

## ABSTRACT

Alternative Agri-food Networks (AAFNs) are highly valued in the West because they are based on ideas linked to social, economic and environmental justice (e.g. Goodman, 2012). In recent years, AAFNs have also emerged in China, perceived to be a result of food safety scares (Si et al., 2015). The motivations of this study are to determine whether or not China's AAFNs are just a copy of Western AAFNs and if they have the ability to accelerate rural development within the context of "*Sannong Wenti*" (三農問題, hereafter *Sannong* for short). This thesis is aimed at clarifying the conditions that have helped shape the emergence and development of AAFNs and the impacts of on-going AAFNs initiatives that try to deal with issues relating to peasants (農民, *Nongmin*), agriculture (農業, *Nongye*), and rural communities (農村, *Nongcun*) in China. It utilises both case study and discourse analysis methods. The argument of this thesis is based on the analysis of data collected from in-depth interviews (face-to-face and online) with various stakeholders; visits to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, family farms, wholesale markets, food enterprises, village committee offices, and NGOs; and information gained from AAFNs-related workshops, academic conferences, and online posts from WeChat, Weibo, and farms' websites.

This thesis consists of seven chapters, among which chapter 4, chapter 5, and chapter 6 are the main chapters. Chapter 4 focuses on the *Nongmin* discourse. It argues that at the current stage, the main driver of AAFNs is not farmers or peasants themselves but civil society groups and "new peasants / new rural elites". I first discuss the image of Chinese peasants; second, analyse who initiated early AAFNs and who are developing current AAFNs, based on the data collected from my field research and online research; third, discuss how these AAFNs link peasants with civil society groups, "new peasants/new rural elites", and the authorities. This chapter offers a new angle to understand China's AAFNs. It sheds light on the driver of alternative agri-food movements in China and points out the significance of new social agents and civil society groups in contemporary China, which is rarely discussed in existing literature.

Chapter 5 focuses on the *Nongye* discourse to discuss the influence of AAFNs on agricultural production, focusing on food quality issues. This chapter first rethinks the definition of "quality"; second, introduces a framework to evaluate quality in AAFNs; third, analyses how quality is ensured in China's AAFNs in the production phase and in the distribution phase with evidence from CSA cases. Lastly, it discusses the challenges in the quality governance in AAFNs. This chapter provides a new paradigm to evaluate quality for AAFNs studies and new perspectives to complement the convention theory. It also has social and political implications for the wider discussion on food quality issues in China.

Chapter 6 explores the *Nongcun* discourse and interrogates how AAFNs influence the form and trajectory of rural development. I argue that AAFNs and their related activities have initiated diverse rural development activities, and these activities are reshaping urban-rural relations in China. This chapter, first, introduces the change of rural-urban relation patterns; second, it puts forward a rural development paradigm at the AAFNs level vis-a-vis the existing rural development paradigm at the farm enterprise level (van der Ploeg and Roep, 2003); third, introduces two projects as evidence to analyse how AAFNs have boosted the reshaping of rural-urban relations. Lastly, it discusses the relationship between the Chinese government and AAFNs in terms of rural development. This chapter contributes to rural development studies by giving a typology of rural development activities at the AAFNs level, and to AAFNs studies with a new conception, “rural turns”, which is meant to theorise the transformative potentials of AAFNs. It is also meaningful for the discussion on rural-urban gap in developing economies.

This study shows that, first, the emergence of AAFNs in China was not simply a result of following trends in Western countries. Their emergence was also rooted in China’s unique socio-economic and political contexts, particularly concerning the trajectory of agrarian change and political reforms, the structure of the conventional agri-food supply system and the peasant niches within that system, the changing food consumption patterns and the rise of middle-class consumers, the authorities’ promotion for ecological agriculture, and a series of food safety scandals which initiated the erosion of consumer trust in food safety governance. Second, AAFNs in China have been heavily relying on two forces, civil society groups and new social agents, mainly “new peasants / new rural elites”, rather than from peasants themselves. These forces have encouraged peasants to participate in AAFNs and rural development activities. Third, AAFNs and their supported activities are not only improving agri-food safety and reconnecting producers and consumers, they are also helping sustain peasantries by educating peasants and consumers, supporting ecological agriculture by stressing broader qualities, revitalising rural communities by improving endogenous and inclusive rural development and, reshaping urban-rural relations.

In sum, this study, 1) offers the *Sannong* framework as an alternative analytical lens for AAFNs studies, 2) optimises the convention theory (Sylvander, 1994) with six conventions in terms of quality studies and, 3) expands and deepens the rural development paradigm from a farm enterprise level to the AAFNs level for rural development studies. In addition, this study indicates levels of cooperation and conflict between the Chinese government and AAFNs, illuminating the potential of emerging grassroots movements in China today.