VWPE No. 5

Christof Lammer

Reworking state boundaries through care

'Peasant friends', 'greedy entrepreneurs' and 'corrupt officials'
in an 'alternative' food network in China

REWORKING STATE BOUNDARIES THROUGH CARE: 'PEASANT FRIENDS', 'GREEDY ENTREPRENEURS' AND 'CORRUPT OFFICIALS' IN AN 'ALTERNATIVE' FOOD NETWORK IN CHINA

Christof Lammer (*University of Vienna*)[1]

Abstract

Agro-food studies has interpreted 'alternative' food movements in 'the West' as expressing a shift in governance from 'state' to 'civil society'. This working paper shows how the state is entangled in an 'alternative' food network in China. While one might be tempted to judge this food initiative as 'less alternative' and as a sign of a 'weak civil society' in 'the East', this would merely reproduce the dominant 'Western' self-image. Instead, I focus on the role of the state, which has thus far largely been neglected. This not only allows new insights into how the 'alternativeness' of food networks is constituted, but shows us that this process transforms the state as well. Rather than presupposing 'the state' and 'civil society' to be distinct entities, I join anthropological approaches to state and care, proposing analyses of how actors in food networks rework state boundaries through performances and negotiations of care. With concern over food safety growing in China, some urban middle-class consumers seek to care for their families by sourcing 'ecological' food through networks with producers, struggling to construct a suitable realm of care separate from 'the state'. Building on ethnographic fieldwork in a self-declared 'ecological village' in Sichuan Province, I spotlight figures that appear in narratives about food safety: the 'peasant friend', the 'greedy entrepreneur' and the 'corrupt official'. I show how actors are identified with — or try to distance themselves from — these figures and how these enactments of state images shape the state as well as the food network.

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

Introduction: state and care in food networks

In June 2015, the Chengdu branch of a Hong Kong based 'community development' NGO[2] organised a workshop on 'sustainable living' (可持续生活) in Daxi Village,[3] a self-declared 'ecological village' (生态村) in Sichuan Province.[4] The opening address of the sustainability workshop was delivered by Dong Jie, the local township's 43-year-old agronomist, who had initiated the village's transition to ecological agriculture in 2009. The 'peasant cooperative' (农民合作社) was established in 2010 and produces and markets rice certified as 'organic' (有机) as well as non-certified 'ecological' (生态) vegetables. This 'ecological village' has attracted considerable attention from local media and officials as well as from NGOs and middle-class consumers[5] from the provincial capital Chengdu.

Dong started his talk by introducing the Daxi village cooperative, the workshop's host institution, as a 'comprehensive cooperative' (综合性合作社). Building on discourses of academics from the self-proclaimed 'New Rural Reconstruction Movement' (新乡村建设运动),[6] he emphasised that the cooperative did not just produce one agricultural commodity as stipulated in the 2006 law on 'specialised peasant cooperatives' (农民专业合作社), but also provided social services and cultural activities. Proudly, he announced that all 'peasants' (农

---

[2] The NGO was founded in 2001 in Hong Kong. It is funded by a foundation established in 1970 by a London-born philanthropist who, the NGO's website emphasises, believed in the motto: "Help people to help themselves". Furthermore, the NGO describes its mission and vision as "resilient communities" in which people "live simply", "sustainably" and "in harmony with each other and with nature", recognising their "oneness with nature". In such communities, people would "support each other" and be "content, creative and secure".

[3] Names of persons, places and organisations directly involved in the food network have been anonymised.

[4] The village comprises about 500 households, 1.700 inhabitants and 2.000 *mu* (133 ha) of arable land.

[5] Scholars of 'alternative' food networks in 'the West' have pointed out that not all participating consumers "necessarily conform to the usual stereotype of the middle-class 'beard and sandals' brigade" (Kneafsey et al. 2008: 175). Of course, there are exceptions in China as well, but there appears to be a clear tendency: to my knowledge, not one 'peasant-worker' (农民工) was among those who understood themselves as 'consumers' (消费者) in the emerging food network under study. Studies of other similar food initiatives in China confirm my impression about the middle-class character of most consumers involved (Shi et al. 2011).

[6] For brief introductions to the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM) see Day (2008) and Day and Hale (2007). It is inspired by and reflects on earlier cooperative movements, the Rural Reconstruction Movement of the 1930s, and Maoist collectivisation of the 1950s. The NRRM is led by urban intellectuals and social activists and aims to improve the welfare of the rural population through enhancing cooperation. The strategy is to bring external resources, mainly ideas and funding, to the countryside to mobilise internal resources of the villages. Anthropologist Matthew A. Hale (2013) has offered an ethnographically based critique of 'alternativism' in the New Rural Reconstruction Movement by focusing on how tensions emerging from the contradiction between non-capitalist ideals and commercial means were negotiated.

民) in the 'ecological village' had now farmed completely without agrochemicals for five years.

In one session of the workshop, an economist called for connecting urban consumers with rural producers. She argued that her consumer association (联盟)[7] would support 'peasant households' (农户) who worked hard to produce 'ecological' products they were unable to sell.[8] She advocated educating 'green consumers' (绿色消费者),[9] organising them in associations, and connecting them with 'peasant friends' (农友),[10] who would then produce 'safe' and 'healthy' food according to need. These 'peasant friends' would care for consumers by producing 'ecological food', while the 'green consumers' would ensure a decent living for their 'peasant friends' by willingly paying a 'reasonable price' for ecological food.

This economist and other women in the consumer association from Chengdu referred to their organization as a 'mommies group' (妈妈团). Although not exclusively composed of women, mothers with children in kindergarten or primary school appeared to be the most active members. In their social media chat group, several of the more active members of the association included the word 'mom' (妈) in their nickname. Members also often posted photos of their children playing in 'nature' or with animals. Several women explained that they participated in the association because they cared (关心) about their children and wanted to provide them with 'safe' (安全) and 'healthy' (健康) food from 'ecological' agriculture.

---

[7] Effectively, a consumer cooperative, but not formally registered as such.

[8] Not all participants at the workshop shared this view. On another occasion, an NGO worker emphasised that he did not want to help with marketing and selling himself. He stressed that it was most important to him that the 'common people' (老百姓) — those who produced the food — could eat well. He emphasised that much would be lost in the village if things were needed from the outside.

[9] Here 'green' is used to refer to 'ecological', 'organic' or 'environmentally friendly' agriculture and food more loosely. However, 'green food' is also one of the certification schemes of the China Green Food Development Center (CGFDC), which was set up by the Agricultural Ministry in 1995 and certifies food (in ascending order of standards) as 'no public harm' (无公害), 'green' (绿色) or 'organic' (有机).

[10] To my knowledge, the term *nongyou* (农友) is relatively rare. It is often translated in the same way as the more commonly used term *nongmin* (农民): that is simply as 'peasant'. However, I decided to translate it as 'peasant friend', as the second character implies a close relationship of friendship (友好). It has also been used to refer to poor peasants, not in a derogatory sense, but with reference to their revolutionary potential and their ability for self-organisation. For example, the term is used in the title of a song in 'The East is Red' (东方红), a revolutionary opera from the time of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. The lyrics of 'The Peasant's Song' (农友歌) go like this: "The thunderbolt shakes heaven and earth, down with local bullies and bad gentry. The poor used to stand inches shorter than the rich, but today their heads touch the sky. Now the peasants are standing up, we are masters of our own lives. All power to the peasants' association, the Communist party is our guide." For a history of the figure of the Chinese 'peasant' see Cohen (1993). For more recent political discourse about 'peasants' in China see Day (2008; 2015).

Some also viewed ecological agriculture as a contribution to a sustainable environment for the future of their children, linking care for 'nature' (大自然) with care for humans.

* * *

These two scenes from the workshop raise interesting questions concerning the relation of state and care. We see both the 'blurred boundaries' (Gupta 1995) of the state and attempts to delineate the food network from it as a proper space for care when an agent of the state opens an NGO workshop that he initiated and co-organized, thus demonstrating the state's entanglement in this food network. As anthropologists have pointed out, the dichotomy between state and civil society is especially prominent in the dominant 'Western' self-image (Hann 1996) and such instances of entanglement are often interpreted in social science as a 'failure' to separate 'state' and 'civil society' and as a proof of a 'weak civil society' in 'non-Western' countries.

Despite the actual entanglements, both the state official and the economist distinguish 'the state' and 'the market' from the food network as a proper realm for care. The township agronomist emphasises that 'the peasants' are organised in a different way from the one prescribed by 'the state'. The village's 'peasant cooperative' is said to be 'comprehensive', not just focused on the production of a single commodity for the market and, therefore, he stresses, different from the 'specialised peasant cooperative' stipulated by law. Here, he links 'the state' with 'the market' to reject both in favour of the 'community' of the 'peasants' embodied in the 'comprehensive cooperative'.

Meanwhile, the economist at the workshop presents herself as a caring 'mommy' who is willing to support 'peasant friends' with the expectation that they will reciprocate by practicing 'ecological agriculture'. Differentiating their relationship from market exchange, she represents both 'mommies' and 'peasant friends' as caring figures. These images play prominent roles in discourses about food safety in emerging food networks in China. Other important figures in these narratives are the 'greedy entrepreneur' and the 'corrupt official', both imagined as not caring and even uncaring.

In this working paper, I examine how different actors are identified with — or distance themselves from — these images when care needs and responsibilities are negotiated and enacted in an emerging food network in China. Actors may identify others with such figures and confront them with related expectations and practices; they may also perform in certain ways in order to avoid such identifications by others. Similar practices may also be interpreted with reference to different figures. By focusing on these images and the value

judgements associated with them, I aim to understand how actors attempt to define the 'alternative' food network as a proper realm for care as they redraw the boundary between state and civil society, thereby transforming the state through their practices.

My argument is based on more than a year of ethnographic fieldwork in a self-declared 'ecological village' and its connected food network in Sichuan Province in Autumn 2013 and from 2014 until 2015. Theoretically, I build on anthropological discussions about the state and about care. From the relational anthropology of the state, I borrow the concept of boundary work, combining it with a focus on care practices and care discourses. My ethnographic study shows how actors' inclusion in or exclusion from the food network takes place with reference to the caring and non-caring discursive figures. In constituting the food network as a proper realm of care separated from 'the state', state actors and citizens simultaneously shape the state by enacting certain state images. Combining these approaches on the state and on care offers not only a new perspective on social science debates about food systems, but also on the state and politics in China and beyond.

Boundary work: bringing the anthropology of the state to agro-food studies

The interdisciplinary study of 'alternative' food movements has largely ignored the state: food networks tend to be interpreted as an example of a shift in governance mechanisms from state to civil society (e.g. Renting et al. 2012). Anthropologists have only recently pointed to the state's important role in 'alternative' food networks (Klein et al. 2014: 9-13), a focus that is, significantly, proposed by scholars working in post-socialist and market socialist contexts. Why is it that exactly these scholars draw our attention to the state? Jakob Klein, Yuson Jung and Melissa Caldwell (2014) emphasise a supposed difference between the socialist and the capitalist experience. Arguing that under state socialism, 'civil society' and 'economy' were never fully distinguishable from 'the state' (Klein et al. 2014: 12), they further question "whether the ideological and spatial distancing that is presumed to exist in alternative food movements based in advanced capitalist societies is, in fact, real", and conclude that it is more likely a myth: "alternative food movements [...] require state support and market structures in order to function and be legitimized" (Klein et al. 2014: 13).

Like Klein and his collaborators (2014), I focus on the state in 'alternative' food movements. However, I propose a different approach. Despite repeated calls to move beyond this paradigm, a deeply entrenched state–society dichotomy has haunted studies of politics in

China since the 1980s (Perry 1994; Pieke 2004). Rather than take the separate identities of 'the state' and 'civil society' for granted, I propose to focus on the boundary work between state and civil society by building on the 'stategraphy' approach (Thelen et al. 2014). Timothy Mitchell (1991) argues that no external boundary divides 'the state' and 'civil society' into two discrete entities. Following Mitchell's call, Tatjana Thelen, Larissa Vetters and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann (2014) propose to study how the boundary between state and society is constructed within a network of institutional mechanisms and power relations. Hence, they propose boundary work as one of the three analytical concepts of 'stategraphy', an ethnographically-grounded relational approach to the state,[11] while noting that concepts of the boundary "are themselves a part of the negotiations and struggles over the power to define how the (legitimate) state should be seen and work." (Thelen et al. 2014: 8) When state actors and other citizens draw the boundary between what is considered inside and what outside of the state, this influences not only expectations of different actors, but also how they act.

This working paper builds on the 'stategraphy' approach by focusing on the construction of the boundary between 'state' and 'civil society' in a food network. It asks how this boundary work contributes to the constitution of the food network as apparently 'alternative', as different from 'the state' and 'the market', and thus as a proper realm for urban middle-class consumers' care for their families through 'ecologically' grown, 'safe' and 'healthy' food. This analytical focus opens new perspectives in agro-food studies as well, especially for studies of so-called 'alternative' food networks, which have often been based on state–society and market–community binaries.

Agro-food research tends to study so-called 'conventional' and 'alternative' food systems separately and with different emphases. Studies of 'conventional' 'food regimes' tend to have a Neo-Marxist focus on the global, structure, exchange value, production and the public spheres of politics/state and economy/market as pioneered by sociologists Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael in the late 1980s (Friedmann 1987; Friedmann & McMichael 1987; McMichael 2009). Studies of 'short food supply chains', 'local food systems', 'alternative', or 'civic' food networks have focussed since the 1990s on the 'local', agency, values, motivations, consumption and the private spheres of civil society and community. Whereas studies of 'conventional' food regimes tend to take a critical view of

---

[11] The other two analytical axes of Tatjana Thelen, Larissa Vetters and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann's (2014) 'stategraphy' are embeddedness and relational modalities. They propose a focus on relations as a way of bridging the analytical gap between state images and state practices.

their research object and focus on the reproduction of power relations, those of 'alternative' food networks tend to be more sympathetic towards their research subjects and tend to look for the transformative potential of such initiatives.

Although critical studies started to challenge the 'alternativeness' of 'alternative' food networks in the 2000s,[12] academics and activist-scholars continue to seek better definitions of 'the alternative'. Thus, dichotomies (alternative–conventional, civil society–state, community–market, or, for that matter, caring–not-caring)[13] keep sneaking into the analysis of food initiatives. Based on such binaries, some authors claim that we are witnessing a shift in governance of food systems from 'state' and 'market' to 'civil society' (e.g. Renting et al. 2012), but such approaches risk reproducing problematic distinctions between self and other. Most studies that fall under the heading of 'alternative food networks' have been conducted in Europe or North America. Although some recent studies have expanded this narrow focus to 'the East' and the 'Global South', the importance of 'civil society' in 'the West's' self-image means that sticking to the binary state–society framework easily translates into essentialising the supposed differences of 'the Eastern Other'.[14] Analysing food networks with a focus on boundary work between state and society provides a way out of this impasse.

The study of 'alternative' food networks lacks neither attempted definitions nor critiques of 'alternativeness'. I take this difficulty to highlight the nature of the food network phenomenon: which combines necessary entanglements with constant efforts of differentiation. Instead of seeking a more precise concept, we must therefore concentrate on how this 'alternativeness', the difference of food networks, is established in everyday practices and discourses. To introduce the state into the analysis of food networks, I focus on

---

[12]   These studies pointed to the non-definability of the term (Kneafsey et al. 2008: 27), the binary mode of thinking (Maxey 2007), interconnections and hybrids (Ilbery and Maye 2005), the heterogeneity within the alternative (Watts et al. 2005), the dangers of conventionalisation (Guthman 2004) and commercialisation (Massey 2000), the naturalisation of the 'conventional' (Maxey 2007) and the marginalisation through the label 'alternative' (Seyfang 2006), the romanticising of 'alternatives' (Massey 2000) and the idealisation of the 'local' (DuPuis & Goodman 2005), as well as the conflation of 'alternative' and 'new' (all quoted in Kneafsey et al. 2008: 26-31).

[13]   For example, as discussed in the next section, Kneafsey and her colleagues (2008) proposed care as characteristic of 'the alternative' and not replicable by 'the conventional' food industry.

[14]   For example, the geographers Si Zhenzhong, Theresa Schumilas and Steffanie Scott (2015) studied four types of 'alternative' food initiatives in China — community supported agriculture (CSA), farmers' markets, buying clubs and recreational garden plot rentals based on in-depth interviews. They operationalised 'alternativeness' by splitting it into eight categories and judged food initiatives in China to have 'weaker alternativeness' and a more limited social-political transformative potential than those in the West, arguing that they were consumer-driven and that participants were more concerned about food safety and health issues than about ecological and environmental issues. Furthermore, their explanation included the claim that China lacked an involvement of 'real peasants' and a 'strong civil society'.

how constructing the food network as an ostensibly distinct realm considered proper for care reworks the boundary between state and civil society.

Focusing on care in food networks

I am not the first one to propose analysing food networks with a focus on care. In human geography, Moya Kneafsey and her colleagues (2008) have studied 'alternative' food networks using feminist approaches to 'ethics of care' (Tronto 1993). Rather than focusing on care intentions and extending the notion from human interaction to care "for objects and environment" (Kneafsey et al. 2008: 42),[15] however, I build on anthropological approaches that focus on care practices among humans (Thelen 2015; Drotbohm & Alber 2015),[16] and on studies of humanitarianism that analyse how care discourses single out certain individuals and groups as suitable care receivers and care givers (Muehlebach 2012; Ticktin 2011).

Thelen (2015) has proposed care as a central element of anthropological theory. Building on an open working definition that understands care as "practices that address socially constructed needs that have a giving and a receiving side" (Read & Thelen 2007: 7),[17] she suggests an analytical focus on care practices that "create, maintain and dissolve significant relations" instead of starting with predefined relational categories such as kinship, friendship and patronage.[18] This perspective offers a way to bridge the academic divide

---

[15] In a similar way, actant-network theory inspired anthropologists broaden their understanding to include care for non-human actants, such as food, animals and plants (Harbers et al. 2002; Harbers 2010; Mol 2010; Mol et al. 2010; Singleton 2010). They point out that most ethnographic work on care has been done in field sites like clinics, nursing homes, educational organisations and other institutions or in households connected through 'global care chains' (Hochschild 2000). Farms and fields are usually not among the first thoughts when it comes to potential sites for studying care. As Annemarie Mol and her colleagues (2010: 9) pointed out, "the daily activities of farmers were rarely topicalised as 'care' at all", although they were "struck by the similarities between farming and other caring practices." It is remarkably how close this understanding of care is to the discourses of food activists who connect care for humans with care for nature, for example at the workshop described in the entry vignette.

[16] Anthropologists building on insights from new kinship studies warn against too expansive notions of care. For example, Heike Drotbohm and Erdmute Alber (2015: 7) conceptualise care as "a particular type of social action performed among people who understand themselves as belonging to each other by kinship and who are performing belonging through care." Thelen (2015) suggests moving beyond the realm of kinship to 'relatedness' more generally (Carsten 2000).

[17] It is important to note that the analytical definition of care used here is different from the way care is often understood in everyday life. Care is conventionally associated with ideas about 'emotional closeness' and 'positive relations'. Social science debates about care, especially in the field of disability studies, have questioned these assumptions. My working definition does not assume that care is necessarily related to 'good feelings'.

[18] Actant-network theory inspired anthropologists' also focus on care practices (Mol et al. 2010). However, their focus on care as 'tinkering' for all kinds of objects is quite different from these questions of relatedness.

between anthropological sub-disciplines such as economic and political anthropology and kinship studies. It allows us to understand links and overlaps between relationships that are usually analysed within supposedly distinct spheres of social life, such as 'the market', 'the state' and 'the family'.

To some extent, Kneafsey's team (2008) does what Thelen (2015: 508) calls for. Taking care out of the 'family box' is a strong point of their work. Instead of looking for care only in this 'private' realm, they include other possible kinds of belonging through their focus on 'reconnection' between producers and consumers. However, when they suggest that 'the state' and 'the market' cannot replicate the care found in 'communities' and 'civil society', another version of the private–public dichotomy sneaks in, limiting our vision of potential interdependences. Despite acknowledging at some length the critique of the dichotomy between 'alternative' and 'conventional', Kneafsey and her team (2008: 30) retain "the term ['alternative'] as a useful shorthand". Likewise, they caution against problematic but widely held normative assumptions concerning care (Kneafsey et al. 2008: 48),[19] yet still pinpoint it as the feature distinguishing 'the alternative' from 'the conventional'. They argue that "larger 'alternatives' will find 'reconnection' through care difficult to replicate, although they are obviously adept at appropriating the discourses of 'reconnection'" for different commercial and political purposes (Kneafsey et al. 2008: 165). In the end, therefore, this analysis largely reproduces the discourses of food movement activists.

Although they invoke care practices, Kneafsey's team's (2008: 161) main theoretical interest lies in the identities and care intentions that "motivated them [actors in food networks] to do things differently". They paint a complex picture of the motivations and desires of actors involved in food networks, pointing to "interlocking 'cares' operating across different scales, from the home through to the local neighbourhood, and the wider community of humankind, and encompassing concerns for people, food, animals, soil and ecosystems" (Kneafsey et al. 2008: 162). However, their reliance on interviews and food diaries restricts

---

[19]   Against possible critics, Kneafsey and her team (2008: 165) stress that they are "not suggesting that some people do not care, or that those participating in 'alternative' food practices must care more, or in a better way, than those who are not involved. People may have different ways of caring, and different emotions, motivations and practices may be involved depending on who is caring for who, what and where." Similarly, others have pointed out that "everyday consumption routines are *ordinarily ethical*" (Barnett et al. 2005 quoted in Kneafsey et al. 2008: 46, emphasis in original). James Carrier argued that what makes ethical consumption a social practice different from ordinarily ethical consumption is the collective or public dimension. What motivates ethical consumers "will come from what people think these realms [economy and society] are like and what they think the relationship between them is and ought to be. Ethical consumption, then, is a collective commentary on these realms and their relationship" (Carrier 2012: 3).

the scope of their analysis by excluding practices that might not be articulated as care in the food network but are still entangled in it and observable through participant observation.

This working paper shares the assumption that it is useful to look at care when studying food networks. However, it emphasises that care should not be used as another analytical attempt for distinguishing 'conventional' from 'alternative'. Instead, by using boundary work as an analytical tool, the processes of differentiating different spheres and figures in relation to care themselves become the objects of study. Each of the following three figures, the 'peasant friend', the 'greedy entrepreneur' and the 'corrupt official', exemplifies different aspects of this care-related boundary work.

Caring 'mommies' and 'peasant friends'

Food safety first became a visible topic in Chinese news in the 1990s. Public attention increased dramatically in the 2000s, with reports about food safety incidents, several of them with lethal consequences, abounding. Perhaps no other country has been affected more thoroughly by food scares than China (Yan 2012).[20] Safe food, instead of merely sufficient food, is now widely negotiated as a new need. With growing attention to food scares, discussions about who should be responsible for and could best ensure food safety ensued. Alongside state regulation and certification schemes, personal relationships in food networks are proposed and explored.[21] The slogan 'mutual aid between city and countryside' (城乡互助) and the Chinese term for 'community supported agriculture' (社区支持农业) and its English abbreviation 'CSA' are frequently used to describe the imagined relationship between urban consumers and rural producers.

In the food network under study, urban middle-class consumers organised associations to seek 'peasant friends' because they distrusted the state's market-oriented certification schemes for organic food which potentially involved 'corrupt officials' and 'profit-oriented

---

[20] Looking at the history of food safety in China, Yan Yunxiang (2012) argues that unsafe and poisonous food emerged as new risks only in the Post-Mao era. Although food-hygiene problems are still more numerous today, incidents with unsafe and poisonous food caused nationwide food scares.

[21] Yan Yunxiang (2012: 723) points to the revival of the practice of 'special supply' (特供). According to him, this practice of relying on existing networks of social connections (*guanxi*) served powerful actors in the Mao era in dealing with the problem of food shortages. He argues that despite disappearing temporarily during the 1980s, the practice re-emerged with the growing attention to food safety risks. However, this perspective seems to echo mainstream narratives where shortcomings in socialism and post-socialism are said to be overcome by instrumental personal connections, while personal relations in the Western capitalist democracies appear as supposedly free of interest, self-chosen and, hence, more 'authentic' forms of friendship (Thelen 2011).

entrepreneurs'.[22] Some actors in the food network spoke of a 'trust crisis' (信任危机) as China's biggest current problem.[23] In the workshop described in the introduction, this desire for connection with producers was expressed in the term 'peasant friends' by the economist and other organisers, who believed that personal relations with 'peasants' would better assure the provision of safe food for themselves and those they cared for. Some urban middle-class consumers, thinking of themselves as caring 'mommies', wanted to connect with producers imagined as 'peasant friends' who would help them with their care. In turn, they represented the money they themselves offered as an act of care for 'peasant friends' they thought required a more appropriate income. Actors in the emerging food network tended to view 'peasant friends' not only as deserving care receivers, but also as relatively unproblematic care givers and viewed those who did "not yet" farm ecologically, as expected, as simply needing "more education".

However, some of the imagined 'peasant friends' were sceptical of the potential effects of such a 'friendly' relationship with urban 'green consumers'. While weeding sweet potatoes in the fields with a woman one day, I told her about the workshop and about the urban consumers' recently uttered desire for 'peasant friends'. Her spontaneous reaction was very negative: "We make our living from producing crops and planting vegetables. We cannot give them our food as gifts."

This woman and her husband were among the villagers most often in direct contact with Dong Jie, the township agronomist who had initiated the peasant cooperative and the transition to 'ecological agriculture'. Cooking meals for visitors he invited to the village,

---

[22] This echoes the discourses of Yan Yunxiang's (2012: 721) informants who blame individual farmers, manufacturers, and retailers for being 'too greedy' and who criticised 'corrupt officials' for causing regulatory failures.

[23] Yan Yunxiang echoes the actors in the field when he argues that "food scares have resulted in widespread social distrust of both food sellers and of the food industry as a whole as well as a deeply felt sense of insecurity." (Yan 2012: 717) Interestingly, this story about urban consumers looking for 'special supply' relying on *guanxi* in the current situation of "pervasive distrust" in the field of food provisioning (Yan 2012: 723) is strikingly reminiscent of similar stories told about the situation in the 1980s in the field of foreign direct investment in mainland China, when Hong Kong investors tried "to utilize or construct social ties with individuals who can facilitate the process of investment" as pointed out by Alan Smart (1993: 397-398). As mentioned in more detail in the section about the anthropology of care, taking care as the analytical lens aims to contribute to overcome academic divisions of labour based on certain categorisations of relations in distinct social fields with different associations. Hence, it is no coincidence, that the issues I discuss here are closely linked to debates in diverse fields, such as those about gifts in economic anthropology, about bribery and corruption in political anthropology as well as about relatedness in new kinship studies or *guanxi* (personal connections) in the anthropology of China.

often on short notice, was a welcome opportunity for them to generate additional cash income. She continued with a short story explaining her reservations:

"Once a visitor who had lunch at our place wanted to buy our sweet potato flour. I did not want to sell it to him, because producing the flour means a lot of troublesome work and we did not have much. But as he was a friend of Dong Jie, so I had no other choice. Also, I couldn't sell it for a higher price, because Dong Jie knows the local market."

From the point of view of this villager, being imagined as a 'peasant friend' of urban consumers put her in a situation where she experienced a personal relation as a burden obligating her to care, and to give something away when she did not want to. 'Friendship' seems to imply a horizontal relation from the point of view of the urban consumers, but the villager clearly identified it as hierarchical and could not ask a higher price for what she was instead asked to give away.[24]

Similarly, another woman, a member of the village committee, accepted the idea of being a 'peasant friend' but added immediately that the cooperative would only accept 'friendship' with consumers if this brought them material benefits. Apart from rare interactions with visitors, most villagers never met any of the urban consumers. Households selling part of their rice harvest to the cooperative and workers at the vegetable unit of the cooperative were both paid for producing 'ecological' food, the means by which urban middle-class consumers cared for their children. I was not surprised that I never heard them referring to urban consumers as 'friends' when I worked with them in the fields. The only emotional response I can remember was their surprise when I told them the high price at which the consumer association resold their vegetables to its members and other customers.[25] The supposed 'peasant friends' asserted that they only worked for the cooperative in order to earn money. Urban consumers in the food network did not regard this focus on material advantages as problematic, but as a legitimate need.

---

[24]   This resonates with James Carrier's (2012: 13) point that it is typically those whose economic life is relatively free of personal dependencies who wish for more personalised economic exchange. In contrast, others, mainly the poor, do not share this preference. According to Carrier, people want personal connections if they are optional, but not if they are obligatory.

[25]   The cooperative sold eggplants for 3 RMB per kilo in the village and on the old market in the nearby city. The consumer association resold different kinds of vegetables for 20 RMB per kilo. While the workers expected higher prices, they did not expect such a big differential in price.

The 'village leader' (村长)²⁶ responsible for the management of the vegetable unit told me that it had proved difficult to find villagers willing to work for the low pay the cooperative could offer: only 50 RMB per day, when the local standard for low skilled work was at 60 RMB. The village leader and the workers both stressed that they worked there only because the village leader had personally begged them to do so. Personal relations coupled with the administrative authority of the village leader made it difficult for villagers to decline. Interestingly, urban consumers who visited the village did not regard this as a problematic form of state involvement, as with the 'peasant friends' stress on economic benefits. Instead, the 'peasants' willingness to accept a lower wage was read as their commitment to the 'community' and the aim of becoming an 'ecological village'.

While the imagined 'peasant friends' did not frame their production of 'ecological' food for urban consumers as care, work in the cooperative was sometimes part of other care arrangements. For example, one of the workers told me that she no longer wanted to work for the vegetable group but continued to because she and her husband had to pay back the money they had borrowed from relatives and friends to buy their son a flat. This son was 27 years old, but unmarried and had no girlfriend and they hoped that his prospects would improve if he could offer a home in the city. Although these care practices contributed to the production of the 'ecological' food, they went unacknowledged in the discourses in the food network.

The 'peasant friend' appears as a powerful image that offers alternative interpretations for practices that might otherwise be understood as greed in 'the market' or as political dependency on 'the state'. At the same time, other care practices of the imagined 'peasant friends' go unnoticed in the food network. These entanglements, and the resulting gap between image and practices, does not appear to undermine the construction of the food

---

²⁶ Since the late 1980s, villagers in China elect the 'village committee' (村民委员会) and the 'head of the village committee' (村民委员会主任, or 村主任 for short). Villagers in Daxi usually referred to the head of the village committee as 'village leader' (村长). This might also be translated as 'village mayor' as he is responsible for village administration. However, this term would be misleading, as the 'village party secretary' (村党支部书记), who is either elected by the village party branch or appointed by the township government, is the political leader of the village and guides the village committee. According to the official version of 'state spatialisation' (Ferguson and Gupta 2002) of the Chinese state since the dismantling of the People's Communes, the village is symbolically a 'self-governed' or 'autonomous' (自治) unit outside of the state, although it is functionally integrated into the administrative structure below the central, provincial, prefectural, county and township governments. During the time of my research in Daxi Village, members of the village committee and leaders of the villagers' groups, the administrative sub-layer of the village, receive a decent compensation from the state.

network as a proper realm for care, separate from 'the market' and 'the state'.[27] When it comes to drawing this boundary, the negotiations around the figure of the 'greedy entrepreneur', who is judged on whether making money is the primary goal or not, are even more complex.

The rice mill entrepreneur as 'greedy entrepreneur'

The counterpart of the 'peasant friend' is the 'greedy entrepreneur'. 'Green consumers' did not view material rewards for care or entanglements with officials as preventing trustworthy personal relationships with 'peasant friends'. In contrast, they regarded the figure of the 'greedy entrepreneur' as a threat to care in the emerging food network, because his primary goal would be to make a profit. Although the NGO workshop mentioned above was initially intended to include entrepreneurs as well as local officials, in the end the township agronomist Dong Jie was the only local official present and only two entrepreneurs had been invited to participate. One was the rice mill entrepreneur who cooperated with the peasant cooperative and was registered for the workshop as a 'business owner' (企业主). The second one was a young lemon entrepreneur who did not appear as a 'business owner' on the list of participants, but instead as an 'ecological practitioner' (生态实践者).

When I first met Dong Jie in 2013, he complained that the cooperative had suffered greatly due to the bad influence of the rice mill entrepreneur on the village party secretary. He claimed that its emphasis had shifted from educating the 'peasants' to seeking state funding and higher product prices based on the state's certification schemes. He often told me that he regarded cooperation with entrepreneurs as a threat to ecological agriculture in the village because their primary goal was to make money. At times he worried that the village party secretary spent too much time with local entrepreneurs. The township agronomist expressed a clear wish to insulate the cooperative from state support and state regulation, both of which the 'greedy entrepreneur' might use to make money.

On the other hand, the rice mill entrepreneur himself framed his involvement in the cooperative similarly to the cooperative workers mentioned above — in terms of care for his children. Once, chatting with me in his office, he stressed that he already earned enough money from his old business, dealing in used cotton rugs, to live a comfortable life until his

---

27   However, in the last section before the conclusion, I show that the cooperative needs a stage for the 'peasant friends' to make their appearance for the urban consumers in the food network.

death. He showed me a photo of his six-year-old son and explained that he was doing all this for him, who would later manage the enterprise.[28]

On other occasions, he presented his interactions with the village party secretary to me as care for a former schoolmate and friend. The cooperative was established in 2010 on the initiative of the township agronomist. Its experiments with ecological paddy rice in one part of the village were successful and then spread to all other villagers' groups. However, this high-quality rice could only be processed with the small, low-quality rice mills that many households already owned. In order to satisfy the high level of consumer demand, expensive new rice milling machinery was needed, the rice mill entrepreneur claimed. Because neither the village committee nor the cooperative had the necessary funds to buy the new machinery, the village party secretary asked his former schoolmate, already a successful local entrepreneur in the neighbouring market town, to invest in the construction of a rice mill in the village. The rice mill entrepreneur told me that he agreed to help, emphasising that he would have not done so if his former schoolmate and friend had not asked him to invest. Through this cooperation, their friendship intensified. When I got to know them, they were spending a lot of time together in tea houses and wining and dining in the city.

The rice mill entrepreneur told me several similar stories about his care for the village party secretary and his cooperative. For example, he praised himself for having helped the party secretary to successfully apply for a project grant from the prefecture-level administration. He explained that at that time the village party secretary was not yet very savvy in dealings with higher-ranking officials. Hence, he offered to go through the procedure together with the village party secretary, showing him how to act 'in society' (社会上), referring to the political and business sphere outside of the village.

Remarkably, the state project grant was intended for the five cooperatives in the prefecture with the highest peasant involvement. Thus, there is an interesting overlap between discourses in the food network and state discourse, which both value forms of 'peasant participation'. Furthermore, the township agronomist himself played a central role in establishing the peasant cooperative and connecting it with consumer associations in the food network. Nonetheless, he opposed the efforts of the rice mill entrepreneur and the village party secretary to acquire this kind of state support. He explained to villagers and in front of

---

[28] This care for the son also includes a gender dimension, as the 18-years-old daughter emphasised in conversations that her father would not prepare the company for her, while he included her in a representative function in the company's sales and advertising activities at trade fares.

consumers that the cooperative should not 'rely on the state' (靠国家) but 'on themselves' (靠自己). The financial support of the state was still crucial to integrating the cooperative into the food network, however. The vegetable unit of the cooperative served as a stage for making the 'peasant friends' care for 'ecological' issues visible for visitors to the village.[29] Hence, the leadership of the cooperative decided to use part of the project grant to pay the workers' wages during the following two years and keep the loss-making vegetable cooperative afloat.

At times when the cooperative was temporarily short of money, the entrepreneur stepped in with high-interest loans since it did not fulfil the official criteria for a bank loan. This enabled the continued production of organic rice and ecological vegetables, although the cooperative remained rather precarious — especially the largely loss-making vegetable unit. Again, the rice mill entrepreneur proudly presented this to me as a generous act of care for his friend the village party secretary.

However, none of these practices of the rice mill entrepreneur were recognised as care by the township agronomist and other actors in the food network. Rather than representing his actions through images of a caring father and a caring friend, they were represented through the image of the 'greedy entrepreneur' associated with the public sphere of economy and politics. This was not the case with the lemon entrepreneur.

The lemon entrepreneur as 'ecological practitioner'

In January 2015, the lemon entrepreneur had already taken part in the first preliminary meeting for the workshop mentioned in the introduction. Despite being an entrepreneur, he was not associated with the image of the 'greedy entrepreneur'. Apparently, the circle of the food network understood his practices and discourses as successfully demonstrating his sincere commitment to 'ecological' agriculture rather than being in it primarily for the money, despite his entanglements with 'the state' and 'the market'.

The lemon entrepreneur was 30 years old when I met him, in May 2015, in the village where he wanted to set up his third citrus fruits production base. He told me that he grew up in the countryside, then moved to the city to study logistics. After graduation he worked in the international department of a company. In 2013 he quit that job and started two projects related to 'ecological' agriculture. In Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan Province, he

---

[29]   I will return to the vegetable unit in the section before the conclusion.

started to market ecological commodities to consumers in that city, as well as in Beijing in the north and Guangzhou in the south of China. Meanwhile, he rented land in his hometown in the south of Sichuan Province and in Yunnan Province in order to plant 'ecological' lemons and limes.

The young entrepreneur explained that he got to know the township agronomist Dong Jie, because they were both part of the same circle interested in ecological agriculture. He emphasised that the agronomist was very well known in this circle and that they had finally joined forces when the latter had the idea to grow 'ecological' lemons in a village near Daxi where no one had grown lemons before. In 2014, the agronomist had been appointed by the township leaders to serve as this village's party secretary. Due to many conflicts in the village, the local government wanted an outsider in this position to mediate between the opposing sides.

In 2015, the township agronomist helped the lemon entrepreneur arrange the transfer of about 30 *mu* of land. Together with the concerned group leader in the village, Dong Jie persuaded the villagers to transfer the operation rights for the concerned land.[30] Not all villagers agreed to the proposed deal at first. Some of them did not trust an outside entrepreneur. They had heard stories about entrepreneurs coming to villages, renting the peasants' land and applying for state support for large-scale agriculture without actually farming the land. After receiving state funds, the entrepreneurs would suddenly disappear, leaving behind fallow fields full of weeds, which meant a lot of trouble for the villagers as well as lower yields in the years to come. Because of these suspicions, the negotiations lasted several weeks before the deal could be completed.

One of the discussions concerning the land transfer was held following a rather big banquet celebrating the baby of the township agronomists' niece. This took place in the courtyard of the niece's parents-in-law, whose house was located next to the land concerned. During the discussion, the agronomist argued that the lemon entrepreneur was different from other entrepreneurs. He claimed that his primary goal was to promote ecological agriculture, stressing that the young man had offered to teach other villagers how to plant ecological lemons on their own land, too, and also to open his marketing channels to them for other ecological products later on. Given the negative image some villagers held concerning

---

[30] In rural China the village collective holds the ownership rights (所有权) to land. All households with a rural household registration in the village have land use rights (使用权) to a piece of land. They can decide to transfer the operation rights (经营权) to a third party.

entrepreneurs from the outside, the township agronomist and the lemon entrepreneur tried to convince the villagers that this entrepreneur was different and trustworthy.

During a later interview, the lemon entrepreneur told me about the challenges of his business. In 2014, insect infestation, plant diseases and old trees had resulted in a bad harvest at his first production base in his hometown. Given that his lemons had earned him no money, the entrepreneur told me that in the weeks to come he would apply for financial support from foundations connected to the food network. He said that this financial insecurity meant a lot of pressure on him as he was not sure if he could continue with the project. However, he told me that he looked forward to organising trainings together with the township agronomist in order to build 'community' (社区) and 'civil society' (民间社会) in the village and to spread knowledge about 'ecological agriculture'.

The negotiations with the villagers and my later interview with the lemon entrepreneur shared certain elements but also differed in other aspects. The township agronomist and the lemon entrepreneur did not tell the villagers about the challenge of the bad harvest. Within the food network, sustaining a loss could be presented as a proof of the sincerity and commitment of the entrepreneur to the cause of ecological agriculture. For the villagers, on the other hand, this information would only make them more suspicious of the viability of the proposed deal. Furthermore, the two did not use the phrase 'building civil society' when discussing trainings for ecological agriculture with the villagers, instead emphasising the potential economic advantage of marketing the 'ecological' products as commodities. On other occasions, the township agronomist and other actors in the food network rarely stressed economic advantages. In this case, however, they needed the villagers' immediate cooperation in pursuing their project rather than the performance of 'peasant friends' for urban consumers.

Comparing the case of the lemon entrepreneur with that of some other entrepreneurs who acquired operation rights to villagers' land in Daxi Village to plant pumpkins, it becomes clear that similar practices were interpreted quite differently in the food network. The pumpkin entrepreneurs were friends with the village party secretary of Daxi Village. They called each other 'buddies' (哥们儿) and often went wining and dining together in the nearby city. In 2015, with the help of the village party secretary, the friends rented land in one of the villagers' groups and hired villagers to plant and harvest the pumpkins. The friends expected to lose money in the first two years, but thought that it would be possible to receive state funding in the third year as a huge amount of state financial support for agriculture was available for enterprises.

This case is remarkably similar to that of the lemon entrepreneur. Both the lemon entrepreneur and the pumpkin entrepreneurs were friends with a village party secretary who helped them rent land. This is especially interesting, as I often heard the township agronomist argue against villagers in Daxi Village transferring the operation rights to the vegetable unit of the cooperative. He often declared that he would have preferred the 'peasants' to cultivate vegetables on their own land, as in the case of the organic rice produced for the cooperative. However, in the case of the lemon entrepreneur, he actually even supported the land transfer efforts.

Despite these striking similarities in practices, the township agronomist and others in the food network understood profit to be the pumpkin entrepreneurs' primary goal but not the lemon entrepreneur's. One difference was that the pumpkin entrepreneurs hoped to receive state funding, while the lemon entrepreneur sought funding from organisations connected to the food network. Furthermore, differences in clothing styles and other personal habits distinguished the rice mill and pumpkin entrepreneurs from the lemon entrepreneur, the township agronomist, and other actors in the food network. The importance and effectiveness of the display of such differences as a means to distance oneself from 'the state' and align oneself with 'civil society' becomes especially clear in the case of the agronomist, who distanced himself from the image of the 'corrupt official' not only discursively, through his rejection of state support for the cooperative, but also in his everyday practices.

The 'corrupt official'

In the section on the figure of the 'greedy entrepreneur' I emphasised that the township agronomist represented himself as critical of state involvement in the food network. In explaining his stance, he drew both on a globalised NGO discourse about 'ecology', 'sustainability', 'participation', 'cooperation' and 'community' and on concepts formulated by Chinese intellectuals, such as that of 'the three-dimensional rural issue' (三农问题),[31] which rejects a focus on the economic aspect of agriculture as the sole explanation of the situation in the Chinese countryside. Here, I argue that he was not only engaging in discursive boundary work, but also distancing himself from his function as state official in his everyday practices, especially concerning food.

---

[31] Wen Tiejun (2001), a leading 'new left' intellectual of the 'New Rural Reconstruction Movement', significantly contributed to the spread of the notion of 'the three-dimensional rural issue'. The concept refers to the interrelation of 'the peasants, the village, and agriculture'.

My entrance to the village under study was facilitated by Dong Jie, the township agronomist. He became not only my gatekeeper to the field, but also connected many other actors of the emerging food network with the peasant cooperative in the 'ecological village'. I first met Dong Jie in autumn 2013 in Shanxi Province at a one-week training on rural social work organised by a Beijing-based NGO.[32] I found him a friendly and inspiring man, about forty years old. During the workshop, he made charismatic speeches about 'community building' (社区建设) and the collective pursuit of a 'happy life' (幸福生活). He became especially passionate when the topic switched to agriculture. He had been inspired by participating in an NGO workshop about 'community building' and by reading a book about 'natural farming' (自然农耕) by Masanobu Fukuoka, who developed the so-called 'do-nothing' approach to farming. When we were eating together with other participants of the workshop, it turned out that he was a vegetarian, did not drink alcohol and did not smoke. He explained that he cared about his health and that eating meat was not ecological.

On other occasions, Dong Jie complained that the villagers wasted much of their time playing cards and Mah-jong. To be sure, sometimes Dong Jie also played cards, but I never saw him playing for money, a common activity of many different people in the local villages and city, both in homes and teahouses.[33] Typically, NGO staff and urban middle-class consumers in the food network expressed agreement with his rejection of gambling.

This committed man worked as the leading agricultural extension officer in the township administration. He told me that in 2009 he had made many phone calls from his office asking all the village party secretaries of the township if they were interested in setting up a cooperative and converting to ecological agriculture. His position as state official was thus crucial to setting up the cooperative and initiating the transformation to the 'ecological village'.

What astonished me was how actors connected within the emerging food network perceived the township official, who presented the village and especially the vegetable unit of the cooperative as a showcase of his approach to ecological agriculture. For example, during the first visit of the members of the consumer association in autumn 2013, the visitors called him 'teacher' or 'rural issues expert' and expressed admiration for what he was doing and

---

[32] The NGO was led by a sociologist from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences who argues for an 'East Asian model of comprehensive farmers' associations' based on the experience of major farmers' organisations in Korea, Japan, and especially Taiwan.

[33] On the moving boundaries between unacceptable and acceptable forms of gambling for money in rural China see Steinmüller (2011).

what they perceived as genuine concern for nature and health, as well as for 'consumers' and 'peasants'. By doing so, they excluded his function as a state actor when looking at his caring practices. During a lunch with one of his former schoolmates, who was now the director of an NGO dedicated to improving the livelihood of national minorities in remote areas through rural tourism, some people suggested that Dong Jie should quit his official post. They stressed that his habits did not suit the work of a rural state official, whom they imagined to frequently wine and dine at banquets, to eat meat, drink alcohol, and smoke, and to gamble with his 'buddies' in teahouses, all to build and maintain his *guanxi* (关系, social relations, personal connections or particularistic ties). They suggested that he should instead work as a scientist or in an NGO, to make broader social changes. They feared that this job as an official would impede his engagement.

In contrast, the township government acknowledged Dong Jie's commitment as an official. He had received several awards for his work. He was even offered a promotion to the next higher level of the agricultural bureau, he explained to me, but refused it on the grounds that he thought it would be more difficult to effect change from higher positions. He claimed that he preferred to work at the township level where he had more chances for direct contact with 'peasants', echoing the discourse of the urban consumers longing for direct connection with 'peasant friends'.

Once I happened to tell one of his new colleagues, who had only recently been transferred from another township, Dong Jie's story about the promotion. His colleague could not believe it and rhetorically asked who would *not* accept such an offer. He thought that, in order to climb up the hierarchy, one needed to invite higher officials to banquets to build *guanxi*, but that most at the township administration level would not have enough resources to do so. Furthermore, he pointed out that Dong Jie was not the type of person that would wine and dine.

On the contrary, the township official did indeed know how to build *guanxi* by inviting visitors to the village and for meals.[34] Although this happened right in front of my

---

[34] There has been a long discussion about *guanxi* in China studies. As a supposedly unique feature of 'Chinese culture', *guanxi* are either criticised for breeding corruption or celebrated for enabling economic growth. In the anthropology of China, Mayfair Yang (1994) constructed a dichotomy between a supposedly rural gift economy based on ethics (人情) and supposedly urban art of *guanxi* based on instrumental considerations. Yan Yunxiang (1996) rejects this binary. Instead, he points out that the distinction between ethics and instrumentality is only conceptual, while in practice emotions and interests are just two sides of the same coin. There would only be a gradual difference of importance in different situations. However, he reintroduces Yang's dichotomy by distinguishing a 'primary form of *guanxi*' from an 'extended form' to understand rural-urban differences. My working paper does not continue this debate by judging certain

nose, it took me some time to notice, and I argue that this has to do with the small details that made it appear different from other banquets usual at that time in that area. As we have seen, the township official was a crucial node in the emerging food network. He regularly used his contacts to introduce other officials, NGO staff and former schoolmates as potential customers to the cooperative. Conversely, he used the cooperative as a practical showcase for demonstrating the viability of his teachings about healthy, ecological agriculture and for expanding his network. During the time of my stay in the village, he would usually invite the visitors to eat at one household located close to both the village committee's offices and the cooperative's vegetable fields. Sometimes he called and asked me to tell the couple that they should prepare a meal — a simple one, with little meat, although meat dishes were usually considered the most important dishes of a proper meal. During the meals with the visitors, Dong Jie never offered cigarettes or alcohol to his guests. When the village party secretary or the village leader participated, they carried out these typical duties of the host in his stead, though several visitors also did not smoke or want to drink alcohol and refused.

Through these mundane practices and everyday performances, Dong Jie succeeded in making these occasions and himself 'different'. It is remarkable that he was not perceived by actors in the food network as seeking to further private goals through his public position,[35] although he was able to use his official function to further his personal vision concerning 'the three-dimensional rural issue'. The township official's distinctive way of doing *guanxi* at banquets made his commitment to 'ecological' agriculture appear credible to urban middle-class consumers and helped him to downplay his state role in their eyes. The banquets he offered in the village formed a stage on which he performed boundary work between 'the state' and 'civil society'. The vegetable unit of the cooperative was another important stage for differentiating the food network from 'the state' and 'the market', as this was the place where the 'peasant friends' could make their appearance.

---

practices as more or less ethical or instrumental. Rather, my focus is on how actors strategically refer to certain figures in the discourse when they make performances of and judgements about morality and instrumentality in order to pursue their goals and visions. In this context, what is interesting for me is Alan Smart's (1993: 399) point that "the style of exchange and the appropriateness of the performance are critical to ... [the] effectiveness [of the art of *guanxi*]". This importance of style and performance for associating or dissociating practices and actors with certain images is what interests me here.

[35] However, not everyone viewed the township agronomist Dong Jie as an extraordinary official. Remarkably, it were those who did not share an everyday lifestyle with him and the other urban middle-class actors in the food network. During a midnight snack, I overheard some villagers from Daxi Village speculate about unjustified advantages the township official would give to his brother who lived in the village where he served as village party secretary. They viewed him through the figure of the 'corrupt official' based on a state image in which politics and kinship should be kept separate.

A stage for 'peasant friends'

During a cooperative board meeting in August 2015,[36] the future of the vegetable unit was discussed. A member of the board reflected that from an "economic point of view", it had been a loss-making operation for the past few years, but that it was of "representational and political value". Without using the state grant subsidising the vegetable unit, the cooperative could not have sustained the operation. Hence, the board members deliberated selling the vegetable unit to a group of investors, among them the close friends of the village party secretary, the pumpkin entrepreneurs. The cooperative could then focus on the more viable sale of organic rice, they reasoned. However, not all members of the cooperative board agreed with the plan. Some argued that it would be wrong to sell the reputation of the cooperative to someone else at a moment when it could finally make money.

About one week before the end of my fieldwork, I was invited to a farewell dinner with village officials, members of the board of the cooperative and potential investors, all of whom had also attended secondary school together. During the meal, the village party secretary drank a toast to one of the investors to whom he referred to as the 'boss', stating that he looked forward to their cooperation, and that he hoped that they would develop Daxi Village together. However, the 'boss' said that they were not there to develop the village, but to "make a profit" (赚钱). This surprised me and obviously also the village party secretary, who immediately corrected him that it was about "earning money" (挣钱). By choosing this very similar yet different term, he emphasised that making money would not be the primary goal, but rather a side effect of one's efforts, thereby referring to the discourses in the food network.

During another farewell dinner, the one with the township agronomist and his family, I told the agronomist about these developments. I was astonished to find that he had not been informed about the cooperative board's deliberations and the ensuing negotiations with the pumpkin entrepreneurs. Angrily, he said that the village leadership would jeopardise the 'ecological' agriculture if they cooperated with these entrepreneurs. He pointed out that consumers in Chengdu would be very sceptical when it came to businessmen. In the event of a takeover of the vegetable unit, the consumers would very likely lose trust in the cooperative

---

[36]   According to state regulations, the members of the cooperative elect the board members. In this case the board was made up of the village party secretary, the head of the village committee, several village group leaders and the villager who serves as the cooperative's technical expert concerning organic rice and whose family cultivates the largest area of rice in the village.

and stop buying the cooperative's rice as well. Although the production of organic rice would have been possible without the vegetable unit, the township agronomist feared that the stage for boundary work for establishing the food networks 'alternativeness' would have been lost. There were just a few days of work for the 'peasant friends' in the paddy fields. In contrast, the vegetable plots of the cooperative provided a stage where 'peasant friends' could make their appearance and demonstrate their care for humans and nature every day.

From the perspective of some board members of the cooperative, this deal would have finally made ecological production economically viable. Instead of using part of the state grant to pay wages to the workers of the vegetable unit, they could have used the money for other needs. For example, many villagers longed for improved village roads, and the state award for 'peasant cooperatives' with high peasant involvement was officially earmarked for such infrastructure investments. After my departure from the field in September 2015, however, the township agronomist informed me that they had averted the deal, a success from his perspective. This shows how judgements and performances relating to the figures of 'greedy entrepreneurs' and caring 'peasant friends' affect the local political economy. Inclusion in the food network may provide potential resources, but may also be experienced as burdensome, controlling or as an outside intervention.

Conclusion

In this working paper I proposed to study so-called 'alternative' food networks with a focus on care and state boundaries in order to move beyond dichotomies and problematic assumptions. I warned against judging food networks in China (or other non-Western contexts) as 'less alternative' or as a proof of a 'weak civil society' due to entanglements with the state. Instead of trying to find ever better definitions of 'the alternative' or offering fiercer critiques of it, I argued that this tension between definition and critique of the 'alternativeness' of food networks points to the very nature of this social phenomenon: the continuous efforts to construct a boundary to 'the state' and 'the market' while there is necessarily entanglement in practice. Hence, new insights in food networks and the state can be gained from studying the processes through which the 'alternativeness' of food networks as a realm of care, supposedly different from 'the state', is established in everyday practices and discourses. My ethnographic material focused on caring ('mommies' and 'peasant friends') and non-caring figures ('corrupt officials' and 'greedy entrepreneurs') in the

discourses in the food network. It showed actors striving to characterise the food network as engaged in 'civil society' rather than 'the state', through associations and dissociations with these discursive figures.

I focused on discursive and quotidian practices through which the boundary between state and civil society was negotiated and reworked. Discourses within the food network overtly rejected state law (as in the case of the 'specialised peasant cooperatives' that must focus on the production of only one commodity for 'the market'), state support (as in the case of the state award for high 'peasant participation' in the cooperative) and state regulation (as in the case of certification schemes for organic food). They represented the figures of the 'corrupt officials' and the 'greedy entrepreneurs' as striving for the maximum individual benefit by taking advantage of opportunities provided by 'the state' and 'the market'. In addition to their discourse, I argued that actors reworked the state boundary by differentiating themselves from these figures in their everyday practices. Taking the example of the township agronomist, I showed how he dissociated himself from his function as state official for visitors to the village by hosting simple meals with little meat and without cigarettes and alcohol.

References to these discursive figures in negotiations and performances shaped the expectations and practices of the different actors in the food network, transforming the state as well. The township agronomist made a space for his personal vision concerning agriculture by distancing himself from 'the state' and 'corrupt officials'. Thus, he attracted urban middle-class consumers and NGOs and generated economic support for his projects. He also increased his power to interfere in village politics, as both the successful land transfer to the lemon entrepreneur and the unsuccessful sale of the vegetable unit to the pumpkin entrepreneurs demonstrate. By arguing for 'community building' and the self-organization of 'peasants' in the food network, he also managed to divert state support intended for infrastructure investment to subsidise wages in the loss-making vegetable unit of the cooperative, maintaining a stage on which the caring figure of the 'peasant friend' could appear and emphasise the difference from the state and its support of market-oriented production. Furthermore, instead of the low wages at the vegetable unit of the cooperative representing a sign of the political power of the village leader over villagers, the image of the 'peasant friend' allowed urban consumers to read the situation as expressing the care of 'peasants' for their 'community' and the 'ecological environment' in the village. These

examples show how reworking of the boundary between state and society through care shifts local power relations.

As state boundaries are negotiated, gaps emerge between care practices and care discourses depending on which side of the boundary someone is imagined to belong. Care practices might appear as 'corrupt' or 'greedy' when read through images associated with the 'public' domains of 'politics' and 'economy' (as with the rice mill entrepreneur), while in other cases pursuit of personal aims might be understood as genuinely caring when not associated with 'the state' and 'corrupt officials' due to differences in style and taste (the township agronomist). Even similar entrepreneurial practices may be represented as caring (the lemon entrepreneur), or not caring (the pumpkin entrepreneurs). Some practices might be understood as care by one side but not by the other (as where the connection longed for by urban consumers was experienced as a burden by imagined 'peasant friends'). Yet other care practices (the villagers working at the vegetable unit to provide care for their adult son) may remain unarticulated in the food network, while nevertheless contributing to the production of 'ecological' food, the means by which urban middle-class 'mommies' sought to care for their families. While most recent anthropological work on care, especially studies focussing on relatedness, stress that care connects, the cases presented here also point to the disconnecting, segregating and exclusionary potential of care, especially if care practices and care discourses, based on the involved boundary work between state and civil society, do not fit together.

References

Carrier, James. 2012. "Introduction". In James G. Carrier and Peter G. Luetchford (eds.). *Ethical consumption: social value and economic practice*. New York: Berghahn, 1-36.

Carsten, Janet (ed.). 2000. *Cultures of relatedness: new approaches to the study of kinship.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cohen, Myron L. 1993. "Cultural and political inventions in modern China: the case of the Chinese 'peasant'". *Daedalus*, 122:2, 151-170.

Day, Alexander. 2008. "The end of the peasant? New rural reconstruction in China". *boundary 2*, 35:2, 49-73.

Day, Alexander. 2015. *The peasant in postsocialist China: history, politics, and capitalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Day, Alexander and Matthew A. Hale. 2007. "Guest Editors' Introduction". *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, 39:4, 3-9.

Drotbohm, Heike and Erdmute Alber. 2015. "Introduction". In Erdmute Alber and Heike Drotbohm (eds.). *Anthropological perspectives on care: work, kinship, and the life-course*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1-19.

Ferguson, James and Akhil Gupta. 2002. "Spatializing states: toward an ethnography of neoliberal governmentality". *American Ethnologist*, 29:4, 981-1002.

Friedmann, Harriet. 1987. "International regimes of food and agriculture since 1870". In Theodor Shanin (ed.). *Peasants and peasant societies*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 258-276.

Friedmann, Harriet and Philip McMichael. 1987. "Agriculture and the state system: the rise and fall of national agricultures, 1870 to the present". *Sociologia Ruralis*, 29:2, 93-117.

Gupta, Akhil. 1995. "Blurred boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state". *American Ethnologist*, 22:2, 375-402.

Hale, Matthew A. 2013. "Tilling sand: contradictions of 'social economy' in a Chinese movement for alternative rural development". *Dialectical Anthropology*, 37:1, 51-82.

Hann, Chris. 1996. "Introduction: political society and civil anthropology". In Chris Hann and Elizabeth Dunn (eds.). *Civil society: Challenging western models*. London: Routledge, 1-24.

Harbers, Hans. 2010. "Animal farm love stories: about care and economy". In Annemarie Mol, Ingunn Moser and Jeannette Pols (eds.). *Care in Practice: On Tinkering in Clinics, Homes and Farms*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 141-170.

Harbers, Hans, Annemarie Mol and Alice Stollmeyer. 2002. "Food matters: arguments for an ethnography of daily care". *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19:5/6, 207-226.

Hochschild, Arlie R. 2000. "Global care chains and emotional surplus value". In Will Hutton and Anthony Giddens (eds.). *On the edge: living with global capitalism*. London: Jonathan Cape, 130-146.

Klein, Jakob A., Yuson Jung and Melissa L. Caldwell. 2014. "Introduction: ethical eating and (post)socialist alternatives". In Yuson Jung, Jakob A. Klein and Melissa L. Caldwell (eds.). *Ethical eating in the postsocialist and socialist world*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1-24.

Kneafsey, Moya, Rosie Cox, Lewis Holloway, Elizabeth Dowler, Lauta Venn and Helena Tuomainen. 2008. *Reconnecting consumers, producers and food: exploring alternatives*. Oxford: Berg.

McMichael, Philip. 2009. "A food regime genealogy". *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36:1, 139-169.

Mitchell, Timothy. 1991. "The limits of the state: beyond statist approaches and their critics. *The American Political Science Review*, 85:1, 77-96.

Mol, Annemarie. 2010. "Care and its values: good food in the nursing home". In Annemarie Mol, Ingunn Moser and Jeannette Pols (eds.). *Care in practice: on tinkering in clinics, homes and farms*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 215-234.

Mol, Annemarie, Ingunn Moser and Jeannette Pols. 2010. "Care: putting practice into theory". In Annemarie Mol, Ingunn Moser and Jeannette Pols (eds.). *Care in practice: on tinkering in clinics, homes and farms*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 7-25.

Muehlebach, Andrea. 2012. *The moral neoliberal: welfare and citizenship in Italy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Perry, Elizabeth J. 1994. "Trends in the study of Chinese politics: state-society relations". *The China Quarterly*, 139: 704-713.

Pieke, Frank N. 2004. "Contours of an anthropology of the Chinese state: political structure, agency and economic development in rural China". *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 10:3, 517-538.

Read, Rosie and Tatjana Thelen. 2007. "Introduction: social security and care after socialism - reconfigurations of public and private". *Focaal*, 50, 3-18.

Renting, Henk, Markus Schermer and Adanella Rossi. 2012. "Building food democracy: exploring civic food networks and newly emerging forms of food citizenship". *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food*, 19:3, 289-307.

Shi Yan, Cheng Cunwang, Lei Peng, Wen Tiejun and Caroline Merrifield. 2011. "Safe food, green food, good food: Chinese community, supported agriculture, and the rising middle class". *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability*, 9:4, 551-558.

Si, Zhenzhong, Theresa Schumilas and Steffanie Scott. 2015. "Characterizing alternative food networks in China". *Agriculture and Human Values*, 32:2, 299-313.

Singleton, Vicky. 2010. "Good farming: control or care?" In Annemarie Mol, Ingunn Moser and Jeannette Pols (eds.). *Care in practice: on tinkering in clinics, homes and farms*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 235-256.

Smart, Alan. 1993. "Gifts, bribes, and guanxi: a reconsideration of Bourdieu's social capital". *Cultural Anthropology*, 8:3, 388-408.

Steinmüller, Hans. 2011. "The moving boundaries of social heat: gambling in rural China". *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 17:2, 263-280.

Thelen, Tatjana. 2011. "Shortage, fuzzy property and other dead ends in the anthropological analysis of (post)socialism". *Critique of Anthropology*, 31:1, 43-61.

Thelen, Tatjana. 2015. "Care as social organization: creating, maintaining and dissolving significant relations". *Anthropological Theory*, 15:4, 497-515.

Thelen, Tatjana, Larissa Vetters and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann. 2014. "Introduction to stategraphy: toward a relational anthropology of the state". *Social Analysis*, 58:3, 1-19.

Ticktin, Miriam. 2011. *Casualties of care: immigration and the politics of humanitarianism in France*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Tronto, Joan C. 1993. *Moral boundaries: a political argument for an ethic of care*. London: Routledge.

Wen, Tiejun. 2001. "Centenary reflections on the 'three dimensional problem' of rural China". *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2:2, 287-295.

Yan, Yunxiang. 1996. "The culture of guanxi in a North China village". *The China Journal*, 35, 14-25.

Yan, Yunxiang. 2012. "Food safety and social risk in contemporary China". *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 71:3, 705-729.

Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. 1994. *Gifts, favors and banquets: the art of social relationships in China*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Zusammenfassung

In *Agro-Food Studies* werden sogenannte 'alternative' Lebensmittelnetzwerke im 'Westen' tendenziell als Ausdruck einer Verlagerung von *Governance* vom 'Staat' auf die 'Zivilgesellschaft' interpretiert. Der vorliegende Aufsatz zeigt wie der Staat in ein 'alternatives' Lebensmittelnetzwerk in China verwickelt ist. Das könnte dazu verleiten, diese Lebensmittelinitiative als 'weniger alternativ' bzw. als Symptom einer 'schwachen Zivilgesellschaft' im 'Osten' zu deuten, was jedoch nur das dominante 'westliche' Selbstbild reproduzieren würde. Stattdessen liegt mein Fokus auf der bisher vernachlässigten Rolle des Staates in solchen Lebensmittelnetzwerken. Das ermöglicht nicht nur neue Perspektiven darauf, wie Lebensmittelnetzwerke als 'alternativ' konstituiert werden, sondern zeigt auch wie in diesem Prozess der Staat selbst transformiert wird. Anstatt 'den Staat' und 'die Zivilgesellschaft' als getrennte Einheiten vorauszusetzen, verbinde ich anthropologische Ansätze zu Staat und Sorge/Care. Ich analysiere, wie Akteure im Lebensmittelnetzwerk durch Aushandlungsprozesse und Darstellung von Sorge die Grenzen des Staates ziehen. Angesichts zunehmender Bedenken bezüglich Lebensmittelsicherheit versuchen einige Konsumenten (vorwiegend Mütter) aus der städtischen Mittelschicht für ihre Familien zu sorgen, indem sie 'ökologisches' Essen möglichst direkt über Netzwerke mit den landwirtschaftlichen Produzenten besorgen. Dabei bemühen sie sich, einen Bereich für ihre Sorge in Abgrenzung zum 'Staat' zu konstruieren. Auf der Grundlage ethnographischer Feldforschung in einem selbst-ernannten 'ökologischen Dorf' in der Provinz Sichuan fokussiere ich auf Figuren, die in den Erzählungen über Lebensmittelsicherheit auftreten: die 'befreundeten Bauern', die 'gierigen Unternehmer' und die 'korrupten Beamten'. Ich zeige, wie Akteure mit diesen Figuren identifiziert werden bzw. wie sie sich von diesen distanzieren und wie diese Inszenierung von Staatsbildern sowohl den Staat als auch das Lebensmittelnetzwerk formen.

Biographical Note

Christof Lammer studied Social and Cultural Anthropology and Chinese Studies at the University of Vienna, Tianjin University and Renmin University of China. From 2013 until 2017 he was university assistant (pre-doc) at the Department of Methods in the Social Sciences and the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna. His research interests are in political and economic anthropology as well as in Peasant and Agro-food studies with a regional focus on China.

Biographische Notiz

Christof Lammer studierte Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie sowie Sinologie an der Universität Wien, der Universität Tianjin und der Volksuniversität in Beijing. Von 2013 bis 2017 war er Universitätsassistent (prae-doc) am Fakultätszentrum für Methoden der Sozialwissenschaften und am Institut für Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie der Universität Wien. Seine Forschungsinteressen liegen im Bereich der politischen und ökonomischen Anthropologie sowie der *Peasant* und *Agro-Food Studies* mit einem regionalen Fokus auf China.

The VWPE is a peer reviewed series which aims at presenting and reflecting on innovative research. The series provides the staff of the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology as well as guest authors with a forum for discussing their findings on a wide range of social phenomena. We welcome submissions that seek to advance conceptual-methodological and theoretical debates as well as manuscripts based on ongoing empirical research.

Die WAPE ist eine Schriftenreihe, die einem Peer-Review-Verfahren unterworfen ist, und die sich zum Ziel setzt, innovative Forschung vorzustellen und über diese zu reflektieren. Die Reihe bietet den MitarbeiterInnen des Instituts für Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie wie auch GastautorInnen ein Forum für die Diskussion ihrer Forschung zu einem breiten Spektrum an sozialen Phänomenen. Wir heißen sowohl konzeptuell-methodische und theoretische Aufsätze als auch empirische Beiträge auf Grundlage innovativer Forschung willkommen.