and <http://www.commongoodfood.org/food-commons>

<sup>ii</sup> The terms 'commons' and 'commoning' are academic imports to China with no consistent translation. Chinese academic literature refers to the 'commons' as *gonggong* (public), *gongyou* (collective property) or *gongtongti* (community).

<sup>iii</sup> 1 RMB is worth proximately 0.12 British Pounds and 0.16 US dollars