

Earthscan Food and Agriculture

ORGANIC FOOD AND FARMING IN CHINA

TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP ECOLOGICAL INITIATIVES

Steffanie Scott, Zhenzhong Si, Theresa Schumilas,
and Aijuan Chen



Organic Food and Farming in China

Despite reports of food safety and quality scandals, China has a rapidly expanding organic agriculture and food sector, and there is a revolution in ecological food and ethical eating in China's cities. This book shows how a set of social, economic, cultural, and environmental conditions have converged to shape the development of a "formal" organic sector, created by "top-down" state-developed standards and regulations, and an "informal" organic sector, created by "bottom-up" grassroots struggles for safe, healthy, and sustainable food. This is generating a new civil movement focused on ecological agriculture and quality food.

Organic movements and markets have typically emerged in industrialized food systems that are characterized by private land ownership, declining small farm sectors, consolidated farm to retail chains, predominance of supermarket retail, standards and laws to safeguard food safety, and an active civil society sector. The authors contrast this with the Chinese context, with its unique version of "capitalism with socialist characteristics," collective farmland ownership, and predominance of smallholder agriculture and emerging diverse marketing channels. China's experience also reflects a commitment to domestic food security, evolving food safety legislation, and a civil society with limited autonomy from a semi-authoritarian state that keeps shifting the terrain of what is permitted. The book will be of great interest to advanced students and researchers of agricultural and food systems and policy, as well as rural sociology and Chinese studies.

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

earthscan
from Routledge

First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Scott, Steffanie, 1970– author. | Si, Zhenzhong, author. | Schumilas, Theresa, author. | Chen, Aijuan, author.

Title: Organic food and farming in China : top-down and bottom-up ecological initiatives / Steffanie Scott, Zhenzhong Si, Theresa Schumilas and Aijuan Chen.

Description: Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2019. |

Series: Earthscan food and agriculture | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018022754 | ISBN 9781138573000 (hbk) | ISBN 9780203701706 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Organic farming--China.

Classification: LCC S605.5 .S43 2019 | DDC 631.5/840951--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018022754>

ISBN: 978-1-138-57300-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-70170-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Wearset Ltd, Boldon, Tyne and Wear

To the farmers of 40 centuries and the new peasants wearing
their hats



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Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful for the time given up by farm operators and staff, farmers' market coordinators, buying club volunteers, government officials, staff of certification agencies, researchers, and others, for sharing their stories and viewpoints with us.

We acknowledge funding from the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada to carry out the fieldwork on which this research is based. We would like to thank members of the Waterloo Food Issues Group, plus dissertation committee members and colleagues, for constructive input on various drafts and presentations we have made on this research.

Three chapters in this book are based on previously published work, although they have been substantially revised for this book. Chapter 4 is revised and published here with permission of the Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems and the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, and reworked versions of Chapters 5 and 8 are used with permission from *Agriculture and Human Values* and *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, respectively.



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1 Introduction

*Steffanie Scott, Zhenzhong Si,
Theresa Schumilas, and Aijuan Chen*

The story of this research project

Let us begin this story with our visit in May 2012 to the BioFach China trade fair in Shanghai, the biggest annual organic food trade fair in China. It was held only two months after the enactment of the new and more stringent national organic certification standards. The first floor of the large two-floor venue was filled with booths of organic food companies, local government representatives, farmers' cooperatives, and visitors who were seeking business opportunities. Curiously, on the second floor, there were two separate venues for conferences and seminars. In the large auditorium, the China Organic Congress was being held. CEOs of many well-known organic food companies, along with government officials, gave presentations about the changing organic sector. Meanwhile, just a few steps away from this auditorium, in a much smaller space, a "community-supported agriculture" (CSA) forum was going on. CSA farmers, buying club organizers, and representatives of farmers' markets gave presentations about their initiatives and visions. Unlike the auditorium group, who were discussing the new organic certification standards and marketing, people here were debating about enhancing producer–consumer connections, community building among consumers, and alternative ecological agricultural approaches. We were struck by these two parallel but disconnected "worlds," with very different levels of economic and political power. It was clear to us that, while both of these groups were engaging intensively in ecological agriculture, their understandings, approaches, and goals of ecological agriculture differed significantly. As we continued our exploratory journey in the organic sector, the juxtaposition of these two "worlds" came up again and again. It became a puzzle for us to explain. We asked ourselves how this came about, what were the major features that distinguished these interest groups, and what different socio-economic and regulatory conditions they faced. In this book, we examine the characteristics, conditions, and cases of the two worlds—top-down and bottom-up initiatives in the organic sector.

Backing up further, the original idea for this study was born during a scoping research trip to China by Steffanie Scott in 2009. During this time,

she visited several organic farms near Shanghai and Nanjing, met with representatives of the Organic Food Development Centre, and learned about the fast-growing domestic market for organic foods in China. Steffanie applied to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and was granted funding for the study in 2010. At the time, Steffanie already had one PhD student, Aijuan Chen, who was able to start fieldwork in 2010 to learn more about the role of small farmers in China's ecological agriculture sector. She and Steffanie conducted fieldwork together in spring 2011. A second PhD student, Zhenzhong Si, began his doctoral studies in 2010 and conducted fieldwork (in part with Steffanie) in 2012, and again in 2013. Theresa Schumilas joined the team of doctoral students in early 2011 and carried out fieldwork in 2012 and 2013. Then, in 2014, Steffanie was visiting scholar at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for one semester, and from there gleaned a perspective on organic and ecological farming and organic food consumers in that part of "China."

Our unique team of two Chinese and two Canadians, with diverse backgrounds in rural development issues, the organic sector, and land management, made for deep learning from each other and deep reflection on our fieldwork findings. Along our journeys, we had all sorts of conversations about China, Canada, organic food and farming, agroecology, peasants, farmers, entrepreneurs, back-to-the-land movements, activism, and how these concepts morphed and translated across space and time. In the concluding chapter we provide some more reflections and impressions of fieldwork based on our diverse perspectives.

Our research focus shifted somewhat over time as our understanding deepened. The research began with an exploration of the ecological agriculture sector in China. Over time, we realized that a vibrant informal organic and ecological agriculture sector was emerging outside the formal, certified organic food sector. Some of the early interviewees were involved in CSA farming and ecological farmers' markets. They introduced our research team to more initiators of alternative food networks (AFNs) across the country. We (particularly Zhenzhong Si and Theresa Schumilas) became interested in the characteristics of these AFNs and how they compared with the values of their counterparts in the West.¹ This led us to examine more nuanced tensions within these AFNs and how these tensions shaped their principles and ways of operating. We gradually realized that, in many cases, these various initiatives had strong rural development goals in terms of fostering the well-being of small peasants in rural areas. A new horizon was unveiled when Zhenzhong discovered their connections with the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM). As his research focus shifted toward this grassroots rural development initiative, he found that it was far more than a campaign of ecological agriculture, although ecological agriculture was a key component of their initiatives. In late 2012, Zhenzhong and Theresa attended the 4th National CSA Symposium, organized by the NRRM team in Beijing, and the International Conference

on Rural Reconstruction and Food Sovereignty, held in Chongqing. These two events showcased this multifaceted and vibrant “bottom-up” social movement.

In 2016, Steffanie (with Zhenzhong Si and other collaborators) received another grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, this time focusing more in depth on the dynamics, knowledge networks, and new entrants to the ecological agriculture sector in one region—around Nanjing. This research is still ongoing but we have drawn on a few insights from it, including fieldwork in 2016, to update the findings reported in this book.

Research objectives

When we embarked on this research in earnest in 2010, there was very little published work on China’s organic or ecological agriculture sector. Through our exploratory study, we sought to learn about various pieces of this puzzle:

- the evolution (or development path) of China’s ecological agriculture sector over time, the types of ownership structures of organic farms, and relationships between government agencies, agribusiness enterprises, private farms of various sizes, and farmers’ cooperatives in the sector;
- the type and extent of involvement of small-scale farmers in this sector, in terms of access to land and capital, labour relations, and knowledge networks;
- the engagement and challenges of farmers’ cooperatives in this sector;
- the factors shaping the development of AFNs in China, amid unprecedented cultural change, and in a context of a state-driven yet market-oriented economy with limited civil society involvement;
- the adoption within China of alternative values and practices from AFNs internationally; major types AFNs in China, and dimensions of alternativeness, within the socio-political and economic context in China; and
- the co-evolution of, and synergies between, AFNs and rural development initiatives—specifically, the New Rural Reconstruction Movement.

A note on terminology

We would like to share a few reflections on connotations and translations of relevant terminology in Chinese. “Ecological agriculture” (*shengtai nongye*), “sustainable agriculture” (*kechixu nongye*), and “circular agriculture” (*xunhuan nongye*) are the most popular terms used in China in relation to the “greening” of agriculture. Organic agriculture (*youji nongye*) is also an established concept, though it often has the connotation

of third-party certification rather than the wider subset of practices that the term “ecological agriculture” can entail (Schumilas 2014). Given that our research started by examining the organic agriculture sector and other ecological agricultural practices, we have chosen to use the term ecological agriculture as our key focus. Ecological agriculture encompasses organic agriculture (certified and otherwise), as well as other efforts toward the “greening” of agriculture, such as certified “green food” in China, and an array of other practices among larger and smaller-scale farms, such as natural and integrated farming, permaculture, circular agriculture (nutrient cycling within a farm), and more. Alternatively, agroecology (*nongye shengtai*) is a term that has gained popularity in some circles internationally among the food sovereignty movement (Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013) and researchers alike (Gliessman 1990; Altieri 1995). However, this term does not appear to be widely recognized (outside the academic field) within China. Having said that, a group of agroecological scientists (Luo and Gliessman 2016) published an edited volume in English, *Agroecology in China*, in 2016. We expect that this term will gain popularity in the years to come.

Agroecology is usually translated into Chinese as “ecological agriculture” or “eco-agriculture” (Luo 2016; Li 2001, 2003). The first conference on agroecology put on by the China Academy of Sciences was held in 1981 in Nanjing (Luo 2016: 2). In contrast with understandings of agroecology in Latin America and some other places around the world, notions of ecological agriculture and research on ecological agriculture in China tend to be much narrower and shallower (or diluted) in at least two respects. First, they focus mainly on ecological and not human or socio-ecological dimensions. This is exemplified, for example, in the 1987 book (in Chinese) *Agroecology Engineering in China* (Ma 1987). Second, even within the ecological dimension, many researchers, government officials, and farmers consider a small use of agrochemicals acceptable within their understanding of ecological agriculture. Moreover, the scaling out of organic agriculture is not seen as feasible for China, in the view of most key stakeholders—even those involved in this sector. In the realm of ecological agriculture research, analyses tend to ignore human (i.e. farmer) dimensions or roles, in contrast to a farming systems research approach (Collinson 2000). In addition, they focus on quantitative not qualitative aspects, and tend to overlook small-scale producers and AFNs. Instead, their research always takes an engineering and scientific perspective. Moreover, scientific researchers see themselves as experts, rather than being interested in farmers’ local knowledge and farmer participatory research.

In the international agroecology movement, and among many researchers, agroecology is viewed as an approach to promote solidarity among small farmers and to embrace a socio-ecological systems perspective. However, in China, the discussion is more about moderately scaling up

family farm operations for greater productivity and economic gains. This focus accords with Chinese government technocratic viewpoints on ecological agriculture that emphasize productivity and technology. There is considerable optimism around “agricultural industrialization” and vertical integration of ecological agriculture among the research community and the government. The current government approaches are also project-based (in silos and specific sites) rather than a systematic, integrated approach. Eco-agritourism is emphasized as the major approach for ecological agriculture development. Despite this clear bias toward government-supported, modernization-oriented development of the ecological agriculture sector, our analysis draws attention to both top-down (or mainstream) ecological agriculture and bottom-up initiatives.

The meanings of “industrial agriculture” are also somewhat different in China from understandings that are common elsewhere. There are two interpretations of industrialization—as an industry versus as an economic sector. The first dimension, known as *gongyehua* in Chinese, refers to the adoption of chemicals, machinery, high-yielding varieties of seeds, and other standardized industrial inputs in farming, and scaling up smallholder agriculture. The other dimension of this, known as *chanyehua* in Chinese, refers to the commercialization and integration of the agriculture sector into the market economy, which aims to increase farmers’ income and diversify services on farm, such as by processing food and agritourism. Because of these two different interpretations of the term industrialization in Chinese, English literature that argues against agricultural industrialization may have been misinterpreted as promoting a shift back to subsistence agriculture. Researchers need to be cautious and have a clear definition of industrialization when discussing the implications of industrial agriculture.

There has been a hot debate on the “appropriate” scale of agriculture (*shidu guimo jingying*) in China, a term that often appeared in governmental documents in recent years. Prof Luo Shiming, one of the key advocates and analysts of ecological agriculture developments in China, recommends that ecological agriculture farms be mid- rather than small-scale in order to be economically viable. Luo also argues that we need to think about different types of machinery needed by small ecological agriculture farms. In the meantime, he argues that there needs to be a better regulatory system, compensation for ecosystem services (e.g. saving water, composting on-site) and enforcement (penalties) for farmers overusing agrochemicals or burning rice stalks.

In using the terms top-down and bottom-up in the book’s subtitle, we recognize the problems of suggesting a dichotomy in categorizing ecological agricultural initiatives. We are also sensitive to potentially misleading readers into thinking that all top-down initiatives that we discuss are state-led. In practice, most of the ecological agriculture initiatives that we examined are shaped by both state and civil society actors. We chose the term “top-down” because the state plays a stronger role in the creation and

development of these initiatives. Moreover, these initiatives tend to be consistent with the state's vision of modern ecological agriculture, in terms of larger-scale, higher-capital investment, specialized production, and deeper integration into mainstream food supply chains. In the end, we opted to use these distinctions as a heuristic to highlight the differing approaches, visions, and values behind the creation of these initiatives.

Research methods

Data collection

For our research, we used multiple qualitative methods to collect and analyze information. Our key method was interviews. Other methods included field visits to farms and alternative food venues, observation of “microblog” and blog posts, and attending CSA symposiums. We also gleaned information from secondary sources including newsletters and informal publications, websites, media coverage, and organic food expos.

Semi-structured interviews were an effective research method for this exploratory type of study as they enabled us to capture opinions of different groups of people and they allowed for open-ended responses and follow-up questions. Moreover, the organic farm sector in China, and particularly AFNs, are nascent initiatives that have not been well documented in existing academic literature. By interviewing people in diverse positions, it is easy to identify not only points of consensus but also disputes and contestations. This is critical for identifying the challenges that confront AFNs and the organic sector in China. Many of the subtleties within these emerging and rapidly evolving initiatives can arise from the interviewees at any time. Some of the interviewees would also help to correct a false perception held by the researcher and disclose misunderstandings that we had not previously identified.

Compared to using a survey questionnaire, interviews enabled us to adjust our questions according to the responses of the respondents and capture critical information. Finally, interviews gave us considerable flexibility to extract information about issues that were of most interest to us. In order to interview people with various backgrounds, we designed various types of questions for a given interviewee. For example, when interviewing a manager of the Beijing Farmer's Market—the most prominent ecological farmers' market in China—we were curious to ask about how the market was initiated, the key rules for selecting vendors, who the vendors are, how it maintains its reputation, the motivations of their customers, their connections with other initiatives and with academics, their perceptions of organic certification, and the core values of the market. But, besides these questions we had prepared, we also learned about the important role of microblogs (known as Weibo in China) in promoting the market, how they had been funding their market, information about



Figure 1.1 Theresa, Steffanie, and Zhenzhong at Green Cow Farm in Beijing.

specific farmers, and the emerging group of “new farmers”—issues we might have missed if we had used a closed-ended survey.

As noted earlier, this study is based on a broad research project about the ecological agriculture sector in China. The research team of three doctoral students (Zhenzhong Si, Theresa Schumilas, and Aijuan Chen) and one professor (Steffanie Scott) collectively conducted 127 interviews in 2011, 2012, and 2013 in 13 provinces and municipalities in China, including Beijing, Liaoning, Shandong, Henan, Anhui, Jiangsu, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Chongqing, Guangxi, Fujian, and Hainan. Our interviewees were key players in the ecological agriculture sector, from diverse positions: employees and owners of organic and green food farms, representatives of organic certification bodies, government agencies, consumer associations, NGOs and community organizers, and researchers (see Table 1.1). Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to five hours. All but five interviews were conducted in Chinese and notes were taken during interviews. Interview notes were later translated and transcribed. We identified most of the interviewees by snowball sampling. The remainder were identified through personal and academic contacts, mass media, online social networks, and national organic conferences and expos.

One online directory that we used early in our study was the China Organic Directory 2009, edited by Organic Services GmbH. It listed organic certification agencies, organic consulting firms, NGOs, and most enterprises and farmers’ cooperatives engaged in organic agriculture in China. It helped us to identify potential interviewees and to understand the development and distribution of organic agriculture in China. One

Table 1.1 Number of interviews conducted with different types of interviewees

<i>Type of interviewee</i>	<i>Number of interviews*</i>
Managers and workers on ecological farms	42
Managers of farmers' markets	4
Representatives of buying clubs	3
People renting plots for recreational gardening	5
Governmental officials	20
Researchers	32
Organic certification agencies	11
Directors and employees of NGOs	10
Total	127

Note

* Some (repeat) interviews were conducted with the same person.

challenge of using this directory for sampling is that some enterprises and cooperatives listed in the directory had already withdrawn from organic agricultural production by the time we conducted the fieldwork. There is a turnover rate of approximately 30 per cent annually in the sector of organic agriculture. This may happen because organic agriculture is certified annually and some enterprises fail to pass the certification, or some enterprises voluntarily withdraw from organic agriculture for various reasons.²

Our second approach for collecting information was field visits to various ecological farms across 13 provinces and municipalities, and to farmers' markets in Beijing and Shanghai. Visiting the ecological farmers' markets, for example, gave us a sense of how vendors promote their products and communicate with customers. By talking with vendors and customers, we collected information about the motivations of customers, the ethical values of vendors, ecological implications of their farming methods, and their perceptions of organic farming and certification. We also participated in a seminar discussion after the market where vendors shared their different perspectives and approaches of how to maintain soil fertility without chemical fertilizers. Through this, we heard about the different farming approaches, farmers' understandings of the principles of organic farming, and their perceptions of organic certification.

Our third approach for collecting information was written text from relevant microblog accounts, blogs, and online forums. "Blog and buzz mining," where internet posts are used as sources of research data, is a relatively new research method in the social sciences (Poynter 2010). Best practices and ethical frameworks are still evolving. Given the conversational nature of blogging, monitoring a community's online exchanges can be similar to monitoring in-person conversations. As such, blogs can be helpful in understanding the beliefs and practices of a particular community. There is an evolving literature around "online activism" specific to

China. The growth of online communities, and in particular the use of micro-blogging has exploded in recent years (Yang 2009). Microblogs have become a significant public space for information flow and exchange since 2011. They have played a critical role in the development of various alternative food initiatives in China.

For their research, Zhenzhong Si and Theresa Schumilas observed various online posts. Zhenzhong's observations of microblogs cover accounts of CSA farms (e.g. Little Donkey Farm, Big Buffalo Farm, Shared Harvest CSA, Emerald Harbor Farm, Tony's Farm), farmers' markets and their organizers and vendors (e.g. Beijing Country Fair Farmer's Market, Beijing Community Farmers' Market, Shanghai Nonghao Farmers' Market, Tianjin Green Farmers' Market, Xi'an Farmers' Market), farmers' market vendors (e.g. Dreamland Farm, Bashangtian Organic Farm, Sunlin Farm, Dandelion Commune, Happy Urban Farmer), buying clubs (e.g. Green League, Shanghai Caituan, Chengdu Green Heartland, Citizen Group of Organic Food Investigation), influential academics and activists in rural development and agriculture (e.g. Li Changping, Jiang Gaoming, Qiu Jiansheng), and alternative food stores (e.g. Jishi, run by Beijing Farmer's Market, Ufood Organic), as well as related organizations and websites (National Urban-Rural Mutual Support CSA Alliance, Hanhaisha, Beijing Organic Assemble, EcoScan, Taobao Ecological Agriculture). When reading these posts, we paid special attention to their opinions and debates about local and seasonal food, trust and community building, self-identity, ecological farming methods, organic certification, healthy eating tips, etc.

In addition to microblogs, Zhenzhong's discourse analysis also included blogs and websites. For example, Shi Yan, the founder of the most influential CSA farm in China—Little Donkey Farm—and several other CSA farms in Beijing, has been an influential figure in the AFNs' community. Her blog posts cover various issues related to AFNs, especially about the values embedded within these networks in the West. Therefore, it provided valuable information to examine food advocacy in China. The New Rural Reconstruction Movement's projects have been widely covered by the mass media. The various websites therefore provided valuable information for understanding how the New Rural Reconstruction Movement addressed its goals with diverse strategies and approaches. Zhenzhong also examined how the mass media described their activities. Critiques of CSA farms and some of their ethical values were also found on the online forum of Emerald Harbor Farm. This provides a contrast, reflecting the contested nature of these nascent alternative food initiatives in China.

During our fieldwork, we learned how extensively AFN participants were using online spaces, so Theresa decided to monitor the Weibo micro-blog posts of eight bloggers for four months. Weibo is a platform that has been in existence since 2009. It is best described as a cross between blogging (as it is understood in North America) and Twitter. The use of Weibo has exploded in the past few years. It had over 100 million users by early

2011 (Yang 2013), and by early 2017 it had 340 million active monthly users, overtaking Twitter (BBC News 2017). Weibo posts include anything from event promotion and distributing information to more political expression. The state censors Weibo for subversive content (Yang 2013) and bloggers typically use pseudonyms to at least partially obscure their identity.

The bloggers that Theresa “followed” were all people involved in the AFNs that we had studied. They included CSA operators, one peasant farmer, buying club volunteers, farmers’ market volunteers, and consumers. The blogs were all in Chinese and were translated by a graduate student at the University of Waterloo. Theresa met most of the bloggers while in China. She sought their permission to monitor their blogs, and they consented verbally. Where she did not meet the bloggers personally first, she notified them by email that she was a researcher reading their blogs and that she might quote them in her publications, and asked them to respond if they had any concerns. No one expressed any concern about the blog monitoring.

There is a debate in the research ethics literature as to whether blogs and online discourse should be considered in the public domain, and hence “cited” in the same way as print media references or other “desk research,” or whether these postings should be considered a more private form of information sharing and hence subject to the same ethics considerations as other in-person types of qualitative data (Poynter 2010). We treated contributions made in online space the same way as contributions people made in interviews, and assigned numeric codes to mask identities.

A final method used in our research was observation, at various events and forums, including the annual BioFach China organic expo held every May in Shanghai. As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this expo was far more than an exhibition of organic brands and products. It included seminars held by NGOs like Green Ground in Beijing that involved participation from CSA farmers, farmers’ markets organizers, and buying clubs organizers. Some of us participated in discussions during these seminars and collected useful information about the challenges and opportunities of AFNs. Another official conference was also held at this expo where large organic food companies, certification agencies, and governmental officials sat together to discuss the development of the organic agriculture sector and policy changes. This forum was in sharp contrast—in terms of values, approaches, and foci—to the AFNs’ seminars. Some of our interviews were also conducted at the expo.

Zhenzhong and Theresa also attended two important gatherings held by the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM) team. One was the 4th National CSA Symposium, at Renmin University in Beijing from November 30 to December 1, 2012. This symposium has been held annually since 2010 by the NRRM. The Rural Reconstruction Center at Renmin University, as the base for the NRRM, facilitated this annual

gathering of ecological farmers (including CSA managers), which brought together NGOs, farmers' markets managers and volunteers, buying club organizers, academics, and other coordinators of NRRM initiatives across the country. In the 4th symposium, Zhenzhong and Theresa participated in seminar sessions and roundtable discussions. The information from various presenters, most of whom are organizers and managers of alternative food initiatives, provided a valuable complement to our interviews. The other conference was the International Conference on Sustainability and Rural Reconstruction, held December 8–10, 2012, at Southwest University in Chongqing, China. This was a conference on the alliance between the NRRM in China and rural reconstruction initiatives in many other countries. Academics and activists sat together to address challenges of environmental sustainability, social justice, equity, the economic viability of small-scale farmers, food sovereignty, and food security. The entire conference was pitched with a strong anti-modernity sentiment and alternative development ideas, which is very rare in contemporary China. Attending these events enabled Zhenzhong and Theresa to better understand the NRRM's alternative values and practices. It helped Zhenzhong to learn about the impacts of the food safety crisis on the activities of the NRRM, and the tactics of the NRRM to cope with the state pressure (see Chapter 9).

Data analysis and case study method

In our research, we used various methods to collect qualitative data about ecological agriculture farms, farmers' markets, and buying clubs, and the NRRM as a broad social movement. We opted for a case study method—gathering stories of various ecological agriculture farms from around China—as the best choice for our study. We did this for three main reasons. First, developing case studies through in-depth interviews enabled us to uncover the subtleties existing in the struggles of these farms, and associated alternative food networks, in the Chinese socio-political context. For instance, we would not have been able to illustrate in detail how a farmers' market works in China (i.e. the power struggles and distinct values among different players) without the case analysis of the Beijing Farmers' Market. Second, the case study method helped us to reconsider some preconceptions about the emerging ecological food sector in general. Before doing this fieldwork, some of us assumed that, having been “flooded” with constant food safety scandals, AFNs in China were merely a response to food safety challenges. Without in-depth case studies, we would not have been able to perceive and document the strong ecological and social concerns of CSA farmers and farmers' market managers. This led us to appreciate the differences in values between AFN initiators and their customers. Third, since AFN studies in the West have already developed a set of theories to explain this phenomenon, it was important