**From pioneering to organized business: the development of ecological farming in China**

**Abstract**

Small-scale ecological and community farming and their associated alternative food networks, are increasingly important in China, as a response to poor farm incomes from traditional small-scale agriculture and as a contribution to widespread concerns about environmental degradation and food safety. However, despite the enormous market potential and the notable success of some ventures, this type of farming remains at the margins, with many businesses struggling to develop beyond their start-up phase and consumers struggling to build confidence in the new produce and routes to market. Many of these farms display the classic elements of what are understood in the West to be pioneer businesses, including high reliance on charismatic individuals, insecure land rights, high transaction and monitoring costs and fragile routes to market. Empirically, many of these businesses fail, largely because they cannot grow out of the pioneer phase before the pioneer grows tired of the business. While this is a problem for all small businesses, it is particularly acute in business sectors like ecological and ‘alternative’ farming in China, where there is very little evidence of suitable and sustainable developmental models. Using Bernardus Lievegoed’s work on organizational development applied to two case study farms, we suggest that there are Western developmental models that are applicable to small scale ecological farming and that have the potential to offer insights into how this might be achieved with Chinese characteristics. We conclude by arguing that, just as in the West, Chinese ecological farms have to plan explicitly for a form of development that allows them to remain committed to their ideals while moving them away from dependence on individual people, family labor and volatile customer bases.

**Introduction**

There have been a series of papers in this journal over the past decade that have engaged with the politics and economics of agriculture and food as a means of improving local environments. Cox, et al (2008) argued that sustainable food security can be enhanced by encouraging communication between the producers and consumers of the food which, for Turner (2011) contributes to improving ecological citizenship. However, as Franklin, et al (2011) found, with respect to a well-established community food hub in the UK, getting local food into the mainstream is a difficult task, even in a relatively affluent society. As Bellamingie and Walker (2013) argued in a later paper, engaging with the mainstream involves interweaving new social and economic relations with existing neoliberal market logic which, for Stanko and Naylor (2018), can increase existing inequalities as activist politics are put aside in favor of a new rationality of logistics and sustainability planning. While all these contributions are Western in derivation and outlook, they speak to at least some aspects of the development of local food production and distribution in China. Not the least of these, echoing Franklin, et al (2011), has been for small scale ecological farmers to establish viable business models (often social enterprises – see Yu, 2011, 2013) that offer a balance between market logic and new social and economic relations between themselves and their customers. Using case studies in the UK and China, we want to contribute to the on-going debates in this journal, by illustrating the dynamics of local food and environment in different cultures as a means of arguing that there are approaches to social enterprise and business development that offer the possibility of enhancing sustainability, in financial, social and ecological terms.

Since the 1990s, China has shown an increasing interest in transforming agricultural production away from its reliance on agri-chemicals, towards a new ‘green’ or sustainable approach which has collectively been termed ‘ecological farming’ (Jin and Zhou, 2011; Li, et al, 2011; Shi, et al, 2011; Yeh, 2013; Liu, et al, 2016). Concomitant with this, China has witnessed significant growth in certified organic agriculture (Paull, 2007), initially through central government policies that promoted ‘Chinese Ecological Agriculture’ (CEA) (Li, et al, 2011; Lu, et al, 2012; Ding, et al, 2018), and more recently through market-based activity (Sanders, 2006; Oelofse, et al, 2010) that has been driven by lucrative export markets and a rapidly increasing urban middle class in China (Friedmann, 2016; Kledal et al. 2007; Shi, et al, 2011; Chen, 2013, 2015). This has meant that small-scale ecological agriculture has become a broadly urban and peri-urban phenomenon while increasingly large-scale corporate (conventional and organic) agriculture dominates rural areas, particularly where the geographical and investment conditions are favorable (Yang and Li, 2000; Liu, et al, 2011; Shi, et al, 2011; Long, et al, 2012; Krul and Ho, 2017; Liu and Ravenscroft, 2017; Ding, et al, 2018).

It might well be the case that farming which produces relatively small quantities of high quality produce for increasingly wealthy and health-conscious people needs to be located near to where these people live (Chen, 2013). But this means that these farms not only have to compete with large scale producers of organic produce (both domestic and imported), but they also often have to compete for land and labor in markets that are largely hostile, or at least antithetical, to them (Siciliano, 2012). As a consequence, many of these farms are on the limits of viability, constrained by the availability of land suitable to their needs, limited often to family and elderly labor, and characterized by immature and fragile routes to market (Sanders, 2000; Hao, et al, 2004; Zhang, et al, 2005; Shi, et al, 2011; Ding, et al, 2018). This is redolent of the position in which pioneer ecological farmers have found themselves, in different countries and situations (Groh and MacFadden, 1997; Rioufol and Ravenscroft, 2012; Ravenscroft, et al, 2013; Laughton, 2017). As individuals, often with the backing of families and local communities, these pioneers can see that there is a socio-economic space in which they can create a sustainable enterprise that reflects their identity, ideals and values (Henderson and van En, 2007; Shen and Shen, 2018). However, after an initial period of success, with lots of family and volunteer support, many of these farmers have found that the future of their enterprise is largely determined by the effort that they are willing and able to put in to maintain it. While many have put in this effort, often at a considerable personal cost (Bloksma and Struik, 1997; Groh and MacFadden, 1997), many others have given up and have either left farming, or have returned to conventional agriculture (Flaten, et al, 2010; Koesling, et al, 2012; Madelrieux and Alavoine-Mornas, 2012).

This is certainly the case in China, where very few Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) enterprises and alternative food networks (AFNs) have yet developed business models that work for them in the medium to long term (Shi, et al, 2011; Chen, 2013; Si, et al, 2015; Liu, et al, 2016; Ding, et al, 2018) (. This has led some commentators to question whether China is really ready to embrace such ecological approaches to farming, particularly when its demand for large-scale food production is so pressing (Li, et al, 2011). It has also led others – examining similar issues in different countries - to question whether there is a need for new economic and business models that offer guidance to pioneers seeking to develop their farms. For example, in their work on CSA in Belgium, Bloemmen, et al (2015) have discussed the case for a new microeconomics of ‘degrowth’, while Yong, et al (2009) have discussed ‘defarming’ and Liu, et al (2017) have argued for shifting the focus away from food production to embrace a much stronger connection with local communities. Yet, to date, there is little research on how small ecological farms – or other forms of social enterprise - can develop from their pioneer phase in ways that are economically and socially sustainable (Yu, 2011, 2013).

In this paper we want to address this gap in knowledge, focusing in particular on the potential utility of a little-known approach to organizational development that was originally designed for such situations and which has previously been applied to small ecological farms in the West. Using two case studies, one in China and the other in the UK, of ecological farms that have undergone sustained and successful organizational development, we intend to address a methodological question about the extent to which the process of organizational development has been significant for the case study farms and, to the extent that it has, how far it offers a scalable approach for other such farms in China. In addressing this question we do not seek to suggest or impose a specific approach to organizational development, nor do we wish to argue that Western concepts are necessarily applicable to China. Rather, we seek to generate new knowledge about organizational development that can help pioneer ecological farmers sustain their businesses.

While there are many approaches to organizational development, within and beyond agriculture (; ), quite a number of CSAs and AFNs have been influenced by the work of Glasl and Lievegoed (Lievegoed, 1980; Glasl and Lievegoed, 1994; see also Bloksma and Struik,1997; Vesala, et al, 2007; McGuire, et al, 2013; Sulemana and James, 2014; Poels, et al, 2017), which uses the metaphor of human development to argue that successful organizations tend to be those that undergo a structured and rhythmic series of changes as they grow. While developed in post-second world war Europe and not part of mainstream business thinking, Glasl and Lievegoed’s work has influenced generations of business researchers interested in the ways in which small organizations learn, adapt and grow into larger organizations (Howard, 2002; Poels, et al, 2017).

The paper is organized into four substantive sections: a brief literature review that explores the knowledge gap and the potential of Glasl and Lievegoed’s approach to address it as a means of generating a research question; a methods section that addresses the research question; the case studies of the two ecological farms; and a discussion of the findings. The paper will conclude by assessing the utility of the findings and the need for further research.

**Literature review: the need for new models of organizational development**

Friedrich Glasl and Bernardus Lievegoed’s work on the development of organizations (Lievegoed, 1980; Glasl and Lievegoed, 1994) is founded on their understanding of evolutionary development: that all organisms go through a series of developmental stages as they grow, and that they have to go through these stages in sequence if their growth is to be sustained and healthy (Bloksma and Struik, 1997). While recognizing that this does not necessarily hold true for businesses, Glasl and Lievegoed argued – and demonstrated empirically - that most businesses that are successful over a long period of time do, indeed, go through identifiable developmental stages. In his early work, Lievegoed also found that business development is not connected with growth per se, but with the need for different structural forms at different points in the developmental journey. He described it thus:

… where organic phenomena are concerned, growth turns into development … The term development describes the following phenomenon: growth continues with a certain structure (model) until a limit is reached; beyond this limit the existing structure or model can no longer impose order on the larger mass; the consequence is either disintegration or a step up to a higher level of order. (Lievegoed, 1980: p.5)

Lievegoed therefore argued that development is essentially discontinuous and occurs in a series of stages, each of which is associated with some specific structural characteristics of the business that are only appropriate to that stage of development. This means that a new business structure is required in order for development to continue beyond the capacity limits of the current developmental stage. This is not about adaptation, but about change, with each developmental stage requiring a different and ever more complex structure to support it. This means that, if they are to develop their businesses, owners and managers must ‘ … set in motion organizational changes in the direction of the next stage in development … ‘ (Lievegoed, 1980: p.7) even though they cannot be sure what this will mean for them and their business.

In offering guidance about the structural characteristics of organizational development, Lievegoed suggested that there are three fundamental stages that all businesses must embrace: the pioneer, differentiated and integrated phases of development, plus an additional fourth stage, known as the associative stage. At the pioneer, or early stage, of development, the organization is characterized by simplicity, in reflecting the personality of the leader/pioneer and the consumer needs that the business aims to satisfy. The pioneer stage is thus associated with flexible and efficient organizations that tend to be successful as long as the pioneer is able to integrate all the elements of the business effectively. This stage is typical of all small farm businesses in which the identity and personality of the farmer are inseparable from those of the farm. It is also typical of most CSA and AFN farms, which are generally developed around an individual farmer or farming family, even if they are not the owners of the farm or business (Groh and McFadden, 1997).

The pioneer phase tends to reach its limit when the business or its market becomes larger than the pioneer can know and manage personally. At this stage the business becomes, in Lievegoed’s (1980: p.11) terms, ‘over-ripe.’ At this point the pioneer is probably over-working and the business is less efficient and successful than it was. Without action the business will either start to disintegrate, or it will require restructuring. Typically, small farms that reach this point disintegrate, often because the farmer gets ill, retires or leaves the farm; in these cases the best outcome for the farm is that it enters a new pioneer phase, with a new or rejuvenated farmer. The alternative, restructuring, involves replacing the pioneer with a differentiated division of functions ordered according to a hierarchy of delegation and control:

The logical technical framework of an organization in this phase gives the impression that it can be contained in a deterministic or stochastic model in which the human being is reduced to a predictable factor which reacts to economic stimuli. (Lievegoed, 1980: p.12)

Rather than featuring the efficiency of a single system revolving around a single pioneer manager, this differentiation phase involves a series of subsystems that each operate through a form of systems efficiency or rational order (Elkin, et al, 2009). This means that parts of the subsystems – including labor – can be replaced without detriment to the whole. The organization can thus continue to develop without putting undue emphasis or pressure on one individual. However, it also becomes impersonal and remote from the social systems in which it operates – typically needing to develop ‘customer service’ divisions to undertake human interactions that were once at the core of the pioneer business.

The limits of the differentiation phase are reached when the ‘… neglect of the social subsystem is felt …’ (Lievegoed, 1980: p.12) and the organization loses the sense of human motivation and creativity. While some traditional industrial companies have stayed for decades in this phase, it is generally the case that this phase is short-lived; there is certainly learning to be done in terms of combining different subsystems within a single organization, but once this is learned it is time to change again, to the integration phase, in which people once again dominate, as the creative force that brings together all the subsystems within one cohesive whole:

For an enterprise to produce the best possible results, it is essential that all its subsystems should be able to make the best possible contribution in an integrated fashion. This means that the economic, technical and social subsystems must all be fully developed while none of the three is superior or inferior to the others in contributing to the whole. (Lievegoed, 1980: p14)

At this stage of development the business will have reached a high level of market acceptance and a good internal culture, with all the essential elements of the organization contained within three interlinked subsystems (techno-instrumental, social and cultural – see Glasl and Lievegoed, 1994; Martinelli, 2001). In many ways this is the highest state of development for the business, as a business, and is often represented as a four-leaf clover in which management is at the center of four interlinked managerial realms, associated with: marketing; processing; communications; and resources (Lievegoed, 1980). In seeking further organizational development it now needs to look externally, to create associative relations with other companies with whom it can do business. These relationships could remain at a reasonable distance, or they could become formal partnerships as the business enters into an increasingly complex network of associative businesses, with the networking making each organization individually and collectively stronger.

As Martinelli (2001) has argued, this approach posits that organizational development is driven by managerial decisions based on maintaining the health of the organization, at a technical, social and cultural level. While referring to organizational development in the West, these approaches are redolent of research on entrepreneurialism and business innovation with Chinese characteristics (Sun, 1993; Huang, 2008; Li-Hua, 2008; Alon, et al, 2009; Shenkar, 2009; Wang, 2010; Anderson and Zhang, 2015; Choi, et al, 2016), in which the emphasis of good business is similarly focused on normative concepts such as *Li* (emulating established social practices) and *Ren* (courtesy, good faith and kindness) (Elkin, et al, 2009: p.78). This suggests to us that there could well be value in considering how Glasl and Lievegoed’s work could be adapted for application to small ecological farms in China.

While we have not found any reference to the application of Glasl and Lievegoed’s work in China, there is certainly a growing interest in organizational development with Chinese characteristics (Huang, 2008; Choi, et al, 2016) that echoes many elements of their work. In particular, it has been recognized that many successful Chinese businesses are essentially pragmatic and relational (Elkin, et al, 2009), in valuing people and personal relationships more highly than strategic visions and corporate objectives (Li-Hua, 2008). For Elkin, et al (2009), this means that an essential characteristic of Chinese businesses is that they are ‘natural’ learning environments that favor order and stability and thus adapt as the external environment and circumstances dictate. This has meant that such businesses have been quick to recognize and adapt Western management approaches where appropriate, including the standardization of routine functions and the development of highly skilled staff (Wang, 2010). It is this preference for ‘aesthetic order’ (Elkin, et al, 2009: p. 74) that offers overlap with Glasl and Lievegoed’s work, insofar as the development of an organization is driven by the pragmatic need to find a new way of working that can underpin and sustain the business. In contrast to the rationalist idealism of many Western approaches to growth, which are predicated on the absolute substitutability of both people and situations (Ames and Hall, 1987), the drive for aesthetic order emphasizes the particularity and uniqueness of each business and the environment in which it operates (Sun, 1993; Elkin, et al, 2009).

**Case studies in the organizational development of ecological farms**

***The differentiated organization: Tablehurst Farm CSA***

Tablehurst Farm, which is part of a community-owned co-operative approximately 30kms south of London, UK, started in 1995 as a relatively small pioneer community farm, whose members – now numbering around 600 - bought shares in the co-operative as a means of providing working capital for the farm. Its early development has been recorded in Klett, et al (1990), Burkham (2010), Petherick (2010), Ravenscroft and Hanney (2012), and Ravenscroft, et al (2013). The early stages of the farm revolved around raising working capital and learning how to run the business – the pioneer group had some farming skills, but needed organizational know-how from the community:

… what they [local people] brought was this enormous skill base that we didn’t have. I was doing the books and I couldn’t use the computer. It was a huge relief when they joined, because they helped us set up systems and organise the finances when we didn’t know how to and didn’t have the time to find out. So the physical labour was good, but these skills were invaluable – and they also brought the community directly into the management of the farms – this was what the farm needed at that time and it was central to understanding the connections between community and farm. (Pioneer farmer, interviewed in 2011)

From its modest beginning, Tablehurst Farm has grown in size and complexity to become a three-hundred hectare biodynamic arable and stock farm producing meat, vegetables and cereals, all of which are processed on the farm and most of which are sold through the farm shop. In addition, the farm runs a café and outdoor kitchen, and a small residential care home. Each of these enterprises has its own management and operating guidelines, with the managers reporting to a Senior Management Team that comprises the Managing Director (also the Farm Manager), the Garden Manager, the Commercial Director and the Care Home Manager. The Farm employs approximately 25 permanent staff, with each staff member located within one of the enterprises. While there is some movement of staff between enterprises to cope with peak labor demand, this is kept to a minimum. A Board of Directors is responsible for the strategic direction and performance of the business. In addition to the Senior Management Team, who are ex-officio Directors, four Non-Executive ‘community’ Directors are appointed to ensure that the vision of the co-operative is maintained.

Insert Tablehurst organogram here

Using Lievegoed’s (1980) *developing organization* as its guide, the transition from the pioneer to the differentiation phase was implemented by the Directors as part of a strategy to address the impending retirement of the last of the original pioneer farmers. Their concern was that the original business model was too dependent on the organizational and communication skills of the remaining pioneer, and that it was too risky to assume that this could be replicated by new management.

It has been tempting to stay too long in the pioneer phase with particular concern that the co-op members were more attached to [the pioneer farmer] than they were to the farm. We needed to change this and to create a strong departmental structure and management that can take us forwards in ways that enable to sustain the organization into its next phase of development (Director, interviewed in 2016)

It was felt best, therefore, to make a structural change which reduced the exposure of the new farmer – whose identity was also shifted to that of Managing Director. The transition away from the pioneer stage was difficult for many on the farm who were used to ‘mucking-in’ with whatever needed doing, but it did allow workers in the different enterprises to specialize in a way that was not previously possible. For many community members it also felt strange not to see one or two familiar faces at all occasions and events. However, they could equally see that improvements were being made and that the farm was entering a new phase in which their relationship would change, although remaining fundamental to the balance to be struck between the economic, social and cultural realms. One of the original community members, who helped raise the initial finance for the farm, commented:

The farm no longer needs my support. [It is] independent and strong. I can now choose when I visit and what I do. (Community member, interviewed 2011)

While it was originally intended that the farm should not stay long in the differentiation phase before restructuring again to foster a more integrated organization, the Directors and Senior Managers have decided first to build the technical and managerial expertise of the teams so that when the integration phase is introduced, there will be sufficient organizational discipline to avoid parts of the enterprise reverting to pioneering.

***The Integrated Organization: Shared Harvest Farm***

Shared Harvest Farm was established in 2012, in a suburb of Beijing. The founder, Shi Yan, had previously been involved with the pioneering Little Donkey CSA, also in Beijing. Although still young, Shared Harvest Farm is now one of the most famous and successful CSA farms in China, with a membership over 600 households and production capacity for three times this number. Shi has played a key role in the success of Shared Harvest Farm, by learning from her experience of a placement that she undertook on an American Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm and her pioneering at Little Donkey. In contrast to many organic and ecological farms, Shi set out to create a farm business that would grow swiftly into an integrated organizational structure that reflected her earlier experience of CSA, but with Chinese characteristics. The farm has reached this stage of development within four years of starting. It is now an integrated organization in which a number of separate production units (farms, woodlands and orchards) provide planned volumes of food to a central hub, which distributes the food to members using a new bespoke on-line platform (see Figure 3). Integration comes about through a commitment to collaborative farm planning, with each production unit knowing what it has to achieve and also what is happening at the other units and in the collaborative distribution of food. In many ways, therefore, the organization of Shared Harvest Farm resembles Lievegoed’s (1980) four-leaf clover in which the hub manages a causal chain of processes, from marketing to production to resources to information and communication management. Shi describes the organization in these terms:

We have a rule for employees. Each department has its specific requirements and is quite easy to understand through common sense, such as the Production, Sales and Membership departments. Actually we don’t want to make it too complicated, as all the management is not costless. The best management is that everybody does their own job well, and helps others if necessary. … It’s impossible to achieve further development. (Shi Yan, interviewed 2017)

**Figure 3. Integrated organization structure at Shared Harvest Farm**



Shi left Little Donkey CSA because she felt that there were too many constraints for her to achieve her desire to farm organically. She first moved to Tongzhou, where she started a pioneer business by persuaded retired local farmers to start farming again, with a shift to organic production. This established the first production base for Shared Harvest. It was only 50 mu of vegetable lands and 110 mu of forest lands for animal raising. At the beginning there were difficulties, relating largely to an uneven supply of a few types of poorly presented vegetables. It was hard at this time to maintain a stable CSA membership. In 2013, Shi moved the business into the next phase of development, by renting another 50 mu of land with greenhouses for vegetable production and its own production team. This allowed the business to maintain a more consistent output with improved quality. As the visitors and members grew rapidly, Shi changed the organizational structure again, to the integrated model that it is today. Within this shift she made arrangements with associated farms elsewhere in China to supply a wider range of produce than that which could be produced at Shared Harvest, such as rice and walnuts. She also set up some new ventures to capitalize on farm tourism, including pick-your-own vegetables, nature education for children, and day visits by members. As Shi has observed, while the regular farm work no longer needs so much of her attention, the success of the new ventures depends on her ability to develop them into sustainable parts of the business:

The farms will operate well even if I am absence for a while. However, the total sales will be less. … Regular sales such as the member delivery is quite stable now, but we also have other seasonal products coming from our associated farms (such as rice) and certificated farms (such as walnut). These sales depend more on me. (Shi Yan, interviewed 2017)

Working at the core of the newly integrated business, Shi had a unique understanding of the farm, targeting it towards what she called a ‘Food community’. She offered the farm as the platform for certified organic foods from all over the nation. If, in addition to organic certification, the food products passed the scrutiny of Shared Harvest Farm (becoming certificated by Shared harvest in addition to their organic certification), they could be sold to farm members and other customers. Shared Harvest Farm also provided opportunities for those who wanted to set up their own organic ventures, such as organic mushroom farming, including help to sell the products via the farm’s brand and website. Shi’s husband, a technical expert, developed the online ordering system for Shared Harvest, making it the first CSA farm from which members can order what they want every week, from the associated farms as well as the ‘home’ farms of Shared Harvest:

We have two types of cooperation. One is incubated by us, and the other is certificated by us and we help sell their products. The rice from Heilongjiang Province was the first type. We needed rice and found the household there, and we helped with their production locally at the beginning. Now we do the monitoring and quality testing annually, taking records, advocating the products, designing and packing the rice. (Shi Yan, interviewed 2017)

In 2015, Shared Harvest started a new type of service, by renting 230 mu of fruit trees about 3km from the farm. Even though they had little experience of fruit production, Shi wanted to diversify the food choices available to members while, in addition, also creating some on-farm accommodation. She decorated five rooms in the house at the fruit farm and now provides a lodging service for members and other customers. What Shi and Shared Harvest Farm do is thus much more than a conventional CSA farm. Indeed, Shi is now moving further into the association phase of organizational development, by housing China’s new CSA Association at the farm as well as working as a research base for Tsinghua and Renmin Universities, and as an education center for many companies, schools and kindergartens.

**Discussion**

While being very different in context, location and business model, both Tablehurst and Shared Harvest share many similarities in terms of their developmental path. Both started as pioneer CSA farms centered on a small number of inspirational people, like so many other small CSAs and AFNs in China and elsewhere (see Schumilas and Scott, 2016; Ding, et al, 2018). Both farms had limited access to land and capital, although from the start Tablehurst had a highly organized community around it that offered both financial and business support. What is particularly interesting, however, is the very different approaches that they took to business development, with Shared Harvest moving swiftly to the differentiation phase in contrast to Tablehurst, which remained a pioneer farm for as long as it could do so. While there are many reasons for this difference, one of the chief ones involves the identity of the lead pioneer. At Shared Harvest, Shi Yan was very much a business developer who left the production side to others, as described by Lang, one of the production unit farmers:

Actually I don’t think Shi helps in the production. She is in charge of the sales and I am in charge of the production. … If Shi was doing the production … for sure they would lose money. … The production plan is always in my head. No need for meetings. I follow my experiences, and change according to the seasons … At the beginning they had requirements for me. Now they don’t, as my supply of vegetables is very diversified. (Lang, farmer at Shared Harvest’s Tongzhou site).

In contrast, the Tablehurst pioneers, were first and foremost, farmers. In true pioneer fashion, they and a small group of others ran all the enterprises and the business itself. They were pivotal to the early development of Tablehurst, with the community seeking them out from a CSA farm in Germany where they had been working and then developing the farm and CSA business around them, as described by one community member:

I knew the place [Tablehurst] and I loved it – and when I met Peter and Brigitte [the pioneers] I knew that they could change things; they could do things … and I had a connection [to them] and knew that I could make things happen … . (Community member interviewed 2011)

While being different, these two approaches are typical of many CSA businesses, which are either led by an individual person or catalyzed by a group or community of people (Groh and McFadden, 1997; Ravenscroft, et al, 2013). While both approaches are very much driven by visions about how to produce food close to consumers, the former tends to be developed from a more singular purpose associated with business sustainability, while the latter is informed by a more general desire for access to certain types of foods and association with a certain way of being, often associated with the concept of care – for people and the environment (Ravenscroft, et al, 2013).

These differences have, perhaps, also informed how and to who the produce is distributed. Shared Harvest is, in many ways, a classic CSA farm in which access to the food is largely via membership of the CSA. However, while many CSAs offer a standardized route to market, usually involving advanced payment for a weekly box of vegetables, Shared Harvest has developed a new on-line ordering platform that allows CSA members to specify what they want, and to vary this as often as they like. Once ordered, delivery is organized in the typical Chinese way, via motorcycle courier. In this way, Shared Harvest operates in quite a similar way to an on-line shop, with produce supplied by a number of associated businesses as well as from the Shared Harvest production bases. In contrast, Tablehurst retails most of its produce, as well as some produce from other suppliers, through its on-farm shop. While there is a system of pre-ordering popular items, most people simply shop at the farm, buying what is available at the time of their visit. This means that whereas the packing and distribution of food is central to the operation of Shared Harvest, it is the processing and retail display of food that performs the same function at Tablehurst. This means that whereas Shared Harvest has constantly to try and expand its membership base, Tablehurst has to concentrate on marketing its shop, to both members and non-members of the co-operative.

At their core, therefore, Shared Harvest and Tablehurst differ most with respect to the relationship that they enjoy with those who consume their food. Shared Harvest has a membership system, but one in which members are those who register to buy food on-line that is then delivered to their homes. Given that there is capacity to supply many more than the current customer base, there are few restrictions on membership. In contrast, at Tablehurst, co-operative membership is separate from consumption, to the extent that anyone can buy the food, but only co-operative members are able to participate to major decisions about the farm.

For these reasons, the developmental path for Shared Harvest has been much steeper and faster than has been the case for Tablehurst which, in contrast, has largely developed in response to stimuli such as the impending retirement of the original farmer. Yet, as these cases illustrate, both are viable and successful models of CSA development that offer insights into how small and marginal organizations can plan their development in ways that have already been proven by others. The two cases also illustrate the utility of Glasl and Lievegoed’s approach to the development of organizations. While, as Martinelli (2000) points out, Glasl and Lievegoed’s approach is just one of many such approaches, it is an approach that seems appropriate for farm businesses, certainly to the extent that concepts of health apply equally well to the human and to a business based on growing animals and crops.

**Conclusions**

At the start of this paper we questioned the extent to which local food can be mainstreamed in a way that does not accentuate, or increase, inequality. This, for us, has revolved around whether there are developmental models that can help improve the sustainability of small ecological farms, whether in China or the West. The evidence – limited though it currently is – is that Glasl and Lievegoed offer a suitable approach that is as equally applicable in China as in the West. This is largely because it conceptualizes businesses as ‘living’ organisms that need to be healthy in order to be sustainable. In this case, health is broadly understood in human terms, related to how the structure of the organization can foster an effective working environment. In the Chinese case this is very much focused on achieving aesthetic order, most readily understood as integration. In contrast, the British case suggests that integration is more of an aspiration, built on a form of rationalist, differentiated, order. Thus, it is not so much that Shared Harvest has reached a more advanced stage of development than Tablehurst (although this may be the case), but that the order and stability associated with differentiation in the UK is much more associated with integration in China. Thus, while it is clear that both businesses were deliberately transformed from their early pioneering approach - as a response to the problems associated with remaining in that phase - the drive for aesthetic order at Shared Harvest has required a more rapid developmental journey than the more rationalist approach at Tablehurst. The transformation of the organizational structures of both farms has therefore involved differentiation, but whereas it appears to be a viable medium term model in the UK, it is no more than part of a shift to integration in China.

Understanding the need for, and process of, transformation from pioneer to more complex organizational structures is, therefore, critical to the future of small ecological farms, where ever they are located. In common with both Shared Harvest and Tablehurst, most of these farms have developed around a pioneer who is critical to the continued success of the farm. Yet, often, the conditions that have allowed the pioneer to succeed are temporary or contingent. Typically this might relate to the health or motivation of the pioneer, or the availability of family labor, or the length of land tenure available. Changes in any of these factors could well make it difficult for the farm business to continue in its current form, and may mean that it closes completely, or has to start again as a new pioneer business. Having the foresight to change the organizational structure before such events happen is therefore critical, and the work by Glasl and Lievegoed is highly significant in providing both structure and insight into how this can be achieved in ways that strengthen rather than diminish the business. Yet, what is abundantly clear is that the ways in which Glasl and Lievegoed’s work is translated into practice is context-specific. In the UK, Europe and North America, certainly, organizational development is understood in largely structural and rationalist terms (Elkin, et al, 2009), with the differentiation phase being pivotal in moving businesses away from the characteristics of the individual to those of an impersonal working environment in which people are substitutable. In the case of Shared Harvest, this shift from the personal to the impersonal is replaced by a more explicit focus on personal (and personnel) development such that human relationships remain central to the success of the business, but within a more structured, specialized and differentiated organization.

While, as the earlier quote from Shi Yan highlighted, transitioning from pioneer to more complex structures undoubtedly increases the cost base of the organization, it also enhances the capacity of the organization to embrace new opportunities. This is clear from both Shared Harvest and Tablehurst, which have both expanded the number of enterprises that they operate. At Shared Harvest this has been mainly about working in association with other farms in order to offer a better choice for members, while at Tablehurst it has been about doing additional processing of foods in order to add value to the meat and vegetables grown on the farm. However, as they develop, both farms also offer new pioneering opportunities for associated businesses to start up, which helps to develop stronger food networks around the farms as well as indicating how organizations in an advanced phase of development can support others starting out on this same journey:

Now we also grind flour to sell online. A bakery is a good direction [for us], but the most important thing is to find an appropriate person to do it. It’s far more than making, and includes many management operations, such as advertising and sales. … we made such mistakes before … we don’t want to increase the products if we don’t have a complete plan. … The management cost matters. Sometimes it even surpasses the value added … The best choice for the bakery is that there is someone who is really interested in it. We can help with sales, with the baker getting a percentage. We can also offer a basic salary during the start-up. By doing this, the baker has a career and guaranteed income, and we have a new products and profits. It’s a win-win model. (Shi Yan, interviewed 2017)

 In conclusion, therefore, it is clear to us that an adapted approach to Glasl and Lievegoed’s work offers a really clear and constructive way of thinking about how to foster a more sustainable CSA sector in China. While not that many farms will have the capacity to transform themselves in the way of Shared Harvest and Tablehurst Farms, most of those involved in small farms and gardens recognize the vulnerability of their current approach without necessarily realizing that they can plan for, and catalyze, change. And, significantly, as Lievegoed has observed, change is not about growth per se, but about development, from one business form to another. For most farms it will probably be sufficient to shift from the pioneer phase to a more differentiated model in which operational responsibility is both hierarchical and shared. However, unless the pioneer also recognizes this need to transition from one form to another, it may well be that the person who did most to make the current business a success could also be the one who brings about its ultimate downfall. Rather, as the Shared Harvest case suggests, while CSA development with Chinese characteristics may well involve transition to a more differentiated structure, it is likely to be one that retains – even enhances – the personal relationships and trust that are redolent of Chinese culture and society.

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