

A Comparison of CSAs in Canada and China

Theresa Schumilas, Dr. Steffanie Scott, Zhenzhong Si, Dr. Tony Fuller

In recent years thousands of diverse alternative food networks and ventures have emerged around the world. Critical food scholars have argued that these alternatives are in response to a global agro-food system which disconnects people from food production and associated ecologies, and that this in turn results in a number of environmental, social, and economic vulnerabilities (Gomiero, Pimentel & Maurizio, 2011; Weis, 2010). Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives were among the earliest of these alternatives.

In the original CSA approach, a group of consumers (usually referred to as 'members' or 'shareholders' support a producer by purchasing a share of the farm's production at the beginning of the season and thus sharing the risks and benefits of the harvest. In this way, CSAs seek a new form of association and market governance in order to redistribute value back to producers, re-build trust between producers and consumers and produce food with an ethics of care (Cox et al., 2008) for people and ecosystems.

However, today's CSAs have evolved significantly from the earliest versions. They take a variety of organizational forms, draw on different ideologies, use a variety of land tenure arrangements and perform varied types of market relations. This presentation compares CSAs in Canada, where they have evolved as an alternative to industrialized agriculture for the last 30 years, with CSAs emerging as recent phenomenon in present day China.

This comparison draws on interviews conducted as part of a study of the evolution and structure of China's organic and ecological sector. Since 2010, Dr. Steffanie Scott and a team of doctoral students (Aijuan Chen, Zhenzhong Si and Theresa Schumilas) at the University of Waterloo's Department of Geography and Environmental Management, have conducted over 100 interviews in Beijing, Liaoning, Henan, Shandong, Jiangsu, Anhui, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Fujian, Hainan, Sichuan, Chongqing and Guangxi. The description of Canadian CSAs is based on interviews with 91 CSAs, conducted in the province of Ontario conducted in 2011.

We conclude that the CSA approach is a hopeful response to social, economic and environmental challenges in both Canada and China. The model demonstrates the potential for strong economic returns and inclusion for smallholders, affordability of trusted food for eaters and strong environmental stewardship. The approach is flexible and farmers are adapting it to address different political, social and economic circumstances.

But CSAs are not static and indeed the different environments in which CSAs emerged in Canada and China are shaping the evolution of the approach. Our comparison reveals that in both countries, CSAs sit at a highly paradoxical moment in history where the boundary imagined to divide alternative markets from mainstream markets is blurring. We conclude with asking some (perhaps) uncomfortable questions in the spirit of helping the CSA movement, in both Canada and China, clarify itself.

References

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