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From Dongfang Shijue, by Aihao

Introduction

As part of efforts to promote public discussion about food safety in China, the Institute for Civil Society of Sun Yat-sen University and *chinadialogue* will publish five special newsletters focused on this issue. This project is supported by the EU-China Civil Society Dialogue.

In this, the first in our series, we explore the collaborative relationship between consumers and farmers emerging through Community Supported Agriculture, just one way in which people are working to create a new bond with the land.

Editor: Zhou Wei

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We're all farmers now

Yin Chuntao Zhou Wei

Fans of Community Supported Agriculture don't care about certificates, write **Yin Chuntao** and **Zhou Wei**. For rising numbers of Chinese citizens, "organic" means trust and support between buyer and seller.

At a monthly "friends of farming" dinner held by Green Heartland, an NGO based in Chengdu, west China, Chen Xia quietly reads an ode to the land against light background music. It's a simple thanksgiving ceremony the hosts conduct before leaving the diners to tuck into a feast of organic produce and listen to farmers talk about their lives and land.

Green Heartland was formed by a group of urban residents who buy their food directly from farmers, and their dinners give the two groups a chance to get together. Chen, who is one of the founders, was prompted by health concerns into thinking more seriously about the origins of her food. In 2007, together with two friends, she organised an organic market and heard about a village called Anlong, which was said to be working to protect its land and rivers through sustainable farming. The group started to buy food from the village.

One of her co-founders, Xia Lu, had been working for an NGO in Anlong, but stayed on after her project finished – as a friend, volunteer and consumer. She had plans for a website through which the farmers could reach out to urban consumers, and hoped to arrange customer visits, farmers' markets and dinners. Her overarching aim was to bring farmers and customers closer together and encourage a return to healthier farming methods. Xia's ideas got a warm response from people already buying food from Anlong – and Green Heartland was born.

A Green Heartland poster

Gradually, the number of customers has grown. Against the backdrop of ever more frequent food safety scares, growing numbers of Chinese citizens are looking for safe and healthy alternatives. The popularity of the organic methods practiced at Anlong is soaring. Zhang Ming, a journalist at local paper *Chengdu Daily*, became both a customer and Green Heartland member after reporting on the village's activities.

> "Gao Yicheng is in charge of deliveries and liaison: 'If you want to buy our crops, you need to come here first and have a look around. We won't give you anything until you've actually visited,' he said."

Some customers have befriended the farmers and help to organise sales and distribute goods. Chen said that the organisation hopes to improve understanding and trust between farmers and the people who eat their produce.

Green Heartland also helps customers link up

to make bulk orders and organises markets to boost sales – as well as the farmers' confidence in the value of organic methods. The group now works with farmers in 10 places around Chengdu and has built up a core customer base of more than 100 people.

Farmers' Friends on a trip to the countryside

This kind of direct participation by consumers in the production of their food is commonly known as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). It originated in Japan, Europe and the United States and, since 2003, has been actively promoted in China by Hong Kong-based NGO Partnership for Community Development (PCD) and global advocacy group Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP).

CSA provides a new way of thinking about food safety, rural economies, environmental damage and urban alienation, as well as creating the possibility of a different way of life. Through local trials, overseas experience and the pressure of food safety scares, CSA has taken root in several Chinese cities as one option for shoppers on the hunt for safer food.

There are many examples. Even before 2003, a group of residents from the city of Liuzhou, south China, were moved to establish Farmers' Friends following a trip to the countryside where they saw first-hand the threats to traditional agricultural methods and farmers' struggle for survival. Their social enterprise now takes city dwellers to the countryside to eat at village restaurants and purchase local products.

The meals are delicious and made with produce fresh from the fields. The farmers that the group works with grow rice in their backyards, in the same ponds they use to raise ducks – a traditional organic method. And the seeds they plant are traditional crops handed down from generations past. These ways of working allow the farmers to escape the constraints of commercial agriculture and boost their appeal to customers.

The rise of CSA in China is helping farmers to understand the wider choice organic agriculture can give them, in terms of both technology and markets. It allows them to see that they have options beyond genetically modified crops and industrial farming, which will only relegate them to the bottom rung of a supply chain.

As the number of customers has increased, Farmers' Friends has opened a museum of traditional farming techniques and a restaurant serving healthy and organic farmhouse fare.

The restaurant, which brings together rural producers and urban consumers, is more about spreading the news and spirit of CSA than serving top cuisine. It works to nurture the traditional crops that are disappearing, provide diversity of income for small-scale farmers, protect farming culture and promote links between city and countryside. The association pays stable prices for produce and has established a fund to help farmers continue to plant traditional crops, organise themselves and promote rural cooperation.

The past three years have seen a surge in cooperation between consumers and farmers outside of commercial markets. All around China, consumers are opening organic shops, holding regular organic markets, setting up

collection or sales points and organising bulk purchasing – all activities that bring together consumers and farmers. And, unlike normal markets, consumer advocacy is a big part of what they do. They even arrange for farmers and consumers to negotiate prices together in order to build understanding and trust.

Beijing Farmers' Market was founded by a small group of consumers in 2010, since when it has expanded to serve an average showing of 2,000 shoppers. Some 20 farmers and farms and more than 10 NGOs and craft workshops attend every event. Natural and handmade everyday goods and processed foods are on sale alongside agricultural produce.

The majority of the products on sale are not actually certified as organic, but consumers can talk to the producers about their goods and how they grew them and build up trust in that way. A core group of volunteers pays regular visits to producers to look at their land and talk to them and ensure their products are qualified for the market. The markets started out as a monthly event, but are now held once a week.

Similar activities are flourishing in many other places across China, including Shanghai, Guangdong, Guangxi and Sichuan.

For participants in CSA, "organic" isn't about certification, but the trust, support and sharing involved in simple business transactions.

And farmers, as well as consumers, are working to build that trust. In Anlong, the organic farmers are even picky about whom they sell their produce to. Gao Yicheng is in charge of deliveries and liaison: "If you want to buy our crops, you need to come here first and have a look around. We won't give you anything until you've actually visited," he said. The farmers here think it's crucial that buyers meet producers.

Working on the farm

Since 2008, the Shanxi Yongji Farmers' Association has been working to develop organic agriculture through farmers' cooperatives. It has attracted plenty of buyers from many places, but is most preoccupied with finding local customers. Zheng Bing, an association official, said that selling locally helps boost trust among consumers.

Supermarkets and big food companies are now pushing "green" and "organic" products. But CSA advocates say that they are in search of something different: nature and health.

At a recent forum on rural development, as experts and NGO representatives were fretting over how organic agriculture could be scaled up, Hebei farmer An Jinlei spoke out: "As a farmer, I don't like the term 'organic'. It has become a buzzword and lost its meaning. The rich folk in the city drive their cars to the supermarket and buy organic food – they're just worried about their own health. But what are their lifestyles and values, their excessive consumption of resources, doing to the health of the planet?"

An prefers to call his farming methods "natural agriculture", which he describes as looking after the land in accordance with natural principles. "The land can't take any more," he said. "We need to look after it, to help it recuperate. You need the land to be healthy if you are going to get food for a healthy life."

An believes many modern agricultural ideas go against the laws of nature. That's what

prompted him to quit his job at a state-owned farm 10 years ago and return to his home village. Together with his wife, he sought out natural farming methods that would restore the land. He believes that even pests have a place. "If humanity doesn't stop its exploitation of the land, there'll be no way back," he said. His determination has seen once lost birds and insects return. A pharmaceutical firm pays a premium for his cotton and corn, while a number of CSA consumer groups in Beijing buy his crops.

An laments that more farmers in his village aren't following his example. They generally recognise the harm done by fertilisers and weed-killers, he said, but believe they have no choice because they can't afford the initial costs of going organic. Without external support, it is almost impossible for farmers suddenly to switch to sustainable farming.

While many farmers cannot afford to go organic, some urban residents have taken matters into their own hands.

Green Mothers Alliance was founded by a group of housewives concerned about their children's' health and development. In 2006, food safety scares prompted these women to experiment with growing their own food, but they soon found they lacked the necessary knowledge to make it work. Inspired by CSA outfits like Little Donkey Farm and Taiwan's Housewives Alliance, they started making bulk purchases from likeminded farmers. Today, their organisation has more than 200 members.

De Run Wu Organic and Natural Store is one of Beijing's oldest instances of urban residents taking control of their food supply. The owners have a small organic farm outside Beijing, where they grow and sell their products. The shop only sells organic goods, both its own products and those it imports from Taiwan and elsewhere.

Urban consumers rent land at Little Donkey Farm to grow vegetables

Wang Tianxiang of organics products business Ecolourful told *chinadialogue* that similar operations existed in China as long as 20 or 30 years ago, but were very rare and generally supplied only senior officials and foreigners. Operations with a wider market have only become more common in the past few years. The market is still small, but demand outstrips supply. And prices aren't high when compared with the costs: half a kilogram of organic vegetables at De Run Wu costs 10 yuan (US$1.60).

Outside of China, CSA got going thanks to concerns over food and land quality. But here, the rise of new approaches to farming has been catalysed by food safety problems. Although most people rely on "organic" labels to make their choices, due to the influence of marketing and the lack of alternatives, more and more shoppers want to know – to really know – where their food is coming from.

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Zhou Wei is assistant editor in chinadialogue*'s Beijing office*
Pictures by Yin Chuntao, Zhou Wei and Yuan Qinghua

[Left] Posters with the words "healthy and organic" are pasted on the walls of the farmers' houses
[Middle] Sellers and buyers at Beijing Farmers' Market
[Right] People working the land at Little Donkey Farm

Organic volunteers go to market

Ma Xiaochao

I had been following the microblog of the Beijing Organic Farmers' Market for six months before I actually attended one of their events for the first time in late September 2011. There, I saw that this group of consciously laid-back Beijingers had achieved something really grand.

Why do I call it grand? Because they volunteer, giving their time for free to bring almost 30 organic farmers and craftspeople from around Beijing together for a weekend market.

In my early days as a volunteer, I was overwhelmed by talk of Tianfuyuan apples, Rice Wine Tavern cloudy wine and Guiyuan milk. I discovered that every trader at the market had his or her own unique selling points, and each one spoke of their own products with pride. Tianfuyuan has been using organic farming practices for over a decade. Guiyuan's cows enjoy organic fodder. The Guoren Green Alliance, staffed mostly by recent graduates, aims to help villages and rural cooperatives grow. The students stay in village homes, both passing on knowledge and helping with the farm work. The goods they produce can be traced all the way back to the field.

As I got more involved in the market I found the organisers had other plans as well. To encourage environmentally friendly agriculture, the market was working to increase sales for organic produce and make consumers more aware of what they were doing. Alongside the weekend markets, they held lectures, meetings and exchange visits between farms and technical trainers.

The market does not admit farmers who use any pesticides or chemical fertilisers; feed livestock fodder containing antibiotics or hormones; use genetically modified seeds; or add chemical additives to processed foods.

It sounds simple. But every stall at the market has to be carefully vetted. Everything the farmer says, his or her aims, the state of the farm's soil, its environment and planting practices –it's all considered. Although there are no actual standards, we can control the process through direct observation. And the farmers need to be open to this, as any consumer can become an observer and go to see the environment in which they work.

This market is helping consumers to find foods they can be confident in and to communicate with producers, as well as keep an eye on the farming environment the goods come from. Now, I've been a full-time volunteer for more than half a year and have made many friends at the market, both farmers and consumers. All of them have the same passion for life.

Ma Xiaochao is a full-time volunteer at Beijing Organic Farmers' Market.
Pictures by Yin Chuntao and Zhou Wei

Safe vegetables, Japanese style

Chen Yantao

For 35 years, the Daichi group has been working to connect farmers and consumers. The two sides share both risks and profits for the sake of safer, healthier food. Chen Yantao reports.

In the blistering heat of summer 2010, there was a spike in vegetable prices in Tokyo and other big cities in Japan. But one group of farmers stood their ground in the face exorbitant prices. They sold their vegetables far below market rates to an organisation called Daichi-wo-Mamoru-Kai, or the Association to Preserve the Earth.

Daichi was established in 1975 with the goal of eradicating harmful pesticides and providing a stable supply of organic farm produce. The Japan of 1975 had similarities with China of today. There were high levels of public anxiety over food safety, especially concerning pesticides and fertilisers used in fruit and vegetable farming.

Japan's economic boom was just taking off. After living through 30 years of post-war poverty, people were eager for mass production and mass consumerism. Back then, the thick smoke belching from factory chimneys was seen as a sign of modernity. In the countryside, traditional farming practices, which had developed over hundreds of years, were considered backward. City dwellers increasingly wanted vegetables and fruit that looked juicy and bright. Huge quantities of pesticides were sprayed and fertilisers applied in the name of an "efficiency revolution". The aim was to improve agricultural yields and reinvent Japan's agricultural sector.

Daichi was created in response. Its founder, countryside-born Kazuyoshi Fujita, started out selling vegetables from a cart, offering a helping hand to farmers who were using mineral fertilisers – and being punished by customers. Their vegetables tasted great but, since they weren't sprayed with pesticides, showed signs of insect damage and struggled to fetch a good price.

Fujita's "safe vegetables" gradually expanded to markets all over Tokyo. Just one year later,

close to 300 farmers and consumers were involved.

Some 35 years have passed and Daichi has grown into a large organisation with a membership of 2,500 producers and 91,000 consumers and an annual turnover of 15.3 billion yen (1.02 billion yuan). Its business operations extend to home delivery, online sales, wholesale, directly-run greengrocers, restaurants, cafes and more.

Fujita is a realist. He says it's pointless merely to shout slogans against pesticide use, and that what's needed is to initiate and popularise a new set of values. It starts with the small things: a single pesticide-free radish placed in the hands of a consumer is better than fruitlessly yelling out 100 slogans, he says.

"We hope to establish new farming practices and a new distribution system as well as a new type of consumer culture. For Daichi to grow, all three of these are needed," Fujita told reporters. By new farming practices, he means refraining as far as possible from pesticide and disinfectant use, applying organic fertilisers to enrich the soil and constructing a harmonious circular agriculture model. And his "new distribution system" is one in which members sign a contract that connects producers with consumers, and under which the two parties share both the risks and benefits of production for the sake of healthier and safer produce.

The bond between the producers and the consumers not only safeguards long-term consumer health but also guarantees stable revenues for the farmers. Most importantly, it protects the long-term fertility of the soil. A new consumer culture means educating customers that it's not what fruits and vegetables look like that's important, but whether they are safe and tasty.

It's only after experiencing many ups and downs through the past 35 years, that the team has found the balance between profit-making and social responsibility. In the first five years, they had no business or distribution experience, and losses were unavoidable.

At that time, almost all farmers were using pesticides and fertilisers. In the beginning, farmers believed Daichi was advocating a return to primitive farming practices. And besides, without pesticides it was difficult to control plant diseases and insect pests. Many consumers didn't want to buy vegetables that had visible pest damage. "We wanted to create a new kind of distribution relationship, one which gets consumers and producers to trust each other, where farmers wouldn't lose out because of market price fluctuations and one where they wouldn't grow unhealthy food in the pursuit of profits. This was our motivation," one of Daichi's co-founders Mr Hasegawa said.

In order to maintain the purity of organic farming, Daichi worked with Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries to introduce a new set of organic farming standards. In January 2000, they also published production processing rules on all kinds of agricultural products they were selling. Over the next 10 years, these rules were continuously improved.

The price of Japanese vegetables rose sharply in 2010 because of the scorching weather. If the famers who had signed up with Daichi had sold their produce at market, they could have earned a fortune. "But we wouldn't do that," said Sato Mao, chairman and general manager of a Daichi member supplier. "Windfall profits only last a short while; building up a stable cooperation and mutual trust is still the most important thing."

Daichi and the contracted farmers agree on prices for each year's produce. Because organic farming is more costly and uses more manpower than ordinary farming, organic goods are inevitably more expensive than their non-organic counterparts. In China, the "organic" price tag keeps the average consumer at a respectful distance, while a small and wealthy minority are alone able to enjoy this "health food". Back in the early days in Japan, Daichi also encountered this problem.

Fujita believes the answer is to work tirelessly to promote the products and guide consumers. Only when the number of consumers rises will prices fall to more reasonable levels, he says. These days in supermarkets, Daichi's products are 1.3 to 1.5 times the price of regular goods. Their consumer group has expanded to the majority middle classes.

From the days of hawking vegetables from the back of carts in the 1970s to its advanced home-delivery system of today, Daichi has felt its way forward, step by step. Now all of the organisation's produce can be ordered by phone, fax or online and delivered to your door within 36 hours.

This article was first published by Xiaokang *magazine, in the first edition of 2011.*

Fears over tainted gelatin capsules

Zhou Wei

On April 15, China Central Television (CCTV) revealed that the Hebei Xueyang Gelatin Protein Factory had sold industrial gelatin to manufacturers in east China for use in medicinal capsules. Soon after, the *Beijing Times* reported that the factory had been selling gelatin made from leather scraps to companies that produce food additives, dairy products and beverages. This chain of events triggered a strong reaction from government, supply-chain managers, media and consumers, and had the Chinese media hot on the news trail.

Gelatin is derived from animal bones, skin, tendons and other connective tissue that contain collagen. To make gelatin that is safe for food and medicinal use, it must be produced from fresh materials. More than 60% of the world's gelatin is used in the food

and confectionary industry. Gelatin produced from leather tanning scraps, by contrast, is only eligible for industrial use.

News outlets including the *Beijing Morning Post* reported that many pharmaceutical firms use gelatin produced from leather scraps to make pill capsules. The worst offenders

produce capsules that have chromium levels 90 times above the official limit. Some of China's best-known pharmaceutical brands are among the offenders.

"Industrial gelatin is made up of many harmful substances, not only chromium, but also other heavy metals and microorganisms," said Dong Jinshi, food safety expert and managing vice-president and secretary general of the International Food Safety Association.

On April 19, the State Food and Drug Administration (SFDA) released the results of its investigation into the "excessive chromium levels in pharmaceutical capsules incident". Of 42 batches of product randomly investigated, 23 exceeded the legal chromium limit.

But according to reports from *Business Times* and other media, the system for testing industrial gelatin in China is still immature. While the SFDA lists industrial gelatin among its "Illegal and Non-consumable Food Product Additives", methods for testing for that gelatin are essentially non-existent.

"You can't tell the difference between industrial gelatin and food-safe gelatin just by looking at it," Dong explained. "What we're seeing now, the exposure of those substituting industrial gelatin for food-safe gelatine, may be just the tip of the iceberg." The situation today is that some companies violate regulations and use industrial gelatine instead of food-safe gelatin, or mix the two in order to bring down production costs. At the same time, there is no robust inspection system or safety standard.

Hao Fengtong, director of the Beijing Chaoyang Hospital Occupational Health and Poison Control Centre, believes the problem of "excess chromium in pharmaceutical capsules" is a harbinger of other ills. When leather is tanned, it goes through many phases, including the removal of hair using sodium sulphide, treatment with miralbilite, lime and acid, tanning with chromium and dyeing. Chromium poisoning is not the only danger.

Back in industrial gelatin's "homeland", there is more to worry about. A recent *Beijing Times* article narrates a telling history: Hebei Xueyang Gelatin Protein Factory is just one of more than 40 gelatin-producing enterprises in Qiansong Village near Hebei's Hengshui City. Qiansong Village began developing a gelatin industry in the 1970s and, at its peak, had more than 200 businesses in this field. Early gelatin factories used relatively high quality pig and cow skin, but later this changed.

"We don't know when, but some factories started using leather scraps, which lowered their production costs," explained a local factory owner. "With small profits but rapid turnover, these enterprises were more competitive than the old style companies, which slowly went bust. In the end, everyone started using leather scraps. After several rounds of this sort of competition, only 40 or 50 factories remained."

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Picture from blog.sohu.com

Who's responsible for food safety in China?

Zhang Ke

Whose responsibility is food safety? At the "2012 International Forum on Food Safety", held in Beijing on April 14, experts from around the world had a clear message: all interested parties bear responsibility.

Professor Hu Xiaosong of China Agricultural University pointed out that China's total agricultural output had grown more than one hundred-fold in a little over 30 years, rising from 47.3 billion yuan (US$7.5 billion) in 1978 to 7.8 trillion yuan (US$1.2 trillion) in 2011. "The flourishing of the food industry brings with it a range of problems – food security does not come with zero risks," Hu said.

Joseph Jen, former under-secretary of the US Department of Agriculture and co-chair of the expert panel at the International Union of Food Science and Technology, said: "China's progress on the regulatory front is spectacular, particularly when compared with certain other countries. Nonetheless, I must be honest in admitting that China's food safety regulation is still very far from the standards of the United States."

Can food safety problems ever be eradicated? Peter Ben Embarek, a food safety expert at the World Health Organization said: "We cannot reach 100% food safety, and every country must face this reality. But what we can do is work to minimise the risks and predict future risks".

In recent years, the Chinese government has cracked down on problems including the use of illegal additives and the sale of clenbuterol-contaminated meat. From a scientific point of view, this is considerable progress. But the common perception among consumers is that food safety is actually getting worse in China.

Chen Junshi, chairman of China's National Expert Committee for Food Safety Risk and professor at the Chinese Academy of Engineering, told reporters there are three key reasons behind this apparent contradiction: media coverage of the issue has expanded; consumers are more aware of their rights than in the past and are demanding zero risks; and the government has strengthened oversight, bringing more problems out of the woodwork.

Chen added: "Safe food products come from producers, not through supervision or detection."

Any country in the world can be hit by food safety problems, added Embarek. From Germany to the United States to China, nowhere is spared the risk. "Food safety is also a key issue in international trade," he said. "Food processed in one part of the world is likely to be linked to production in another. Food safety must be viewed from a global perspective."

In this context, all countries must cooperate to boost global food safety, he added. "We cannot operate separately – we need to establish a global food safety system."

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