



The new urban agricultural geography of Shanghai

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural geography has remained largely trapped in a neoclassical economic paradigm in which farm types have been understood to be predominantly products of location and global markets. This paper attempts to subvert this approach by reflecting on the emerging culture of small scale ecological farming in Shanghai. Such farms have been growing in number since 2000, driven largely by the availability of land and an increasing demand for safe and healthy food. While being a rational productivist response to a market opportunity, however, these farms reflect a break with conventional farming, in terms of their size, location and new farmer identities, as well as their socio-cultural relationships with customers and local communities. Using a survey of 45 such farms, the paper illustrates how and where new forms of farming, and the alternative food networks that they support, are colonizing the city. While being redolent of the growth in urban farming in many western cities, farming in Shanghai is driven by private individuals with personal and family, as well as broader community, motives. This suggests that while Shanghai may be experiencing the growth of alternative forms of what might be understood as civic agriculture, those involved are not primarily interested in the civilizing mission ascribed to many such movements. Rather, the new farms are hybrid service businesses in which the sales and marketing skills of the new farmers have allowed them to transform individual customers into members of food networks who form mutual co-dependent trust relationships that underpin the survival of the farms. Perhaps as a result of this, and despite strong demand for organic food, these new farms face a marginal existence in which business development is constrained as much by the strength and continuity of their food networks as it is by the quality and quantity of food that they can grow.

1. Introduction

It is now well over a decade since Morris and Evans (2004, p.96) observed that agricultural geography was something of an ‘awkward’ case in terms of the broader cultural turn in geographical analysis. While going on to observe that it had not entirely been bypassed by culturally-informed research, they did call for new work in agricultural geography that is concerned with both academic and policy questions about the future of agriculture and the food system. While this call has been partially addressed by a range of studies over the intervening years, particularly Lobley and Potter (2004) and Burton and Wilson (2006) on farmer identities, Ilbery et al. (2010) on property relations, Scott et al. (2015) and Schumilas and Scott (2016) on alternative food networks, and Poulsen (2017) on civic agriculture, there have been few studies that have considered how the geography of agriculture is changing in the ways identified by Morris and Evans (2004).

This paper seeks to address this gap in knowledge through an

analysis of the changing spatial and cultural geography of 45 small, broadly ecological, farms¹ in the greater Shanghai area. In particular, in recognizing recent work on alternative food networks (AFNs) in China (Schumilas and Scott, 2016), the paper examines the links between the new agricultural forms typified by AFNs and their location within city regions. This is, therefore, not so much a paper about the forced relocation of traditional small Chinese farms (Day, 2008), but one that examines the emerging phenomenon of new farms locating in new spaces with new socio-cultural relationships between the producers and consumers of food of trusted provenance. It is also about the extent to which cities like Shanghai are witnessing the growth of a hybrid civic agriculture that is helping to redefine post-productivism and multi-functionality in farming (Wilson, 2009) as part of a new – or alternative – food movement that places considerable emphasis on the spatial and cultural connectedness of the producers and consumers.

The paper therefore seeks to contribute to a number of current debates, about the role and nature of civic agriculture (Poulsen, 2017;

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¹ By this we mean farms that use no inorganic or synthetic chemicals and self-identify as organic ecological, regardless of whether or not they are formally certified as such.

Spilkova, 2017), about nature-society relations, in terms of the multiple ecosystem services derived from organic agriculture (Stapleton et al., 2014), and about the geography of an encultured alternative food network (AFN) in which location near to markets is less significant in terms of logistics than it is in terms of overcoming the cultural distance that has grown up between consumers and conventional farming practices (Sanders, 2006; Carolan, 2011; Wang et al., 2015; Schumilas and Scott, 2016; Spilkova, 2017). The paper commences with a review of literature that seeks to place the work within the context of an emerging geography of urban farming. This is then illustrated through the empirical research on which the paper is based, which reports on the key characteristics of a number of small ecological farms in Shanghai. The discussion section draws out the main findings of the work, to illustrate in particular how new farmer identities are emerging and the impact that this has had on the location and organization of the farms. The final section of the paper draws out the significance of the work, in terms of addressing and advancing the agenda first set out by Morris and Evans (2004).

2. Literature review: development of small-scale organic farms in urban China

There is current interest in urban agriculture across much of the World (Zhang et al., 2005; Viljoen and Bohn, 2014; McIver and Hale, 2015; Poulsen, 2017), particularly in terms of the contribution that it can make to urban greening and food supply, as well as to local forms of community-building and food activism (Si et al., 2014; Schumilas and Scott, 2016; Spilkova, 2017). While elements of this wider context are found in China (Shi, 2002), the growth there of small scale ecological farming and alternative food networks has mainly been driven by concerns about food safety and the failure of large scale (organic and conventional) agriculture to address these concerns (Paull, 2007; Klein, 2009; Liu et al., 2013; Holdaway and Husain, 2014; Yu et al., 2014). Informed by demand from China's expanding and highly educated middle class, small scale ecological farming has grown in popularity, both as a source of safe food and as a site for '...nascent activists deploying grassroots community organizing strategies' (Schumilas and Scott, 2016: p.302). While Shi and Cheng (2010) claim that the first such farm and associated network was Little Donkey, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiative started in Beijing in 2009, fieldwork in Shanghai indicates that similar – if less high profile – approaches to ecological farming and food networks had started several years before this, at Muyu Farm and Biofarm. Notwithstanding these and quite possibly other small scale initiatives, it is clear that the establishment of Little Donkey increased the visibility of CSA and organic farming in China (Shi et al., 2011), introduced the idea that farming could be an occupation of choice instead of inheritance, and led to many new membership-based ventures being started over the last five years. For example, Shared Harvest Farm in Beijing, which now covers an area of over 300 mu (20 ha) and supplies more than 500 families; Letu Citizen Farm in Dalian, which covers 200 mu (13 ha) and also supplies over 500 members; and Zhuhai Green Finger Citizen Farm, which covers an area of 300 mu (20 ha) and has a membership of more than 300 families (see Hao et al., 2004; Jiang, 2013; Chen, 2014).

Consistent with Schumilas and Scott's (2016) findings, the business models for these farms consist of a sustained market demand for safe (often organic) produce allied to a complex web of non-market social relations with a network of consumer-activists. For Johnston (2008), this is about collectivizing consumption, while Levkoe (2011) refers to collectivizing subjectivities around food and Miralles et al. (2017) refer to the sharing economy. As Schumilas and Scott (2016: p. 305) observe, the collective nexus between producers and consumers found in relation to these farms suggests the emergence of '... hybrid market-civil society networks (that) identify and work towards common interests and reframe analysis towards collective and away from individualist responses to food system challenges.' Yet, while these hybridities may

represent a new level of collective consciousness and action around food, there is no doubt that many of the farms involved in these networks remain at the margins of viability, as they do in many parts of the World (Groh and McFadden, 1997; Shi et al., 2011; Rioufol and Ravenscroft, 2012; Liu and Ravenscroft, 2015). While there are many contributing factors to the marginal viability of small farms, a dominant narrative in China is that relatively few farms have been able to secure their food networks in ways that provide them with a consistent market for their produce at a price at which they can afford to produce their food (Chen, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). This is exacerbated by the highly individualized environment in which they operate, where some farms are able to subsidize their production costs, through philanthropy or the exploitation of family, volunteer and peasant labor. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that many successful small farms are funded by people who pursue healthy living and have a commitment to improving the environment, but who leave the farming to others – who may or may not share their values (Schneider and Schumilas, 2014).

What this suggests is that there is a number of factors influencing the growth of small scale farms in urban China, some of which replicate more traditional farming, and some of which are new. Of these factors, the two key influences are that these new urban farms are dominated by farmers who choose to farm rather than simply inheriting from their parents; and that these farmers have a new hybrid approach to farming that remains committed to the production of food, but within a network in which customers are constructed as insiders, or members, who share a certain sensitivity to the ways in which food is produced (Liu and Ravenscroft, 2015). While commitment to organic and ecological farming is undoubted, these farms hardly associate with conventional approaches to certification and food standards. Indeed, they position themselves very much as the antithesis of the dysfunctional organic certification programs in China (Qiao, 2011), which are associated with big industrialized farms. This separation between the large and conventional certified organic farms and the smaller 'ecological' farms extends also to geography, with the large farms increasingly dominating remote rural areas where they can amass large land holdings, and the small farms locating in the city, as a means of connecting with educated and affluent urban populations (Shi et al., 2011). Yet, despite this commitment to inclusivity within alternative food networks, there is evidence that this form of inclusion may not extend far beyond these populations:

China's AFNs privilege connecting to land and to the urban entrepreneurs who operate farms over the peasants who grow the food and labor on these farms. However, it is not only the consumers in these networks who display a distrust of peasant farmers. Indeed, AFN organizers and CSA entrepreneurs at times also seem to contribute to the marginalization of peasants. For some of the CSA operators in these networks, peasant farmers are simply labor, and there is no attempt to integrate them into the decision-making on the farms.

Schumilas and Scott, 2016: p.306

Empirically, therefore, it appears that small scale farms and food networks in urban China are following a developmental path that is unique – in terms of the emphasis on food activism – while also replicating the privilege and power structures found in AFNs elsewhere (Schneider and Schumilas, 2014; Schumilas and Scott, 2016). This developmental path is clearly influenced by the growth of AFNs elsewhere, particularly in developing membership-based CSA, where the need for certification is replaced by trust relationships between producers and consumers (Shi et al., 2011). From this, Chen (2013a) has found that the perceived value of CSA membership to Chinese people is little different to the value perceived by CSA members in other countries, leading him to conclude that the idea of caring for others, openness and transparency of production, frequent interaction with consumers, and the high quality of the products, has contributed to the construction of a new consumer trust in Chinese food, certainly for

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