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(Bio)politics of existence and social change: Insights from the Good Food Movement

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Abstract

How can we break away from a fixation on top-down power dynamics and track the impact of social movements in societies that do not easily fit with Western neoliberal theorisations? Building on Foucault's insights on governance, this article proposes an analytical lens of the 'biopolitics of existence' to address this problem. The term existence refers not simply to the 'corporeal' needs of survival (be it of an individual or an organisation) but also to the freedom to (self-)develop and the ability to interact with others. By examining how the Good Food Movement has transformed the *bios* of ordinary people into agency and reshaped the governing ethos in China's food system, this article demonstrates that to assess the gravity of social change is to first comprehend how actors calculated their action in a particular socio-political ecology. To speak of the politics of existence is to recognise that existence is simultaneously something to be defended and to be established. A 'biopolitics of existence' lens is instrumental in making visible social actors' logic in (re)forming socio-political norms while keeping in sight the entanglement of different stakeholders.

Keywords

biopolitics, China, existence, food movement, Foucault, social change

Introduction

The mornings of the Spring Festival Week in Chinese cities are normally very quiet, as most migrant workers have returned to their villages and urbanites sleep in after their festive exhaustions from the previous day. But the Spring Festival of 2020 was different. For Chen Feng, founder of the Wuhan alternative food network (AFN) *Natur*, who

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hurried along the dead streets to open *Natur*'s storage facilities, the urban silence felt like an existential cry for help: his native city was under lockdown as the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there was no food shortage, the pandemic was associated with hygiene management of the wholesale market. This re-evoked public panic over food safety and shot up demands for *Natur* products. Luckily, over the years, *Natur* has formed a cohesive community with its consumers and producers with the slogan 'participation is procurement'. With labour, time and personal resources volunteered by these ordinary citizens, *Natur* quickly established contingency delivery routes for quality food procured from their network of independent farms (Zhang, 2020). Similarly, 1000 kilometres away, staff at the Beijing Country Fair, one of the most vocal AFNs in China, spent long hours checking farm deliveries and filling orders from the public. As Tian-Le, organiser of Country Fair, commented on social media, meeting the massive demand was like 'fighting a war'. But, heartwarming efforts such as farmers lowering their prices to help families in need and consumers volunteering to pack and deliver fresh produce have turned limited resources into unlimited collective assurance (Yang, 2020).

Both *Natur* and Country Fair are part of what has been called the 'Good Food Movement' in China. It is a closely networked, but independently run nationwide campaign on establishing a socially and environmentally just food system. Since the exposure of a series of national food scandals in 2008, for many people living in China, to put 'good' food in one's dining bowl has been a daily existential concern (Lam et al., 2013; Yasuda, 2018). The pandemic has simultaneously accentuated AFNs' popularity among the public and highlighted their capacity to mobilise social resources at a time of crisis. Indeed, Chinese's leading news media lauded such civic initiatives as grassroots 'self-redemption' (*ziji*) in desperate times (Zhang, 2020).

This was not the first time the term 'self-redemption', with its dual connotations of citizens' efforts of self-rescue and their awakening to previously neglected political imperatives, was used to capture the significance of grassroots initiatives in China. Parallels can be drawn with Chinese society's fight against another existential crisis: air pollution. Nationwide grassroots air monitoring was also heralded as China's civic 'self-redemption', as the bottom-up activism formed a 'reverse coercion' (*daobi*) on the government to make policy changes (Feng & Lv, 2011; Wang, 2012).

Yet apart from occasional media attention and rare policy influence, the scale and depth of social changes grassroots movements have brought to China remain ambiguous. Given the government's intolerance to opposition, many non-governmental organisations need to tread gingerly within the realm of 'intra-system operations' and not be seen to challenge the Party's dominance (Zhang & Barr, 2013a). Even for sympathetic observers, there are good reasons for reservation towards grassroots agencies (Meng, 2011; Spires, 2011; Teets, 2014). In addition, given their cultural and developmental differences, East Asia societies do not always easily map onto conventional Western frameworks (Ong, 2000). New conceptual tools are needed to uncover social logic and its impact that are otherwise elusive.

This article offers a new approach to track state–society dynamics in the making. Taking the Good Food Movement as an example, it argues that the pace and depth of social change grassroots initiatives can set in motion hinge on the (*bio*)politics of *existence* among stakeholders (e.g. the individual, the civil society and the government). At

the surface level, threats to life necessities (e.g. air quality, food safety, pandemics or climate risks) can serve as powerful incentives for the collective reordering of socio-political relations and practices (Beck, 2011). But meaningful ‘existence’ in the lifeworld denotes both the occupation of a socio-political *space* necessary for survival and development, as well as the capacity for *agency*. In other words, it requires both the freedom to (self-)develop and the ability to interact with others (Pelluchon, 2015; Rabinow & Rose, 2006). Thus, for individual citizens, as the article demonstrates, their involvement in these social movements was not simply to defend their ‘*zoē*’, or bare life, but to (re) introduce into the public domain their *bios*, their qualified life with particular socio-political demands and responsibilities (Agamben, 1998). The presence of civil society in an otherwise politically intolerant society itself has value. But guarding its social space both motivates and constrains its confrontation with the state. The Chinese government has its own ‘existential concern’: as its legitimacy heavily relies on its perceived performance over solving social problems, it needs to tactically assimilate civil society’s appeals into its governing ethos (Rose, 1999; Teets, 2014; Zhu, 2011). This article elucidates how a food movement transformed the *bios* into agency and reshaped a governing *ethos*.

By establishing an analytical lens of the ‘biopolitics of existence’, the article fills a gap in governmentality discussions which often struggle with moving beyond top-down power relations when examining non-Western, especially authoritarian, societies. More specifically, the article demonstrates how a biopolitics of existence lens facilitates contextual understandings of the intricate balance of power in China’s political ecology and how through a careful calibration of their socio-political existence, actors found their leverages over the (re)formation of socio-political norms. After laying out the analytical framework in the first two sections, the article introduces the Good Food Movement in the Chinese context with an explanation on methodology. How the politics of existence has been deployed by the individual, civil societies and the government is then examined in turn.

Biopolitics and the study of individual agency

For Foucault (1978, 2008), biopolitics refers to an explicit calculation of power to maximise certain objectives at the individual and collective level. He calls the mentalities and rationalities in the deployment of this power ‘governmentality’, which includes a range of practices, or ‘technologies’, that shape, guide and direct the conduct of the self and of others (Lemke, 2001). To summarise, in Foucault’s much cited phrase, biopolitics operates through ‘the conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, 1982, pp. 220–221). In other words, the ‘bio’ dimension of biopolitics draws our attention not simply to how the governing rationale and structure shape the quality of individual life (the *bios*), but how this is achieved through a normalising effect on citizens’ expectations and imaginations of how they should and could behave.

Two key points of the Foucauldian conception of power are related to this article. Firstly, Foucault extended the analytical attention of power from *government* to *governance* by diverting our fixation on the classic ‘top-down’ chain of command to the bottom-up, the rhizomic, and other fluid power relations at work. The discussions on

biopolitics and governmentality underline that ‘politics’ is no longer a privilege of the establishment, but an aggregated result from interactions amongst a range of public, private and voluntary assemblage of actors (Rose, 1999, p. 17).

Secondly, while Foucault’s works are commonly interpreted as exposing the insidious and repressive nature of modern politics, as political scientist Thomas Dumm (1996) pointed out, one of Foucault’s key contributions is his attention to individual agency. To lay bare how individuals are unwittingly disciplined to conform with desired behaviours of the authorities, was a call for vigilance not submission. Part of Foucault’s later work further explicated this point, especially through the discussion on ‘aesthetics of existence’ (Foucault, 1986, 1988). Vikki Bell (1996, p. 83) rightly reminded us that Foucault’s point was ‘to show us that we are “freer than we think we are”’, for his demonstration of the contingency of power opened up possibilities of change. Indeed, the self is not a given but a product of processual interactions and transgressions of existing norms and power structures.

However, when applying a Foucauldian perspective in practice, a large body of studies struggle to make visible biopolitics beyond top-down power relations. For example, Paul Garrett (2019, p. 469) has criticised how the plethora of neoliberal discussions has effectively become a ‘self-referential world’ of the ‘left elites’ and fails to incorporate voices of progressive social movements. Even when the study is on emerging biotechnology where political legitimacy is yet to be established, it is often easier to trace the normalising influence of the professionals over the public rather than the constitutive impacts of grassroots agencies (Ong, 2012; Rose, 2001; Thacker, 2005). In short, while the diversity of power and individual agency are acknowledged in theory, in practice, discussions on governance seem to favour the realm of the elites (Garrett, 2019).

This is perhaps more obvious in biopolitical examinations on China, where the individual is seen mostly as the subject of population control, either in the corporeal sense (see Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005; Ho, 2014), or in what Nikolas Rose (2001, p. 18) called ‘the ethos of human existence’ (e.g. lifestyle, behaviours; see Chen, 2012; Farquhar & Zhang, 2005). Little connection has been drawn between individual agency and the evolving national politics of the *bios*. This article addresses this analytical gap by bringing into focus interviewees’ interpretation of what conditions their (physical and social) existence in China’s political ecology and how this effects the subsequent strategisation of their actions. But as China is effectively a one-party state, before we go any further, there is an elephant in the room that needs to be addressed: Does Foucauldian biopolitics apply to non-democratic countries?

Foucault’s theorisation was undeniably Eurocentric. Edward Said (2013, p. 206) once commented that Foucault’s work gives the illusion ‘as if “history” itself took place only among a group of French and German thinkers’. Foucault’s writings on China were scant. In a number of interviews, he was straightforward about ‘leav[ing] open here the question of China, about which I know little’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). However, Foucault did engage with non-democratic societies.

Sergei Prozorov, through his systematic examination of Foucault’s writings on Soviet biopolitics, pointed out that Foucault was intrigued by the seemingly paradoxical case of the Soviet Union: at the macro-level, it officially rejected Western capitalism but at the micro-level, the socialist state embraced many bourgeois values (similar to

contemporary China). The Soviet example was 'governmentally identical to the West despite being ideologically distinct' (Prozorov, 2014, p. 10).

Interestingly, Foucault seemed to have foreseen an analytical bias that persists today in an interview with the journal *Herodote*. Here he warned that an excessive insistence on the importance of state power, even in the case of an authoritarian regime, runs the 'risk of overlooking all the mechanisms and effects of power which don't pass directly via the State apparatus, yet often sustain the State more effectively than its own institutions' (Foucault, 1980, pp. 72–73). Foucault (1980, p. 73) went on to reiterate his view with the provocation, 'Do you imagine the mechanism[s] of power that operate between technicians, foremen and workers are that much different here and in the Soviet Union?'

In a similar vein, anthropologist Aihwa Ong's studies on governance in China and Southeast Asia have warned against the tendency of perceiving Asian states as 'an entity of singularity' with an all-encompassing presence (Ong, 2006, p. 12). Instead, she argued that these countries should be seen as 'post-developmental' societies, which favour differential regulation of populations to maximise their 'capital-ability' at the confluence of local and global opportunities (Ong, 2006, pp. 18–21; Foucault, 2008, p. 226). Thus the dynamic of their biopolitics is better captured through the lens of 'graduated sovereignty' (Ong, 2000). The term 'graduated' refers to the state's differentiated implementation of policies and the disciplining and response to citizens in proportionate measure as a better way to maximise potential socio-economic benefits while maintaining control (Ong, 2006, pp. 97–100; 2012). Correspondingly, Ong introduced the concept 'graduated citizenship', which signifies the differentiated political freedom the government allows individuals depending on their education or socio-economic status (Ong, 2006, pp. 76–79). Graduated sovereignty is not necessarily an 'Asian' phenomena, but a governing technique in the context of social transition. As Robert Castel (1991, p. 294) demonstrated in his discussion on the trajectory of risk management in the US and France, similar 'differential modes of treatment of populations' can be observed when new practices are in conflict with older ones.

In short, China has its particularities, but the actual operation of politics is much less centralised and uniform than some may think. Not only does the general logic of biopolitical power struggles still apply, being at the confluence of intensified globalisation and domestic transformation, but China also provides a fertile ground for new forms of governing strategies and practices. It is sensible to question the governing capacity of ordinary citizens in an authoritarian state. But the point should not be on *whether* they have power to act, but rather on *how* they have deployed their agency and to what extent they were successful. For the ability to govern or to shape biopolitics lies not in existing authority, but in the ability to 'seek an authority for one's authority' (Rose, 1999, pp. 27–28). After all, to enquire about the 'biopolitical' is not to ask 'what is the norm', but to understand 'what makes the norm'.

'Biopolitics of existence' and social change

Arguably food movements are about biopolitics by default, for their focus is on shaping individual and collective behaviours and socio-economic relations to maximise social and/or environmental benefits in a food system. By 'biopolitics of existence', this article

underlines how social actors' concerns of their existence constitute the strengths and limits of their leverage in (re)forming biopolitics. This can be further unpacked with three points.

Firstly, the term 'existence' is not simply about physical 'presence', or 'survival'. Rather, this article invokes the socio-political dimension of this term, and uses 'existence' to denote the occupation of a social-political *space* and the capacity for *agency*. To put it crudely, existence incorporates presence and its consequences. This broadens Foucauldian discussions on the 'aesthetics of existence' (Foucault, 1988) by extending the examination of the constituting capacity of subjects beyond self-care and onto a collective search for a good life.

Secondly, to speak of the politics of existence is to recognise that the urgency and intimacy of 'corporeal' needs (be it of the physical body of the individual or of the socio-political body of organisations) can be a source for social innovation. For example, Collier and Lakoff (2005, p. 29) called the Brazilian urban poor's subversion of state-led urbanisation the 'counter-politics of sheer life', in which a marginalised public put forth a set of values and expectations to the state administration based on their 'needs as living beings'. Similarly, as this article shows, to maintain and extend their existence, both civil actors and the government need to continuously experiment and adapt to new circumstances.

This leads to the third point. That is, the existence lens calls for a contextualised understanding of social changes. Here philosopher Corine Pelluchon's (2015, p. 27) idea, 'living is living from', is most illuminating. The *bios* as life proper are lived with and through others (Rose, 1999). In fact, as this article demonstrates, both civil actors and Chinese authorities recognise that governing objectives are not necessarily best achieved through coercive or antagonist struggles but are better achieved through strategies that allow them to draw from or bounce off existing material and structural contexts. Thus a social actor's inactions are sometimes just as revealing as their actions. To assess the gravity of social change is to first comprehend how actors calculated their action in a particular socio-political ecology. After all, to govern is not to incapacitate others, but 'to act upon action', to conduct the conduct of others (Rose, 1999, p. 4; Rose & Miller, 1992).

To summarise, the biopolitics of existence provides an analytical angle that makes visible grassroots agencies in the collective making of social change without losing sight of the entanglement between different stakeholders. As the Good Food Movement shows, although biopolitics is about governing the masses 'from a distance', the terms and conditions of the governing apparatus are not dictated by the government but can be negotiated and revised by the society.

The emergence of the Good Food Movement in China

'The sovereign sees people as the primary source of strength and the people see food as the principal source for strength' – the centrality of food to politics proclaimed by politician Guan Zhong around 700 BC remains influential in China today (Li, 2014). Modernising agriculture is a key component to every stage of China's contemporary development. This can be seen from the dominance of rural affairs in China's 'Number

One Central Documents' (NOCDs), the first policy document the Chinese Central Government releases annually which sets the 'tone' for the year. Between 1982 and 1986, five consecutive NOCDs were dedicated to agricultural reform, with a particular focus on the 'household contract responsibility system' (Ministry of Agriculture [MOA], 2017). This helped China to achieve its neoliberal reform for it rendered autonomy and flexibility to rural labourers which maximised grassroots uptake of new economic opportunities (MOA, 2019). As China moved on to bolster its international status in the new millennium, agriculture was at the centre of a new wave of reforms. Since 2004, every NOCD has focused on developing a globally competitive modern food system (Xinhua News Press, 2019). In fact, the term NOCD has now become synonymous with 'agriculture policies' in Chinese colloquial language.

The irony is that an imbalanced fixation on short-term economic gain has profited the food industry but not increased income for Chinese farmers (Cook & Buckley, 2015). In addition, the more secure Chinese domestic food production is, the less safe its food has become. Since 2003, a spate of national food scandals have alarmed the public that their health is under constant exposure to risks such as the overuse of pesticides, food adulteration, fake food and poor food hygiene (Yan, 2012). As safe food effectively became a limited resource, the Chinese authorities' first reaction was to form a new 'pecking order'. In some provinces, local government has paired up farmers with Party cadres as their dedicated source of 'reliable vegetables', while nationally-owned enterprises rent farms to secure their safe food provision (Liang, 2012).

Since 2008, a handful of civil organisations led by overseas-returns were established spontaneously in major Chinese cities to revamp reliable food productions (Zou, 2015). Similar to other Western consumer-based alternative food initiatives (Delind, 2011; Nonini, 2013), most of them started as farmers' markets, and put more emphasis on empowering individuals to reorient power relations in the food system. Partially related to their commitment to develop locally embedded eco-farming, these AFNs are closely networked but independently run. Although the movement has spread to more than 20 major cities in China, there is no centralised organisation or an official name for this expanding civil effort (Zhang, J. Y., 2018; Zou, 2015). It has been dubbed 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'.

Fieldwork for this study took place between July 2014 and May 2016 and focused on three civil organisations: Beijing Country Fair, Xi'an Farmers' Market and Wuhan *Natur*. The data set consists of two parts. First, 14 one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted. These include 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). 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, p. 51; Morgan, 1996). Calls for focus group participants were sent through the three organisations' online social media

and emailing lists. 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 of participants was 39.5, with the youngest being 23 and the oldest 63. Overall, focus groups had an 8:3 female to male gender ratio. This is not surprising, as in China women mostly manage family meals and all three AFNs attract more female members. In fact, they also have a higher portion of female staff, with only *Natur* under male leadership. While the focus groups mainly consisted of urban middle class, they also incorporated participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The average monthly household expenditure for participants was 5316 RMB, equivalent to a middle-class family expenditure, with the lowest being 1500 RMB and the highest, 17,600 RMB.

Written consent was obtained from all participants. 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. Both interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Data analysis followed an iterative and multi-level coding process (Yin, 2010). Closed coding was first applied to the transcripts which were embedded in the interview schedules. Examples of codes include ‘rationale’, ‘resourcing’ and ‘interpretation of outcomes’. On the basis of closed coding of these empirical themes, the transcripts were then re-analysed through a process of open coding which connects to conceptual themes (Campbell et al., 2013; Layder, 2013, pp. 129–158), such as ‘agency’, ‘empowerment’, ‘existence’, ‘(socio-political) boundary’. All data are anonymised. Individual names referred to in this article are their online pseudonyms.

Self-redemption of agency

To describe grassroots food movement as ‘self-redemption’ (*ziji*) was arguably a conscious choice promoted by a number of key activists from the beginning. Shi Yan, one of the leading food activists, pointed out in a 2012 newspaper interview, *ziji* has two dimensions: (1) a reactive side of conducting self-defence or self-saving which only points to short-term mitigation and (2) a proactive side which encourages ordinary citizens to ‘pick up’ their rights and responsibilities ‘to co-produce an efficient system’ (China Weekly, 2012). This was echoed by many activists I interviewed across the three cities (Interviewee 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10).

On the consumer side, the Good Food Movement organises events such as the farmers’ market, public seminars and weekend family farm visits to bring urbanites and farmers together to reflect on their roles in the food system. *Natur* has been using ‘self-redemption of the dining table’ (Zhang, 2020) as their publicity slogan to evoke a sense of urgency and responsibility among the public to take action:

Once credibility is lost [in the food system], bottom-up effort is perhaps most the important but often ignored solution [in China], because most people consider the solution lies in establishing a new authority . . . But trust is not something that can be ordered by authority but is something

founded on balanced social relations, no? It lies in how we carry out our lives . . . Many places have adopted the idea ‘participation is procurement’ that *Natur* put forward in 2010: One cannot just wait to be served, one needs to show initiative. Participation is self-redemption . . . We are here to promote a notion of choice. State institutions can provide the basics, but anything beyond that depends on your own choice. (Interviewee 9)

By framing the solution to food safety as a correlation contingent upon one’s ‘choice’ and ‘initiative’, *Natur* connects the personal with the political. More importantly, it dismisses a conventional reliance on ‘authority’ as the solution. The focus groups in Xi’an had a similar emphasis on consumers’ responsibility in shaping the food system:

Participant 1, FG5: Consumption determines production, not the other way around! Current food safety problem is partly consumers’ own fault. If you are going for the cheap price, for the packaging (P7: And quantity) yes and for quantity, then that’s what you will get.

P7, FG5: Consumers need to be educated too.

‘Consumption determines production’ is simultaneously a recognition of responsibilities and of power. What the consumers should be reminded or ‘educated’ of, is not simply what choices to make, but how their actions will shape the behaviour of other people (e.g. producers catering to their preferences). The self-redemption they are seeking then is ‘not exclusively on what each one of us has a right for, but also on what the rights of other human beings require of me, of the states, and of the society as a whole’ (Pelluchon, 2015, p. 321). The Movement’s equal attentiveness to the welfare of producers also helps to mobilise farmers’ agency. One producer I interviewed made the following distinction between government’s support and the Movement’s empowerment of the farmers:

The government only knows one leverage, subsidy: seeds subsidy, grains subsidy, fertiliser subsidy . . . that’s a total waste . . . If you really care about farmers . . . provide capacity building, enable them . . . [The Movement] can really help the farmers, it opens up marketing channels to the public and has a showcase effect . . . to inspire more farmers. (Interviewee 1)

Speaking from personal experience, Interviewee 1 considered real empowerment lies not in material subsidies, but in capacity building. Yet agency cannot be taken for granted for it carries responsibilities that may not be intuitively welcomed by everyone:

There were two types of farmers: Those that recognised the network belonged to everyone and thus to themselves too, so they felt they must have a voice and have [their] own concerns heard. And there were those who simply considered [participating in the Movement] as troublesome (*mafan*), and preferred that you or some business agency figure out everything for them, as long as it makes money. (Interviewee 8)

Similarly, Interviewee 10 in Wuhan said, ‘most people still hold onto this state-dependency that the government promotes, they forgot they have capacities too’. For all three AFNs, empowerment of the farmers was a procedural process.

Chinese farmers generally have poor education. So it demands a lot of ‘accompany-work’ (*pei-ban*). You need to have a continuous presence by their sides and work out a number of issues with them together. (Interviewee 6)

The term ‘accompanying-work’ conveyed a sense of collegiality rather than patronage. It echoes the Movement’s aim of not to establish an alternative authority but to invigorate individuals’ agency in the shaping of local food chains, and ‘let them further look up themselves’ (Interviewee 3).

Individual agency is not a zero-sum prerogative given or denied by a state. Rather it is contingent upon a subject redeeming their ability to respond to (rather than abide by) political norms (Foucault, 1988). The differentiated levels of consumer awareness of their role in the food system and the varied attitudes among farmers towards the Movement’s call for action shed light on a less explored aspect of ‘graduated citizenship’ (Ong, 2006). In that, the differential level of rights citizens enjoy is not solely based on what government conferred according to individual socio-economic qualities acquired *a priori* (Ong, 2006, pp. 78–84). But it is ‘graduated’ depending on discriminating efforts among individuals in exercising and extending their political rights. Arguably, the ‘accompany-work’ (Interviewee 6) AFN staff spent their time on with consumers and producers was to encourage and nurture ‘graduated agency’ within an authoritarian regime. For both the Movement organisers and members, their campaigning for an alternative food chain was not simply to protect their physical health or ‘*zoé*’. Rather, it was a collective journey which procedurally awakened to and acted upon their prerogative of demanding better provisions of their *bios*, their existences as socio-political beings (Agamben, 1998).

To see one’s dining bowls as the mini arenas of biopolitics may be easy, but the rapid development of the Good Food Movement in an authoritarian state cannot be taken for granted. In fact, it was based on a careful calibration of its existence.

Calibration of existence

My second visit to Beijing Country Fair started at the local police bureau as Country Fair staff were summoned there by a phone call. After a 10-minute taxi ride, we arrived at the police bureau, registered at the reception, and waited. None of the activists knew what this was about, as the summoning phone call that morning was curt. After a long wait, a police officer came to the lobby, only to inform us that the officer who requested this meeting was out and thus we needed to reschedule and come another time!

Knowing how overstretched the staff already were with their daily work, this outcome even made me frustrated. But Country Fair staff were compliant and reassured the female officer they would make another appointment promptly. I was both impressed and confused by their measured response. The staff member in charge of event organisation explained to me that ironing out tensions with local authorities was a routine part of her job. From experience, this was likely about some paperwork related to an upcoming farmers’ market or meeting new requirements for a future public event. Given many Chinese regulations were vaguely worded and depend on discretionary interpretation of local officials, cultivating a good and collaborative rapport was key for the survival of

AFNs. So long as they helped the police do their work, it was a ‘manageable problem’ (Interviewee 11). As that staff member once worked in the Rock music industry, she made a face and joked, ‘Can you imagine this? A punk like me is getting used to bending my knees to keep the market going’ (Interviewee 11).

Many activists interviewed shared a view that a prerequisite for successful AFNs was to have a pragmatic understanding of the local political ecology that conditions civic initiatives. In this case, the main factor was the boundaries of Chinese authorities’ socio-political tolerance. While the Movement was passionate at launching new ideas and new experiments, they were also careful of steering clear of stepping on the authorities’ toes. For example, when the Movement piloted a multi-site experiment on establishing a grassroots Participatory Guarantee System, staff were reminded not to use terms such as ‘certification’ or ‘accreditation’ as the government would consider it trespassing on their administrative remit. Instead, they chose wordings such as ‘quality assurance’ and ‘peer-monitoring’ which would do the job but not appear as a defiance or threat to the establishment (Interviewee 3, 8). Another example is that *Natur*, being in Wuhan, the national research hub for genetically modified (GM) crops, tactically avoided taking sides on GM discussions in their public events so as to reduce political tensions with local institutions.

But such careful calibration of the dos and don’ts is not simply submissive, because knowing the boundaries is to also understand the authorities’ ‘existential concerns’, i.e. what the authorities worry about. This gives them a chance to break new ground and expand their influence. One example was that in 2015 *Beijing Youth Daily* carried the headline ‘Zuojiazhuang Commerce Bureau introduces you to Beijing Country Fair’ (Zou, 2015). Given at the time outdoor farmers’ markets as a vending venue remained a legally grey area, the Commerce Bureau’s public endorsement was a ‘completely unbelievable’ achievement (Interviewee 12). Part of the reason, as the news report suggested, was that the Country Fair facilitated the Bureau’s public engagement initiatives and ‘brought the commerce bureau closer to the vendors and consumers’ to establish a ‘mutually beneficial market environment’ (Zou, 2015).

This futile trip to the police station was a reminder that grassroots movements constantly need to calibrate their actions so as to coexist with an authoritarian regime (Spires, 2011; Teets, 2014; Zhang & Barr, 2013a). At one level, the Good Food Movement’s political strategy reminds us that the ‘existence’ of a civil space in and of itself has value. Thus, instead of seeking direct confrontation, its first priority is to protect the new space it opens up and try to procedurally inch into the realm once dictated by state authorities. At another level, the Movement’s fight for ‘existence’, not ‘dominance’, entails a more inclusive form of biopolitics. As the next section shows, what the Movement has managed to achieve, then, is to create new social conditions and public discourse that change the governing landscape from the bottom-up.

Shifting governmentality?

I once had dinner at the same table with a government official who was really annoyed [at the eco-farming criteria the Movement is introducing]. He said the government didn’t stop us only because we were too small to matter . . . I don’t think that’s a bad thing . . . There are producers

that cannot get into one market, but then they can join other markets or start their own. These are the invisible non-direct impacts, our value lies in here. (Interviewee 8)

The above excerpt is a vivid illustration of how any assessment of the Movement's impact on the government seems to be trapped in a paradox: On the one hand, their approach to revamping the food system is an unsettling contrast to institutional ones and can make officials 'really annoyed'. On the other hand, one can also dismiss their work as they are 'too small to matter'. It perhaps all depends on what one takes as evidence. I've demonstrated elsewhere that all three AFN communities deliberately chose to stay small and stay local. Instead of conventional 'scaling up', they resort to a 'rhizomic' spread of their practices and actively encourage 'copycat' organisations to emerge around China (Zhang, J. Y., 2018). It is the hard-to-trace spillover effects that Interviewee 8 considers most valuable. In fact, she went on explaining her view on how the Movement exerts influence:

Firstly, individual efforts are big enough to change their immediate environment. Secondly there is an accumulative effect, and if the public discourse in general is shifting, and the government want to survive (*huo xiaqu*), it needs to comply with public views rather than going against it. (Interviewee 8)

A political leverage the grassroots have, according to Interviewee 8, is the government's responsiveness to its own existential concern. It is easy to forget that even for authoritarian government, general public attitudes have implications on the effectiveness of its governing apparatus.

There is arguably a shift of ethos in the Chinese government's modernising approach towards agriculture in the past decade. For example, in the government's renewed effort to deliver a safe 'shopping basket program', the 2012 NOCD pointed to 'standardised and scaled-up production' (Xinhua News Press, 2012). This policy fixation on seeking technical solutions to China's food quality problems culminated in the 2017 NOCD which launched the vision of establishing 'Big Agriculture, Big Food' that called for industrialisation in all aspects of China's food system (Xinhua News Press, 2017). Yet since 2018, as in the words of the Director of China's Central Office for Rural Affairs, the governing focus has shifted to 'bring more humanness into the villages' (Zhang, M., 2018). For example, half of the 2018 NOCD's policy directives were on green development and capacity building (Xinhua News Press, 2018). Similarly, echoing Interviewee 1's diagnosis of China's chronic overvalue of subsidy over capacity building, the 2019 NOCD had four of its five central plans on enhancing education and training programmes among the rural population (Wang & Zhang, 2019). It is difficult to link any of these policy changes with the Good Food Movement. What can be said, however, is that the underlying rationales of the governing strategies, or the governmentality of Chinese agriculture, are shifting, and shifting towards what the Movement has been campaigning for.

While the Chinese government may not like grassroots dissent, it is the government's 'survival instinct' (to '*huo xiaqu*', as in the words of Interview 8), that determines what the authorities will stomach. The Good Food Movement reflects what Jessica Teets (2014) found through her in-depth study of civil societies across China. That is, although

it may not have democratised China or toppled the government's dominance, it has facilitated greater state–society dialogues being assimilated into the normal politics in an authoritarian regime. Arguably the idea of pursuing ‘good food, good people and good heart’ becomes biopolitics when it is not just an articulation of needs and values, but turns into conditions and requirements in the prioritising and organising of practices, at the individual and population level (Rose, 1999, p. 51). Instead of being ‘too small to matter’, the Movement may be ‘too embedded to overlook’.

Conclusion

In a general sense, all long-lasting social change concerns biopolitics, for it reframes the point of reference in configuring personal and collective conduct. Social change promoted by the food movement is perhaps a most convenient example of remaking biopolitics, for food conflicts often reflect an absence of a ‘social contract of reciprocal accountability’ (Bohstedt, 2016). In many ways, the Good Food Movement aims to rebuild this social contract. In 2020 post-lockdown Wuhan, Chen Feng and his colleagues are organising their annual rice seedling planting field trip, bringing urban families to work alongside farmers. In Beijing, Country Fair is recruiting a new editor for their online platform, FoodThinkChina. In June 2020, the city had a second outbreak of COVID cases, again associated with the wholesale food market. The pandemic further pushed more Chinese to think seriously about food, and their role in shaping their relationship to it.

Yet while Foucault's insights on governance aimed to open up the singular vision of the centre–periphery dominance to incorporate diverse sources of agency, empirical studies may struggle to capture and comprehend evolving power dynamics outside of top-down relations (Garrett, 2019; Ong, 2012). This may be especially true for studies on non-Western societies. While fieldwork data may indicate substantial change has taken place, ‘on paper’, the underlying social logic and its latent impact may remain elusive as these changes do not always neatly fit into (Western) terminologies and categorisations.

To address this analytical gap, this article proposes the lens of the ‘biopolitics of existence’, which illuminates the enactment of agency in a particular political ecology. Existence embodies the socio-political *space* and *agency* that underwrite citizens' capacity for change. As Foucault (1991, p. 58) pointed out, what underlies political transformation is not an eruption of ‘an all-powerful subject’, but ‘a space of differentiated subject-positions and subject-functions’. With their livelihoods at stake, consumers and producers are incentivised to take action. The collective self-redemption the Good Food Movement led is not simply active citizenship (e.g. enactment of prescribed rights) but ‘*activist* citizenship’ which aims at redefining orders and practices of their local food system (Isin, 2009). Conceptually, existence is simultaneously something to be defended and something to be established. Empirically, this helps us to comprehend and articulate social emergence embodied in social emergency.

Contextualising social actors' behaviours and strategies in their respective calibration of ‘existence’ also helps to maintain a perspective of *real politik*. As such, AFNs' selected inactions are just as informative as their actions. The government is learning too. While local authorities learnt to benefit from the Movement's platforms, the central

government has become more responsive to public values to maintain its political legitimacy (Teets, 2014). Biopolitics is not just politics over the *bios*, but itself is a living social project. Questions like how other stakeholders, such as the industry and scientific communities, influence biopolitics, or how ‘existential’ concerns take shape in other post-development Asian societies, await future investigation. The lens of the ‘biopolitics of existence’, however, could be instrumental in making visible social actors’ logic in (re)forming socio-political norms while keeping in sight the entanglement of different stakeholders.

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