

Forging urban-rural connections through alternative food networks: the emergence of Community Supported Agriculture and buying clubs in China

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The strengthening of urban-rural connections through food offers a chance to narrow the social divide and economic gap between urban and rural residents. The hegemonic industrialization and urbanization processes underway in Chinese cities have dramatically distanced food producers from consumers. In response to parallel trends in the west, re-localization of the food system has become an important thrust among social movements and local economic development programming. Although food re-localization initiatives do not have a strong presence in China, they are growing, as signified by the emergence of food buying clubs and community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms (in which members pay at the start of the season for weekly deliveries of vegetables, thereby sharing in the risk of farming, and recognizing that in some years yields may be higher or lower). To date, there have been few academic analyses of such initiatives in China. Through examining CSA farms and buying clubs from Beijing, Chengdu and several other cities, this study analyzes the drivers of and obstacles to their development, and their implications for the transformation of social and economic relations between urban and rural areas. Based on 47 interviews with key players in alternative food networks across China, we posit that the underlying social and environmental values (e.g., establishing solidarity to support farmer livelihoods and ecological farming practices) that have driven the development of CSA farms and food buying clubs in the west are often absent in China. Instead, the growth of CSA farms is largely driven by consumers' concerns about seeking safe food. Likewise, the development of buying clubs represents a process of self-organization of urban citizens to respond to food safety concerns. While the emergence of CSA farms and buying clubs does foster the re-localization of food, the CSA label is often adopted more as a marketing strategy than out of a commitment to the principles of food sovereignty. This study contributes to our understandings of food systems as well as urbanization by revealing the wider implications of urban-based alternative food networks for agricultural sustainability but also opportunities for community-building within the context of rapid urbanization.