

Eco-certification and Scripts of Community

Introduction

One Friday afternoon in May 2015, I came along for the first delivery of vegetables from the peasant cooperative in Daxi Village to a Chengdu consumer association's new shop.* The three founders and leaders of the village's peasant cooperative – Dong Jie, Wang Zhaochen, Kang Sunbin – and I travelled together from the self-styled ecological village to the provincial capital. After over an hour in heavy traffic, we finally arrived at the shop. A woman in her thirties came out.

This was Wu Yingying, the consumer association's founder and volunteer store manager. She walked over and welcomed us effusively, addressing the three other men as 'Elder Brother' rather than by their official titles or as directors of the cooperative. In this way, she was invoking a close personal relationship with the three men. In a process that Thelen, Thiemann and Roth (2018) call 'kinning the state', she had framed their relationship as a personal one between close relatives or friends, rather than as one between a store manager and officials who were responsible for regulating and coordinating agricultural production at the township and village level. On this occasion, Dong Jie similarly called the village leader 'Elder Brother Kang' rather than addressing him by his name or political title.

Personal commitment was very important to Wu Yingying. She only agreed to being interviewed if it had a purpose beyond my research and degree. By mentioning that I had co-organized a food

co-op in Vienna like the consumer association in Chengdu, I demonstrated my commitment to the cause of building an ecological future through community. During the interview, Wu Yingying gave several reasons for organizing the consumer association. Two are particularly interesting in terms of this book's focus on the multiplicity of performed state boundaries.

Wu Yingying explained that she and the other organizers of the consumer association had not trusted the state's certification scheme for organic agriculture. Like other consumers in China (Yan 2012: 721), they suspected that personal relations (*guanxi* 关系) between officials and producers would interfere with the certification scheme and enable fraud and corruption. Moreover, the consumer association rejected state certification for another reason. Wu Yingying viewed the organic standard as a Western innovation that had been imported to China and emphasized that an older Chinese notion of ecology had existed beforehand. She charged that the standards set for 'organic' products were too high for many producers to start the transition process on their own. While she claimed that other distributors only looked for producers who already fulfilled the organic standard, the consumer association was more flexible, knew its committed producers personally and understood ecological agriculture as a transformative process.

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The diverging evaluation of personal relations as either undermining state certification or offering an alternative to it is remarkable. The urban middle-class citizens involved in this food network of peasant cooperatives and consumer associations understood personal relations not only as potential 'corruption' that undermines the 'transparency' of 'organic' certification, but also as a way of guaranteeing 'transparency' in their food network and enabling 'ecological' agriculture and access to 'safe' and 'healthy' food. Similar contradictory evaluations of personal relations can also be found in the social science literature. This apparent contradiction of personal relations nurturing 'corruption' and 'transparency' constitutes what I call the 'puzzle of personal relatedness' (Lammer 2018).

This chapter argues that the multiplicity of performed state boundaries is key to understanding these diverging expectations regarding personal relations. Continuing the analyses started in the first chapter, it delves further into the repertoire of markers of distinctions between state and non-state. As in Chapter 1, I will follow a contrast suggested by actors in the food network: the consumer

association's shop is 'completely different' from the organic grocery store next door. I examine how the state was distanced through the specific presentation of 'state certification' (*guojia renzheng* 国家认证) in the consumer association and by turning material markers of the non-ecological into markers of the state when urban customers visited and toured the ecological village.

For urban consumers concerned about cross-cutting personal ties corrupting organic certification, the boundary between state (as regulator) and market (as regulated) is at stake, but the market is no longer the opposite of the state when the consumer association is contrasted with the organic grocery store. Here, the market becomes linked to the state through certification as a shared marker of distinction, against which civil society and community are performed as non-state and nonmarket others. Moreover, as we will see, the New Rural Reconstruction Movement performs two scripts of community as superior to the state: a globally travelling model of 'community-supported agriculture' (CSA, *shequ zhichi nongye* 社区支持农业) and a model of traditional rural China. To capture this multiplicity of non-state others in performances of state boundaries, this chapter introduces the idea of 'domain multiplicity'.

Opposing Evaluations of Personal Relations in Social Science

The analytical distinction between personal and institutional relations looms large not only in studies of so-called alternative food networks but also in economic anthropology, postsocialist anthropology and China Studies. In these literatures, personal relations are often either condemned or celebrated.

The Agro-food Studies literature on 'alternative food networks' (Goodman, DuPuis and Goodman 2012) abounds with terms suggesting personal relations between producers and consumers, such as 'close encounters' (DeLind 1999), 'embeddedness' and 'direct social ties' (Hinrichs 2000), 'close interpersonal ties' (Goodman 2003), 'face-to-face interaction' (Renting, Marsden and Banks 2003), 'local, direct contact and personal relations' (Pratt 2007), 'proximity' and 'direct marketing' (Jarosz 2008), 'reconnection' (Kneafsey et al. 2008), 'personal connections' and 'informal networks' (Aistara 2015) or 'moral economic family' (Carlisle 2015).

One key inspiration behind much of this literature is Karl Polanyi's dualist typology of economies that are either embedded within social

relationships or disembedded anonymous exchanges. While neoclassical economics see social ties as imperfections that necessarily make markets less efficient, the opposing neo-institutionalist argument holds that these ties can also make them more efficient. Economic sociologists have modified this binary opposition and argued that market economy is always socially and institutionally embedded (Granovetter 1985; Block 2003). Similarly, in economic anthropology, Stephen Gudeman (2009: 18) has reformulated Polanyi's approach, holding 'that all economies are both embedded and disembedded'.

Although these sociologists and anthropologists have tried to move beyond opposing evaluations of personal relations, the opposition is very much alive in social science. In contrast to studies of alternative food networks, in much of the literature on regulation personal relations appear as a threat to the travelling Western model of the idealized 'independent regulator'. Corruption is said to be pervasive in China and thought to undermine transparency (Delman 2003; Tam and Yang 2007; Hsueh 2011; Zhou G. 2017). Sometimes *guanxi*, often translated as personalistic ties, is even explicitly presented as a culturally specific explanation of corruption (Delman 2003; Fang 2008; Cheng 2012). Such diagnoses build on, and reproduce, the mainstream liberal narratives that criticize the Chinese state for unduly blurring the boundary between public and private (see the Introduction).

Inspired by neo-institutionalist economics, the anthropologies of postsocialism (Verdery 1996; Ledeneva 1998) and China (M. Yang 1994; Yan 1996) offered an alternative interpretation: the deficiencies of socialist institutions compelled both state actors and other citizens to develop instrumentalist personal ties to overcome shortages (for a discussion of the anthropology of China see Lammer 2018: 374–78; for a discussion of postsocialist anthropology see Thelen 2011). Mayfair Yang (1989; 1994) explicitly suggested understanding *guanxi* as a nascent civil society against the socialist state. Transferring this argument to regulatory challenges of food safety, some have argued that, in the face of failing state institutions that have been imported from the West, citizens in post-Maoist China and postsocialist countries use personal relations to achieve transparency (for China, see Yan 2012; Zhang et al. 2015; Zhou G. 2017; for postsocialism, see Dunn 2004; Aistara 2015). Activist scholars have pointed to emerging 'alternative' food initiatives in China, but they regard these initiatives' transformative potential as limited by excessive state intervention (Scott et al. 2014; Si, Schumilas and Scott 2015), continuing to other China and its institutions. When Western regulatory institutions

supposedly ‘fail’ (neoclassical economics, studies of certification) or ‘succeed’ (neo-institutionalist economics, studies of alternative food movements), instrumentalist personal connections in the form of *guanxi* are still often invoked as a Chinese cultural or socialist particularity.

In this chapter, the point in outlining these discussions of personal relations in the social science literature is that these positions are not restricted to academic debates. Consumers’ scepticism regarding the state’s ‘organic certification’ scheme resonates with academic positions inspired by neoclassical economic theory that sees Western regulatory institutions being corrupted by the Chinese culture of *guanxi*. Consumers’ hopes for alternative food networks resonate with academic positions inspired by neo-institutionalism that see personal relations as citizens’ reaction, or even resistance, to malfunctioning state institutions.

As Jakob Klein (2014: 139) argues, “‘alternative’ food movements with Chinese characteristics’ should be understood as both ‘part of a globalized critique of a market-driven “global food system”, [and] also as ongoing, critical conversations with state socialism’. Academic ideas about personal relations have most directly reached organized urban middle-class consumers in Chengdu through activist scholars of China’s New Rural Reconstruction Movement, and some of their publications could be found on the shelves of the consumer association’s shop. The models of ‘mutual aid between city and countryside’ propagated by these activist scholars were partly inspired by Western food movements and their model of ‘CSA’ as a civil society alternative to state and market and partly by notions of traditional Chinese rural culture. For example, Shi Yan had worked as an intern at a CSA farm in the US and used this experience to initiate the Little Donkey Farm, ‘Beijing’s first CSA’, which became the topic of her doctoral dissertation. She and other scholar activists have more recently contrasted such alternative food initiatives with certification, drawing on Fei Xiaotong’s (1992) anthropological study *Earthbound China*. They used Fei’s concept of the ‘relational morality’ of the ‘differential mode of association’ to conceptualize CSAs and similar forms of direct marketing (Merrifield 2020).

With this concept, Fei contrasted social organization in China and the West. He claimed that in the West individuals form organizations with clear membership boundaries, while in China individuals associate in overlapping, discontinuous networks centred around individuals and made up of dyadic social ties. Explicitly presenting food networks such as CSAs as alternatives to certification, activist schol-

ars argue that ‘information about the farm, about organic food and about sustainable living’ is ‘borne along relational ties, flowing outward to expand the network of people that know and trust the farm’ (Shi et al. 2011: 557). As in his previous description of the ‘Chinese traditional system of government’ (Fei 1946, see also the Introduction), Fei presented the blurred boundary of this mode of association as a unique feature of Chinese society.¹

The community of food networks was thus modelled both on activist models of Western civil society organizations and academic models of traditional rural China. Yet, despite this multiplicity of non-state others, performed state boundaries overlapped. Presenting certification in the food network in a specific way created a safe distance between the state and community in both modern Western and traditional Chinese terms. For the model of Western civil society, distancing the state avoided the corruptibility of organic certification through *guanxi*. For the model of traditional rural China, distancing the state enabled the flexibility of *guanxi* against the rigidity of Western certification.

Producing Transparency through Consumer Participation

Members of the consumer association claimed that their shop was ‘completely different’ from the store that a well-known organic grocery chain operated just next door. A post by a food blogger reproduced this opposition. After discussing this ‘para-ethnographic’ (Holmes and Marcus 2008) account, I analyse how the organic certification scheme was differently presented in the two shops. Although the products the consumer association sold also included food with organic labels, certification as a marker of the state and the market was hidden, crossed out or recontextualized. As the association rejected this tool of producing transparency, the ecological character of the agricultural products had to be made visible and credible to urban middle-class consumers in a different way. I will argue that transparency was mainly produced through the possibility of consumer participation and personal experience.

In public discourse, transparency technologies are usually said to correct deficits in various fields, such as democracy or (as here) food safety. Anthropologists have offered more critical accounts of transparency. Marilyn Strathern’s (2000) study of ‘audit culture’ in higher education asks what visibility conceals. Similarly, Todd Sanders and

Harry West (2003) have noted that transparency and conspiracy thrive simultaneously. Taking transparency's literal impossibility as its premise, Andrea Ballesterio (2012: 161) has suggested moving beyond 'the tendency to make the visibility/opacity dyad both the phenomenon to be explained and the basis for explanation'. Rather than asking what the transparency of the certification scheme concealed or what kind of conspiracies consumers suspected of being hidden behind labels of organic agriculture, I look at how actors in the food network recontextualized the official labels, producing their own kind of transparency, and thereby constituted themselves as different from and superior to the state in matters of ecological agriculture, food safety and sustainability.

Transparency in the Organic Grocery Store

In May 2015, the Chengdu consumer association's new shop opened for business. Wu Yingying, the head of the association, said she had volunteered to be its unpaid manager. During an interview, she explained that this shop had replaced four temporary pickup locations. Those were in different parts of the city, were run entirely by volunteers, and only open to members. In the new shop, two paid clerks were responsible for the everyday tasks. These clerks had previously worked at other supermarkets but had no experience with ecological agriculture or food networks. In contrast, Wu Yingying was familiar with food cooperatives from living and studying abroad in the US and in Europe.

Wu Yingying explained that the consumer association had opened the shop for several reasons. There were problems at the pickup locations. Either the rent was too high, or the landlords or other tenants no longer wanted them to distribute their food there. Moreover, the members of the consumer associations no longer had time for all the necessary work, which they had performed voluntarily from 2005 until 2015. Finally, Wu Yingying recounted that they had decided to open the shop to nonmembers because it would benefit both producers and members: producers could expect a more stable sales volume, while members would have consistent access to a broader variety of products.

A branch of one of Chengdu's most popular organic grocery chains is located directly next door to the consumer association's shop. During the interview, Wu Yingying, the head of the association, drew my attention to this neighbouring store and, with another member of the consumer association, urged me to take a look. When

I returned, they asked me if I had noticed that the two shops were ‘completely different’. They suggested that the store’s only goal was to sell products and to make money.

A food blogger from Chengdu also took this spatial proximity of the shops as an inspiration to contrast the two. Like Wu Yingying and other members of the consumer association, this blogger presented herself as cosmopolitan.² She used an English name and had mentioned in another post that her favourite places she had visited in the world were Switzerland and Hong Kong. The blog entry about the shops appeared on an organic lifestyle website that claimed to have been among the first platforms for this issue in China. Focusing on differences in design and practices, she used two ethnographic vignettes of her visits to construe the two shops as two distinct models. She called these two models ‘CSA’ and ‘capital operation’.

Here is my translation of the blogger’s description of her first impression of the organic grocery store:

It looks high end, classy, top grade and has a compact layout, a fashionable interior, advanced equipment, passionate staff, a complete range of products, attentive service. Unfortunately, it was forbidden to take photos. As soon as one of the employees saw me entering the shop, he quickly approached me and welcomed me with a smile. He introduced the history of the chain and the organic products, being able to impart a lot of content at once, answering all questions asked – it’s clear that the company’s training was successful. The shop assistant told me that the company has several production sites in Sichuan, and that except for fruit, some grains and seafood all products come from their own farms. Customers can return food within forty-eight hours if they are not satisfied with the freshness or the taste. . . . Later, he persuaded me to leave my phone number, offering a big gift box worth 200 RMB that would be delivered by a delivery service . . . my consumer-self left perfectly satisfied; my organic-journalist-self left with a heart full of doubts.³

Interestingly, she interprets the activities of the employee as the effect of not his personal commitment but rather his institutional duty, stressing that ‘it’s clear that the company’s training was successful’.

In contrast, the blogger emphasizes personal reputation and direct social contact in the introduction to the shop of the consumer association. She mentions that anyone very familiar with ecological agriculture and CSA in China would have already heard about this consumer association. The blogger then introduces Wu Yingying as someone who had run the CSA since its very beginning and as the founder of the shop. She recounts how she had already experienced

Wu Yingying's uncompromising attitude towards the products at an organic trade fair in Shanghai and that at a later forum about 'natural life' she had witnessed even more intense criticism by Wu Yingying. She tells her readers that Wu Yingying periodically travels around the country in search for satisfactory products. Without a 'personal inspection' or a 'personal testing', she would never put the products on sale in the shop. This is the duty she gives herself as the person in charge of the shop. Finally, she writes that Wu Yingying's character made a deep impression on her, describing her as candid, frank and honest, and as someone who would not make insincere remarks out of politeness. The blogger supposes that this is probably the only way she can make the shop work and gain the 'moms' trust in her choices.⁴

The blogger then promises that what one will see upon entering the consumer association's shop is 'completely different' from at the store of the commercial organic grocery chain:

In the shop, there is only one female worker filling shelves with goods. When I walk into the shop, she is busy with the work in her hands; she does not raise her head and does not greet me. The storefront is not big, approximately twenty square metres. The simple interior resembles a traditional farm shop opened in the city; upon entering the door, it evokes my memories of walking in the countryside.

In contrast, when my doctoral supervisor visited me in the field, her first thought was that the shop resembled food co-ops and small organic and health food shops in Austria and Germany. This already hints at the domain multiplicity of performed state boundaries, in this case overlapping stage designs of Western civil society and traditional Chinese rural community as non-state others of the state-supported capitalist food regime.

The blogger then goes on to describe the props used in this performance that for her differentiate the consumer association from the organic grocery store:

Because it is summer and the vegetables are placed in a winnowing basket and not refrigerated, they are a bit dried out and the outward appearance is not very good.⁵ On the shelves, there are many kinds of hand-made foods with limited processing: the packaging is simple, the labels are handwritten; there are also some completely manufactured things: for example, toothpaste and snacks. Customers who are not familiar with Wu Yingying or the origin and development of the shop will presumably leave the shop completely puzzled after having walked around the shop

for the very first time, especially if the shop assistant does not actively introduce the situation; however, if one is slightly more careful, one can discover second-hand books in the shop, including books and materials about rural reconstruction and ecological agriculture.⁶

This blogger's account recognizes the boundary work of the consumer association, through which they distinguish their association's shop as community-oriented from the store next door as state-regulated and market-oriented. At the same time, her evaluation of the acknowledged difference is more ambiguous. On the one hand, the blogger seems sympathetic to the consumer association's shop. She praises its simple, traditional 'peasant' style and values the diligence and hard work put into it. Knowing Wu Yingying personally, she trusts her. On the other hand, she also points out alleged deficiencies in comparison to the organic grocery store. She asks if the 'resistance to the current business system' comes at the expense of 'customer interests'. She wonders if this would not eventually lead to the outright rejection of technology and science. She points to the consumer association's simple and crude packaging that sometimes even lacks a tag with the dates of production and expiration. She mentions skin care products that have not been tested and processed food of unclear composition. Aside from the legal question, 'normal consumers' would also not trust such kinds of products, she asserts. Despite her ambivalent evaluations, one can still discern a specific kind of transparency that she contrasts to the transparency offered by the state's organic certification schemes.

Transparency in the Consumer Association

In this section, I identify three characteristics of the transparency produced by the consumer association to make its 'civil society' and 'community' identity stand out and represent the organic grocery store as a 'capitalist' other following the state's market-oriented path to organic agriculture. All three elements emphasize the benefits of personalized relations in the food network.

First, transparency is produced through the invisible but explorable. By showing that not everything is already transparent at first glance, the consumer association suggests to visitors that there is still something invisible that can be personally explored. The consumer association's employee acts unobtrusively, as if the goal of the shop were not to sell things. Instead of delivering well-prepared information to 'passively receiving' customers, the blogger claims that this

self-declared CSA project offers opportunities for potential members of the community to become active in it, from enquiring and finding out for themselves, to participation by consumers in the shop's operation as described by the blogger:

They [the women] not only organize group purchases but can also assume work responsibilities in the shop when help is needed: for example, dividing, packaging, preparing and delivering stuff. Although laborious, this participation makes her [a specific mom with children in a Waldorf school] feel enriched. The shop has a crowd of consumers that help others by helping themselves. They build close relations with peasant persons that are not only relations between buyers and sellers but that also involve trust. When both sides get to know each other well, be it the producers or consumers, they would treat this friendship all the kinder.

Here, the blogger invokes both 'market' and 'mutuality', the notions Gudeman (2009) views as constituting the dialectic tension of all economies. The blogger presents the relation between producers and consumers as growing ever closer to mutuality and more distant from the market. This distancing of the market did not only happen discursively: I could observe a division of labour in the interaction with customers. The salesperson tended to be responsible for the parts of the interaction associated with numbers, such as measuring goods, calculating and receiving customers' payments. Wu Yingying and other members took on these tasks only when no salesperson was available. Members would help with other kinds of tasks, such as arranging the products or cleaning. Most often, they would sit together and talk, sometimes in the front of the shop around a big table. If nonmembers showed interest in a product, the volunteer manager or the members would not only introduce the product but also include background stories about its producers.

For example, when a customer asked about some unfamiliar seeds, Wu Yingying explained not only that this was called quinoa, but that 'Elder Brother Ma' grew it in Hebei Province. She pointed to a poster with a photo and description of his farm and continued that he had just started trying to cultivate it in the last year. Before, she had only seen imported quinoa, usually from South America, but Elder Brother Ma had been surprisingly successful. She was very happy that a 'localized' version would now be available. She explained that the cultivation of quinoa in China had been mentioned in very old books. She told the customer that she had already seen more than seven colours of quinoa, that it was said that white quinoa has the highest nutritional value and that quinoa looked very beautiful in

the fields but the harvest was hard work. She recounted that she had gone to the fields to ‘investigate and study it first hand through participation in the physical work’ (*dundian* 蹲点) and added that she liked Elder Brother Ma as he was different from most other peasants. He had a ‘spirit of research’ and was skilled in using agricultural tools. Before tilling the soil with his own hands, he had worked in the NGO sector, she added. The natural conditions at his place were very poor for agriculture, but his parents had come with him and helped him cultivate the land. He also grew popcorn and tomatoes that looked like flowers from above.

This style of transparency through ‘participation’ and ‘community building’ reveals additional information to the customer who seeks it. Without face-to-face interaction, customers might not understand what they are seeing, because of the performance of difference from market culture. They ‘might leave the shop completely puzzled’, as the blogger writes. In her description, this staging of an explorable invisibility is set against the kind of transparency provided by the organic grocery chain, an unexplorable visibility. She represents the organic grocery store’s employees’ active attentiveness as rendering customers passive: behind the active presentation of certain information, the blogger suspects that something else might be concealed. This impression is strengthened by the store’s policies against consumers making things visible themselves by exploring. The blogger stresses:

The organic grocery store did not let me take photos and stopped me. On a trip, friends wanted to visit two production sites on their way but were coldly turned away: only the site in Chengdu is open to outsiders. But the Chengdu site is just a farm for leisure and amusement. We want to see how vegetables are planted, not horses reared in pens.

This statement’s claim to a right to investigate personally and its rejection of amusement in beautified surroundings reiterate an appreciation for diligent work. Furthermore, it points to the second distinctive characteristic of this style of transparency through which ‘civil society’ and ‘community’ were performed: the visually imperfect.

The consumer association produces transparency by displaying imperfections in the surface appearance, implying to customers that there is no need for additional representation. The dried-out vegetables are a case in point, but the simple wooden shelves also suggest that representing commodities in the best light was not considered very important. This left the impression that there was no boundary between consumer association insiders and potential customers as

outsiders. They had nothing to hide behind a surface, so there was no need for the kind of staged transparency seen at the organic grocery store, which, if present, might even have suggested a lack of trust and personal relations in the food network.

The blogger criticizes the visualizations of certain scenes and certain knowledge that were continuously imposed on the customer in the organic grocery shop. The shop assistants' 'brainwashing' was comparable to advertising by brands. However, this picture omits the consumer association's careful consideration of its symbolic visualizations. For example, Wu Yingying and Dong Jie had discussed the simple and natural appearance of the shop during the first vegetable delivery. It seems crucial to me that the blogger did not consider the representations at the consumer association's shop actively chosen like those at the organic grocery store next door.

A third distinctive feature of the consumer association's transparency was the shop's heterogeneous materiality. In her post, the blogger observes that unique handmade products prevailed and that even labels and price tags were handwritten. The way the consumer association's shop staged organic certification provides an even more striking example for discussing this third style of transparency as a performance of civil society and community that distanced the state.

Staging State Certification

Starting in the 1990s, the Chinese government introduced various standards for 'green' (*lüse* 绿色) (1990), 'organic' (*youji* 有机) (1994, redefined in 2005) and 'hazard-free' (*wugonghai* 无公害, literally 'without public harm' and sometimes also translated as 'pollution-free' or 'harmless') (2001) agricultural products (Thiers 2002; 2006; Scott et al. 2014). Activist scholars have argued that

unlike in the West where civil society-based initiatives have spearheaded the development of ecological agriculture, in China, state intervention has played a much stronger role. Paradoxically, while globally, ecological agriculture began its emergence as an 'alternative' to subvert industrial agriculture, in China it began already 'conventionalized' and is serving in many ways as a vehicle for reinforcing the government's priorities for agricultural modernization and neo-productivism. (Scott et al. 2014: 159)

In the early 1990s, state ministries set up the first Chinese certifying authorities, the Green Food Development Centre (CGFDC) and the Organic Food Development Centre (OFDC). The Ministry of

Agriculture established and initially funded CGFDC. Its certification scheme for ‘green’ food targeted the domestic market and still permitted the use of some comparatively safe chemical synthetic substances in the food production process. In 1993, CGFDC joined the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). OFDC is a branch of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, which started its ‘organic’ certification programme in 1994. Due to its initial export-orientation, OFDC used standards established by foreign regulators in jurisdictions such as the European Union, Japan or the United States. It joined IFOAM in 2002. These two state agencies, CGFDC and OFDC, were the most important certifiers in China and competed for market shares (Thiers 2002: 365; Scott et al. 2014: 161).⁷

There was no linear process of moving towards ever-stricter standards. In 2001, the Ministry of Agriculture instituted a standard for ‘hazard-free’ food, which aimed to address the problem of agrochemical contamination and related food safety concerns. This less stringent standard was introduced as producers had not used the ‘green’ standard as widely as had been hoped for. In 2005, the ‘organic’ certification was no longer based on foreign standards but reformulated by the Chinese certifier itself, signalling a turn to the domestic market (Scott et al. 2014: 160–61).

Both the organic grocery chain’s store and the consumer association’s shop sold products with state certification. However, they contextualized them in different ways.

Affirming Certification in the Organic Grocery Store

As mentioned above, members of the consumer association prompted me to visit the organic grocery store next door to look for ‘complete difference’. One of the first things I noticed was that there were several posters in front of the organic grocery store. There were photos of fresh-looking vegetables and fruits, as well as smiling, Western-looking faces. Inside the store, I could not miss a big map of the world showing the origin of products from Europe, the US and Australia, like organic tomato sauce imported from Italy. Outside of the store, a slogan urged paying for organic food instead of cheaper food that might cause illnesses. A sidewalk sign presented the three labels of the state’s certification scheme for organic agriculture as authoritative information for the customers, visually representing the hierarchy of the scheme in the shape of a pyramid with four layers in different shades of green. From the dark green layer at the bottom

up to its light-green tip, the pyramid was labelled in English with the terms ‘general’, ‘pollution-free’, ‘green’ and ‘organic’. More detailed Chinese captions explained that the hazard-free food at the bottom allowed a wide range of agrochemicals, that the green food in the middle only allowed certain agrochemicals in regulated amounts, and that the organic food on top was the only one that allowed neither synthetic fertilizers and pesticides nor genetically modified organisms and provided traceability for all products.

Hiding Labels as Markers of the State

The consumer association presented the certification scheme in a different way. While the organic grocery store next door claimed that everything they sold met the organic standard, only some of the products in the shop of the consumer association had been certified. No official information of the certification schemes was presented. Nonetheless, Wu Yingying had explained to Wang Zhaochen and Dong Jie, during a tour through the shop at the time of the first delivery, that ecological products that did not yet have organic certification were stored on the lower shelves, while those with the organic label could be found at eye level and higher in the shelves. In this hierarchical spatial order, uncertified ecological products appeared subordinated to the certified organic products. In this set up, the ecological was staged as not-yet-organic.⁸ However, as three examples below will show, the presentation of certification was more ambivalent, less authoritative, and thereby distanced the state from the consumer association.

First, only some products came in packaging with logos and labels. Products lacking certification were also available at the consumer association’s shop. Moreover, even some certified products lacked labels. The peasant cooperative from Daxi Village not only delivered noncertified ‘ecological’ vegetables twice a week but also supplied the consumer association with rice. Although the cooperative’s rice was certified as ‘green’ in 2015 and was already in the process of acquiring the label of ‘organic’, this was not eye-catchingly visualized in the shop of the consumer association. The cooperative could have packaged the rice in small plastic bags, as it did for other occasions such as trade fairs, but instead after it was husked at the mill it was put into big twenty- to thirty-kilogram sacks. Those that were delivered to the consumer association in Chengdu were plain white with no logo of the cooperative or enterprise and no certification label, only the weight and the name of the rice variety, which Kang Sunbin

wrote on the bag with a red poster pen. This style of packaging was, I argue, yet another part of performing civil society and community into existence by avoiding the visibility of the state's certification schemes and thus distancing the consumer association from other market actors selling organic produce. The hiding of markers of the state in front of certain audiences contributes to the segregated multiplicity of performed state boundaries (see also Chapter 1), in this case endowing products of Daxi's peasant cooperative with the aura of the state for those who value it but not for others sceptical of it.

Negotiating Certification for the Ecological Village

Dong Jie was the one who established the business contacts between the consumer association and the peasant cooperative from Daxi Village, but he was not the only person involved in marketing the cooperative's productions. In 2010, when it was new and lacked resources, the village party secretary Wang Zhaochen had persuaded a local entrepreneur, his former schoolmate Wen Erqiang, to invest in constructing a rice mill in the village. He also tried to create a market for the products of the cooperative by using his existing contacts and establishing new ones.

This was no easy undertaking. For example, the cooperative first tried to sell what they called 'ecological' vegetables through a subscription programme in Yinhe City, the county town, in 2013, but by the time I returned, in autumn of 2014, they had already abandoned this scheme. The very small group of consumers in Yinhe City wanted more variety, while the leaders of the cooperative argued that they were already growing more different crops in the vegetable unit's fields than was economically viable. Furthermore, home delivery was time- and cost-intensive. As the Chengdu consumer association's shop was then only buying a small part of the harvest, the remaining vegetables were still sold at the lower prices for conventionally grown food offered at the old market in Yinhe City.

Together with Wen Erqiang, who was more experienced in dealing with higher-level officials, Wang dealt with public authorities to obtain the required business registrations, as well as applying for government project money. While Dong Jie argued that there was no need for certification because of his contacts with organized urban consumers, Wang Zhaochen and Wen Erqiang applied for green and organic certification. When Wen Erqiang presented his new business to friends and acquaintances, I heard him pointing to collaborations with universities and media reports about ecological agriculture in

the village. Even more importantly, he often emphasized proudly that their rice had ‘state certification’ for green and organic foods, which would enable them to sell their products throughout China. For him, state certification was highly relevant. While he had earned a locally respectable income from his original, dusty business collecting and compressing used cotton rugs in his small hometown and selling them in other provinces, this did not grant him the same respect from acquaintances of a higher status. State certification enabled him to imagine himself as a successful and modern entrepreneur.

Dong Jie, on the contrary, argued that the consumers with an environmentalist outlook organized in associations in Chengdu did not consider state certification necessary and so the expensive registration process was a waste of money. Indeed, they might even interpret a focus on certification as prioritizing profit over ecological agriculture, as he warned Wang Zhaochen and Wen Erqiang. To consumers in the food network and to me, on the other hand, he defended the certification of the cooperative’s rice on the grounds that they had probably done so because ‘the state’ offered them subsidies. As mentioned in the first example above, certification as a marker of both state and market was rendered invisible in the consumer association’s shop.

Crossing Out the State

As we continued our tour through the shop, I noticed that parts of the labels on some packages had been crossed out with a black poster pen. This is the second example of how the consumer association staged certification in a way that distanced the state. This time, distancing was achieved without hiding markers but by rendering them visibly irrelevant. Wu Yingying explained to us that these imported products had been certified as organic in Taiwan, which was not recognized by the Chinese authorities.

At first glance, organic certification appears to be taken seriously by the consumer association, otherwise certified products would not have been placed on the shelves separately from, and above, noncertified products. On the other hand, the organic label was here staged as insignificant. This product from Taiwan was placed on the same shelf as the organic products, even though the certification had been crossed out according to the Chinese state’s regulation. This staging of the product raises the question of who could legitimately claim to establish what was ‘organic’ through rituals of certification, but it also naturalizes the notion of ‘organic’. It denies that rules and rit-

uals of certification are centrally involved in producing an ‘organic’ product. It suggests that the agricultural product and the farming practice that produced it are indeed ‘organic’ and would be valuable with or without the certificate and the processes in laboratories and offices that go into producing it. The information infrastructure that enables the products’ circulation as organic remains hidden in the background (Lammer 2024).

Furthermore, at first glance, the Chinese state appears to be recognized. The rule is followed, the label is made invisible and the product is not sold with the label ‘organic’. At the same time, the way in which the state’s rule has been followed is highly visible, as the black ink catches the eye. Thereby, the state and its decision concerning the validity of foreign certification schemes is challenged at the same time as it is accepted. Through the black ink, the consumer association’s shop makes this negotiation of organic certification between states visible to member and nonmember customers alike, while through the placement among other certified products, the consumer association stages this negotiation between states as irrelevant. While acknowledging the rules of the Chinese state, it simultaneously sets itself up against it, representing the state as incompetent in the matter. The consumer association creates credibility among members and potential customers by presenting its selection of certain ‘healthy’ and ‘ecological’ foods from specific producers as superior to the state’s institutional certifying mechanisms and regulations.

Mirroring Rule-Bound Certification

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Wu Yingying and her associates also rejected state certification as a Western import. According to them, ‘organic’ agriculture was still about ‘controlling nature’, albeit no longer with ‘chemical’ but with ‘organic’ inputs, while the older Chinese notion of ‘ecological’ agriculture was about ‘following the rules of nature’ (see also Chapter 1). Furthermore, she charged that the organic standards were too rigid and too high for many producers to start the transition process on their own.⁹ While other distributors only looked for producers who already fulfilled the organic standard, the consumer association understood ecological agriculture as a transformative process enabled by the flexibility of a mode of association that Fei Xiaotong had ascribed to traditional rural China.

On the day of the delivery, before the shop formally opened, two curious women in their fifties entered and carefully examined some

fruit. After a while, Wu Yingying struck up a conversation with one of them and frankly confessed that not everything they sold in the shop met the organic standard. She pointed to the pears and apples and said that they had been sprayed with pesticides two and three times, respectively. In *this* shop, they knew the producers and disclosed such information, she emphasized. The woman expressed approval and added that the most important question was when the pesticides had been applied.

In this third example, the lack of certification was presented not as a weakness of the producers but as a strength of the consumer association's form of transparency that disclosed information face-to-face, rather than trying to uphold a perfect image and selling only certified 'organic' products to unrelated outsiders. By performing flexible personal relations as the opposite of the state's rigid certification, the consumer association mirrors and thereby reproduces these bureaucratic institutions' self-representation as rule bound. However, the positive view that this rule boundedness ensures the reliability of certification schemes against the corrupting influence of personal ties is replaced with a negative evaluation that highlights an alleged lack of adaptability to peasants' needs. This mirroring renders the flexibility and transformative potential of institutions such as certification agencies invisible.

Anthropologists who study bureaucracy have long pointed out that formal organization is not fixed but always being made. Therefore, it makes sense to speak of 'bureaucratization' (Kirsch 2003: 217) rather than bureaucracy. Let us look at an example of bureaucratization of organic certification in the US state of Montana:

As the most immediate interface with the 'necessary evil' of certification, organic inspectors were the most common and illustrative example of actors who were often seen as helpful [by farmers] despite, rather than because of, the character of their institution. . . . [O]rganic *inspectors* were often highly respected and appreciated, as their social position was typically viewed as closer to that of the farmer than that of the certifying body. (Carlisle 2015: 7)

For example, one farmer said 'that he had developed his network of grower friends through his work as a certifier'¹⁰ and that he and his colleagues acted 'as extension specialists instead of just fact gatherers' (ibid.: 10).

Liz Carlisle (2015: 8) uses this story to argue that organic audits should be considered a 'ritual of rural life'. Reading her ethnography through the lens of New Ritual Theory (Bell 1992), each organic cer-

tification ritual needs to include certain elements, characters and sequences. However, their arrangement is not fixed and participants in the ritual of certification have room to exercise agency, such as Carlisle's certifier's ability to downplay 'fact gathering' and emphasize advice. At this point, organic inspectors appear as 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980) with discretionary power who flexibly make certification rather than only implement it. Personal relations and the flexibility they enabled were not the essential substance of 'alternative' food networks that was absent in state certification. Rather, mirroring the self-representation of certification as rule-bound allowed actors in the food network to perform personal relations as a marker of the non-state other.

Performing the Ecological Village

Since the consumer association's transparency included individual experiences and personal inspections of the producers' farming practices, urban middle-class consumers 'went down to the countryside' as well. Different materialities were identified by these visitors as markers of the ecological or its opposite. How Dong Jie, the leaders of the cooperative and other rural citizens negotiated these associations with references to the state is the topic of this section.

Justifying Agricultural Practices with the State

Dong Jie not only connected consumer associations to the Daxi Village peasant cooperative but facilitated my access to this self-styled ecological village for my ethnographic research project. As I described in the introduction, visitors to the village were welcomed by slogans highlighting its ecological agriculture. During my first weeks there, it seemed that almost any villager I met, especially for the first time, would start the conversation by claiming that they, or the whole village, practised ecological, organic or green agriculture. To back up this claim, they denied using agrochemicals, chemical fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides, which they explained were not good for health and the environment. Some would offer more sophisticated versions detailing not only the farming practices they avoided but those they used instead: electric lights as a means for pest control, rapeseed press cake and manure as substitutes for chemical fertilizer, or bio-gas slurry for both fertilizer and pest control. In addition to such conversations outside the fields, visitors like me could read the activities

and material conditions in the fields as signs of the ecological or not ecological, which therefore also often provoked explanations.

In April and May 2015, villagers in Daxi Village transplanted rice seedlings. I once again followed the narrow muddy paths to where five people were already planting them in the ankle-deep water of a small field. Building on my limited experience of the last few days, I did my best to help plant this rice, intended for family consumption, without disrupting the others' work. The families' relatives, who were also their neighbours, also helped. One person had been responsible for digging up the seedlings from the non-irrigated land where they had been planted and then sprouted. We planted them in the paddy field in rows, but in a neighbouring field an elderly couple and their grandson were using a different technique. After covering the soil with plastic sheeting, they made holes in a triangular grid pattern using a wooden template before planting the seedlings. In the field on the other side, a middle-aged couple used yet another technique: instead of tilling the soil before transplanting, these villagers planted the seedlings in untilled soil, making holes for them with their fingers with greater difficulty. Afterwards, they covered the field with rape-seed straw that had been harvested only a few weeks earlier.

These three different techniques had been introduced by agronomists in recent decades. Until the 1970s, rice was sowed in irrigated fields and seedlings transplanted twice. This method was abandoned in the 1980s, when an agricultural extension officer promoted a labour-saving technique. Since then, the villagers had started seedlings on non-irrigated land and then transplanted them only once, directly into rows in the irrigated fields. The plastic sheeting technique had been promoted since 2010 by a scientist from Sichuan Agricultural University who claimed that it would increase yields by retaining more moisture and warmth in the soil so planting could take place earlier in the spring. That way, after the first harvest, the rice would sprout again and produce a second harvest and higher total yield.

The scientist stressed that this method was also in line with standards of organic agriculture. Dong Jie recounted that he had first enthusiastically supported this method, but now he rejected it as not ecological. Not only did plastic residues stay in the soil, but the plastic mulch destroyed micro-organisms. In the long run, this would lower the quality of the soil, and consequently yields as well. Therefore, he was now promoting the technique of mulching the untilled soil with straw.

Standing barefoot in the water, I found it less warm and smelly than the water in another household's fields the previous day. Those

had been prepared with manure, as the harvest was intended for sale to the village's peasant cooperative; this time the man of the household had scattered a greyish powder before the rest of us gently pressed the rice seedlings into the soil. When I asked him what kind of fertilizer this was, he claimed that it was manure. When I replied that it did not look like manure, one woman smiled and said he was trying to trick me. The man's brother admitted that it was 'phosphate fertilizer', and I could also see this printed on the package. Another woman reacted by gesturing that he should keep quiet and whispering not to tell me. In return, the brother justified his revelation by arguing that ecological agriculture only meant giving up pesticides and herbicides so using this mineral fertilizer was acceptable.

Because people like me, the ethnographer, visited this village that pursued a development strategy of ecological agriculture, villagers became implicated in negotiations of the ecological. In the situation mentioned above, my question was interpreted differently. While two villagers read it as an inspection of ecological agriculture, the other two at first did not. Seeing the reaction of the others, the brother started to refer to the various inputs regulated by the organic certification schemes.

A few weeks later that June, I was working at the vegetable facility of the peasant cooperative. One worker, a 50-year-old woman, commented to me about another woman from the village whom we had seen spraying the broad-spectrum herbicide glyphosate on her paddy fields. She smiled at me and said, in a jocular tone, that this woman was doing bad things. Switching to a more serious voice, she first justified the use of agrochemicals by the location of the field in the neighbouring village. She then argued that anyone could apply pesticides and chemical fertilizer on their fields if they ate the rice themselves. Those who used agrochemicals and ate the rice from these fields were 'not afraid of dying', she added, again smilingly, apparently referring to and making fun of the urban food anxieties that were expressed by middle-class consumers visiting the village. It was legitimate to use agrochemicals, if one did not sell the rice to the cooperative, she asserted again in a more serious voice. Pointing to another worker of the vegetable unit, she claimed that there were also some who did not use agrochemicals on their own rice fields. Another villager passing by overheard our conversation. He argued that the peasants had no other option than to use herbicides, as well as urea and phosphate fertilizer. Otherwise, farming would be too labour intensive. They did not have enough time to cultivate their personal crops without fertilizer, as the yields would be too low. Finally,

he stressed that these ‘low toxicity’ agrochemicals had no negative impact on the environment.

This time, the rural citizens did not appeal to the state’s certification schemes. Instead, the woman based her first justification of the use of herbicides on the state’s administrative division between villages. Her second drew on the idea of a public–private split. Invoking this split enabled her to acknowledge the legitimacy of urban consumers’ health concerns in the public sphere of the market while setting aside their desires and demands by arguing that the household was and should be a unit for autonomous decisions when, for example, the health of the household members is concerned. The passerby rejected the demand for ecological farming by not only pointing to the amount of work and time it required but drawing on a different state discourse that stresses agricultural productivity. Furthermore, to counter health and environmental concerns, he invoked a pesticide classification that was part of the state regulations on safe use of pesticides. In their justifications of different agricultural practices of their neighbours, these rural citizens referenced various instances of state regulation both to claim practices as (more or less) ecological and to defend those they could or did not want to claim as ecological. They linked neither the ecological nor the non-ecological exclusively to the state.

Preparing the Stage for Consumer Visits

Rather than merely relying on villagers to improvise explanations, the hosts of urban consumers, NGO staff, journalists and officials carefully arranged their visits in advance. When such occasions came up, Dong Jie called on Village Party Secretary Wang Zhaochen or Village Leader Kang Sunbin, sometimes at short notice, to prepare everything in the village. This usually meant that they mobilized Group Leader Wang Yiyou and other members of Villagers’ Group No. 1, where the village committee was located. They instructed villagers to pick up litter along the village road and sweep the village square.¹¹ Those whose homes were near the village committee office building were expected to sweep their courtyards as well. Wang Zhaochen’s daughter-in-law or wife was asked to clean the office.

Some product samples, such as packets of rice or vegetables, were prepared for display at the rice mill or village square. Display panels representing the history of the cooperative were very often set up as well. They featured faded photos of earlier visitors from research institutions and universities from China and from abroad, as well as

photos of newspaper reports about the cooperative, which were used to establish the reputation of the ecological village and its peasant cooperative. Those who had previously visited the village became part of what was represented to later visitors. During such visits, Dong Jie or Wang Zhaochen's daughter-in-law often took photos, further enhancing the importance of the ecological village for the next group of visitors.

Furthermore, Dong Jie prepared the village leaders to meet the expectations of visiting urban consumers. In early November 2013, on my second day in Daxi Village, Dong Jie was about to show me around. On this occasion, I overheard a discussion between him and Village Leader Kang Sunbin. Dong Jie announced that some consumers from Chengdu who had recently founded a consumer association wanted to visit the village in five days. Fan Chenlu, a woman with several years of experience practising ecological agriculture in the suburbs of Chengdu, planned the excursion for the group. Dong Jie therefore told Kang Sunbin about two issues he anticipated might give the consumers misgivings: pigs and polytunnels.

Regarding the pigs, he asked Kang Sunbin why the cooperative engaged in animal husbandry: 'Is the goal to sell products, or to do ecological tourism, or to produce manure for plant production?' He emphasized that his personal opinion was that it should only be for the latter, and certainly not about selling animal products. Kang Sunbin replied that it would not be possible to raise pigs without selling them. Dong Jie answered that it was in fact not even necessary to raise pigs at all – there were alternatives to manure. Fan Chenlu, the woman who was about to visit, practised ecological agriculture without animal manure, using rapeseed oil cake instead. In Daxi Village, the conditions were even better for this: here, they were already planting rapeseed, but in the suburbs she had to buy it. Dong Jie stressed that her vegetables grew very well indeed. Hence, he proposed organizing a discussion between the consumers and producers when they visited.

Dong Jie added that he thought it was also necessary to raise the issue of the polytunnels and asked what their purpose was. Apparently, they had already discussed this issue, and Kang Sunbin replied that his goal was definitely not to produce 'out of season' vegetables – they would only use the polytunnel to overwinter plants. Otherwise, frost would kill the plants and he would not be able to provide vegetables for the consumers. Dong Jie asked if there were other ways to do so, as the customers of ecological agriculture were dedicated environmentalists, and if they saw the polytunnel they would sus-

pect profit maximization and doubt that the cooperative was really practising ecological agriculture. Kang Sunbin replied that there was no alternative and defended himself by pointing out that he had only nine polytunnels and that they were made of bamboo rather than metal. Apparently, he expected that consumers would interpret both the small scale of the operation and the kind of materials used as markers of the ecological. Dong Jie insisted that they would need to bring up the issue themselves to make the consumers understand that it was not about planting out-of-season vegetables for profit. If not, the polytunnels would immediately hurt the cooperative's reputation. Kang Sunbin agreed that everyone should sit together and state the pros and cons of polytunnels.

I understand Dong Jie's conversation with Kang Sunbin not only as an attempt to change the latter's perspective on pigs and polytunnels. Despite Dong Jie's critique, the cooperative continued to raise pigs and kept its polytunnels through 2014 and 2015. When they expanded the vegetable unit with a second facility at another villagers' group, they also built new polytunnels there. While the cooperative did not necessarily follow every suggestion of the township agronomist, supporting the cooperative while simultaneously criticizing certain aspects did not diminish Dong Jie's legitimacy. Rather, his critique strengthened his position and credibility vis-a-vis urban consumer associations as it could be understood to demonstrate his personal commitment. His conversation with Kang Sunbin should thus be understood as an attempt to orchestrate a performance of transparency during the urban consumers' visit by encouraging the village leader to speak openly about certain issues. This was another aspect of preparing villagers for urban consumers' excursions to the ecological village.

When Fan Chenlu visited Daxi Village with the new consumer association from Chengdu in 2013, the lunch arranged for them included three different kinds of rice produced by the cooperative. As mentioned in the opening vignette of this book, such banquets offered an opportunity for Dong Jie to distance himself from the productivist state's taste for meat-heavy meals. Strengthening his positioning on the side of civil society, Dong Jie also often linked markers of the non-ecological with the state, dissociating himself from both.

The Non-ecological as a State Boundary Marker

Visitor tours were led through the vegetable unit's fields. Visitors saw birds, butterflies, earthworms, caterpillars and insect-gnawed cauli-

flower leaves and the like as signs of ecological agriculture. During one tour of a small group of urban consumers, Dong Jie supported such interpretations by telling stories of visiting experts having seen animals and plants there that were rarely found outside nature conservation areas. One visitor described the small fields and the weeds in a mandarin grove as ‘disorderly’. Dong Jie confirmed this as another marker of ecological agriculture, complaining that the state-supported ideal of monocultures and sterile weed-free soil disturbed the self-regulation of nature. Biodiversity, he stressed, was a good thing, not a bad one: many experts only tried to solve the superficial problems without looking for their deeper causes. With this explanation, Dong Jie was linking the non-ecological to the state.

As the tour continued, a woman spotted a sponge gourd (loofah) with a withered blossom in another field. She interpreted this as a product of ecological agriculture and claimed that the sponge gourds the supermarket sold were immense due to the use of chemical fertilizer. Even if refrigerated, a 75-centimetre sponge gourd would keep growing, and its blossom would not wither. What she did not know was that this field with the withered blossom did not belong to the cooperative’s vegetable unit. As in this case, visitors looking at the ecological village sometimes read any material object as a sign of the cooperative’s ecological agriculture, even when they were looking at fields where households cultivated vegetables for sale on the local market (rather than through the cooperative) and had applied chemical fertilizer and agrochemicals. Such interpretations were less problematic for the self-styled ecological village than when other material objects were read as markers of non-ecological practices.

When the group returned from the vegetable unit of the cooperative to the village square, it was hot, and we rested in the shadow of a tree next to a pond. Looking at a crack in the concrete embankment, Dong Jie remarked that this was neither sustainable nor ecological. Earth banks were the natural habitats of animals like frogs, which could not live on an embankment like this. Concrete, he sighed, was the current standard for state-financed projects – one saw it everywhere. He thought that the village committee had probably only undertaken this construction project because state funding was available. Such concrete embankments might seem cheaper than the stone walls they had built in the past, but they were not as durable. He pointed out that the concrete already showed signs of wear, even though it was only one year old.

Other instances where Dong Jie associated the state with signs of the non-ecological included subsidies for mechanization and the lo-

cal state's distribution of a proprietary 'straw decomposition agent' to villagers when they implemented a policy to 'return the straw to the fields'. While Dong Jie approved of this composting policy in general, he rejected the use of agrochemicals to speed up the process, considering it another state attempt to control nature.

To be sure, Dong Jie did not manage to turn every sign of non-ecological practices into a marker of the state. Spots of dead grass testified to the use of herbicides. Plastic residue in the fields showed where plastic sheeting had been used to cover the soil rather than straw. Ashes in the fields indicated that straw had been burned rather than returned to the fields to cover the soil. When visitors pointed to these material objects, which they deemed non-ecological, Dong Jie blamed the peasants, whom he said needed more 'participatory education' rather than 'top-down' preaching (Chapter 1). In this way, he reminded visitors of the flexibility of personal relations in community-supported ecological agriculture, in contrast to the rigidity of state regulation. This avoided another possible interpretation: that state regulations had been ignored and the regulators responsible for enforcing them had looked the other way when it came to those with whom they entertained personal relations. This other interpretation was not unfamiliar to organized urban consumers. It was an interpretation that was akin to the declared distrust in possibly corrupt state certification.

Dong's tours familiarized visitors with a repertoire of state boundaries that included the non-ecological as another boundary marker. His criticism of the non-ecological – including organic certification – thus allowed him to position himself outside of the state. As the non-ecological served as a marker, different scripts of the boundary between state and non-state could be performed with it. In the food network, the enactment of two different models of community combined two possible forms of criticisms that were linked to contrasting ideas about personal relations and the state in China and the West.

Conclusion: Domain Multiplicity

This chapter started from the observation that personal relations were regarded as producing either 'corruption' or 'transparency' and 'flexibility', both by actors in a Sichuan food network and in the social science literature on regulation and food safety. Performed state boundaries and their domain multiplicity are key to understand this apparent paradox.

Despite great variety in the details, a common thread runs through discussions about personal relations in Agro-food Studies, economic anthropology, postsocialist anthropology and China Studies. This is the idea that either ‘cold’ institutions of some kind are deficient and provoke a ‘warm’ reaction from society or that the ‘warmth’ of society is a deficiency that prevents ‘cold’ institutions from functioning effectively. The underlying assumption is that the personal and the institutional can be clearly distinguished. Similarly, for urban citizens in Chengdu personal relations on the side of the state appeared as potentially corrupting the Western liberal model of regulating organic agriculture. On the side of civil society and community, personal relations appeared as enabling transparency and flexibility that fostered ecological agriculture. Performed state boundaries could turn corruption into transparency and flexibility and vice versa.

Performances of consumer participation provided Dong Jie and food activists with plenty of opportunities to distance themselves from markers of the state when facing an urban middle-class audience that was not only oriented to liberal versions of the West but also anthropological versions of traditional rural China. In the welcoming scene, Wu Yingying avoided the use of official titles as markers of the state. In the consumer association, scripts of civil society and community were performed against both state and market; against the neighbouring store of an organic grocery chain, certification was hidden, crossed out or recontextualized in the association’s shop. In the ecological village, Dong Jie not only differentiated between organic certified agriculture and ecological agriculture and linked the former to the state and the later to civil society and community; he also turned what visitors took to be markers of the non-ecological into markers of the state or into the opportunity to perform ‘participatory education’ in contrast to the state’s ‘top-down’ approach.

This performative boundary work was effective. In an interview, Wu Yingying stated that the cooperative in Daxi Village was doing a good job producing ecological rice and vegetables and that it was difficult to find such ‘honest’ people nowadays. She particularly admired their willingness to operate the unprofitable vegetable unit. From her perspective, the villagers followed Dong Jie’s agricultural advice not because he was an official at the township but because of his (participatory) ‘methods’.

The consumer association’s way of staging transparency in contrast to certification put the spotlight on personal relations. I identified three institutionalized features of the consumer association’s transparency: the explorable invisible, the visually imperfect, and

heterogeneous materiality. This mirroring reinforced rigid and unitary certification as a marker of the state, thereby strengthening the alternativeness of the food network as modelled on the flexibility of *guanxi* in the traditional community of rural China.

The alternativeness of the food network was further bolstered by another script of non-state community. As the mirroring sustained an image of routine certification as rule-bound, any sign of personal relations and flexibility looks unusual and thus indicates corruption. In turn, certification could also be distanced to perform the food network as civil society against state regulation that was undermined by *guanxi* – as expression of Chinese cultural or socialist otherness. This double attack on certification – as both rigid and corruptible – demonstrates the productivity of overlapping state boundaries that multiply non-state others.

In this case, domain multiplicity mutually reinforced the performed boundaries between state and community, even if this community was informed by both activist models of Western civil society and anthropological models of traditional rural China. Being a shared marker of the state, the distancing of certification as non-ecological could hold different models of non-state others together, even though these models have been conceptualized as substantially different forms of social organization.

The next chapter continues this analytical focus on domain multiplicity in performances of state boundaries by looking at summer camps that rural development NGOs offered as a response to the problem of the ‘rural left-behind child’. Here, in addition to the boundary between state and community, another split enters the picture: that between the state and the family.

Notes

* An earlier version of this chapter was published as ‘Distancing the Regulating State: Corruption, Transparency, and the Puzzle of Personal Relatedness in a Food Network in Sichuan’, *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 47 (3–4), 369–406, Copyright © 2018 The Institute, Inc. Reprinted with permission. This chapter has been significantly revised and adapted for this book. It introduces the notion of domain multiplicity to further develop the ethnographic theorization of performed state boundaries.

1. ‘Theoretical ventriloquism’ (Hirschauer 2008) and ‘theoretical puppetry’ (Lammer 2024: 271) impose limitations on theoretical creativity in research based on interviews and participant observation with actors

who know how to speak and perform social scientific concepts. Aiming for more analytical symmetry in analyses of organic certification and food networks as their supposed alternative, I have therefore used the notion of information infrastructure to understand how labels and people shape the value of food. This allowed me to uncover how information both depends on and intervenes in the materiality it is supposed to be informing about (Lammer 2024).

2. In the arrival scene described above, Wu Yingying greeted me briefly in English, explaining that she had studied and lived abroad for six years – in the United States, Spain, the Netherlands and Latin America. For many members, studying abroad was never in question, it was only about which university in the US or Europe their child should be sent to. Some members told me that their children had already spent a year of high school abroad: in Denmark, for example.
3. To protect the anonymity of the actors and institutions involved, I do not provide links here. I have archived copies of the blog post, published in spring of 2016, and other posts mentioned.
4. The blogger’s reference to ‘moms’ already points to another non-state domain. As the majority members, young women with children referred to the consumer association as the ‘mommies’ group’. In the food network, domain multiplicity was at least threefold; some shared markers served to perform partly overlapping boundaries: between state and civil society, between state and community, and between state and family (see also Chapter 3).
5. This presentation of ‘ecological’ and ‘healthy’ vegetables by the consumer association contrasts sharply with what Klein (2009: 81) observed in 2006 and 2008 in hypermarkets in China: ‘Unlike the conventional produce, vegetables sold under these three categories [green, organic, hazard-free] were always . . . sealed in plastic and carefully labelled with the producer’s name and (sometimes) the emblem of the certifying body. As Zhang [a marketing manager] explained, “Consumers need to know that they are being sold healthy foods!”’
6. In the shop, there was also a stack of several rustic wooden benches covered by a linen cloth with a painting of a green planet with green trees, a rainbow and handwritten slogans about ‘small peasants’ and ‘sustainability’. Wu Yingying explained that the benches could be used during film screenings and other events.
7. According to Paul Thiers (2002: 365), ‘[b]oth of these certifiers have occasionally presented themselves to the international organic community as nongovernmental organizations’. While Thiers (2002: 366) dismisses these claims as ‘false’ by stating that ‘there has never been any domestic, nongovernmental presence in organic certification in China’, this boundary work at the international level itself appears worthy of closer study. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the question of how organic certificates travel across national borders, with one case from the consumer association’s shop.

8. In Chapter 1, I introduced the difference between the notion of the ecological as ‘not-yet-organic’ and the notion of the ecological as ‘completely different from the organic’ in more detail.
9. Others have reported similar assessments by smallholders and larger organic farms concerning the revised and more stringent national organic standards issued in 2012 by the Certification and Accreditation Administration of the People’s Republic of China (Scott et al. 2014: 161).
10. This also questions the widespread thesis that technologies of transparency function only as individualizing tools of neoliberal governance that create measurable and marketable entities and subjectivities (Shore 2008; quoted in Ballesteros 2012: 160).
11. In Chapter 6, I discuss how the village leadership used Minimum Livelihood Allowances as a means for pursuing the village’s development strategy as an ‘ecological village’ by selectively implementing workfare.