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China Grows Organic

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Southern Methodist University

Abstract: In the past two decades, the growth of the organic industry in China has exploded as China reacts to poor food quality and global market demands, as well as heightened environmental degradation. This paper explores the rise of the organic movement, the causes for its success, and the importance of its continued growth.

“Organic agriculture is a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local condition, rather than the use of inputs and adverse effects. Organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved.”

“有机农业是一种能维护土壤、生态系统和人类健康的生产体系，她遵从当地的生态节律，生物多样性和自然循环，而不依赖会带来不利影响的投入物质。有机农业是传统农业、创新思维和科学技术的结合，她有利于保护我们所共享的生存环境，也有利于促进包括人类在内的自然界的公平与和谐共生。”¹

¹ "Organic Definition." *International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements*. N.p., 2005. Web. 12 July 2013.

Standing on a guard tower on part of the Great Wall of China, I looked down at the uneven steps that had taken over an hour to climb and at the steady stream of people who braved the drizzling day to make the same ascent. I had been in Beijing for a little more than a week, and I was still in a state of awe, taking everything in. As I had climbed the treacherous stairs, I couldn't help but imagine I was a Chinese warrior in the mid 1st century BCE, forging the way across the steep Northern Chinese mountains, the fear of nomadic invaders compelling my every move. I looked out at the Chinese countryside wondering what it would have been like to look over your village, and to see clear across the valleys to other mountains. It took a lot of imagination, because as I stood elevated above all of my surroundings, I could see no farther than the base camp near the road, a river just past that was barely distinguishable through the gray air.

In the summer of 2013, I went to Beijing, China with Southern Methodist University's study abroad program. I went to study Mandarin, and learn about Chinese culture, and I had some idea that I would find out what I could about the organic food movement in Beijing. My interest was mainly fueled by my own desire to maintain a healthy lifestyle while abroad, and I knew about a few food scares that had probably sparked some sort of movement. As I traveled to different organic farms, restaurants and grocery stores, I realized that the organic movement in Beijing was not born of a hippie-inspired commune seeking to return to nature. While these efforts do exist, the organic food movement in Beijing is a response to several immediate dangers that anyone who has traveled to Beijing in the last ten years is unable to forget. The city is shrouded in heavy gray smog for 6 out of 7 days of the week, and cautionary tales of eating unwashed vegetables and drinking the tap water float around like age-old myths. Organic farming in Beijing is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

This paper will explore the political, economic and social factors that led to the need for wide-scale reform and reimagining of the agriculture systems in Beijing. The results of this research and project are combined in a resource of organic and healthy food in Beijing that is available on the website findingorganicbeijing.com. The goal is to increase access to organic food by providing a hub for all of this information, so those in search of it are able to find it.

Introduction

Sustainable agriculture and organic farming were a part of Chinese culture for 4,000 years before the introduction of western farming practices in the 20th century.² Chinese culture is tightly woven with the importance of the earth, and a harmony with nature. These ideals were expressed in Chinese farming techniques like the application of composting and crop rotation. Recently rediscovered techniques were also used throughout Chinese history, like the integration of

² Scorzon, Alberto. "Organics in Chinese Food Law." *European Food & Feed Law Review* 9.3 (2014): 179-86. Web. 02 Oct. 2014.

different crops to promote growth and prevent pests, today called biodynamic farming.³ During agricultural industrialization, many of these practices were abandoned and forgotten, and for the past two decades, China has engaged in prolific efforts to correct the environmental and health damage that modern farming techniques have caused. Organic, clean food is now a burgeoning market in China as consumers demand safe food after several food scares, and as entrepreneurs create platforms for increased access to organic produce.⁴

The Recent History of Agriculture

In the late 1970's, the cultural reform and opening of China caused the growth of many industries and trade as the people's commune system and the planned economy were replaced gradually by a market economy.⁵ The central government began to encourage rapid industrialization to prevent the "fall of small-scale rural production in the extensive and competitive market".⁶ This is when western farming practices began to dominate the Chinese agricultural industry, practices like monoculture farming, which is the planting of large quantities of one crop on the same plot year after year. The extensive use of harmful pesticides enabled monoculture plots to grow in the absence of plants that would ward off pests in nature.⁷

The use of pesticides allowed farmers to grow more crops, and make more money, remaining competitive in the quickly diversifying market. Starting around 2005, many rural taxes were repealed, meaning farmers no longer had to pay fees for their land or livestock slaughter, for instance. These gains for the farmers, however, could not combat the rapid growth of urban China, and as more people moved into the cities, the demand for agricultural products continued to climb. Deforestation, ground water exploitation, and land erosion were identified as major side effects of heavy chemical use and unsustainable farming. Actions were taken to combat the depletion of natural resources at the end of the 1990's, and continued into the 21st century. However, the population continued to grow and feeding them was, understandably, a higher priority than efforts to farm more sustainably, that is, for the majority of farmers.⁸

Grassroots Organic

³ Ibid

⁴ Wolf, DiMatteo and Associates. *Go to Market: People's Republic of China*. Publication. Organic Trade Association, 2014. Web.

⁵ Wei, ShangJin. "The Open Door Policy and China - Rapid Growth: Evidence from City-Level Data." *Growth Theories in Light of the East Asian Experience*. Ed. Anne O. Krueger and Takatoshi Ito. Vol. 4. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1995. 73-104. Print.

⁶ Jinbao, Liu, Chen Jiancheng, Fang Shaoyong, and Li Qiang. "Chinese Agricultural Policies in Thirty Years and Analysis on the Effects." *China Population, Resources and Environment* 18.5 (2008): 1-6. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 11 Feb. 2015.

⁷ Tansey, Stephanie B, 157. *Recovery of the Heart: Dialogues with People Working towards a Sustainable Beijing*. Beijing: New World, 2012. Print.

⁸ Jinbao, Liu, Chen.

Across China, certain individuals have remained devoted to the feasibility and necessity of organic, sustainable farming. Many of these individuals see the problems that confront China closely linked; a holistic perspective to the issues being the only solution. Some have watched for as long as 20 years as the country slowly learned what they have known all along, and one-by-one, other farmers joined their ranks. These farmers refuse to use pesticides, and insist that returning to nature is the only way to solve the environmental, food safety and health problems that the Chinese face.

Terese Zhimin is one of the devoted proponents of biodynamic, sustainable farming. Zhimin worked in the export marketing industry, working with canned goods and agricultural products until the late 80's. She learned about the residues and contamination of many food products and decided she would start a farm when she retired. She has now owned God's Grace Garden for over 14 years, and has employed biodynamic farming techniques to make the farm completely self-sufficient. This means that everything the farm needs to operate comes from inside itself. The struggle to turn a previously chemical-drenched plot into an organic farm took several years. The soil had to correct itself, but slowly the earth healed and cleansed the ground. Three years after Zhimin bought the land she had her first marketable crop, and was able to sell through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Zhimin was one of the first organic certified farms in China, and is one of only a handful of producers of non-homogenized milk.⁹ Her farm continues to be a standard for other ecological projects, and a testament to the equilibrium of natural forces.¹⁰

There are a few other farmers who started their sustainable, eco-farms in Beijing before there was government or economic incentive. These farms tend to emphasize the community aspect of being a patron of a farm, rather than any one particular health benefit. The farms reach customers mostly through word-of-mouth, and deliver to patrons of their CSA on a weekly basis. These relatively small-scale farms have enjoyed the trickling support of interest ex-patriots and environmentally conscious Chinese for years, but the movement as a whole seems to be going in a very different direction. A direction more suited to the size of the country. After all, if organic farming in China is really going to take hold, it's going to take a lot more than the efforts of a few organic altruists.

The Political History of Organic Food

Policies involving organic food in China date back to 1990, when the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) first introduced eco-food certifications. Eco-food makes up 27% of the food grown in China, and only 1% of this is organic. There are three levels of certification within the category of eco-food which are organic, Green Food and Hazard-Free. Organic food production is overseen by the MOA and the State Environment Protection Agency and based on international standards while the

⁹ Tansey, Stephanie B, 154-174.

¹⁰ "God's Grace Garden - an Organic Farm in Beijing." *YouTube*. YouTube, n.d. Web. 12 July 2014.

other two standards just restrict the use of the most harmful chemicals, and other synthetic pesticide, and are based on state criteria.¹¹ The Green Food label has been extremely successful because for several years it provided a pathway to the organic certification, a stepping-stone for transitioning farms. The Green Food label is widely recognized by Chinese consumers, where organic is still mostly misunderstood.¹²

China Acceded to the World Trade Organization in 2001, a move that brought food safety concerns to the forefront of public attention. Increased trade with other countries meant increased standards for food safety, and China began reviewing food safety policies, and enacting stricter regulations by 2003.¹³ Unfortunately, China did not adjust quickly enough, and several “trusted companies” who were exempt from certain testing, were the source of some of the largest food scandals in Chinese history. One such incident was a protein-synthesizer, melamine, found in baby formula that caused kidney damage and in some cases, death. Importing countries were affected by food safety risks, and started passing restriction on certain Chinese exports.

After 2005, the amount of agricultural land being farmed to organic increased dramatically because the first government organic certification was introduced in response to export restrictions. However, in 2006 the amount of pesticides imported into China rose by 62%. The increased demand for chemical repellent, despite the growing organic market, was due, in part, to the demand for non-toxic, and less harmful chemical pesticides from countries like the USA and Japan. Furthermore, rapid deforestation and conversion of agriculture lands caused the depletion of natural predators of rodents and insects, driving up the need for chemical pest solutions.¹⁴

An issue closely tied to the organic movement, is the innovation of genetically modified organisms (GMO). The first commercially grown GMO crop in China was tobacco, but concerns over consumer reaction quickly shut down the production of transgenic tobacco. In 1997, the first Chinese Biosafety Committee was established and approved GMO cotton and a few other vegetables. Strict labeling regulations exist for any GMO products sold or imported, and GMO's are not considered organic under the current organic certifications.¹⁵

Eco-Food Certifications

Eco-Food consists of three categories; Green Food, Hazard-Free, and Organic Food certifications. Hazard-free is the least stringent, while organic food is the

¹¹ Paull, John. "The Greening of China's Food - Green Food, Organic Food, and Eco-labelling." Proc. of Sustainable Consumption and Alternative Agri-Food System Conference, Liege University, Arlon, Belgium. pag. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 04 Oct. 2014.

¹² Wolf, DiMatteo and Associates

¹³ Prevost, Denise. "Food Safety in China: Implications of Accession to the WTO." *China Perspectives* 1 (2012): 39-47. Web. 20 June 2014.

¹⁴ Chen, Jason. "China's pesticide imports rise sharply." *Pesticide & Toxic Chemical News* 6 Aug. 2007: 18+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 9 Apr. 2015.

¹⁵ Paull, John

strictest. Green Food is perhaps the most recognizable and successful of the three. In the past, Green Food used two standards, one labeled “Organic”, and the other labeled “Conversion to Organic”, which provided a middle-ground for transitioning farms. However, this middle classification was discontinued in April of 2014 due to misuse to confuse consumers.¹⁶

There are several government departments that have their hands in eco-food policy, many of whose responsibilities overlap.¹⁷ It is a source of confusion and point of criticism in current eco-food policy in China. The National People’s Congress is the highest state power in the People’s Republic of China, and they pass laws like the Law on Agriculture Product and Quality and Food Safety Law of the PRC that are then enforced by the Ministry of Agriculture. The Administration of Quality, Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ) measures and rolls out regulations for certifications and food quality assurance. There are also several centers that develop organic policy and enforce certification validity. These include Organic Food Development Center (OFDC), Standardization Administration of China (SAC), the Certification and Accreditation Administration of China (CNAC), and Chinese Organic Food Certification Center (COFCC). One can see how this many levels of regulation can get confusing. In 2010 a food safety commission was established “to address China’s food regulatory regime by improving government coordination and enforcement.”¹⁸

Green Food certification is granted by the state and is based on state-developed standards, while organic certifications are held to international standards. Currently there are 25 institutes that will issue different organic certifications in China, all of which are accredited by the CNCA. Green Food is highly regulated at the production and market level. Testing occurs post-production to measure toxic chemical residue, and synthetic chemical insecticides are prohibited.¹⁹ Organic food, in comparison, is much more strictly defined, as it meets international standards. Chemical use is forbidden, and bio-diversity and sustainable farming techniques are encouraged.

In the past, organic labels have been distrusted due to the ease of low-level official payoffs and bribes, and the generally weak legal enforcement.²⁰ However, the government is combatting these concerns with rigorous regulation of the label, and frequent testing of produce to gain recertification.

The Economic Feasibility of Organic Food

The rise of the middle class in China is a phenomenon that is influencing the cultural landscape of China, and creating unique opportunities for certain industries to thrive. While the middle class does not seem to be concerned about rocking the boat politically, they are extremely interested with their safety. With the

¹⁶ Scorzon, Alberto.

¹⁷ Prevost, Denise.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Paull, John.

²⁰ Wei, ShangJin.

implementation of Deng XiaoPing's One Child Policy in 1979²¹, parents have become increasingly protective of what their children do and eat. The many food safety debacles in the last decade have created a hyperawareness on a global scale of farming malpractice in China. For this reason, many consumers are willing to pay the higher price for cleaner food.²² "Green Food" labeled food cost about 10 – 50% more than regular food, while organic food costs at least 50% more than chemically-farmed food, but with expendable income growing in the pockets of the still-growing middle class, Chinese parents can afford the hike in prices.²³ Some studies suggest that price deters consumers from buying organic²⁴, but for those who can afford it, the bigger problem seems to be trust of organic brands. This is not a bad sign for the organic industry as a whole, and is, in fact, good news for small organic farms operating through CSA models.

Another reason organic food has taken off with the Chinese middle class is because environmental issues are the Switzerland of Chinese politics. The middle class is interested in continuing to grow their wealth, and maintain low levels of interest in speaking out democratically. This makes environmental issues the perfect battle for most Chinese, because it is something everyone is in agreement about.²⁵

At the advent of industrialization of Chinese agriculture, pesticides were much cheaper than labor, and many large-scale farming operation required pesticides for high yield. However, in recent years the cost of importing pesticides has risen, making pesticides a less economical solution. Selling organic produce increases farmers' income, and prevents some of the urban flight caused by higher wages in the city.²⁶ With government encouragement of sustainable farming methods, and biodynamic farming techniques circulating the Chinese countryside, owning and operating an organic farm is more feasible than ever before.²⁷ In addition, the agricultural land that remains unutilized in China is usually farther away from large cities and pollution. This makes these sites ideal for organic farms, and indeed, many new and expanding farms have maintained the integrity of the earth in the rural places, making organic certification relatively easy.²⁸

The problem of bringing produce to market is diminishing with the proliferation of online grocery stores, and at-home delivery models. These systems bypass the grocery store that might leave your food untouched, slowly rotting beneath the hourly mist of the refrigerator section. Instead, consumers order exactly

²¹ Mosher, Steven W. "China's One-Child Policy: Twenty-Five Years Later." *Human Life Review* 32.1 (2006): 76-101. Web. 20 June 2014.

²² Prevost, Denise.

²³ Li, He. "Emergence of the Chinese Middle Class and Its Implications." *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 33.2 (2006): 67-83. Web. 11 Feb. 2015.

²⁴ Suh, BoWon, Anita Eves, and Margaret Lumbers. "Developing a Model of Organic Food Choice Behavior." *Social Behavior & Personality: An International Journal* 43.2 (2015): 217-30. *Academic Search Alumni Edition*. Web. 19 Feb. 2015.

²⁵ Li, He.

²⁶ Paull, John.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Scorzon, Alberto.

what they want, allowing the producer to wait for a demand before he or she harvests anything.²⁹

While Chinese consumers are still slowly stepping on the high-speed rail that is the organic movement, the rest of the world is demanding higher standards of food. Many countries, including the USA, have heavy restriction on food being imported from China because of the food safety scandals that plagued Chinese exports throughout the 2000's.³⁰ Much of the push for organic produce has been an economic response to these crippling restrictions.

Obstacles

The certification process for organic farms is costly, and time-consuming. There is a three-year conversion period, and the loss of income during that time can be crippling.³¹ The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) advocates for community based certification programs, and transparency with consumers, thus eliminating the need for small farms to go through the tedious process. IFOAM says, "the closer a consumer is to an organic producer, the less need there is for external verification."³²

As a potential consumer of the Chinese organic produce, my biggest concern is that as clean organic food becomes a staple for many grocery stores and restaurants, the integrity of the food will decline. Indeed, it is a lot of work to farm organically and sustainably, and if done inefficiently, can decrease crop yield. I have a reoccurring nightmare that I will one day walk down the crowded street next to Olympic Park's Bird Nest in Beijing, a popular haunt for tourists and visiting rural-dwelling Chinese families, and among the stands for fried scorpion on a stick, and appalling sugar creations, there will be several street vendors with two characters, 有机, displayed proudly on their stand. These characters, meaning organic in Chinese, would be the equivalent of the word "organic" plastered across a booth at a state fair selling fried oreos, or suspicious-looking hotdogs. This is a future that I fear, but I am hopeful that with the current regulations, can be avoided.

Conclusion

There have been great strides toward organic education and proliferation of organic produce in Beijing. In addition to the long standing CSAs of farms, several grocery chains have started stocking organic produce. However, although there have been great leaps in the way of environmental consciousness and sustainable efforts, access to organic food is still limited. While grocery stores sell produce that is labeled organic, it is difficult to find restaurants that source their food from sustainable farms or companies. Those who want to eat organic food can do so more

²⁹ Wolf, DiMatteo and Associates.

³⁰ Nyambok, Edward O., and Justin J. Kastner. "United States Import Safety, Environmental Health, and Food Safety Regulation in China." *Journal of Environmental Health* 74.6 (2012): 28-34. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 20 June 2014.

³¹ Scorzon, Alberto.

³² "Organic Definition."

easily than in the past 30 years, but people who are unfamiliar with the concept may never be exposed to the benefits and importance of sustainably sourced food. This is a big hindrance to the proliferation of organic food throughout Beijing.

Still, the greatest obstacle that faces the organic community is large-scale implementation. Granted, it was this line of thought that brought China to a largely monoculture, chemical ridden crop state, but the thought is important. What is the point of keeping food clean if you can't feed the population? Is not contaminated sustenance better than starvation? And after all, from a health perspective, if you are getting any vegetables at all, that is still better than a diet of only boxed, processed foods. When I began researching the movement in China, I was tempted to think of the agriculture industry as some great evil, but there are many people wrapped up in the convoluted, literally contaminated situation. The farmers are just trying to maximize yield and make a living; the consumer, especially in Beijing, is most likely unaware of any behind-the-scenes conflict; and the pesticide companies – well there is no defense for them except capitalism. In my opinion, the most important variable in this whole mess is choice. In the relatively new market economy, there is room for everyone, and organic farmers certainly have a well-deserved and necessary place.

Results of My Project

While doing research in Beijing, I documented my thoughts and encounters in a blog, anxinbeijing.tumblr.com. AnXin is a Chinese word for peace of mind and safety, which I aim to help people find through the blog. To the same end, I created a website to increase accessibility. The website, findingorganicbeijing.com, contains lists of farms, restaurants, and grocery stores that sell organic food, and have sustainability as a tenant of their company values. I plan to continue to add new resources and locations as Beijing's organic movement grows. A great advance for this project would be to translate it all into Chinese, for native speakers to use without a language barrier. That extension is too large for the scope of this project, but is certainly something I am interested in pursuing after the timeline of this research.

This project will impact small-scale farmers who are featured on my blog and on my website by directing consumers to them, and advocating for the CSA style of obtaining clean food. At many of the small farms I went to, the owner personally escorted me around the farm, and they were more than generous with their time and produce. For their devotion to the cause, and hard work in sowing the seeds of the organic movement, I hope to give back in this small way.

My research also serves to concentrate many different sources and independent blogs about organic and health food in Beijing. Although not easy to find, there are several individual blog entries on finding reliable food in Beijing. Over the course of two years, I have tried many variations of search inquiries and found just about every post there is. As discussed, a big hindrance for the movement is the confusion shrouding the industry and what makes something organic, and where to find it. The website I have created puts all the information on organic food

in Beijing in one place, making the search for interested consumers a lot easier. This has the potential to impact expatriates living in Beijing, and even tourists traveling through Beijing.

I hope my work will benefit one group of people in particular: the study abroad program at SMU and at other English-speaking Universities. It is difficult to acclimate to a new culture, language, and settle into classes while also trying to find clean, responsibly farmed food. I am in contact with the study abroad program at SMU, and will continue to seek out programs at other universities and offer my research as a resource to their students.

In the long run, others can build upon this research, and this work can serve as a marker in time for how the movement has progressed up until now. The landscape of the organic movement in Beijing has changed already since I started my work, and will continue to transform. This research can serve as a reference for where the movement is now so that in the future we can see patterns emerge, and continue to make progress.

The website and this research is for anyone in Beijing or traveling to Beijing. It can be challenging and confusing to commit to living sustainably, and is certainly against societal norms. However, with small efforts like this, I hope the people who encounter this work will grow more comfortable with the idea of being radical and taking ownership of what they put in their bodies. We all have a responsibility to ourselves and to this earth to be conscious of the consequence of our actions; this is one step closer to making those actions informed.

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