The "Real" Organic Food in China: The Tradition-Modern Divide and the Role of Boundary Work

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Abstract

It is important to study governance in alternative market fields as a set of knowledge /rationalities that structures collaboration for everyday knowledge making by the participants. This article examines how two camps of advocates negotiate the definition of what composes civic organic food. A divide has emerged in the community of Beijing civic organic growers between organic agricultural producers who espouse traditional approaches, and those who rely on modern approaches. The ambiguity of the civic organic standards opens up a contingent arena for participation and negotiating boundaries between "traditional" and "scientific" organic practices outside the current "certified" version of organic food in China. This article applies the framework of boundary work to demonstrate how alternative market actors maintain boundaries between real and fraudulent organic food by engaging in debates with the rival camp. The boundaries between traditional and modern scientific organic camps are not defined by the pre-existing or by the internal properties of any given knowledge system as certain producers have claimed/presented. Instead, these situated social actors, through a set of ongoing dynamics in their daily practices, are constantly constructing and transforming the boundaries of the civic organic food supply. This is also how they attempt to gain legitimacy for their practice even though non-certified organic has never been recognized by the state. Growers' reputation, public exposure, and consumers' judgement on the moral compass of producers have all been influential factors in maintaining the legitimacy of civic organic in alternative food networks.

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Introduction

Thiers (1996; 2002; 2005; 2006) studied Chinese organic agriculture in 1990 and argued that certified organic production was seen as a means to target the lucrative international market. Given that incentive, developing organic agrifood was the same as producing other goods: all aimed at fetching a premium price in the international market. Two different branches of the central government and various local and state governments competed with each other to gain the profits. Thiers (2006) further argued that politics and markets shaped Chinese organic agriculture standards differently from organic standards in the West, which were characterized by non-governmental, civil societypolitics. Instead of developing standards and procedures which served the interests and needs of local farmers and consumers in China, OFDC adopted international standards and tailored local priorities to meet requirements of the global market (Thiers, 2006).

Ten years after Thiers' (1996) study, the domestic organic agrifood movement was booming(Si 2017; Cody 2019), but the state still held its original position. Organic agriculture was still seen as mainly for export, and therefore needed to be based on stringent standards so it would be accepted by global buyers. Organic agrifood stands for high-end products which are targeted for export and a small portion for domestic sales. From this perspective, farms that can achieve organic standards still need to be large because only they have the technological resources to support and meet the required standards.

It is moreover a state mechanism to retain its authority in regulating the domestic organic agrifood market. As an official from the committee that participated in writing the national standards commented, "A few years ago, many foreign companies sold whatever they named organic in our domestic market;it was a totally chaotic time. Now, order has been established, thanks to the national standard" (informant L, official, 2012, Beijing).

Like L, many officials do not see it through a social rights perspective but believe that small-scale farmers wanting to engage in organics are impractical idealists or unethical businessmen who simply try to take advantage of "organic" to make profits. Organic agriculture is perceived as an advanced system of modern agricultural technologies which needs agriculture professionals and strict research processes to guarantee its quality to global buyers. As for domestic agriculture policy, food security is emphasized and the connection between food safety and organic agrifood is not recognized.

Thus, the strategies applied to demonstrate the validity of national standards of organics are not meticulous, as state authority may not be the best nor the only "definer of the meaning of organic and guarantor that standards are met" (Thiers, 2007: 198) but it remains a strong authority. How, then, do the civic organic producers gain legitimacy to call their products "organic" if their products are not certified according to state regulation? This paper attempts to answer this question and examines how producers deploy a range of strategies to negotiate where the boundary of real organic food should be drawn, by introducing various scenarios in which the boundaries between two camps are produced simultaneously. I first introduce the background of a divide between organic agricultural producers who espouse traditional approaches, and those who rely upon modern approaches in the community of Beijing civic organic growers. I then engage the discussion of civic organic agriculture, and further explain how incorporating the boundary work framework into the existing literature will be beneficial. This paper shows that the boundaries between traditional and modern scientific knowledge in Chinese organic agricultural practices are not defined by the pre-existing or internal properties of any given knowledge system. Instead, civil society actors in the public arena are constantly transforming these boundaries through their daily practices and by actively associating their working processes with knowledge systems that are familiar to them.

The "Tradition-Modern" Debate and "Real" Organic Food

The world of non-certified organic food seems to be full of legends and traditional cultural elements. The storyline of those who have abandoned fortune and fame is woven into the urban narratives of organic foods. In this community which is familiar with non-certified organic food, the type of organic food associated with it stands for a certain form of purity which has not been contaminated by the market economy and profit-seeking motives. On the other hand, quite a few of my informants told me that it is difficult to run organics as a normal business, since some "psycho" spiritual gurus, who retreated into mountains, had ruined the reputation of organic food by associating their unusual stories with it. In other words, the name of civic organic food has been marginalized to a special kind of community: a closed circle of like-minded consumers who would buy into stories of spiritual gurus but who lack knowledge on agriculture and science. As a result, at a larger scale, organic agriculture sounds neither scientific nor reliable, according to this rival camp.

In the debate over what is real organic agriculture, one group claims that organic agriculture means returning to traditional farming and seeking an alternative development path for China. Organic agriculture, they would argue, has been inherited from eastern philosophy and religious values such as those of Taoism and Buddhism, respecting the harmony between people and nature and promoting ideas such as "less is more". This version of organic agriculture argues that it is inherited from traditional practices, which are assumed to be holistic, philosophical, and pure, as opposed to the modern, standardized, technological, and contaminated agriculture. On the other hand, the other group depicts organic agriculture as based on scientific knowledge, with a management system cohesively incorporated into modern, advanced farming, and thus distinct from the traditional Chinese way of farming, which is perceived as backward. As I continued to do my fieldwork, this divide appeared too obvious to ignore. From the legendary stories of some spiritual guru to business-oriented organic food producers, it became apparent that the traditional/modern divide plays a critical role in constructing the civic organic food supply. Cody (2018; 2019) examined a group of middle-class urban residents near Shanghai who were similar to the informants of this study. He explored the complex questions of the urban/rural dichotomy, questions of morality, and the accelerated modernization in China in which the civic organic food growers are embedded. Similarly, in the present study, even though the dichotomous typology of traditional-scientific features of organics has been abandoned since the mid-2000s by critical food studies scholars – who contend that such a simple dichotomy does not accurately represent the complexities of healthy food and ecological agriculture –, this study argues that it is important to examine the efforts, by differing "traditional" and "modern" camps among these civic organic growers, to debate about "real" organic food. These debates can be seen as a food governance technique.

Boundary Work and Food Governance

Scholars of science and technology have been known for examining the micro politics of collaboration in the creation of new "research fields" (Keller 2002). Similar to scientific systems of collaboration, alternative economies can be seen as "market fields" or forms of "knowing and growing" in which commodities are embedded (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002). In other words, "markets" do not only include buyers and sellers, they also include the entire field of actors, artifacts, and knowledge that affect the exchange of commodities along the value chain, including government, NGOs, business and civil society groups, and consumers, as well as knowledge about what is a "good" economy, a "good" life, a "good" commodity, and a "free" market. In addition, in applying the lens of the micro politics of collaboration, specific markets fields will become stabilized into modes of governance, "the inter-firm relationships and institutional mechanisms through which non-market coordination of activities in the [marketing or "value"] chain is achieved" (Humphrey and Schmitz, 2000: iv).

This mode of governance is a process rather than a "form". Therefore, instead of studying particular criteria or a set of standards, it is important to study the governance in alternative market fields as a set of knowledge/rationalities and a structure of collaboration for everyday knowledge making by the participants. By studying the boundary work process of defining real organics, I explain why these actors' boundary work practices are at the same time practicing alternative organic food governance.

Boundary work was initially applied to study how the boundaries between science and non-science are drawn through constant negotiation of participating social actors (Gieryn 1983). Boundary, in that respect, emphasizes its role of separation and exclusion of professionals (e.g., Gieryn, 1983 1995 1999; Fisher, 1990; Gaziano, 1996; Kinchy and Kleinman, 2003; Mellor 2003). Gieryn (1983) first applied the "boundary work" concept to explain why and how that the demarcation of science from non-science is not just an analytical problem for academic inquiry, but a practical problem for scientists to construct ideologies suited to protecting and advancing their professional authority. In other words, the intellectual authority of science is obtained by continuing the processes of boundary-work efforts of scientists, rather than being internal properties of science itself. The academic literature has applied boundary frameworks to organic agriculture (Goldberger, 2005; Li and Loconto, 2019), and the purpose of this paper is to show that this allows us to understand governance in alternative market fields as a set of knowledge or rationalities of civic organic growers in non-western settings.

The civically engaged practices of alternative markets, as dynamics of alternative economics, need to be further understood. Scholars have argued that alternative markets have their own "market fields" and "modes of governance," and maintain themselves through civic engagement (Bulkeley et al, 2007; DuPuis and Gillon, 2009). Thus, through careful analysis of the micro politics of organic food, it is important to understand organic food as a mode of food governance as well as a disruptive form of knowing and growing.

Conceptualization of "Organic" Food

The concept "non-certified organic" has not been introduced into Chinese mass media discourse nor is it recognized by the state, so strictly speaking, non-certified organic food is "illegal organic" or "fraudulent organic". Globally, however, the concept of organic is slippery and contested, as what constitutes real organic food is not an agreed upon conclusion (Lockie, 2006). Meanwhile, the civic food network refers to new relationships that are developing between consumers and producers, who have engaged together in new forms of food citizenship (Renting et al, 2012).

A divide between authentic (A) and fraudulent (D) organics, as shown in Table 1, is not able to totally depict controversies of practice and certification. Besides A and D, there could be organic food B, in which the producers practice "organic" procedures but do not get certified by any agency, or there could be organic food C, which has been certified as "organic" but has not incorporated any ideas or practices of organic farming. Rather than asking the question "What is real organic food in China?", I ask where organic food, or at least the food labelled by influential civil society groups as "organic", can be found. By investigating "organic" food at different sites, I have empirically learned how civic organic food in China is produced materially, through various social dynamics by multiple social actors, in the arena where they are simultaneously producing the knowledge of the so-called civic organic food. The following subsections will elaborate the conceptual categories applied and specifically describe the methods used in this study.

Table 1. The divide between practice and certification of organic agriculture

Name/Actuality	Practices	No Practices
Certified	"Ideal" organic food	Many supermarkets' organic food
Non-certified	Civic organic food	Fraudulent organic food

Based on these categories, the organic food in this study is named "civic organic food" instead of "non-certified organic food".

Methods and Data

This paper is based on interviews with 39 informants in China (mostly around the Beijing area) during my 11 months of ethnography in 2012. I also conducted on-site observation at organic farms and a farmers' market. To start my fieldwork, I made connections quickly with informants through snowball sampling, by following the actors in the small circle of non-certified organic food producers. My two initial contacts were influential figures in their groups, and both were critical in putting me in contact with other informants. They also were "gatekeepers" allowing me to establish who was participating in civic organic agriculture and not some other type of organic agriculture. For example, one initial contact of mine told me that civic organic may exist in other places, but that the discourse about it mainly spread from the farmers' market which is most well-known for its civic organic agriculture products in Beijing. This was also the main hub of my fieldwork.

It is important to include the social world that is part of these practices in terms of both the actors' subjectivities and the artifacts that are produced (Li and Loconto, 2018). Field observation at various sites allowed me to see how nonhuman actors, such as standards, devices, and images, are engaged in producing the discourse of civic organic agriculture. It enabled me to better understand the settings in which actors were actually negotiating knowledge and enacting realities. I also kept field notes throughout my observations, which I used as memos for my later data analysis.

Justificatory Tactics

During my fieldwork between 2012 and 2013 in Beijing, Qing was often mentioned as an example of a "real" organic food grower. Qing graduated from Peking University in 1979 and served as a faculty member in 1983 at Peking University Law School. His wife was a faculty member in the English department. The couple was successful but they both chose to withdraw from the mainstream in the 1990s. Besides their close family members, nobody had any idea where they went. There were rumors that Qing went abroad, had become a monk, had committed suicide, and so on. In 2011, Tang, a leading journalist in China, received a phone call from Mr. Qing, with whom he had shared a dormitory room at Peking University. Tang went to visit Mr. Qing and reported his story in 2011.

Qing and his wife had been living hermit lives in a place they described as paradise, in a rural area 110 kilometres from Beijing. They had rented 2,500 acres of land for 50 years at the price of less than 200,000 yuan (approximately US$3,000), and for over a decade they had been living the lifestyle of Robinson Crusoe. There was no village, electricity, or road to their house; getting to their home required walking more than 30 minutes from the main road (West China Metropolis Daily, 2011). Qing went to the county close to the mountain no more than once a month to purchase salt, the only commodity he needed from the market, and to run other errands. Once a year, he would go to Beijing, always bringing his own food and water from the mountain. He found that his chest would hurt from the polluted air in Beijing for at least three days after each time his visited the city. Yet, eventually Qing decided to "come out" and started to sell their non-polluting or "purely organic" agricultural products. His goal was to earn enough income to continue their lifestyle in the mountains.

This story sheds some light on the organic food Qing was later marketing, which in his words means "uncontaminated agricultural products". Back in 2013, I was sitting at a table in an environmental non-governmental organization (NGO), joining in a conversation about Qing with people who came to the NGO

to buy food,

> *A: I bet that his products are ten times more organic than those we can buy from the market.*
>
> *B: Of course, considering Qing's integrity, I certainly trust his products; how can he have abandoned it all? He could have made millions of yuan, considering he was doing so well before becoming a recluse on the hill. He could have "gone to sea" (xiahai□□, which means to take the entrepreneurial plunge in Chinese) like many of his peers.*
>
> *C: Yes, but he did not. That obviously showed his attitude towards money, so it's unlikely that he would put any chemical substances in the food he produces and consumes with his family.*
>
> *I: But where can we buy his products?*
>
> *B: It's so pricy, I've heard that the millet he produced is over ten times the market price, and he has so many friends waiting to buy from him. Well, I guess there wouldn't be any left over for us.*[1]

From the above conversation, it is easy to see how those who were engaging in the conversation associated organic food with an imaginary retreat from a modern lifestyle to a place of tranquillity. They found this imagery resonant with the hermit lifestyle of the Taoist tradition, which has been a cultural symbol for the ideal lifestyle of dignity and purity in the Chinese tradition. I had never met Mr. Qing in person but I kept hearing stories about him repeatedly from different people I encountered at various locations. Even today, he rarely comes out of his paradise and he sells his products only to a limited number of acquaintances.
Qing is one of the many celebrity organic producers I came across during my fieldwork. I was able to eventually contact, meet, and interview other less famed organic producers, such as Xun and Ming[2]; however, in the small circle of non-certified organic food producers, Qing's food stands out as a version that follows the strictest of organic standards, equivalent to the high moral standards of its producers. Similar to the above-quoted conversation, the narrative of Qing's organic products highlights the idea that "real" organic food is not merely more "pure", or morally trustworthy, than the certified organic food sold in the supermarket, but also of higher quality than non-certified but commercialized organic food produced for the market. It is produced not for profit, but rather as a result of the moral qualities associated with the person who produces it.

Organic Food Production as Tradition

Although none of them admits that they are the leaders in the non-certified organic circle or that there is a coherent discourse about organic agriculture and traditions, celebrity producers such as Xun and Ming share the same values, supported by many others who insist on the traditional roots of organic agriculture. In their words, organic agriculture is mostly referred to as a "return to innocence/purity". In the views of those who establish a close connection between Chinese tradition and organic agriculture, today's world has regressed, not progressed, from the past. This is evident in the fact that despite progress in terms of material achievements, there has been regression in the cultural and spiritual domains. The series of problems that comes with modernization far outweighs its benefits, and highlights two negative aspects: the pollution of the environment and the degradation of morality in the social world. Only tradition, a return to innocence/purity, would solve these problems. "Organic" in this sense stands for "innocence", or a kind of purity, which is polluted by both the physical environment and social crisis in today's world. As Xun said:

[1] Interview with three consumers in an environmental NGO, Beijing, 2013.
[2] The names of the informants in this study are all fictitious to maintain confidentiality.

> *In the ancient times, people did not have material development but they were happier and more content. People in the modern world today now have won everything by trading off the homelands and natural environment to industrial progress. Without roots in nature and land, people are not able to achieve happiness. So I just hope to remind people the importance of the land and the environment through the food we eat every day (Xun, March 2013, Beijing).*

Xun is a radical environmental activist from Taiwan who once led local Twainess villagers to resist several polluting factories and pillaging by a property developer. In 2005, she was included among the group of 1,000 women working for peace that the initiative "1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize" nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize[3]. Xun then turned from environmental protection to brewing fruit and rice vinegar, since she is Hakka (a subgroup of Han Chinese), whose people have kept alive many Chinese traditional practices such as brewing and fermenting. Others, especially Nei, share Xun's views. Nei is a mother who initiated the first organic famers' market in Beijing. She also self-organized a "mothers group" that promotes organic food from field to table. According to Xun, what is worse than environmental degradation is the erosion of moral values, or "the pollution of human hearts".

Many moral values are eroded by profit seeking: people today prefer quicker benefits. Ming echoed this:

> *It was so difficult for me to find trustworthy food since I had allergies to chemicals. I was working full time for China's largest food company in its international trading department, flying from country to country. I had no time to grow my own food so I had asked my extended family members in the countryside to do it for me: but no, even they played tricks to save time and put in chemicals which I had required them not to. Finally, I quit my job and rented the land here as you see now (Ming, June 2012, Beijing).*

In Chinese history, the hermit's life is an important component of the traditional spiritual lifestyle (Porter and Johnson, 2009). Nearly half of the informants I met were part of the so-called San Gao group, and shared Ming's experience to some extent. San Gao literally means "three highs": high education levels, as it is common for these farm owners to hold a PhD, or sometimes even two; high income from previous work, in the golden collar class (the term "golden collar" is similar to "white collar", meaning those professionals who earn a high income); and high standards in pursuing ideals. Their stories are all similar: they enjoyed high achievement in their previous work (usually in the financial sector) but were not satisfied with either the value or the quality of their lives, so they sought ways to improve the quality/meaning of their lives through better food choices or lifestyle. They started part time by renting farms and could self-supply food for their family and friends. They eventually decided to quit their well-paid jobs and devote themselves to full-time farming. They became business owners, running the farm while living the dream lifestyle of their ancestors. As Ming elaborated in telling her story:

> *Organic agriculture is not a petty bourgeois lifestyle, but a way of life and attitude towards life. I put walls around the field because I started my farming experience from zero and was afraid villagers around me would think I'm a lunatic. I grew up as an urban Beijing native, knowing nothing about farming. I could not learn from others either, because people I talked to thought I was crazy for not wanting to apply chemicals, since at that time it was thought to be progressive. How could you go against the trend? I learned everything from zero by myself. Only later did I realize that traditional classics had the knowledge I needed (Ming, June 2012, Beijing).*

In this way, organic is framed as a lifestyle one can lead to follow the path of one's ancestors. It resembles the ancient way of living in many ways: self-provision, family farm, and diversity in food production. Thus, it is not about earning a living but about maintaining a lifestyle, one that entails being close to nature and living in harmony with it. In this sense, organic farming is less about farming and more about agri-"culture": that is, cultivating one's soul and seeking the meaning of life.

[3] Lan Hsiang Hsu (China, Taiwan), PeaceWomen Across the Globe – WikiPeaceWomen, Accessed 30 April 2022, http://wikipeace-women.org/wpworg/en/?page_id=3216

Under this value system, organic farmers who have land and resources do not deliberately build Shu yuan. Shu yuan, or Academy of Classical Learning, is a form of traditional school that was established privately in the mountains to provide scholars with a quiet environment away from worldly distractions. Programmes, including children's summer camps, were run yearlong. Children were taught the traditional classics, including Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional schools of thought, as well as food education.

"Is there any tradition which can be more closely related to farming itself?", is a question I also asked my informants, since the discourse of organic farming consists not only of abstract concepts but also includes cultural heritage. If the organic farming discourse is produced through tradition, the discourse actually can reflect by material elementes in agriculture. The informants showed me specific commodities and technologies. Among all the commodities, rice is the product they most frequently associated with tradition. Although the genetically modified organism (GMO) issue is a forbidden topic, which most informants did not address directly, organic rice is mentioned by Xun as "the right kind of rice" to make traditional food such as rice noodles, rice wine, and sticky rice cakes. Another of the most frequently mentioned traditions is fermenting technology. Not adding "artificial" additives is the key to the technology.

> *As a country with a long history, food-fermenting technologies, which really say much about human-time relations, have been important parts of the food culture: rice wine, vinegar, soy sauce, etc. The right apprentice for fermenting technology is difficult to find since everybody now somehow seems to believe in the modern and "quicker" technology of fermenting vinegar by putting in additives (Xun, March 2013, Beijing).*

Besides food and food technologies, several informants also pointed to the classics of agriculture as the "visible" substance of traditions. In the ancient classics, answers to questions regarding proper farming are provided. Organic agriculture producers frequently refer to three classics: Taoist philosophy; Huai Nan Zi (淮南子), a 2nd-century BCE Chinese philosophical classic, which includes Yin-Yang and the Five Phases theories; and Qi Min Yao Shu （齐民要术）, the most well-kept ancient Chinese agricultural texts written in the third century CE. Apart from these, there were no specific farming techniques. One informant said:

> *Now everyone is about science, efficiency, and development. Promoting tradition starts from the fact that we need to respect tradition rather than to see it as backwardness. So we start from simple things of tradition to create awareness. It's still at an early stage (Ming, June 2012, Beijing).*

For the traditional organic group, the modern organic group stands for profit-seeking and efficiency at the cost of certain values, including family, morality, and virtue; in short, what should be removedf from their real organic food. On the other hand, moral values and human bonds are critical in establishing the right way of organic production. Returning to the ancient lifestyle can be seen as a means of purification. The key is to refuse the negative material consequences associated with modern lifestyles, such as the pollution from chemicals and of human hearts. The organic food production system also needs to be separated from negative social relationships associated with reckless progress, industrialisation, and development, by rebuilding local community, promoting trust relations among people, and advocating for civil society.

The justificatory tactics argue that "organic" growing is an opportunity to return, reconstruct, rebuild, and reorganize lost agricultural traditions. What stands in the center of traditional organic agriculture is the notion of the morality and quality of organic food growers. In other words, for dissenting people who have various opinions of what organic food means, the trustworthy producer-consumer relationship carries more weight than anything else in constituting that which is authentically "organic".

Organic Food Production as Modern

Others provided different justificatory tactics for their organic food production, based on scientific and expert knowledge. Wen is the first college student from his village, which is under the administration of a town in Miyun district（密云区）in north-eastern Beijing. After he graduated from a top agricultural university in

China, Wen travelled around the country for various business opportunities before finally settling in his hometown and starting his own business. Wen caught my attention the first time I talked to him. He boldly criticized Qing and others such as Xun and Ming mentioned above.

> *Some of the people in the organic circle are psycho in terms of their actions in participating in agriculture. Organic agriculture becomes a way of action art. This way of marketing organic is dangerous as it gives the impression that it is merely for a group of idealists. Moreover, they are not trained in agriculture and know little about how important scientific knowledge of farming is both useful and necessary (Wen, May 2012, Beijing).*

At the time I visited Wen on his farm, he detailed his disagreements with the group as he directly framed himself as a modern agricultural professional and businessperson, and attributed the difference of the two camps to different profit models.

> *To the three highs, they had savings from their previous jobs so they have money to burn: organic agriculture is just a romantic lifestyle or an idealistic attempt for them, but to me and many other farm owners, it's our livelihood. Organic agriculture does not need to be all morally high; like any other business, it's a business opportunity for us to earn profits by providing high-quality products to the group that needs them. So I would like to discuss venture capital and management issues instead of those "values", "traditions", and "ideals" (Wen, June 2012, Beijing).*

In Wen's mind, the failure to attribute select scientific characteristics to organic food that effectively demarcated it from traditional and somewhat backward agriculture had endangered his interests. He therefore considered it necessary to provide scientific foundations for the superiority of the organic agriculture in which he was engaged. To do so, Wen constantly emphasized that his professional education in agriculture differed from that of the San Gao group of farm owners "who, before organic became popular, had zero experience in farming" – as Wen put it throughout the interview. Wen also claimed that he had many innovations that brought technological changes into the conventional food system and helped to improve what is now labelled as organic.

A well-known innovation of Wen's is breeding chicken and vegetables together in a greenhouse. China Central Television (CCTV), the predominant state television broadcaster in China, reported on this innovation on its agricultural channel. The news report clearly gave Wen a special kind of credibility, as he told me that his customers subsequently trusted him more deeply, despite the fact that he had not received organic certification from any third-party agency. Wen successfully convinced a majority of his VIP customers that organic certification by the official third party is suspect and intended only to generate profits. When I asked Wen what gives him legitimacy that his customers can rely on, he replied:

> *My members come to me not for a very romantic reason such as social justice. They come to me because of food safety. I fully understand their needs and can provide them high-quality produce, guaranteed by my expertise in agriculture. There is no so-called traditional or modern agriculture. There are ONLY right agricultural practices, which are based on scientific knowledge. If you visit my farm, you will gain confidence in our products not because of the stories I told you but because of what you are seeing with your own eyes (Wen, May 2012, Beijing).*

"In modern societies, science is near to being the source of cognitive authority: anyone who would be widely believed and trusted as an interpreter of nature needs a license from the scientific community" (Barnes and Edge, 1982: 2). Wen's narrative, resembling the modernization narrative which engages science as the authority, is representative because it transforms organic food into a question of truism: only science knows what real organic food is. Wen's opinion was shared by informants who cited science as their authority. Yet situated actors may have slightly different interpretations of what modern science comprises. For example, Shen said:

> *I see the difference between organic and conventional products lies in management, not technology. The technological part is straightforward: make the milk pure without external unnecessary "contamination"*

> *during the process. The management issue is difficult: organic is all in the details of management (Shen, July 2012, Beijing).*

Shen worked in an embassy before becoming the CEO of the RI organic milk company, one of a few companies producing organic milk in China. His company also received organic certification from one of the renowned state third-party agencies. Unlike many others who show obvious negative attitudes toward formal organic certification, Shen argued:

> *In the current Chinese context, certification is the mandatory requirement for our business. So we get the organic certification: our product is good enough to meet the standard, and it gives us an opportunity to receive inspection by professionals (Shen, July 2012, Beijing).*

Shen also indicated that by following the rules, his company had received considerable financial support from the county government. The local government also complimented his work as it set the goal of developing a modern and sustainable agriculture system. Many other informants suggested that Shen had strong social ties with important political figures, as his previous job gave him access to social resources that others did not have. Shen himself, however, attributed the company's success not to his personal relationships but to the strict management procedure it employed. In other words, the advantage of following the current organic certification required steps that demarcated his products from the "low-quality" products that had no evidence base besides self-proclaimed stories.

What Shen referred to as "low-quality" milk with only self-claimed stories was the "organic milk" at the farmers' market sold by another merchant, Ming, who was mentioned earlier as one of the traditional organic food supporters. Ming owned fewer than 10 cows, so the amount of milk she sold was quite limited. Shen did not speak against Ming directly since they both participated in the farmers' market, but Shen firmly stressed the "authenticity" of his own products.

> *Without systematic management procedures, one cannot produce qualified dairy products. However, some consumers are so naïve that certain touching stories can just convince them. Consumers should not trust what they can see either, because they are not professionals. However, the legal certification and management procedure cannot be lies since it would have required too many people in disparate departments to make the lies happen (Shen, July 2012, Beijing).*

The faith in strict management can be seen as another interpretation of organic agriculture as modern agriculture. Instead of focusing on the knowledge of farming, this perspective stresses the executive aspect of food production. In this account, the critical factor of organic is the quality of a commodity, which needs to be guaranteed by modern management. The quality of organics cannot be separated from the quality of the commodity produced.

A notable argument is the way this group to which Shen belonged responded to questions about organic food in terms of food security. The informants I interviewed admitted that there inevitably is tension between food security and organic agricultural production. That is where markets and an efficient business model need to step in and match up the high-quality products with the group that appreciates their value. This reasoning stresses quality and efficiency under a neoliberal influence, which is not shared by the traditional group who apply a morality of the growers as a framework to justify their values. One of the informants, Wang, addressed this difference and argued that the determining factor was the social environment of China:

> *We are for profits, but it does not mean we have not efficiently solved the problems of food safety and environmental pollution. The form of a firm is determined by the society in which the firm operates: we are in a market economy and the rule of the market is thirst for profits! The competition will filter out the winners from the losers. That is why we are steadily improving the quality of our organic products (Wang, July 2012, Beijing).*

The traditional organic group refers to some research suggesting that organic agriculture is not less productive.

Or they argue that the current food system is not sustainable, and even though the organic food model does pose certain risks to food security, it still stands for the right path that agricultural development needs to take. They believe that production problems will be resolved later along this path.

> *If you didn't take the path, you'd never know.In the current conditions, we just need to make sure that it is the RIGHT path and take it. Rejecting organic agricultural development just because it might conflict with food security is like refusing to eat meals just because you are too afraid to choke to death while eating (Ming, June 2012, Beijing).*

From this point of view, management systems and technology are the two critical criteria to define real organic agriculture, and thus the tradition camp's organic practices are unqualified measured by the two criteria. Certification, whether it is third-party certification or professional certification, is necessary for one to be defined as "organic". As is typical in the discourse of modernization, technoscience and management are referred to as the premium knowledge that guarantees "the right way of developing organic agriculture", according to the science camp.

The Boundary Work of Making the "Real" Civic Organic Food

By tracing the multiple trajectories of everyday civic organic food narratives, I show that it is actually through the above two justificatory tactics of producing "traditional" in relation to "modern" organic agriculture that a certain version of civic organic comes to have legitimate authority without being officially certified.

The boundary work strategies of the traditional organic camp are different from the modern ones; one of their main strategies is framing organic as a solution to "the problem of pollution" caused by modern development. It emphasizes the pollution of both the environment and people's hearts. The solution appears to be in changing current social relations by building bonds between people, for instance through the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) certification model, or reconstructing community, and many other human-factor enhancing approaches. The discourse shows "anticipatory nostalgia", in Hugh Raffles' words, which indicates how "things which have not yet and may never exist come to pass" (Rofel 1999 quoted in Zhan 2009: 21). The boundary work of modern organic, however, is done by emphasizing the quality of products, instead of the moral quality of producers. Modernizers are doing their best to demarcate authentic "organic" from the unqualified agriculture of amateur farmers who have not received formal agricultural education or training.

Despite the apparently different, yet related, discursive tactics in claiming their practices to be authentic, the two groups share similarities in many aspects. Both groups have practised organic agriculture for a short amount of time. Thus, what they both emphasize as being the most important assignment for them is growing the idea of organic food in people's minds, rather than growing organic agriculture on the land. The modern organic agriculture group uses the term "marketing and giving consumers the right information". A firm even changed "community-supported agriculture" (CSA) into "customer-supported agriculture" to stress its business model. The traditional organic agriculture group, however, defines it as "educating citizens and rebuilding the trust relationship among people by engaging growers and buyers of organic food, a slogan printed in the farmers' market in Beijing.

These shared similarities of organic agriculture are essentially about trust. However, they also reflect the technological aspects. One of the modern organic agriculture firms showed me the evidence for its technological advances. This involved burying one video camera every few meters in the soil to detect whether the farmers who work on the field actually follow their instruction of not using certain pesticides, as required. Another common "high technology" check that the modern organic agriculture firms perform is reviewing the soil and air quality indicators every few days on WeChat.[4] The traditional organic food group embraces

[4] WeChat is a popular social network communication service widely used on mobile phones (236 million monthly active users ac-

the use of WeChat (微信) as well.

The traditional food group has used their techniques to promote trust. A common strategy is holding various events that engage people to participate in traditional food cooking techniques at 24 solar term points. A Chinese lunar year has 24 solar terms, and in traditional Chinese culture, farmers used the 24 solar term points to signify the timing of farming. Special food was prepared for different solar term points using seasoning. One event I attended was intended to teach people how to make the sweet green rice ball at Qingming (清明 or clear and bright), one of the 24 solar term points. Mostly women members with their young children attended these events.

At these events, the organizer would emphasize the idea that "real food" has the right kind of energy only when it is prepared with the appropriate seasoning and good ingredients. In this case, the sweet green rice ball needs wormwood juice (wormwood is a seasoning grass) and high-quality organic rice. Thus, organic has been successfully framed again under "Chinese tradition". The event was held in Beijing, which is situated far north of the Yangtze River, whereas traditionally the sweet green rice ball was only consumed to the south of the Yangtze River. I was concerned with the conflicting value it might appear to have, as one version of "organic" involved eating local. However, nobody else at that event seemed to be concerned about that question. Apparently, these events convince many people who attend that organic, after all, is just a revision of the ancient cultural values related to food. Quite a few of the participants bought rice from the organizers after the event.

Besides the marketing aspect, there are hybrid practices with modern and traditional elements in each type of organic production. All the traditional organic food farms I visited were using Baoyi seed （包衣种子） because the specific seed to be used for organic farming (according to the national organic standard) is simply not available on the market.

> *It would take us many years to go back to a pure traditional practice since it is hard even to locate seeds. This is the reality of the current situation in China: nobody can find the organic-standard seed, and even those who have organic certifications are the same. Tradition is more about the value and attitude of farming and human-nature relations, rather than any specific technology. In that sense, the traditional values we follow differentiate us from those who perceive organic only as commodities sold on the market (Zhong, August 2012, Beijing).*

When I visited the organic milk factory with Shen, I noticed that the milk cows were fed with traditional Chinese medicine-based herbs. I asked Shen why and he asserted that it was a technological innovation as in the olden days those herbs were only for people, but now they were being used creatively in animal feed. In addition, traditional music was played when the cows were being milked, which was another technological innovation, based on Kobe beef production practices in Japan. It is important to note that even modernists such as Shen himself could have framed their product easily within the "traditional" framework, if he had wanted to.

In another scenario, I met Ronger in a Chinese medicine clinic. Ronger graduated from an agricultural university and was attracted to organic agriculture because it was not only about agriculture but also the "Chinese dream." He worked as a team member for one of the most well-known organic programmes officially affiliated with the Food Safety Center in the Department of Sociology at one of the most prestigious universities in China. Ronger told me that he was trying to convince the clinic to give them the leftover herbal medicine for them to use as a reliable and cheap food to feed their chickens. I asked why he had chosen this clinic and why herbal medicine, as well as where he got the idea. He explained:

cording to its official report by August 2013).

> *All things are quite random. I have been a fan of Chinese traditional medicine for years. Before joining our current program, I did my internship here in this clinic, so it was easier to ask them than other clinics with which I had no personal ties. The organic food trend in China has just started, so all that we could attempt to do is to make our program survive. At a practical level, there are really no divides between traditional and modern "organics": all of us are altering the concept to make it feasible, depending on the path we travelled before. Sorry I can't tell you a story that doesn't sound like a closed circle, but that is what it is (Ronger, March 2013, Beijing).*

Ronger did not tell me a closed-circle story, but his words did demonstrate what I had been observing: the boundaries between traditional and modern knowledge are outcomes of the efforts of social actors, rather than explanations. They are fluid yet have material force.

As Latour (1993: 76) has argued, "[o]ne is not born traditional; one chooses to become traditional by constant innovation. The idea of an identical repetition of the past and that of a radical rupture with any past are two symmetrical results of a single conception of time". In that sense, we have never been modern and the boundary between traditional and modern knowledge is a false divide in the first place. According to Latour, "modern" exists only in the conjoined processes of hybridization and purification. Once people stop believing in the purification processes and start acknowledging "the hybrid", the modern as a project will collapse.

The trajectories drawn above in which "real" organic is produced alongside traditional knowledge and modern science follows Latour's notion of "relativist relativism". Organic, traditional, and scientific are not entities with predetermined properties but are constantly in a process of boundary production and construction. The boundaries are drawn around organic agriculture (what would be considered as "real" organic) and between the traditional and modern knowledge systems, while there is little direct interaction between the two social groups. In most trajectories, they constantly talk about the other group, but do not talk to each other, so the boundaries mentioned are interactive not through social engagement, but rather as the rival reference upon and against which justification tactics by one camp are crafted. Yet, boundaries for things are also boundaries for people, as the "right" boundary of the object would require the same "right" actions of social actors to go with it. Thus, the boundaries are still group boundaries, even though there is little direct negotiating between these two groups.

Conclusion and Implications

The role of civil society has become important in transforming food systems to incorporate notions of justice, control, and food sovereignty (Renting et al., 2012). This article started from the question: how do the civic organic producers gain legitimacy to call their products "organic" if those products are not certified according to state regulations? This paper examined various kinds of trajectories in which, by drawing boundaries between "traditional" and "modern" knowledge systems, two groups produce boundaries around "real" organic food and gain legitimacy for their products. In other words, the man-made dichotomous typology of traditional-scientific organic agriculture is not defined by the pre-existing and internal properties of agricultural science or tradition. Nor is it simply limited to being a set of homogeneous and pre-existing knowledge systems. Instead, the boundaries are constructed and transformed constantly by situated social actors through a set of working processes, as a legitimacy technique. It is through processes of negotiating boundaries that a certain notion of "organic" takes shape and stands out from others. Therefore, drawing the boundaries of "real" organic food is an ongoing achievement by social actors in action.

Situating China's "civic organic agriculture" within the existing literature of alternative food and other civic organic agriculture, this paper attempts to understand how civic organic food is upheld and legitimized through the performance of actors, without being recognized by the state. The connection drawn between the two civic organic camps has been operating outside of state governance/certification schemes. High-

profile organic growers who seemed to demonstrate the safety and non-contamination of their food, affiliated with certain traditions and scientific elements, were earning consumers' trust so they would succeed in marketing civic organic food. Meanwhile, consumers formulated trust in farmers' organic practices based on the farmers' life history or their exposure in the media, interpreting their background and operations with either the traditional knowledge system or the modern scientific system.

The ambiguity of "organic" thus opens up a contingent arena for negotiating boundaries between traditional and scientific knowledge, and for participating in the production of real organic outside the current certified version of organic food in China. Yet discourses have the power to shape our world. Although the boundaries themselves are fluid, changing constantly in various situations, they still exist in every setting and generate desired or less-desired results as the participants negotiate. Those results are or will become realities: a proliferation of certain organic producers and the failure of others; different organic farm landscapes: large-scale or small-scale operations; and many other possibilities.

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