

# Trusting, qualification, and sustainable consumption in Alternative Food Networks in Taiwan (and China)

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## Abstract

This proposal outlines a research about the Alternative Food Networks in Taiwan emerged amidst market and regulatory failures reflected in a series of food scares. The proposal will briefly discuss the literature on AFNs and argue that AFNs in Taiwan provide unique cases of consumers taking direct actions and linking food safety to environmental concerns. It then deploys a neo-Polanyian concept of “the economy as instituted processes” to highlight the reconfiguration of reciprocity and exchange in AFNs and raises questions regarding how consumers develop trust with producers, re-establish the qualities of foods and the environment, and how consumer practices help reconfigure these processes. The research design involves comparing a consumer coop, a CSA farm, a farmers’ market, and an online platform for direct selling of local and organic foods, and considers a further comparison with new AFNs in China. The data will be collected from interviewing organizing activists and customers. The research expects to contribute to our understanding of consumer agency in the dynamics between trusting, qualification, and consumption practices. It also expects to contribute to the study of sustainable consumption by learning how consumers can reconfigure the social processes to change the economic processes.

## 1. AFN in Taiwan: contexts

Recently, a growing groups of food networks have emerged in Taiwan that are labeled by the media as “young farmers” and their works are considered as “agricultural art renaissance” (蔡晏霖 · 2014; 李丁讚, 2011). What is special about these groups is that they were initiated by young and well educated people sometimes coming from rather urban background and they aim to change agri-food provision and consumption. They organize organic production, help sell food produce directly to consumers, and educate consumers about healthy diet and sustainable consumption. Most importantly, they have larger objectives in facilitating socio economic changes around food and agriculture.

Quite plenty works have been conducted in the west on similar groups that are conceptualized as Alternative Agri-food Networks (AFNs) (Sharp et al, 2015). This

includes community supported agriculture, (CSA) 、 farmers market, buyers' club, producer/consumer cooperatives. In the concept of AFN, "alternative" refers to that these groups produced and provided foods in ways different from conventional industrialized food provision system (Filippo et al, 2014). "Food network" refers to the organizational innovation of direct interaction between and among food producers and consumers (Sonnino et al, 2006). Other concepts developed to characterize these groups include civil agriculture (Truger, 2013) and local food networks. These groups are seen as civil society efforts to intervene market and the environment around food, emphasizing the value of civic participation and social justice alongside economic profit making (Guthman, 2007) ° .



Figure 1. AFN as civil society adjusting the dynamics between market and environment

While AFNs have developed for over a decade in Western Europe and the US, it is a new development in Taiwan thus we need to examine the contexts of its emergence. The first important context is the pervasive food safety scandals in recent years that have severely diminished public trust in food, in food industries and markets and the state. These AFNs are thus a response to what appears to be market failure and regulatory failure (鍾怡婷, 2014). The second context we need to consider is the transformation of consumer movements in Taiwan. The consumer movement have transformed from focusing on consumer protection in the 1980s to the advocacy on ethical consumption in the 2000s with the formation of the Homemaker Cooperative and the Taiwan Fair Trade association (Wahn, 2015). The AFNs can be seen as continuing this trend to push consumers taking active citizen actions.

AFNs in Taiwan combine consumer movements with social movements on agriculture,

the environment, and community building. As a local development of international phenomena, it allows us to examine the change of market society and explore a new approach that civil society can change markets. But different from existing literature with a focus on producers' forming networks, this research focuses on the role of the consumer in AFNs. It examines how consumers make new connections with producers, with food, land, and the community (Lehner, 2013), which reveal a new way consumers exercise agency (Sassatelli, 2015). The Taiwan case allows us to contribute to two debates in the sociology of consumption (Warde, 2015): how consumers change economic processes through new consumption practice and the importance of socioeconomic processes to sustainable consumption.

The next section summarizes existing literatures on AFNs and raises a research question. The following section explains the application of the polanyian concept of the economy as instituted process to elaborate research questions surrounding the role of consumers. The research design of two comparisons, case selections and data collection will be discussed before discussing three themes for analyses. The proposal concludes with some reflection on the theoretical and empirical contribution a study on AFNs in Taiwan can make.

## **2. Literature and Research questions**

Researches on AFNs by sociologists and geographers have analyzed the different forms of networks and their socioeconomic characteristics. These works help us identify certain aspects of the AFNs left out and can be filled by a case study of its development in Taiwan.

AFNs are primarily characterized as the shortening of food supply chains (SFSC) which brings a variety of social, economic, and environmental benefits (Watts et al., 2005). In terms of economic benefits, AFNs cut out wholesalers, processors and retailers as the middlemen, to improve farmers' income and reduces the cost for consumers (Gianluca, 2011). Moreover, through organic and chemical free production method, AFNs help increase food qualities, availability and affordability of foods for consumers. Rather than standardized food qualities that suit market competitions, the interaction between producers and consumer facilitates the "quality turn" of foods production and consumption. Consumers are encouraged to appreciate the origin, the nutrition, tastes and socioeconomic effects that food brings (Little et al, 2010).

For the social benefits, AFNs are often discussed with reference to embeddedness and relocalisation of food economy as they allow direct and close interactions

between farmers and consumers that embed market exchange within local social relations (Lamine et al. 2012). This embeddedness replaces the anonymous and dispersed interaction between individual consumers and producers in the market. It engender trusts between actors (Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, 2015) and allow the sharing of risks and costs in food production (Brunori et al, 2011). This sharing then is argued to enhance solidarity between and among consumers and farmers in the community that actors develop concerns for the social, economic and environmental conditions and consequences of food provision (Obach and Tobin, 2014). This is more participatory governance by citizens of economic activities (Flora and Bregendahl, 2012).

Besides economic and social implications, AFNs have environmental benefits (Forssell and Lankoski, 2015). The reduction of transport can reduce food carbon footprint and the reduced use of synthetic and chemical fertilizer also reduces water and soil pollution. Consumers are also encouraged to change their consumption practices in terms of the selection, preparation, cooking and eating habits as well as food waste practices. The changes in the provision and consumption constitute a specific approach to sustainable development.

Moreover, the reorganization of food provision and consumption with these socio-economic and environmental has important political implications. Scholars have used concepts such as food democracy and food sovereignty to highlight the way AFNs enable democratic participation by stakeholders and redistribute power and resources from multinational corporations to producers and consumers (Renting et al., 2012). AFNs can allow consumers to develop ecological citizenship (Tregear, 2011, Seyfang, 2006) to share the costs and risks while gain access to and influences the governing of food provision and consumption.

Existing research have mainly studied development in Europe (Venn et al., 2006) such as France (Dubuisson-Quellier et al., 2011; Lamine et al., 2012), UK (Seyfang, 2006; Kirwan et al., 2013) \ Italy (Fonte, 2013). They also mainly focus on the cooperation between producers and consumers (Kjærnes, 2012). However, there are emerging calls to pay more attention to the role of the consumer in AFNs. In this respect, AFNs in Taiwan can offer ideal cases as they are organized by consumers in response to consumer concerns.

A focus on the consumer allow the research to analyse how new economic organization and new social relations shape and support each other. For example, we can expect that new social relations of consumers and producers not only facilitate

trust but it is also through different interactions that food quality is re-established. The consumer's changing consumption habits and actions are equally critical for the functioning of AFNs and their capacity to foster wider change. Thus the main question this research raised is: what is the roles consumers play in organizing AFNs in Taiwan that incorporate social, economic, and environmental goals?

### **3. A neo-Polanyian perspective to highlight consumers**

The research will apply a Polanyian concept to build a framework for analyzing the role of consumers in AFNs in Taiwan. While economic sociologists are more familiar with the Polanyian concept of embeddedness (Cangiani, 2011), the research argues that the concept of institute economic process can better capture the reorganization of food provision and consumption in AFNs and highlight how social and economic actions of the consumer are crucial for this reorganization.

Polanyi (1957) argues in the substantive conceptualization of the economy that the economy is instituted process. For the economic process part of the concept, the economy is the process where human utilize natural resources to satisfy needs and reproduce society. The economic activities turning natural resources into commodities involve division of labour and thus goods are circulated among actors. There are different mechanisms for integrating actors and their economic activities, illustrated through ideal types of redistribution from a center, reciprocity between equal partners, and exchange among actors.

Most importantly, the economic processes are "instituted" as the processes are stabilized and integrated in different ways through social and political processes (湯志傑, 2012). Thus the concept allows us to look at how different elements, actors and activities, are configured together. It also allows us to examine how social processes and institutions shape economic processes. The concept is further elaborated and developed by Harvey 和 McMeekin (2013) to illustrate the configuration of production, distribution, appropriation and consumption of goods and services. See figure 1 below:

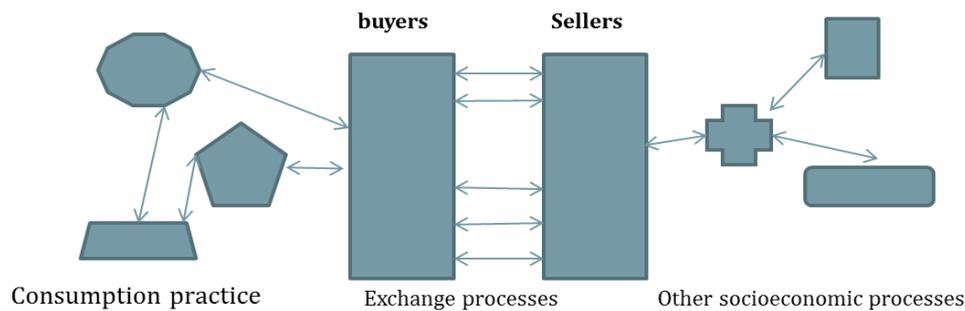


Figure 2. Social processes that institute economic processes

In the figure, sellers and buyers of goods and services in the market are both engaged in other socioeconomic relations beyond exchanges in the market. Producers have their division of labour with suppliers while consumers use goods to interact with others such as families and friends in social practices. The division of labour among producers and the practices of consumer shape the way the economic process including the exchange process in the market are instituted.

The instituted economic process concept provides a framework to analyse AFNs and highlight the role of the consumer in the case of Taiwan. It can bring to the fore that AFNs involve alternative mode of provision and consumption, a new economic process. AFNs involve the equally important principle of exchange and reciprocity that consumers and producers exchange in markets while engage in reciprocal understanding and caring outside of markets.

Here, we can incorporate consumption practices and we can highlight the interaction between producers and consumers both within and outside of markets. These reciprocal interactions are the social processes that change economic processes and support the instituting of new processes. Through this framework, the research question can be further elaborated to ask:

“How consumers develop new relations to farmers, food, and to community”

“How consumption practice constitute a critical part of the overall economic process in AFNs”

“How consumers develop trust to producers?”

“How consumers change perceptions about food qualities?”

#### 4. Design and Cases

The research intends to conduct two comparisons: one between different types of AFNs in Taiwan and the other between AFN development in Taiwan and that in China. For the first comparison, different types of AFN have different extent of consumer-producer relations and this may influence the role of consumers in

shaping new socioeconomic processes (Flora et al, 2012). For example, CSA and consumer cooperatives provide more close and regular interaction between specific groups of producers and consumers than farmers' market and online direct selling platforms.

So the research has selected 5 different AFNs in Taiwan. They are selected from the Green Food Education seminars recently organized by the Homemaker Cooperative. The seminars aimed to promote healthy diets, local organic foods, agricultural development and environmental actions. The selection of cases from this seminar allows us to look at cases that more or less share similar objectives and formed some kind of a network. They are also selected for their different localities of operation, from urban to suburban and from north to the south parts of Taiwan.

Using a MSSD (Landman, 2008), the comparison will look at how similar cases with different interaction produce different outcomes. See Table 1 below for a list of these AFN cases. It includes the first and arguably the only consumer cooperative in Taiwan, the homemaker Cooperative. There is also the first farmers' market in Taiwan, the Hope Market. There is a CSA project initiated by a former engineer. Also included are two online platforms selling local foods for us to contrast indirect consumer-producer interaction in virtue communities with those more closely associated with a given place in CSA and cooperatives. The News & Markets offers news regarding food and agricultural issues in Taiwan while helping farmers sell their products. Finally, whereas the Cop and the Hope Market are formed in the early to mid-2000s, the other groups are formed more recently in the early 2010s, giving the research cases emerging from different time periods.

Type	AFN name	formation time	place
CSA	QianJia CSA	2012	Hsinchu
Consumer cooperative	Homemaker Cooperative	1997-2001	Taipei
farmers market	Hope farmers' market	2006	Taichung
buyer club	Howsfood	2012	Taipei
online platform	News&Market	2011	Taichung

Table 1. Selected cases of AFNs in Taiwan

Data collection in this research will adopt two methods. Firstly, data will be collected from publications and documents produced by these AFNs and media coverage of them. These AFNs have actively disseminated information through websites, newsletters, and social media such as Facebook Fanspages, allowing us to gather

materials about their rationales, strategies, and events. There are also plenty materials written by organizers and members about their experiences and thinking about AFNs, its implications, and a variety of related issues. They also share stories and news articles about their work, challenges and breakthroughs. These materials can provide rich information that will help the collection of data from the second method, interviews.

Secondly, data will be collected from interviewing organizers, consumers, and experts in different AFNs. It aims to conduct semi-structured interviews on these actors about their experiences, their views as well as their observations regarding consumer-producer relations. The organizers are obviously good starting points and it is expected that they can also point to other people such as volunteers and active members as interviewees. There are also a few academics involved in these AFNs and they can provide valuable insights about AFN operation and challenges they face.

With 6 cases to collect data, the research plans to take a year. It will start with the oldest organization Homemaker Coop and move on to others. The timetable is presented as follows.

Time	Two months	Two months	Two months	Six months	Six months
Work	Data collection	Data collection	Data collection	Analysis	writing
Target	Homemaker Cooperative	Hope market QianJia CSA	News&Market Howsfood		

Table 2. Timetable for comparing AFNs in Taiwan

## 5. Extension: China and Taiwan comparison

The second set of comparison will be carried out between AFN development in Taiwan and China. It has been pointed out that AFN is also emerging in China (Scott et al, 2014; Si & Scott, 2015; Schumilas, 2014, Si, 2014) due to the prevalent food safety problems (Xu, 2012; Xiu and Klein, 2010), which made them comparable to those in Taiwan.

However, studies have recognized the importance of the consumer in these AFNs in China but also pointed out that they care more about the economic and safety benefits of purchasing food from AFNs than the social justice and environmental concerns that have been the focus in Western AFNs (Liu et al., 2013; Yan et al., 2011). AFN consumers in China are not supported and engaged by consumer, farmer,

environmental movements and NGOs as is the case in Taiwan (Hanser and Camille, 2015; Klein, 2009, 2013, Yang, 2013). The limited development of civil society in China allows us to explore the challenges and limits for consumers to institute new socioeconomic processes (Yan Yunxiang, 2012; Mol, 2014). Contextual influences and the role of civil society can be highlighted in such a comparison that leads us to clarify how consumers may play different roles (Wang et al. 2015; Veeck et al., 2010).

6 cases of AFNs are selected from the literature for further data collection and analysis. See the cases in the following Table 3. The cases are selected from those developed in Beijing (Jun, 2012) and Shanghai and they cover three main types of AFNs: buyers' club, CSA, and farmers' market. This allows the research to compare Taiwan and China while taking into account the influences of different types of consumer-producer interactions and different localities.

Type	AFN name	formation time	place
buyer club	Caituan	2010	Shanghai
farmers' market	Nonghao	2011	Shanghai
CSA	Yi Mu Tian Organic Farm	2008	Shanghai
buyer club	Green League		Beijing
CSA	Little Donkey Farm		Beijing
farmers' market	Organic famers market		Beijing

Table 3. Selection of cases of AFNs in China

Data for these cases will be collected through the same methods that are applied to collecting data in the Taiwan cases. The research will examine materials published by AFNs on social media such as microblogs and websites as well as news reports about them. The researcher will also conduct observation in farmers markets and CSAs. Information thus gathered will help the researcher in conducting interviews with the organizer, participants, and experts in each AFN. It is expected to take 4 months for data collection, another 4 months for analysis and 2 months for writing as laid out in the timetable:

Time	Two months	Two months	six months	six months
Work	Data collection	Data collection	analysis	writing
Target	Beijing: Organic famers market, Little Donkey Farm, Green League	Shanghai: Nonghao, Caituan, Yi Mu Tian Organic Farm		

Table 4. Timetable for research on AFNs in China

## 6. Trusting, Qualification, and Sustainable practices

The analysis of the study will focus on three themes derived from the literature as well as from the rationales of these AFNs as presented in their introductory materials. AFNs all emphasize enhancing the trust between consumers and farmers, the better qualities of food they offer and the need to revalue food in hitherto neglected dimensions, and the need to educate consumer about changing the way food are consumed. Thus the three themes are trusting, food qualification, and changing consumption practices for sustainability. The focus on these themes help us understand both the role of the consumer and how social process change economic process in AFNs. Each can be expected to be a topic for a paper.

First, the analysis of consume-producer relation focuses on “How do consumers in AFNs build trust with producers?” AFNS studies have discussed the level of trust and mechanism of trust creation through certification or participatory guarantee system where the quality and production methods of foods are subject to examination by all stakeholders including consumers (Grasseni, 2014). Yet a discussion of the role of consumers is needed to understand the process of generating trust as well as how trust is maintained.

Möllering (2013) concept of trusting will be utilized in this analysis. He sees trusting as a process of interaction between actors rather than a state of relation in the concept of trust (Lyson et al., 2015). Thus the research will like to examine how consumers get to know famers, and they learn about their works and challenges. It will also try to understand how different type of networks and different type of interactions shape their trusting efforts. This leads to the analysis of how consumers’ trusting to particular producers turn into trusting of the networks and trusting for the food sold through it. Hence this analysis in directly relevant in how producers and consumer perceive and value foods which is further discussed in the second theme.

Secondly, the research analyses “How do AFNs determine and reestablish qualities of food products?” The analysis will draw on the concept of qualification (Callon et al., 2002). The concept refers to the social processes that shape how market actors identify the dimensions of product qualities, how they establish standards of evaluation, and how they interact to contest ad assess product qualities (Beckert and Musselin, 2013). This social process is argued to be important for the establishment of value (Beckert, 2011) and hence influence the working of markets (Wehinger, 2013).

Using the qualification concept, the research aims to analyse consumer-producer relations in qualifying foods in AFNs in the context of persistent food safety issues. It will look at how producers try to inform and promote different dimensions of quality that is downplayed in markets. It will look at how consumers respond to them and how they experience and feed back to producers about good food. Particularly, the analysis intends to examine whether different types of social interactions in different AFNs shape qualification as well as how new qualities turn back to change social and economic interactions.

Third, the research will analyse the change of consumption practices and how such change is important for the working and potential for AFNs. This analysis will employ the practice perspective in the sociology of consumption that focuses on how people use goods and services to engage in social practices (Welch and Warde, 2015). This perspective on use rather than how consumers decide to purchase particular items in markets allows us to investigate how requalified food is used, how use change social relations that consumers have with other consumers and producers.

Analysing practice changes in different AFNs, the research is interested in how consumers learn from organizers, producers, and from each other. It will examine what types of changes are involved, the processes of changing, the challenges of persuading others in one's families and among friends. It will try to understand how consumers understand practice changes and how these affect social and economic relations with regard to food production and exchanges in markets.

The analysis of trusting, qualification and consumer practice change highlights the various roles of consumers in AFNs. It intends to show that consumers interact with farmer producers in specific ways in different AFNs that shape the valuation of economic actors and relations, food qualities, and uses. It can also show that specific sociopolitical contexts in China and Taiwan may shape the challenges and strategies of consumers in these roles. It is these interactions that institute economic processes and thus their clarification lead us to a better understanding of the varied and multiple ways consumers are involved in the instituting of economic processes. Such an understanding will take us to a broader picture of that can be painted by the research.

## **7. Revisit Consumer agency in sustainable development**

This is a multi-theme study as it is strategically designed for the researcher to explore different issues of general concern by utilizing a new development in a specific context thus is worthy of investment. But there is a core concern with broader

theoretical implication that aims to bring together analysis of trusting, qualification and practice change. Such links let us grasp the dynamics of instituting new economic processes through different social processes. Such dynamic also highlight consumer agency in a different approach to sustainable consumption. These are the broader contribution the research hope to make.

Figure 3 below shows the trust between actors is important for the qualification of foods while understanding food qualities in new ways may require changes in consumption practices. At the same time, consumer practice change may shape trusting relationships with farmers. In other words, there can be a dynamic between the relations between actors and the valuation and use of foods. This is a dynamics that the Polanyian concept of instituted economic process enables us to recognize and analyze.



Figure 3. Dynamics of socioeconomic processes in AFNs

With the focus on such dynamics, the research can write another paper to further elaborate the concept of the economy as instituted processes. It provides examples of how social processes interact with, support, and change economic processes in AFNs. But rather than seeing economic process as instituted by social processes, the cases may illustrate how social and economic processes are configured and thus reveal configuration as a source of change. In addition, Taiwan and China provide useful contrasts to understand how such dynamics of trusting, qualification, and practice change are shaped by distinctive sociopolitical contexts. This leads us to raise questions about the role of civil society in the dynamics between the working of markets and the environment.

It is the hope of this research to then revisit the idea of consumer agency in social economic change. Consumer agency is often discussed in terms of consumers making different choices in markets, using goods and services in new ways (Evens, 2011;

Cembalo et al, 2012) and organizing collective actions such as consumer movements to change policy and social values (Carrier and Luetchford, 2012). However, the role of consumers in AFNs demonstrates a multiple ways consumer can exercise agency. The trusting relations, food re-qualifications, and changing consumption practices all point to the possibility that the consumer can re-configure the social and economic relations around food (Cabrera and Christine, 2012). This may lead us to reconsider how consumers combine actions in markets and through civil society to facilitate a dynamics of change involving relations, valuations, and practices.

Also the discussion will help us think about a different approach to sustainable consumption (Lorek and Vergragt, 2015). Currently, sustainable consumption is discussed in terms of socio-technical system transitions (Southerton et al. 2004; Southerton & Welch, 2016) that build on technological advances, changing cultural values and changing consumer practices (Spaargaren, 2003). The AFNs in the case of Taiwan and China can be seen as examples of how sustainable consumption can be pursued through consumers' collaborating with producers and institute new food qualities. Sustainable consumption thus can be built on a reconfiguration of relations among actors and nature. This opens our views to think about how the kind of systemic change that sustainable development requires involve the configuration of economic and social processes rather than just any element in them.

The understanding of these dynamics also shed lights on the potential for change in consumer societies in East Asia. The history of consumerism in East Asia is quite different than that in the West (Griffiths, 2010; Podoshen et al., 2011). Rapid growth under strong states meant that it is difficult to change state policy through consumer movements. Exploring the development of AFNs, the research allows us to reflect on how consumers with rising spending power but limited institutional influences can reflect on alternatives (Zhang, 2015; Browne et al, 2016). This research can engage with works being done on Japan (Kondoh, 2015; Hisano, 2015) and together explore how consumers build social and civic orientations through working with other agricultural and environmental movements.

## **Conclusion**

This research can be a strategic starting point to further our understanding of social dynamics of instituting as well as the transformation of market societies in East Asia. It is trying to set up a research agenda with several directions to pursue after this study. One is how different AFNs collaborate and form networks among networks. This involves the scaling up of niche innovations (Maye, 2013) and the expansion of trusting relations. The other is how consumers try to combine practice change and

political actions as AFNs engage in policy lobbying. We can also ask how AFNs change the qualification of food and the potential of alternative markets to coexist with conventional markets. These topics will enhance our understanding and extend these debates about how the relation between economy and society change in East Asia where marketization is posing greater challenges for sustainability and governance for society.

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