AFN as Bricolage: towards an alternative notion of 'alterity' as 'hybridity'

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Chenjia XU[1]

Abstract

The alterity of alternative food networks (AFN) is increasingly difficult to define, given the multiplicity of their 'hybrid practices' that intersect both the 'alternative' and the 'conventional'. This article proposes the framework of bricolage to address the alterity-hybridity tension. Building on the post-binary construal that sees both the alternative and the conventional as hybrid collectives, bricolage registers the alterity of AFN and their transformative potential in the mode in which resources and values are hybridised. With the ethnographic account of how a famers' market in Beijing 'makes do' with the available resources in its multi-layered environment, and subsequently 'skews' and subverts the 'conventional' from within, the article demonstrates that it is through the distinct modus operandi of hybridity that the prospects of doing food otherwise are opened.

[1] South China Normal University

Corresponding author: Chnjia Xu, chenjia_xu@scnu.edu.cn

Bibliographical note

Chenjia Xu is a Research Associate in the Food Studies Centre at SOAS, University of London

Introduction

The hybridity-alterity dynamics became a central topic in AFN studies at the turn of the century, a time when the normative or 'prescriptive' (DuPuis and Goodman 2005) paradigm of alterity was vigorously contested and reconsidered. The introduction of actor-network theory (ANT) (Goodman 2001) to agri-food studies and the growing attention to how alternative ways of doing food are enacted in specific social, economic and historical processes (Jarosz 2008; Mount 2012) have prompted a shift from alterity to hybridity in the AFN research landscape. Through the lens of ANT, the conventional system is not an entity *a prior* but a process of 'performative ordering', and AFN are constantly in the process of becoming, as the associations and detachments among human and non-human actors have to be performed and negotiated (Whatmore and Thorne 2004; Holloway et al. 2010; Le Velly and Dufeu 2016). Empirical studies further shed light on how various 'hybridising strategies' are deployed by the farmers (Ilbery et al. 2010; Cerrada-Serra et al. 2018) and consumers (Holloway et al. 2010; R. Johnson et al. 2016) that compose AFN as hybrid spaces (Smithers and Joseph 2010) or hybrid collectives (Le Velly and Dufeu 2016). These theoretical and empirical works underscore that the conventional system and AFN are in practice intersected (O'Neill 2014), imbricated (McCarthy 2006), mutually constitutive (Sarmiento 2017), and symbiotic (Hopkinson 2017). Some have therefore proposed abandoning the notion of 'alterity' (Blumberg et al. 2020) which, according to (Le Velly 2019)'s acute reading, triggers unease and discomfort, in favour of other more open, processual, and relationally registered frameworks such as ecological embeddedness (Morris and Kirwan 2011), 'autonomous food space' (Wilson 2013), territorial assemblage (Lamine et al. 2019), market *agencement* (Le Velly and Dufeu 2016), and so on.

'What is alternative about AFN' remains pertinent, however, not only due to its centrality to the legitimacy and identity of AFN practices (Mount 2012), but also because it holds the key to deploying their transformative potential to actualise more sustainable and just ways of doing food. Considerable scholarly efforts have been invested to appreciate the alterity of AFN. Unlike the binary thinking of the 1990s which fetishises a romantic, counter-hegemonic notion of alterity, there is now a shared appraisal of *in situ* analyses (Beacham 2018a; Fendrychová and Jehlička 2018) which, by foregrounding 'what is alternative *in*' rather than 'what is alternative *to*'[1], find how alterity is contextually specific and geographically variegated (Holloway et al. 2010; Martindale et al. 2018). The post-binary and situated deliberations hence register AFN on an open ontology that sees them as undergoing a process of becoming. Alterity is defined not as what AFN are but as what they do, actually and potentially. By deploying the technique of 'reading for difference' of the diverse economies approach (Gibson-Graham 2008; Harris 2009), many have explicated that alterity manifests not only in alternative products and distribution networks (Watts et al. 2005) but also in novel, non-capitalist economic logics, relations and practices (Chiffoleau 2009; Rossi 2017; Corvo 2018; Matacena 2020; Rosol 2020) which are often crafted through hybridising strategies. Such outcomes are not definitive but evidence of the 'generative capacity' (Beacham 2018b), the 'promises of difference' (Le Velly 2019), and the 'possibility of an economic and political "other"' (Jonas 2010, 4) underpinning the alterity of AFN.

If hybridity does not necessarily undermine alterity, which lies in the prospects for doing food otherwise, then how and from what do these prospects emerge? If the boundary between the conventional and the alternative is porous, and if both are performative orderings or hybrid collectives, then what endows the latter with the promises of difference that the former does not behold? What enables the becoming of diverse economic practices and operational logics that stand as 'alternative' to the mainstream system? This article seeks to demonstrate that it is from the situated practices of hybridising conventional and alternative elements that the possibilities arise for food to be done differently. In other words, the alterity of AFN is nurtured precisely in their hybridity. To articulate this notion of alterity as hybridity, I construe AFN as 'bricolage', the act of 'making do' with what is already available and 'skewing' the resources from their previous, known uses.

[1] Campbell (2020)'s political ontologies approach is an exception. This work takes 'alternative to what' as the primary matter of concern, and seeks to underscore how other possible farming ontologies – indigenous and alternative alike – are silenced by the modernist one.

Bricolage emphasises not so much the *content* as the structural *form* of hybridity, and the central concern here is with the mode whereby heterogeneous resources, relations and strategies are *agenced* into a hybrid collective. Through the lens of bricolage, my ethnography of the operational dynamics of a farmers' market (FM) in Beijing examines the strategies deployed by AFN participants to start and substantiate various hybrid inventions and subversions (Sonnino and Marsden 2006; Jones et al. 2010; Cherrier 2017; Le Velly and Moraine 2020; Zwart and Mathijs 2020). In so doing, it seeks to shed light on alterity as registered on the specific *modus operandi* of hybridisation.

Theoretical Framework: Bricolage

Since Levi-Strauss first introduced bricolage as a theoretical notion in his seminal work *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962), the concept has proven to be productive in many research areas including cultural studies, educational research, entrepreneurship and innovation studies, social ethnographies, and so on (Phillimore et al. 2016). In his original writing, Levi-Strauss derived bricolage from the French verb *bricoler*, meaning to tinker and make do with what is at hand in pursuing an objective, and used it to denote the thought form of mythical thinking, 'the science of the concrete'. Bricolage is construed in contrast to engineering, which describes the thinking pattern in modern science, 'the science of the abstract'. According to Levi-Strauss, unlike the engineer who would start with a blueprint for the intended product and gather or/and create all the necessary instruments accordingly, the bricoleur begins with the readily available, and makes improvisations given the specific tasks to be fulfilled. Deleuze and Guattari also acknowledge that bricolage is founded on the multiple yet limited, hodgepodge-like stock of materials and that bricoleurs have the ability to 'rearrange fragments continually in new and different patterns or configurations' (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 7). However, to them, 'bricolage' is characterized by an openness in the consequence, by an 'indifference towards the act of producing and toward the product, toward the set of instruments to be used and toward the overall result to be achieved' (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 7). In other words, what bricolage produces cannot be deduced from – thus is not pre-constrained by – the stock of materials, the intention of the bricoleur, nor the mode in which bricolage is performed. Whereas Levi-Strauss used 'bricolage' to denote the intellectual system of a particular culture, Deleuze and Guattari understood bricolage' mainly as an ontologically primary process, 'a continually producing production' in which the act of producing and the product cannot and need not be distinguished (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 7). Between the two articulations of bricolage, there exists a subtle yet by no means trivial difference. Interestingly, Viveiros de Castro, the Brazilian anthropologist who has rejuvenated structuralism by integrating it with Deleuze's philosophy of immanence and becoming, provides a novel reading of bricolage that goes beyond the disparity. He reinterprets the bricolage-engineering distinction in terms of 'examples' and 'models', in that 'Examples are borrowed horizontally—they diffuse—while models are imposed vertically—they emanate. Models give orders and enforce order; examples give cues, inspiring inventions and subversions' (Viveiros de Castro 2019: S301).

How does bricolage, by way of examples, inspire inventions and subversions? The answer lies in the three features that define a bricolage. First, it is an *ad hoc* response to the environment, and therefore often appears to follow no clear pre-determined trajectory. Second, it builds on a singular, limited yet heterogeneous repertoire, and therefore frequently requires situational improvisation. Third, as a corollary of the first two, it yields highly contingent results, meaning that the product is mostly unpredictable. The elaboration and expansion of 'bricolage' in different fields of study often tend to pay greater attention to the latter two attributes, whereby bricolage is equivalent to 'making do' (Hatton 1989; Muggleton and Eicher 2002; Baker et al. 2003; Baker and Nelson 2005). The recent new translation of *La Pensée Sauvage* helps highlight in the first feature a deeper layer of bricolage as 'skewing'[2], a situational deviation away from the set trajectory, 'a

[2] In the 1966 English edition, '*mais toujours pour évoquer un mouvement incident*' (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 26) is translated as 'always used with reference to some extraneous movement' (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 16), whilst 'the new translation' provided by Mehlman and Leavitt renders it into 'always to indicate a movement off the expected path' (Lévi-Strauss 2021, 20), putting more emphasis on the juxtaposition between the bricolage movement and the expected path. Besides, another notable disparity is with regard to

movement off the expected path' (Lévi-Strauss 2021: 20). Cultural studies theorists have mainly built on this dimension, as they address the power dynamics between the dominant and the dominated (yet by no means passive or docile) groups. For them, bricolage denotes the tactics of 'artisan-like inventiveness' (de Certeau 1984: xvi–xix) among subaltern groups to resist and subvert the hegemonic cultural norms, for instance by 'appropria[ting] [a] range of commodities by placing them in a symbolic ensemble which served to erase or subvert their original meanings' (Hebdige 1979: 104).

I would suggest that bricolage as skewing is always implicated in bricolage as making do; the emergent use of a given element for a new project is, very likely, to be skewed from its previous applications. It also indicates that at the heart of every bricolage is a subversive virtuality to be actualised. In this light, bricolage and its distinction from engineering add to the analytical troupe of market *agencement*. Markets are *agenced* 'hybrid collectives', but not all hybrid collectives are *agenced* in the same mode. The conventional one, once established and stabilised, is performed in the manner of engineering[3], a 'mode of creativity' that 'starts with a project, devises a conceptual blueprint, and orders cut-to-measure equipment and elaborate specific materials to accomplish the engineer's project', whereas AFN as bricolage 'relies on already available heterogeneous materials not originally designed with the bricoleur's contingent project in view' (Viveiros de Castro 2019: S300). To put this in ANT language, by engineering, the conventional system enrols actants and shapes them into 'intermediaries' which are mobilised *en masse*, whereas AFN, through bricolage, are emergent from the contingent associations among heterogeneous actants as 'mediators'. Therefore, what endows AFN with the 'promises of difference' is not so much the specific resources, strategies and values that are hybridised, but the *modus operandi* whereby hybridisation takes place. As bricolage incorporates contingency and mediation into the process, the possibility of difference is always present. As making do, bricolage prompts the associations and attachments to be created among elements that may very likely be excluded from the engineer's model-led projects; as skewing, bricolage hinges heavily on mediation and translation, which produce unexpected results, hence the prospect of becoming otherwise. This means that bricolage is always open-ended and cannot be pre-determined by any essentialist identity or 'nature'. It thus resonates with assemblage thinking that has been productive for highlighting the heterogeneity, the distributed agency, the open-endedness and the relational, immanent character of agri-environment governance practices (Loconto 2015; Forney et al. 2018; Forney 2021; Helliwell et al. 2022). If the focus of an assemblage lens is 'not so much on the specificities of the elements but rather on the multiple connections that make them exist in the whole' (Forney et al. 2025:15), then bricolage complements it with a micro perspective for tracing how such connections (and disjunctions) are drawn out.

In a nutshell, bricolage fosters a notion of AFN alterity as the mode in which hybridisation unfolds. A number of empirical studies have demonstrated the productive force of bricolage in elucidating how alterity arises from hybrid practices, through 'the ability to strategically navigate in a context' (Mangnus and Schoonhoven-Speijer 2020: 10), 'the production of new situated knowledges, objects and associations' (Feyereisen et al. 2017: 300) which 'build the capacity of the collective to act from within the system they want to change' (Feyereisen et al. 2017: 312), or 'the ability to attach new meaning and interpretation of materials', to 'creatively identify materials and resources within local contexts and use them to their advantage' and to creatively 'restructur[e] potential building blocks' (Grivins et al. 2017: 343). In what follows I introduce the bricolages of a FM in Beijing to further add to the empirical deliberations of the *modus operandi* of hybridisation in relation to alterity.

this line: '*Et, de nos jours, le bricoleur reste celui qui œuvre de ses mains, en utilisant des moyens détournés par comparaison avec ceux de l'homme de l'art*' (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 26), especially to '*des moyens détournés*', which is translated as 'devious means' and 'means that are skewed', respectively, in the 1966 and 2021 versions.

[3] The conventional market *agencements* in practice also entails bricolage, especially in the initial formation (see Xu (2023) for a discussion of transnational corporation's bricolage when developing local markets.) But engineering makes possible the mobilisation and coordination among the huge number of elements in the conventional system(s).

The FM and its Bricolages

The ethnography is part of a larger project that investigates the everyday food practices in contemporary Beijing in relation to the wider processes of urbanisation, stratification and individualisation after the late-1970s market reform. In part as a response to the pervasive food safety hazards, procuring safe and healthful foods for self-consumption has become salient in the quotidian foodways of ordinary Beijingers. Following my health-conscious and safety-concerned research companions, I came to From Farm to Neighbor (F2N), an emerging FM in Beijing back then. Trying to understand how personal concerns around food and eating become 'social' and addressed through AFN, I took F2N as a main field site. I visited the marketplace regularly as a shopper, attended the stalls with vendors when business was hot, and was involved in the organisation of special events with the F2N management team. Through these experiences I gained the insight, as discussed elsewhere, that F2N was an alternative social space where individuals with food safety and health concerns sought 'self-protection' collectively. The close engagement with the management team, however, further led to the recognition that such an alternative space could not be carved out only by the shared 'imaginaries' or pursuits of a more desirable future, but entailed 'fussy' and sometimes difficult logistic arrangements, giving rise to a range of interesting bricolages.

The ethnography below delineates, from the manager's point of view, how to navigate the particular material and institutional context, to gather and integrate various resources, in order to keep open the FM as an alternative space where care of the self becomes care of human and non-human others. F2N was founded in the summer of 2014. Unlike many FMs that mainly proffered agricultural products, F2N furnished artisanal food (hand-made cookies, fish balls, cheese, etc.) and sustainable goods (hand-made toiletries and clothes). Apart from weekly marketplaces, F2N also regularly organized workshops and public events, often in collaboration with NGOs and sustainability networks, to promote sustainable and healthy lifestyles such as zero waste and vegetarianism. My fieldwork at F2N took place between September 2015 and October 2016, a time when the organisation was at a unique stage of development. The FM had just managed to stabilise the network and was actively probing potential paths to go 'forward' – almost in the dark and not always with clear visions for the future. This provided a unique window for me to take note of the bricolages that F2N creatively put together. Specifically, I focus on three situated bricolages that re-*agence* the conventional system and open up other possibilities.

Before going into the details, I shall discuss how the ethnographic accounts were assembled from the multi-sensorial and multi-modal encounters in Beijing. I took 'participant sensation' (Howes 1991; Howes 2019) as the guiding methodology, which allowed me to attend to and be affected by the contingent and ephemeral 'intensities' that went way beyond the realm of representation. These affects and 'facts', often imperceptible to the conventional regime of signs, constitute the backbone of my ethnography, and the section on *renao* is written up from them. The sensorial and affective engagement is contextualised with 'textual' encounters. These include media reports on F2N, and social media posts that the management team, vendors and frequent shoppers shared about their experiences of and reflections on F2N and its marketplace or special events. From these materials I managed to gain insight into the FM's past, especially the exciting but logistically difficult early days of startup. The semi-structured interview with the founder and manager Erica was instrumental in filling in some of the gaps in the textual material, and enabled me to present the discussion on the venue as a bricolage in the current form. But more importantly, it was through the face-to-face conversation that I could feel the tensions between alternative ideals and regulatory, financial viability, which serves as the base of the part on entrepreneurship.

Bricolage 1: the venue

The interaction between producers and consumers is usually foregrounded in FM research. Indeed, these market forms stand out primarily in that they bring producers and consumers back into the face-to-face, un-anonymised encounter, helping them 'short-circuit' the elongated supply chain in the conventional system

(Sonnino and Marsden 2006). Kirwan writes that 'it is the interaction between producers and consumers that embodies the underlying dynamics of FMs' (Kirwan 2004: 408). FM is also understood to be 'a space in which producers and consumers can circumvent the consumption spaces constructed by powerful actors in the food chain' (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000: 293). Notwithstanding the significance of the producer-consumer dynamics, they depend on a physical site, a market*place*, to unfold and to expand the network of alterity. This material dimension has so far received little attention, with only a few exceptions (Spilková et al. 2013; Nigh and Cabañas 2015; Morckel 2017; Morckel 2018). The first bricolage I shall introduce pertains to how F2N found itself a venue to nurture the desirable producer-consumer dynamics.

I first came to know about F2N through the internet. The FM maintained a robust and active presence on social media, which is becoming a key site for AFN organisation and mobilisation in China (W. Chen and Tan 2019; Martindale 2020). After a month of engagement in the group discussion, I finally paid a visit to the F2N marketplace, following the direction indicated on their web page: Floor B1 of 'the Grand Summit'. When I arrived, I thought I was at the wrong address. The Grand Summit turned out to be a high-end shopping mall in one of the most privileged areas in Beijing. Immediately adjacent to it is the Diplomatic Office Building, and a Diplomatic Residential Compound. Across the street there is Hotel Kempinski, Westin, Hilton Beijing, and the skyscrapers that house foreign companies and Sino-Foreign joint ventures. Stepping inside, I felt even more perplexed: bright but soft lighting illuminating every inch of the space, fresh and elegant scent pampering the olfactory sense without overwhelming it, soothing music playing in the background, and contemporary art pieces adding a chic flavour to the cosmopolitan vibe. 'Intuitively', the Grand Summit seemed an unusual, if not a 'wrong' venue for a farmer's market: the built environment projected the spatio-economic strategies of the mall as a 'new enclosure' (Goss 1993), which stood in contrast to the sociality of marketplaces (Watson 2009). In short, the mall was too urban as an outlet for provisioning 'organic' farm produce, and too commodified as a space for nurturing and pursuing 'alternative' values.

But worse than a 'wrong' venue is no venue at all. Having a physical space where networks of people and produce can regularly cluster together to become a 'place' is crucial for the operation of FMs. The goal to restore face-to-face encounters and forge personal ties between producers and consumers is difficult to achieve without a physical site where people can meet and connect. A FM's development may be deeply constrained by logistic problems, especially the lack of a sufficient and secure space for direct interactions to unfold (Nigh and Cabañas 2015).

In the case of F2N, the venue turned out to be a key factor for personal endeavours of self-care and self-protection to evolve into social initiatives. F2N began with Erica, the founder, trying to heal herself with 'clean and pure' food. Originally from Taiwan, Erica came to Beijing in 2013 after spending eight years in North America and subsequently two years in Shanghai. Not long after this move, her physical and mental well-being deteriorated, which prompted her to become more 'mindful' about eating and to gravitate towards alternative foods. Due to the lack of existing access to locally grown, seasonal, chemical-free produce, Erica contacted as many farmers as she could find around Beijing, visited their farms to explore where and how food was grown, then built rapport with those who shared the same visions and values. Every weekend she travelled around and collected weekly food supplies from the farms. After a while, she decided that it would be more convenient for herself if she could bring the farm produce into her own neighbourhood. In the summer of 2014, she gathered six farmers, invited friends, colleagues, and neighbours, and put together the first F2N marketplace, in the 'borrowed' backyard of a pub, M, managed by her friend. It was in this open space behind the small bar that the relatively closed, private, personal network of self-protection became a social one.

The venue sponsored by the M pub was particularly instrumental to the emergence of F2N. The physical site allowed for the convergence of scattered actors, thus contributing to the condensation of the network connections during the early development. However, the use of space sometimes clashed with the for-profit activities of the pub, and the support was sporadic. Between December 2014 and October 2015, F2N became a mobile market. For ten months it had to float around the city for venues – mostly independent restaurants

and gastropubs but occasionally shopping malls – that would open to it at low or no cost. Such mobility allowed F2N to expand the network spatially and socially, reaching more neighbourhoods and communities across Beijing. This was however very costly, given that most of the limited management capacity was devoted to liaison and negotiation with potential venue providers. Moving the marketplace every other week was a hindrance for patrons and some of the vendors to commit to the network. In the end, the marketplace finally settled down in the Grand Summit in late 2015. The reason for F2N to accept this arrangement was simple: the venue promised stability, and it was free. The Grand Summit management offered the open space on Floor B1 for the marketplace to meet during the weekends, and provided other logistic support, including a housekeeping service and storage for keeping supplies during the week. The sponsorship was based on the acknowledgment of F2N's values, but also on the expectation that the marketplace would draw more visitors over the weekend. This firm rooting allowed F2N to expand its network and diversify the marketplace into various formats with a presence in different locations.

The seemingly unthinkable location of the FM points to how AFNs operate by bricolage rather than engineering. As organisations, AFNs usually do not have many resources to work with. The venues they choose and the forms they take are determined not only by the aspired social values but also by the resources they are able to mobilise. F2N had no means to 'engineer' itself an ideal, perfect venue that would embody its values in the purest form. Rather, it could only 'make do' and let the marketplace become wherever there was a space to appropriate – be it a restaurant, a backyard, a campus, a residential community or a shopping centre. This bricolage, far from subsuming F2N to a commercial logic or rendering it 'vulnerable to conventional co-optation', in fact skewed and subverted the spatial and sensorial politics of the mall, which is especially evident in the next bricolage I introduce.

Bricolage 2: Renao

FMs are often characterised by 'a positive atmosphere' and 'a sense of community' (A. J. Johnson 2013: 324). Inspired by the 'visceral approach' (Hayes-Conroy 2010), scholars demonstrate how this marketplace quality is attributable not only to the producer-consumer dynamics, but also the sensorial mobilisation of bodies, the spatial organisation of particular food settings (MacDonald 2013), and the affective nature of food (Carolan 2016). At F2N, material and sensorial resources were put together with the symbolic elements as the organisers crafted the network into a place of conviviality, a place of *renao*.

A visit to the F2N marketplace always felt somewhat surreal. To get there, one first had to enter the mall. This is a place to wander, to stroll about, in a leisurely, relaxed fashion. Haste and hurry would seem so incommensurate with the setting that anyone dashing by would be noticed. Hence, taking the escalator downstairs to the FM, where unmediated social interactions among strangers were endorsed and even encouraged, was a bewildering experience. The tranquillity of the mall receded whilst the lively and vibrant market energy embraced the sensorium. It felt as if two different 'realities' coexisted in parallel on and under the ground. The escalator was the gateway between 'being-in-the-market' that prompts engaged, intense interaction, and what resembled 'being-in-the-plaza' but in a more disengaging, serene mode (Richardson 1982).

Such 'being-in-the-market-ness', often referred to as *renao* in Chinese culture, is another bricolage created at the F2N marketplace. Literally meaning 'hot and noisy', *renao* is the spatial, sensorial and social quality that emerges from the gathering of people and things, a 'sociothermic affect' (Chau 2008: 488) which is 'more diffused than "feelings" and more complex than simple excitement' (Chau 2005: 163). As a traditional cultural idiom, *renao* makes manifest 'the "human flavour" (*renqing wei*) generated from enthusiastic human interactions' (Yu 2004: 138), and is key to the 'life' of any marketplace. Moreover, this positive quality often generates a greater convergence of people, since people like to '*cou renao*', that is, to be near and become a part of *renao*.

Considerable efforts and resources were invested to 'stir up' *renao* at the F2N marketplace. First and foremost, the spatial configuration of the physical environment created a close and intimate but also open and inviting aura. The stalls were made of simple long tables, laid out before the market opened then removed after the closing time. There were three sections for three categories of goods: fresh produce from local farms, artisanal foods, and eco-lifestyle handicrafts. In the latter two sections, the stalls were arranged at intervals. They were close enough so that the vendors, usually sitting behind the table, back against the wall or the escalator, could strike up casual conversations with one another when there was no business to attend to. They were also distant enough to allow one-on-one interactions and negotiations between vendors and curious shoppers. In this way, the marketplace became an open and engaging environment, welcoming anyone to join *renao*.

The farm produce was showcased on the most prominent spot. Here the spatial arrangement was slightly different. All the stalls were connected, with no gaps in between, and vendors sat or stood on the inner side, facing outwards towards shoppers who would stroll around the section space. This arrangement helped nurture an atmosphere of 'collective effervescence' for it enhanced the closeness of people as well as things. Vendors worked side-by-side and back-to-back. They would converse, exchanging useful farming or market information, as well as discussing affairs of a more personal and private nature. They would offer homemade farm specialties for one another to sample and to nibble. They would also collaborate, helping one another when shoppers crowded around stalls, handing over useful tools and bags to whoever needed them, and even directing customers to patronise 'neighbouring' vendors. Comradeship instead of competition was the ethos here, and the noises they constantly made filled the otherwise too quiet and solemn mall space. Every inch on the stall surface was occupied by farm products: bunches of fresh green leafy vegetables in large plastic bags, perfectly ripe red tomatoes in bamboo baskets, unpeeled corncobs arranged neatly in pyramids, and piles of clear food boxes containing tofu, braised baby potatoes and other ready-to-eat farm delicacies. The space beneath the tables was also taken up, by sacks bulging with brown potatoes or purple aubergines, multicoloured clusters of fruits, and huge ice boxes storing pork or beef portioned in vacuum bags. All these effectively created a charmingly copious scene that would immediately capture the attention of anyone entering the space, alluring more bodies into the co-production of *renao*.

Through a range of creative and *ad hoc* mobilisations of the material and sensorial aspects of things and bodies, a *renao* marketplace was established in the quiet and almost 'desolate' mall. This peculiar bricolage contributed to the steady growth of F2N. *Renao* is part of the reason why the Grand Summit management was willing to offer the space to F2N for free. But more importantly, *renao* may foster 'a sense of communal life through the sharing of a common space' (Chau 2005: 140) and, in the case of the F2N marketplace, through the sharing of food and food work. In *renao*, the 'sensorial production of the social' (Chau 2008) is at work: when people 'approach' *renao*, they immediately become part of it. The convivial, lively and vibrant ambiance built on and intensified the mutual responsiveness among different actors. This could develop further into active engagement, sustained interactions, and social bonds. When *renao* grew, the F2N network expanded, for *renao* sensorially bound producers, consumers, and others into a network of 'togetherness'.

Meanwhile, the *renao* bricolage subverted the spatio-sensorial politics of the mall and the broader urban experience. Once a quintessential feature of the urban neighbourhoods, *renao* is now a rarity. The ongoing government-led urban renewal under late socialism has drastically transformed the urban forms and how the city looks, smells, and feels, with profound implications on urban livelihoods and everyday life (Zhang 2006; Su 2015; Pow 2017). The liveliness and vibrancy of the streets and alleys are dying out as municipal governments seek to project 'spatial modernity' onto the urban landscape, often by 'upgrading' traditional food marketplaces into modern supermarkets (Maruyama et al. 2016; Y. Chen and Liu 2019). 'Loss of *renao*' has become a key trope through which popular discontents are expressed regarding the often forcefully imposed restructuring of urban space and experiences (Zhang 2006). In this context, the *renao* bricolage, by allowing unmediated connections and instantaneous engagement to play out among people who were not necessarily acquaintances, projected a specific form of sensorial 'alterity'. Within the enclosure of the high-end mall, the

FM cracked open a *renao* space where it was possible, once again, to do food in a convivial mood.

Bricolage 3: entrepreneurship

Another fascinating bricolage, pertaining to the governance complexity of AFN (Manganelli et al. 2020), is the 'entrepreneurial' path that F2N crafted for itself. There are two dimensions to it: first, F2N maintained a legal status as a commercial entity within the Chinese regulatory system; second, F2N operated by a 'business model' in order to 'compete' for resources on the market. The entrepreneurial path is a bricolage in the original sense of the word, being an *ad hoc* response to the environment, one that is deeply shaped by the post-socialist state *as well as* the neoliberal market.

While F2N, like many other AFNs in China, began as a personal endeavour, its continual becoming on the social scale depended on the acquisition of a formal, legal registration with the state. Although a charity or NGO registration would, ideally, be more commensurate with the pursuit of social and environmental values, the registered legal status of F2N is a company: a 'cultural development co. ltd'. It is a product directly resulting from the stringent government regulatory system over the non-public sector. The registration of NGOs is strictly confined to a few specific fields, and the 'permission' of an official sponsor, usually a government body, is essential. Sometimes it can take an organisation more than a decade to fight for but still fail to acquire its legal status (Wang 2012). Even if it is successfully obtained, the organisation is subject to the supervision, regulation, intervention and even mandatory administrative assignment by the government, mediated through the sponsoring agency. Under this regulatory framework, and without the necessary institutional resources, it was practically impossible for F2N to register as a charity or an NGO. In response to the tight control over the civil society space, grass-root organisations in China have found an alternative route to legal status. Instead of registering with the Ministry of Civil Affairs as NGOs, they turn to the State Administration of Industry and Commerce (Xu and Smith 2012). The AIC system grants the legal status of a commercial entity, that is, an enterprise. The procedure is less complex and not as time-consuming, and AIC status does not require direct supervision by a sponsoring body, thus allowing organisations more autonomy.

Though it was not a problem to 'register' F2N as a business, it was a painstaking decision an arduous task to 'run' it as a business. Erica was aware of the tensions here. After all, it was not her intention or aspiration to run anything as a business:

> *… During the first year, my understanding was that I was simply doing something for myself. I wanted to make a difference to my life and the life surrounding me. I do not aspire to be a boss of an enterprise, and I do not intend to turn F2N into a business model…*

As F2N was stepping into the third year of operation around mid-2016, the pressure to operate as an enterprise was felt intensely, to the point that Erica remarked that '… without a business model, others will look down upon you, and they will think that you don't have a future'. These words expressed a sense of frustration over the paradox that the farmer's market's future depended on the extent to which it was 'enterprised'. Astounding as it may sound, I was not surprised by her mention of a 'business model'. The remark pointed to the '*chuangye* fever' or 'entrepreneurial boom' that reached its climax in around 2015 and 2016. Starting from 2011, business startups became a new fashion. Entrepreneurialism gained further momentum from the state's launch of the Popular Entrepreneurship and Innovation plan in 2015. By mid-2016, entrepreneurship was the predominant fad in Chinese mega cities, to the extent that it was almost impossible to walk into a cafe without witnessing people discussing business proposals, series A, venture capital and so on.

It is evident that the entrepreneurial bricolage of F2N was a product of a specific context. The post-socialist state still maintained a relatively tight grip over the non-government sector. Meanwhile, the market dynamics nurtured an entrepreneurial boom, which was then captured by the state, appropriated and turned into a neoliberal social engineering project. This aligns with the general insights on the AFN in a post-socialist context: they have to negotiate vis-a-vis both the market and the state when seeking to carve out alternative trajectories

for food production and provisioning (Jung et al. 2014; Pungas 2019). In the case of F2N, we see how such negotiation is further complicated as the state and the market forces interweave, making entrepreneurialism almost the 'only game in town'. The FM was 'cornered' by a dual force into entrepreneurship.

The imperative to 'enterprise' an AFN was experienced even more painfully given the tight financial constraints presiding over the efforts to actualise alternative ways of doing food. An anecdote that Erica shared with me lays bare the emotions and sentiments when being 'forced' to negotiate the integrity of the FM with financial viability:

> *My friend just said to me: 'this (FM) is something those wealthy people do for fun. Are you rich? You are not. So you cannot run it like a charity.' I was so pissed and sad hearing this that I rushed out of the restaurant and cried hard for five minutes. He had to come out and apologise to me. But actually, he's got a point. We need to make money in order to survive.*

Erica's dilemma is indeed thorny, but not peculiar to her case. To stay in business, AFN organisers and operators often face the difficult task of balancing and negotiating between personal, collective commitment and financial needs (Avanzino 2013; Hodgins 2014), and sometimes they do resort to and incorporate the conventional system, for instance by seeking collaboration with large retailers for product outlets (Milestad et al. 2010). The dilemma is interpreted as an indication that alternative strategies 'seeking greater closure in food provisioning struggle in the face of the open economy' (Pratt and Luetchford 2013: 16), implying that the entrepreneurial path was an inevitable but necessary compromise.

The framework of bricolage reveals how the 'compromise' is nevertheless a creative product of the bricoleur appropriating, negotiating with and improvising from what is available to her in a given environment, and at the same time skewing and subverting it. In the end, Erica decided to go down the entrepreneurial path, recognising 'very discretely' that what she was doing with F2N was precisely *chuangye*, an equivocal term that may indicate creating a business but also starting a vocation. When asked about the decision, she replied:

> *I'm a non-conforming person. The more people want me to do something the more I rebel against it. … But when you have staff working for you, you have to be responsible for them. … when I look at these lovely people, I feel they are like my own children and I hope that working here can help them make a better living.*

Just as the entrepreneurial environment forced F2N into making a 'compromise', the entrepreneurial bricolage 'compromised' the notion of entrepreneurship. When Erica registered F2N as a business, she also affirmed a vocation. A skewing effect was moreover set in motion: the entrepreneurialism was no longer about profit but redefined as a means of 'care'. F2N thus started off as an initiative of self-care, and became a means for Erica to care for others. This 'others' were not only the staff members, but also the vendors who made F2N possible. To finance the daily operation, the F2N management team devised special 'consultancy services' to help vendors promote their products and values. One form of such consultancy was themed DIY workshops, with the input of planning and marketing from the management team, and the contribution of co-hosting vendors of necessary ingredients, tools and materials, as well as hands-on instructions on how to make artisanal foods or handicrafts. Through these workshops, vendors could make their visions and values known and appeal to more people, and F2N could retain a part of the attendance fees to fund the daily operation. While there was indeed the possibility that the introduction of a market logic, through consultancy, might 'taint' the mutual support and shared care. However, the point here is that the entrepreneurial bricolage added a latent meaning to 'consultancy', hence carving out the prospect of doing consultancy as comradeship. '[T]he "bricoleur" may not ever complete [her] purpose but [she] always puts something of [her]self into it' (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 21) – and it is this 'something of oneself' that makes such seemingly compromising bricolage creative and transformative.

Concluding Remarks

This article proposes the framework of bricolage to addresses the hybridity-alterity dynamics by focusing on the operational dynamics of AFN. The particular strength of post-binary thinking – ANT in particular – is the conceptual reconfiguration of the conventional-alternative relations as being interdependent and interactive, rather than dichotomous. The alternativeness of AFN is perceived no longer through the normative, essentialist notion of 'alterity' attached to 'assumed values', but instead with a more open and practice-oriented focus on the prospects of doing food otherwise – as AFN proffer within their respective socio-economic and geographical milieus. However, given the hybridity of AFN and their porous 'boundary' with the conventional counterpart, what makes them behold the 'promise of difference'? In addressing the question, some have highlighted the agentive capacity of AFN projects as the conception of a more desirable future (Le Velly 2019), while others point to the semiotic and material construal of alternative 'economic imaginaries' (Watts et al. 2005; Misleh Heller 2021). Both highlight the aspirations for an alternative as a condition for other possible futures to be virtually created and actualised.

Bricolage attends to the situated practices and processes of hybridisation as key to understanding AFN alterity. The ethnography from Beijing shows that when people 'make do' with what is readily available, they 'skew' the elements and resources from the previously set and known uses, thus opening up the prospect of difference. To strive for self-sufficiency, F2N engaged with hybrid practices, putting together the elements of the conventional system, cultural idioms and institutional strategies that are peculiar to the post-socialist context in Beijing. It 'made do' with the free venue despite the highly commercial mall setting, so that the rootless network could be anchored and further consolidated; it mobilised the cultural preferences for *renao*, crafting a convivial marketplace that was particularly attractive in a context of massive scale 'spatial cleansing'; and it acquired the status of commercial entity, even applying a 'business model' to maintain its operation under the regulatory system, while functioning as a vocation of care. Apart from attending to *what* is hybridised into AFN, the notion of bricolage is particularly concerned with the mode in which hybridity unfolds, proposing an understanding of alterity as hybridity, especially the *modus operandi* of hybridisation. It thus prompts researchers to examine not only the intersections between the conventional and the alternative, but also the manner in which novel associations and attachments are drawn up in practice.

The shift from the content to the form of hybridisation that bricolage enables and encourages also raises interesting questions regarding the transformative potential of AFN. The prospects of doing food differently, offered by AFN, now hinge on the alternative visions that participants individually and collectively construct, *as well as* the particular mode of putting together the resources from their immediate socio-material environment in order to substantiate those visions. Thus, what matters for bringing about sustainable futures is not only specific AFN as pockets of diverse economies but also, if not more crucially, bricolage as the mode of creation. In this regard, I concur with Dwiartama and Piatti that 'the most important thing for local AFNs to succeed is creating as much space as possible for the engagement process and relationships to occur' (2016: 162), given that the relationships are nurtured in the manner of bricolage rather than engineering, through examples that are 'differently alike' instead of models.

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