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How to Be Modern? The Social Negotiation of 'Good Food' in Contemporary China

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Abstract

Developing safe and sustainable food production for its population has been central to China's 'Modernisation Project'. Yet recent fieldwork in three Chinese cities suggests that there are two conflicting views on what a 'modern' agriculture should look like. For the government, modernisation implies a rational calculation of scale and a mirroring of global trends. But an alternative interpretation of modernity, promoted by civil society, has been gaining ground. For this camp, good food production is then established through a 'rhizomic' spread of new practices, which are inspired by world possibilities but are deeply rooted in the local context. Based on 14 interviews and five focus groups, this article investigates the ongoing social negotiation of 'good food' in China. It demonstrates how a non-western society responds to the twin processes of modernisation and globalisation and provides insights on the varieties of modernity in the making.

Keywords

China, food, globalisation, globalisation, social movement, varieties of modernities

Introduction

To modernise has always been at the heart of the Chinese Communist Party's agenda since its founding of the People's Republic (Zeng, 2016). For a larger part of the past 60 years, Chinese society has been confident and content in following the government's lead in modernising their country (Zhang and Barr, 2013). Yet as globalisation intensifies, a confluence of ideas and experiences have opened up 'a plurality of imagined worlds', which in turn have set the Modernity Project 'at large' (Appadurai, 2013: 5–8, 18). That is, 'how to be modern' is no longer a question that hinges on the government's prescribed solutions, but has become a negotiated agenda between the state and society.

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The author's recent fieldwork in three Chinese cities suggests that, at least on matters of developing a safe and sustainable food system for its population, there are two conflicting views on what a 'modern' agriculture should look like. Both provide valuable insights on the intricate business of modernising in a global age.

For the Chinese government, modernisation implies a rational calculation of scale and a mirroring of global trends. The Chinese government was keen to replace the 'messiness' of a labour-intensive agriculture with a 'modern' image of predictable, profitable and thus more audit-able industry. More importantly, since joining the WTO in 2001, Chinese agriculture experienced further impact from international competitors. With imported soy and corn increasingly dominating the Chinese grain market, the imperative China faced seemed to be what former US Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Benson summarised as 'get big or get out' (Fite, 1981: 102–117). In fact, the Chinese government has gradually consolidated its modernisation approach into the 'Big Agriculture, Big Food' (BABF) policy framework (State Council, 2016). It entails supply-side reform which necessitates further industrialisation of regulated and subsidised farming. As this article later demonstrates, this government-led modernisation project can be characterised as 'globalisation-induced', for its trajectory is shaped by a global expansion of a homogenised perspective on development (Ritzer, 2007).

However, in recent years, an alternative vision on what a modernised food system looks like has started to gain ground in major Chinese cities. Initially organised as spontaneous middle-class urbanites' collective efforts to find reliable food sources amid a series of food scares and pollution-related food contaminations in China, these urban initiatives have effectively grown into a closely networked nation-wide campaign (Zuo, 2015). There is no centralised organisation or an official name for this expanding civil effort. This article refers to this collective initiative as the 'Good Food (*Liang-Shi*) Movement', for they all subscribe to the pursuance of '*liang-shi, liang-ren, liang-xin*', literally translated as 'good food, good people and good heart'. Similar to other western consumer-based alternative food initiatives (Delind, 2011; Levkoe, 2014; Nonini, 2013; Starr, 2010), this Movement puts more emphasis on empowering individuals and on environmentally conscious development that is sensitive to specific contexts. They thus take a more critical and reflexive view on questions such as how technologies should be applied and on what urban consumers can contribute to a sustainable food system.

However, there are two qualities that make the Good Food Movement in China particularly informative to the understanding of how a non-western society responds to the twin processes of modernisation and globalisation. First, the Good Food Movement does not primarily orient their agenda as anti-capitalist or anti-industrialisation. Rather, they tap directly into 'the discourse of modernisation', for it speaks to the government's core concerns and 'has huge appeal to the public' (Interviewee 3). More specifically, they aim to become a new 'reference point' (Interviewee 9) that offers an 'alternative imagination' (Interviewee 8) on what a modernised food system could look like. Second, the Movement is a product of globalisation. Not only are many of the key organisers overseas-returns, but the development of the Movement in the past few years has significantly benefited from a global flow of ideas and transnational exchange of expertise. But as the article illustrates, the Movement differs from the government significantly on situating modernisation on the ground in a global age. Participants of the Movement do not see diverse

(global and local) experiences as constituting a hierarchical order of cogency. Rather they are adept at taking part in and benefiting from a 'rhizomic' spread of inspirations across geographic borders. Thus, instead of being 'globalisation-induced', this civil society-initiated modernisation project is better characterised as 'globalisation-enabled'.

Despite an increasing recognition of the multiplicity and hybridity of modernity (Beck and Grande, 2010; Karagannis and Wdgner, 2007; Schmidt, 2006) and an emerging awareness of social movements as sources of new ideas and new knowledge that shape our modern societies (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991; Hess, 2007), little empirical research has been done on how the agri-food movement has shaped developing countries' modern outlook. This article fills this gap of knowledge. Based on five focus groups with interested publics and 14 interviews with key staff and long-term volunteers associated with the Good Food Movement in China, this article demonstrates that while both the government and civil society subscribe to the modernity discourse and emphasise the role of scientific advancement, they have different takes on the 'means of modernity' in a global age, and subsequently call for a different set of collective action (Appadurai, 1996: 112). The value of examining the ongoing social negotiation of 'good food' in China lies not so much in how *specific practices* can be transplanted to other developing countries. On the contrary, as this article demonstrates, Chinese activists believe that socially sustainable food production is necessarily locally negotiated and ingrained. Yet what is informative about the Good Food Movement is that it demonstrates an emerging *outlook* on the instrumentality of the global which enabled grassroots actors to challenge the state's role as the sole 'arbiter of the relationship between globality and modernity' (Appadurai, 2013: 18). The article contributes to the sociological understanding of 'varieties of modernities' by empirically examining how ideas for alternative modernisations emerged and how these collective imaginations were set into motion (Domingues, 2009; Escobar, 2004).

This article first reviews debates on the varieties of modernities and on government-led agricultural reforms in China. This is followed by a methodology section and then key findings from the Good Food Movement. The article concludes with reflection on what the China experience informs us about the paths to modernity.

Varieties of Modernity in a Global Age

'Being modern' is one of those sociological concepts that everyone can instinctively recognise but yet struggle to pin down. The idea of modernity has always been closely associated with European traditions since the 17th century (Giddens, 1990). In its most general form, becoming modern can be interpreted as signifying 'ruptures' and 'differences' (Bhambra, 2007). It is a 'dis-embedding' process in which social actors seek 'progress' through rational choices rather than submitting to a blind faith in upper authority (Escobar, 2004; Giddens, 1990). Following the European experience, some (institutional) characteristics have been equated as indicators for modernity: such as the emergence of nation-states, increasing individualisation, reliance on instrumental rationality (e.g. science), democratisation and the rise of institutional capitalism (Domingues, 2009).

Yet, experiences of the global South not only challenge the validity of any linear conception of modernity, but also highlight that divergent modernisation paths cannot be

conveniently reduced and packed into regional (cultural) boxes (Arnason, 2002). For example, viewed in the European tradition, China would be considered as the ‘modernising outlier’. That is, China has been successful in meeting many development goals but has not established ‘a liberal regime of property, regulation or accumulation’, as other Asian countries have done (Domingues, 2011: 531). There is thus an increasing recognition of the ‘varieties of modernities’ (Beck and Grande, 2010; Seth, 2012; Taylor, 1999). Modernisation is both an individualising and a universalising process and perhaps is always an entanglement and a negotiation of the two (Appadurai, 1996).

Relating to the focus of this article, it is important to highlight a *temporal* element that underlies the phenomena of varieties of modernities in China. The idea of modernisation entered Chinese public discourse not as a product of the Enlightenment, but as a ‘reactionary’ desperation to save China from the ‘national survival crisis’ in the face of western imperialism and Japanese innovations between 1839 and 1949 (Cui, 2012). In other words, China’s pursuit of modernity was at least a century behind developed countries (Zeng, 2016).

This temporal background helps to contextualise China’s modernisation from two aspects. First, due to China’s colonial past, for the past 60 years, modernisation as a national project was largely driven by the urge to gain China competitiveness internationally (Dirlik, 2002: 26–28). This fixation on (economic) ‘growth’ that led Chinese government’s approach to modernisation resembles what George Ritzer (2007) coined ‘globalisation’. That is, transnational diffusion of institutional capitalism has led to a standardised and normalising effect on how one evaluates and what one should expect from a modern society. In China, this assimilation of mainstream rationales into domestic development strategies has been celebrated as a ‘pragmatic attitude’ of ‘grabbism’ (Wang, 2015). The government is often quick to introduce new practices without necessarily instigating deeper social and cultural reflection. Such a governing mentality is not limited to the field of agriculture, but can also be identified in China’s wider knowledge economy, such as in finance and biomedical innovations (Cui, 2012; Zhang, 2012).

Second, when examining ongoing modernisation processes in China, it is crucial to bear in mind that in an age of ‘high globalisation’, emerging civil societies may also have something meaningful and instrumental to contribute (Appadurai, 2013: 3; Dirlik, 2004: 142–143; Escobar, 2004). The Good Food Movement is a social reflection of and response to the government’s uncritical adoption of ‘globalised’ industrial agriculture.

As the article later demonstrates, the globalisation-induced modernisation project led by the Chinese government and the globalisation-enabled modernisation project led by Chinese civil society together reflect what Appadurai (1996) identified as the entangled universalising and individualising effects of modernisation. The point is not simply to criticise one approach and advocate the other. Many studies have noted that conventional ‘contention’ framing of social movements is no longer helpful, for the steering power of social movements comes from the creation of new ideas and new world views (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991; Hess, 2007). A full appreciation of the varieties of modernity must recognise that the heterogeneity of modernisation is not constrained to divergences *between* states, but also *within* a nation-state. Thus, the point is to illuminate how the emergence of different collective imaginaries of the modern have led to different forms of collective actions in the search for the good life. More specifically, the article argues

that it is a difference in the self-subscribed *instrumentality* of the ‘global’ that has led to different modernisation approaches.

Globalisation-Induced Modernisation: The ‘Big Agriculture, Big Food’ Approach

Modernising agriculture has been at the heart of Chinese government’s policy since its Open-Door reform (MOA, 2017). Intensified globalisation is arguably a major factor in pushing China’s formation and enforcement of its modernisation agenda in agriculture in the last 20 years. As mentioned in the introduction, since joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, a lack of market competitiveness over staple foods, such as soy and corn, has created a new form of ‘food security’ challenges for China. In fact, in response to rising global market pressure and its impact on the domestic economy, for the last 14 consecutive years, China’s ‘Number One Central Document’ (NOCD), the first policy document the Chinese Central Government issues every year, has been dedicated to agriculture reforms (MOA, 2017).

It is thus not surprising that in the Chinese government’s blueprint of a modernised agriculture, a key preoccupation has been promoting large-scale technology-intensive agriculture. Whereas the government’s rationale for the 10th Five-Year-Plan (FYP) in 2001 still framed agriculture as a contributive and supportive element to domestic economic performance (Zhu, 2001), its 11th FYP made a clearer vision that agricultural production itself should be progressively framed as an industrial plan which ‘adapts to international collaboration and competition’ (MOA, 2005). The goal to scale up agricultural production through industrialisation was further emphasised by the 12th FYP, which saw the application of technology, entrepreneurial management and national integration of market and resources as three key elements to actualise a modern agriculture (State Council, 2012).

Most notably, for three consecutive years between 2014 and 2016, the Chinese Central Government’s NOCDs focused on the ‘modernisation’ of agriculture (State Council, 2014, 2015, 2016). The 2016 NOCD has consolidated its modernisation approach into the ‘Big Agriculture, Big Food’ (BABF) framework, which strengthens the 12th FYP directives by further expanding integrated large-scale production to all aspects of China’s food system (State Council, 2016). More specifically, it proposed a ‘structural reform on the supply side’. This is described as requiring the ‘integration of funding [...] planning, and the unification of standards, supervision and regulation’ and to ‘upgrade the whole industrial chain of agriculture’ through further application of bio- and IT-technologies (State Council, 2016: 1.1, 1.3 and 1.4).

China’s modernisation path resembles what George Ritzer termed ‘globalisation’. That is, the pursuit of narrowly defined economic ‘growth’ and productivity has led to an imperial expansion of a particular mode of technology policy, which is characterised by the promotion of centralisation, standardisation and a replacement of human with non-human technology (Ritzer, 1993, 2007: 15, 20–30). The Chinese government’s modernisation agenda, especially the BABF framework seems to be mirroring this global trend.

As traditional husbandry is being supplanted by highly scripted industrial farming, China has also encountered similar side-effects which are not unfamiliar to western experience. To begin with, a simple industrialisation of the food system has led to an ‘organised

irresponsibility', which subsequently caused a trust crisis in China (Beck, 1992; Wang, 2013). Since 2004, media exposures of cases such as the plantation of 'trash vegetables' on contaminated soil and the use of melamine to artificially increase protein percentage in inferior milk have caused major food safety concerns (Wang, 2013; Zhang and Barr, 2013).

Second, in the eyes of the farmers, modernisation also seems to have failed on its promises. The policy shift from developing agriculture to agro-industry in the above mentioned 11th FYP was coupled with nudging the rural population into second and third industries (such as local tourism) (MOA, 2005). Some have criticised that, in this approach, farmers have been abandoned, rather than empowered by modernisation (Liu, 2015). Increased productivity of Chinese agriculture in the last 13 years has not resulted in an increased income for Chinese farmers (Cook and Buckley, 2015). The promotion of scaled up production with entrepreneurial management has aggravated social divide between the rural and the urban (Cook and Buckley, 2015; Liu, 2015).

In summary, this government-led approach could be argued as 'globalisation-induced' modernisation. Not only was it pressured by global competition, but more importantly, this modernisation path has been heavily shaped by mainstream global models. The Chinese government (perhaps quite rightly) sees the 'global' context as something to be responded to. The international arena with its affiliated treaties is where trends or norms are set. As such, existing global experience offers lessons to be drawn from. But as China's modernisation project pushed ahead, its associated health and social side-effects became more visible. As a result, China's rising urban middle class has started to experiment in taking some of the issues into their own hands.

Studying the Emerging Good Food Movement

Growing public concerns over food safety have given impetus to grassroots initiatives in search of alternative food systems (Zuo, 2015). Since 2008, a handful of civil organisations led by overseas-returns were established spontaneously in major Chinese cities. Most of them started as farmers' markets, which functioned mainly as a platform to source and to promote reliable farm products (He, 2015).

The author first came into contact with these civil groups at the end of 2011. At the time, the operation of these civil groups had expanded beyond being a food source. By synthesising a range of relevant international experience, it has become typical for these civil groups to project themselves as inclusive community-building initiatives where public seminars, farm visits, international academic exchange and farmers' training have been incorporated into their organisational routines (Zhang, 2017). At the same time, these independent local organisations started to form a national network through increasing inter-organisational visits and a sharing of resources (e.g. contacts and suppliers). More importantly, they began to explore the possibility of setting up China's grassroots Participatory Guarantee System by drafting and debating on shared standards and codes of practice (Interviewees 3, 4, 5, 8, 10). Collectively, they have also expanded their original focus on 'organic food' to supporting a diverse range of 'good food', as long as they are products of sustainable farming and fair trade.¹

Fieldwork for this study took place between July 2014 and May 2016. Currently, on the basis of published records (Zuo, 2015), fieldwork data and personal contacts in this

area, the best estimation is that to date similar types of groups have spread to around 20 major cities in China. This study mainly concentrated on three civil organisations: Beijing Country Fair, Xi'an Farmers' Market and Wuhan Natur. These three sites were chosen for their complementary insights on the Good Food Movement. As the national capital, Beijing is a well-resourced and highly globalised north-eastern city. Wuhan is the moderately well-off southern provincial capital of Hubei and is a main hub for agro-industry research. Xi'an is the capital of the north-western Shaanxi province, which is less innovation-driven and financially less advantaged than Beijing or Wuhan. These socio-economic differences led to different complementary organisation profiles. Beijing Country Fair is one of the most vocal and influential civil organisations in advocating an alternative modernisation path for China's agriculture (He, 2015). Being closely engaged with transnational academic and policy debates, Beijing Country Fair is arguably the 'idea hub' for this campaign. In fact, Xi'an Farmers' Market, begun in 2011, is one of the many organisations that were initially inspired by the Beijing model. Xi'an offers a good example of how to translate national and international experience to a relatively conservative local culture. Wuhan Natur, established in 2008, is one of the first civic initiatives to seek reliable food production and is perhaps the most successful in building a cohesive food community. Each group has an estimate of 500 to 2000 subscribers on their mailing list, with Beijing the largest and Xi'an being the smallest and youngest.

The data set consists of two parts. First, 14 one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted. This includes 11 interviews with activists who are core members of these groups (five in Beijing, four in Wuhan and two in Xi'an) and three with collaborating producers (one producer from each city). Interviewees were recruited through a snowballing approach with the aim to deepen understanding on the rationale and objectives of the Movement.

Second, five 90-minute focus groups with interested publics were conducted (two in Beijing, two in Wuhan and one in Xi'an). Focus groups have a particular advantage in identifying and comprehending how collective meaning and new frames of value references have been negotiated and introduced by a social movement (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991: 4; Morgan, 1996). Interaction within focus groups allows participants to potentially 'enjoy the opportunity of taking on the teaching role' as they 'individually and collectively explain their situation' and elaborate tacit-knowledge that may otherwise be difficult to obtain (Gaskell, 2000: 51). Calls for focus group participants were sent through the three organisations' online social media (e.g. Chinese versions of Twitter and WhatsApp) and emailing lists. A key concern for selection was to balance between having sufficient common concerns and having diverse opinions (Olofsson and Ohman, 2007). Thus, only people who were responsible for family food shopping were invited to apply. Interested individuals were asked to submit information on their age, gender and how long they had known their local Good Food Movement organisation. Based on these data, invitations were then sent out to create mixed groups. The resulting five focus groups consisted of six to nine people each. In total, 37 people from 18 different professions participated. The average age for participants was 39.5, with the youngest being 23 and the oldest 63. Overall the groups had an 8:3 female to male gender ratio. This is not surprising, as in China it is mostly women who manage family meals and all three organisations claim to have a higher appeal among women. While the focus groups mainly

consisted of urban middle class, they also incorporated participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The average monthly expenditure for participants was 5316 RMB, equivalent to a middle-class family expenditure (State Statistics Bureau, 2016), with the lowest being 1500 RMB and the highest of 17,600 RMB. Semi-structured discussions focused on what qualified as ‘good food’, perceptions of food safety and the roles of consumers, producers and technology in food production.

Written consent was obtained from both interviewees and focus group participants. All data were recorded and transcribed. Coding was established through two phases. Initial coding consisted of descriptive typologies that helped to map out the Movement’s ‘Vision’ (with sub-categories of ‘food’, ‘infrastructure’, ‘technology’ and ‘people’) and ‘Practices’ (with sub-categories of ‘producer-oriented’, ‘consumer-oriented’ and ‘NGO development’). Then ‘axial coding’, such as ‘rationale’, ‘resourcing’ and ‘interpretation of outcomes’, was developed to further ‘dimensionalise’ the data and establish analytical links between categories (Bryman and Burgess, 1993; Maxwell, 2005: 97).

Globalisation-Enabled Modernisation: The Good Food Movement

To demonstrate how Chinese civil actors steer the twin processes of modernisation and globalisation, this section first examines the modernisation approach the Good Food Movement promotes. It then discusses how Chinese activists and the participating public situate themselves amid the confluence of local, national and global possibilities. It argues that part of the Good Food Movement’s emerging popularity is owed to its ability to go beyond a simple local–global binary, which in turn allows a multiplicity of actor-oriented engagements to promote socially sustainable food systems.

Reimagining the Modern

A number of North American studies have highlighted that alternative food initiatives are not just about food, but are experiments of “‘alternative pathways’ towards social transformation’ (Nonini, 2013: 270; Starr, 2010). Chinese activists I interviewed voiced a similar ambition. As one key organiser of the Beijing Country Fair commented, he and his colleagues perceive their work as an exploration of an alternative modernisation:

We refer to modernisation and speak directly to this jargon that the government is persistent on promoting. This has a strategic consideration. For [the government] has monopolised the definition and the usage of what ‘modernisation’ is. Modernisation has become nothing but high-tech, large-scale, and the reduction of human labour [...]. We feel the need to correct, or to demonstrate to the media, the public and the government that, at least on the issue of modern and sustainable agriculture, there is another way to imagine it. (Interviewee 3)

This ‘strategic consideration’ of tapping into the modernisation discourse as described by Interviewee 3 is exhibited in two aspects. Primarily set as consumer groups, the Good Food Movement aims to educate and to ‘modernise’ urban consumers. For example, similar to other ‘farming with a face on it’ initiatives observed in Germany, Switzerland

and the USA (Starr, 2010), the Good Food Movement in China encourages more consumers to engage with the production process, through events such as market activities, farm visits and public lectures. But the point was not limited to curate a more cohesive consumer–producer relation. Rather, the Movement was particularly attentive to making urbanites more reflexive and self-conscious about their role in the food system, as one of the organisers of Xi’an Farmers’ Market explained:

We’ve always campaigned for rational consumption. Consumers need to be reminded of the fact that consumption has a bounce-back effect on production as well. It takes certain types of consumers to encourage corresponding modes of production [...] There is an old local saying that everything has a *zujin* (off-limits) – one needs to know where the limits are. The same with consumption. To be a rational consumer requires one to know a bit more about food production itself. (Interviewee 5)

In the eyes of activists, a modern food system required a corresponding ‘modernisation’ of the consumers. A ‘rational’ consumer, as described by Interviewee 5, was a reflexive individual who knew and acted within reasonable premises. A number of interviewees highlighted the importance of turning consumers from passive recipients at the end of the supply line to active contributors in shaping a sustainable food system (Interviewees 1, 6, 7). Wuhan Natur pushed this reflexivity project further by promoting the idea of ‘Participation Is Procurement’ among interested publics (Interviewees 9, 10). This idea is explained by Natur consumers as follows:

Participant 4, FG4: ‘Participation’ is a wide concept, I can participate by making a purchase, by being a volunteer (to the farmers’ market and other public events), by visiting farms. 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.

Participant 1, FG4: And soon you will find that this ‘participation’ has been integrated into part of your life, part of your life attitude.

The author has detailed the community-building events of the Good Food Movement elsewhere (Zhang, 2017). The point to be highlighted here is how both Movement organisers and participating consumers have reached a tacit understanding that a ‘modern’ food system is not limited to the production of ‘things’ but is also about encouraging consumers to become engaging ‘beings’. This re-framing of modern consumers as contributing individuals rather than passive and innocent victims of the supply chain is empowering. For it gives the consumers a sense of ‘imagined control’ (Participant 5, FG2) and a sense of shared ‘accountability’ and thus ‘ownership’ over the social production of good food (Participants 1, 7 in FG5, Participants 1, 3 in FG1).

Another reason for the Good Food Movement to connect itself to the Modernisation Project is that it helps to incentivise more farmers in joining the Movement by dissipating a common misunderstanding in China that ‘sustainable farming’ equates to technology-free ‘primitive farming’ (Interviewees 1, 8, 10). One consumer-turned-producer in Beijing named his farm ‘Knowledge Source’ to highlight how his sustainable farming was also tech-savvy (Interviewee 2). In fact, not only did a number of staff and

volunteers working for the Good Food Movement have agricultural science degrees, all of the three organisations the author visited had strong relations with relevant scientific experts to help farmers in establishing and maintaining good farming practices.

But activists interviewed were also cautious of the conditions of how technologies were applied. One interviewee who had previously worked for a government-purchased rural development programme saw the difference between the government's and civil society's approaches to technology as follows: 'The government first and foremostly sees sustainable development as a poverty reduction programme, but for us it is capacity building' (Interviewee 6). This interviewee went on to explain that consequently they often engage with 'a different pool' of agricultural experts. That is, scientists who were willing to adapt existing local farming culture into their recommendations rather than airdrop instructions. Similarly, Xi'an Farmers' Market started the Small Farm Companionship Programme in 2013. They called their training scheme 'companionship' for it reflects a mutual learning process of introducing farmers to sustainable farming techniques as well as negotiating a set of farming practices which respect local environment and social conditions. For Chinese activists interviewed, this is also out of a practical concern. To put a human touch on the employment of technology and remain context-sensitive also resulted in better adherence (Interviewee 7). This is especially important for China, a country where the peasantry in general has little formal education (Interviewees 1, 6, 8, 14).

Thus, similar to the government's approach, the modernisation project envisioned by the Good Food Movement is also powered by technology. But for civil society groups, technology is to empower rather than instruct the farmers. Thus, to paraphrase renowned activist Vandana Shiva (2000: 109), the conflict over the application of technology to modern agriculture is not a conflict between 'culture' and 'technology', but between two cultures of technology: one guided by the pressure to 'globalise', the other is guided by the need to incentivise individual commitments. By encouraging responsible and reflexive behaviours on both the producers and the consumers, the Movement effectively became a platform for 'modern citizenship education' (Interviewee 9). To some extent, the Good Food Movement has turned the modernisation project from its head back onto its feet. Their alternative imagination of a modern agriculture is less oriented on the making of modern *things*, but on the making of self-conscious and self-reflexive modern *beings*.

Beyond the Local–Global Binary

The emergence and development of the Good Food Movement was enabled by the globalisation process. This is not least because a number of key organisers of these local initiatives were once Chinese-expats in Europe or North America. Importantly, all three organisations host and participate in lively transnational debates. This is especially apparent in Beijing, where Country Fair frequently invites international academics and practitioners for public seminars. It also sends staff to short-term training and exchange programmes to other (mostly Asian) countries and to present at international conferences. This access to global experience is further shared domestically through inter-organisational visits, exchanges and co-sponsoring of events. Many interviewees

recounted that practices, such as community support agriculture (CSA) in North America, the participatory guarantee system (PGS) in Europe and the idea of solidarity economy from Latin America, gave them initial inspiration on how to reform the food system (Interviewees 1, 9, 8, 14).

But as one of the interviewees hastened to add, they ‘are not “purists”’ and they believe that the main value of their work lies in their ‘originality’ (Interviewee 8). To be sure, the organisers and affiliated producers are highly reflexive and selective in what to take from these international lessons. However, it would be misleading to equate the intellectual dynamic promoted by these discussions simply as the aforementioned ‘grab-bism’ (Wang, 2015) that has dominated China’s modernisation. One telling example is that during the fieldwork, the author noticed that all three organisations accommodate diverse views in their public events. For example, Beijing Country Fair had a public seminar almost every week, with academics and farming practitioners from Australia, Brazil, Taiwan, Thailand, the USA as well as from the Guangxi minority region, inner Mongolia and Beijing. The presenters often had different preferences on farming cultures and represented a wide range of thoughts.

The author was both amazed and confused by this ‘fluidity’ of idea exchange. The author asked Country Fair staff if they were worried that this intermingling of diverse discourses would blur ‘the message’ or the vision of modernity they wanted to communicate to the public. The organisers responded that, on the contrary, ‘fluidity’ and ‘diversity’ *were* their main message (Interviewee 8). In fact, they tried to avoid projecting any approach as authoritative or definitive, for they were ‘not here to point fingers, but to inspire [...] [and] to make the public see their own role in making changes happen’ (Interviewee 3).

This orientation towards how global experiences should be presented and used is perhaps not surprising for it is in line with the Movement’s actor-centred modernisation discussed in the previous section. Instead of seeking technological fixes to social problems, they focus on encouraging self-conscious and empowered individuals to make their contributions. This emphasis on maintaining contextual sensitivity and on empowering (rather than instructing) the individuals make the Good Food Movement particularly deft in taking advantage of the possibilities and resources that a globalised world has to offer.

While Chinese activists interviewed naturally hope the Good Food Movement will be further ‘spread’ to a greater number of Chinese cities, almost all of them were sceptical, even dismissive of a ‘scaling up’ of their own organisation (Interviewees 4, 5, 8). One example was that during an interview with the founder of Wuhan Natur, the author commented that the success of Natur helped to set an exemplary ‘standard’ for the trade on how sustainable farming could be achieved. The interviewee immediately corrected the author:

I don’t like the word ‘standard’, for I’m not sure the society needs standard too much. I’d like to think of us as providing a ‘reference point’, this is what the society needs more of [...] We welcome anyone to come and have a look at how we operate, but they are not obliged to adopt anything, because every context is different. Beijing’s experience may not work in Wuhan, and vice versa. The most rooted solution is the best solution, as what Korean natural farming

suggested, expertise comes from indigenosity. Once uplifted from the root, it loses its value. (Interviewee 9)

This deliberate avoidance of being a 'standard' in preference of being a 'reference point' is revealing. This resembles the very path that the Good Food Movement practitioners have walked themselves. International experiences were just 'reference points' for Chinese practitioners to work out their own socially embedded solution. In the eyes of Interviewee 9, both a globalisation of industrial production and of a blanket scaling up of a particular alternative approach should equally be avoided. It seemed that Chinese activists preferred ideas and practices to be spread through a 'rhizomic' approach, in which burgeoning new practices can be instigated by seed ideas afar but are deeply rooted in the local context.

This 'rhizomic' outlook seemed to be embraced by the participating public as well. Focus group participants pointed out that if these civil organisations sought for expansion and scaling up, it would inevitably 'change the nature' of the Movement (Participant 4, FG5; Participant 2, FG1), for the Movement would become similar to those industrial food suppliers, which have caused many of the food safety issues in the first place (Participant 1, FG5). Participants view the Movement more as a platform rather than an enterprise. As one participant put it, 'the most important mission' of these civil organisations was to be the 'single spark' that alights a prairie. That is, to make 'more people know and experience eco-friendly agriculture, an alternative mode'. But the point is not to expand its operation to dominate the 'prairie' itself (Participant 8, FG2).

But this shared inclination to stay 'local' should not be mistaken as provincial protectionism. In fact, while all of these organisations work with local farmers, neither one of these organisations is restricted to the promotion of 'local food'. For example, Xi'an Farmers' Market and Beijing Country Fair regularly exchange food resources to improve consumer choices. Wuhan Natur's organisers actively seek quality food from various independent farms across China, as well as importing packaged products from like-minded providers in neighbouring Asian countries. This provides a good contrast with many other alternative food initiatives in the USA and Canada. Previous studies in North America have pointed out the uncritical assumption that locally produced food is 'inherently more socially just and environmentally sustainable' often severely limits food initiatives and, in some cases, was counterproductive (Delind, 2011; Levkoe, 2014: 388). In fact, leading food studies scholars have criticised the simplistic framing of food as 'either Marxian fetish or Durkheimian totem', which often leads to a local/global binary in food movements (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002: 6). Rather, studies on consumer-producer networks have argued that food represents a 'realm of connectivity' (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002: 17). The essence of the alternative food movement is thus to mobilise consumers' capacity to act through the deployment of specific knowledge, rationales and choices to 'reconfigure the hegemonic' orderings of connectivity in conventional agro-food systems (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002; Lockie, 2002: 281). In this regard, the Good Food Movement's 'rhizomic' outlook seems to demonstrate a possible avenue of how a 'rooted transcendence' of the 'local' can be achieved. For it does not aim to establish a *self-reliant* food community which confines its food choices only to local sources. Rather it reconfigures the connectivity of the agro-food system by promoting a network of

self-sufficient food communities, which, through the exchange of knowledge, option and resources, empowers individuals to make informed choices on procuring food from like-minded producers. The network of producers and consumers that the Movement cultivates could be ‘distant’ physically, but is congenial (and thus ‘local’) with their visions of modern agro-food systems.

In comparison to the formulation of the government’s BABF approach, the modernisation project projected by the Good Food Movement can be characterised as globalisation-enabled, rather than globalisation-induced. For activists interviewed, the world is ‘flat’, not in terms of socio-economic equality or natural and historical endowments, but in the sense that they do not think that the cogency of social experiences constitutes separate ‘levels’ (e.g. the local, the national, the global). For both the organisers and participating public in the Good Food Movement, the ‘global’ represents more of an idea bank or a resource pool rather than an instructor of a higher order.

Conclusion

How to be modern? This is a question that not only baffles many developing countries, but remains intriguing to academic debates worldwide. For some, we have never been modern (such as Latour). For others, we need to be ‘more modern’ to overcome many of the modern problems (such as Giddens and Beck). For still others, we are or should aim to be ‘post-modern’, for modernity has or will reach an end through its self-inflicted problems (such as Baudrillard, Derrida). But if we could take a working definition of modernity in a general sense – that is, modernity being the emergence of *new collective imaginaries*, which are associated with technological development (not least information technology) and form the basis for new forms of *collective actions* in the search of the good life (Appadurai, 1996; Seth, 2012) – then modernity is ‘a continuously evolving horizon’ (Thomassen, 2014). The way to achieve modernity is also not a set path, but an open quest, which needs to adapt to particular challenges of the time (Karagannis and Wdgner, 2007; Schmidt, 2006). A key challenge for developing countries’ modernisation in our time is how to mediate a path of modernisation in an age of high globalisation.

On this topic, China’s ongoing modernisation of its food system provides insights from at least three levels. First, as the Good Food Movement started to gain popularity in major Chinese cities, it demonstrates that with intensified globalisation, the modernisation project is no longer in the monopoly of nation-states. Rather both the images of the modern projected by the government and by the civil society functioned as ‘an organised field of social practices’ and each represented ‘a form of negotiation’ between sites of agency and global possibilities (Appadurai, 2013: 31).

Second, and relatedly, the social negotiation of ‘good food’ in China exhibits ‘varieties of modernity’ in the making. While the government’s BABF framework resembles a ‘globalisation’ of development rationales that focused on the modernisation of *things*, the Good Food Movement experimented with a more actor-focused approach that promotes the modernisation of *beings*. The existence of two different modernisation approaches at work in China underlines Eyerman and Jamison’s (1991: 55) claim that the impact of social movements lies not merely in its contentions, but in its ‘creation, articulation, formulation of new thoughts and ideas’. Chinese grassroots’ search for

an alternative imagination of the modern highlights the fact that ‘being modern’ is not simply a collection of ‘matters of fact’, but denotes approaches in which ‘we “make” and define ourselves as modern’ (Seth, 2012: 1384).

Finally, on the making of modern beings in the contemporary world, China’s experience suggests that different views on the instrumentality of the global lead to different imaginations of what modernisation entails. For the Chinese government, globalisation represents a challenge, a stimulus and a collective that is instructive. Following the lead of well-trodden development models is a sensible solution to mounting international competition. Thus, the government-led agenda can be characterised as ‘globalisation-induced’. In comparison, the rise of the Good Food Movement is globalisation-enabled, for it obtained its primary ideas and social influence through its engagement with and channelling of international debates, expertise and experiments. But for the three organisations studied, the global and the local do not necessarily constitute a hierarchical order, but are a continuum of a pool of resources and possibilities.

It is important to note that the Good Food Movement is only emerging. The Movement’s reach is still limited when compared to the government backed industrialised agro-food system. Nevertheless the development of the Movement provides a notable example of how a non-western society responds to the twin processes of modernisation and globalisation. It evokes reflections of what ‘being modern’ means in a globalised world and how it might be achieved. The comparison between the two modernisation approaches in the Chinese food system illuminates how self-orientation in a global age significantly affects one’s perceived instrumentality of the global and subsequent heterogeneous pursuit of modernisation.

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Note

1. Apart from the consideration of inclusiveness, this expansion of campaigning focus to ‘good food’ also has a practical concern. That is, with the level of water, soil and air pollution in China, it is extremely costly to produce organic standard food.

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