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Social work and sustainable rural development: The practice of social economy in China

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Running head: The practice of social economy, China

Key words: food insecurity, green economy, green social work, community practice, community-based participatory research, China

Accepted for publication: 21 February 2020

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Abstract

The impact of globalization on local agriculture and food systems has brought issues such as food security and rural sustainability to the forefront of policy-making in developing countries. In China, the restructuring of domestic agriculture and the liberalisation of trade following accession to the World Trade Organization have led to growing reliance on imported food and raised concerns for food self-sufficiency and safety. Inspired by the concept of social economy, social workers in China have explored alternative pathways towards sustainable food production and consumption through local initiatives. Based on participatory action research in a Chinese village, this study examined the potential contribution of social work intervention in responding to China's agrarian challenges. It is shown that by linking rural cooperatives with the local food system and allowing farmers to sell directly to urban consumers at fairer prices, social economy initiatives provide a viable pathway for sustainable transformation by empowering rural producers while giving urban consumers access to sustainably produced food.

Introduction

Globalisation has intensified economic exchange and deepened interdependence between countries and regions (Held & McGrew, 2003). In agriculture and food production, local producers and rural communities around the world have been increasingly incorporated into global circuits of production and consumption. While giving farmers greater access to market and capital, however, scholars and developmental NGOs have at the same time observed the growing dominance of corporations and agribusinesses in rural production, which often subordinate the interests and needs of local farming communities to corporate demands and agendas of free trade (Burnett & Murphy, 2014; McMichael, 2014; Yan, Chen, & Ku, 2016). The industrialised and market-driven model of agricultural production has been criticised for expanding global capital at the cost of peasant agency, social justice and environmental

sustainability (Desmarais, 2002; Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010). These developments have caused growing resistance among peasant communities in both developed and developing countries, and given rise to transnational agrarian movements (Borras, 2010; Edelman & Borras, 2016).

Like other countries in the Global South, China has become more integrated into the global economy especially since its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. Agrarian globalisation has influenced China's rural development in significant ways as well as the sustainability of its overall development. In recent years, food security has come to be regarded as one of the major issues confronting the Chinese government (Christiansen, 2009). Food security in China is related to both subsistence and safety. In facing these challenges, the social work profession in China has begun to contemplate its role in responding to food security and environmental issues by examining and adapting theory and practice models that can effectively guide social work in rural settings. In particular, the concept of 'social economy' has gained currency among social work scholars and practitioners in China. As defined by Wright (2006, p. 107), social economy is 'an economy organized in such a way as to serve the needs and aspirations of ordinary people, not elites'. For this to happen, it 'must in some way or another be controlled by ordinary people—that is, subordinated to social power' (Wright, 2006, p. 107). Guided by this notion, social work organisations in rural China have experimented with the practice of social economy, for instance through fostering cooperation between rural producers and urban consumers.

In this article, we report on a participatory action research project in Southwest China to demonstrate how rural social work, by employing social economy as the practice framework, can play a crucial role in responding to challenges of food and agricultural production in rural areas. In Pingzhai village, producers were organised into cooperatives to grow organic crops, which not only bolstered sustainable farming practices, but also responded to the increasing demands for safe and healthy foods in urban areas. By adopting the principle of fair trade,

Chinese social workers helped rural producers connect directly with urban consumers to sell their produce at a better price, which also served as a poverty-alleviation strategy for farmers. By reflecting on the achievements and limitations of this case study, this article builds towards the search for alternative models that promote community empowerment and sustainable rural development.

Agrarian challenges and the emergence of social economy in China

As an economy under transition from state socialism towards marketisation, China has experienced deepening agrarian and food issues in recent decades. At the national level, growing reliance on food imports has heightened concerns for food security, self-sufficiency and safety. In rural areas, agricultural modernisation has resulted in the commercialisation of operation and contributed to the demise of smallholder farming and the difficulty of sustaining rural reproduction. By examining these challenges, this section sets the context for the emergence of social economy as a practice framework in contemporary China.

Challenges to rural sustainability in China

Under neoliberal globalisation, the advancement of free trade has deepened the food import dependency of developing countries on basic foods and increased their vulnerability to food-price inflations (Otero, Pechlaner, & Gürcan, 2013). In China, declining food self-sufficiency and increased reliance on imports have heightened concerns over the security of the nation's food supplies (Zhang, 2013).

Using soybeans as an example, Yan et al. (2016) demonstrated that China is experiencing a food crisis around self-sufficiency and safety. Until the mid-1990s, China was not only self-sufficient in soybean production, but was also a net exporter of soybeans (Wang, 2013). However, in 2000, China surpassed Europe as the biggest soy importer in the global market. Its imports, totalling over 70 million tons in 2014, accounted for 57.7% of global

soybean trade and about 80% of China's soybean consumption (BBC, 2015). As the US, Brazil and Argentina constituted the top three exporters of soybeans to China, the crop has become implicated in the changing political-economic relations between China, the US and South America (Oliveira & Schneider, 2014). In Brazil, for instance, soybean export serves as an instrument to balance the country's booming imports from China. Weary of the dominant role played by US-based transnational corporations in the global soy complex, observers in China have voiced concern over the situation where 'South America produces soybeans, China buys soybeans, and the US sells soybeans' (Yan et al., 2016, p. 373).

Dependence on food imports has aggravated domestic concerns for food safety. The increased import of genetically modified (GM) crops in the wake of China's WTO entry opened up heated debates concerning consumer rights and corporate interests (Yan, et al., 2016). For instance, the import of soybeans involves GM crops that are patented by transnational agribusinesses such as Monsanto. These developments took place amidst growing awareness of food safety issues among China's rising middle class (Yan, 2012). The proliferation of food safety scandals, including the notorious case of melamine-tainted milk powder that led to large-scale poisoning, led to vocal calls by Chinese consumers for the tighter monitoring of food safety ethics (Hanser & Li, 2015; Kan & Yuen, 2018; Klein, 2013).

Underlying China's growing food dependency are domestic sources of change that entail important transformation in rural economy and agricultural production. To begin with, the loss of arable farmland to industrialisation and urbanisation has directly hit agricultural production. Over 200,000 hectares of cultivated land were lost per year to construction in the late 1980s (Lin & Ho, 2005), while the first six years of the 1990s saw the further disappearance of 4.85 million hectares of farmland (Ho & Lin, 2003). The problem of pollution further decreased the area of land fit for farming. According to a report jointly issued by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and the Ministry of Land and Resources, almost 20% of China's remaining 122 million hectares of arable land was contaminated

(Bloomberg, 2017). More broadly, poverty and underdevelopment in the countryside have prompted the mass exodus of rural populations to coastal cities in search of jobs. The departure of the able-bodied workforce gave rise to the proliferation of hollow villages in rural areas, where farmland abandonment and declined productivity have emerged alongside significant socioeconomic problems such as the widespread phenomenon of left-behind children and the elderly (Jacka, 2012; Ye et al., 2013; Murphy, 2014).

Aside from the loss of farmland and labour, structural changes in China's agricultural sector also posed new challenges to smallholder farming. Household-based production flourished in the early reform years following agricultural de-collectivisation. The implementation of the household responsibility system introduced the practice of contracting land to individual households for agricultural production (Ku, 2003; Unger, 2002). By granting peasants residual income over their agricultural produce, the system was credited for bolstering agricultural productivity and improving farmers' income in the early years of reform (Brandt, Huang, Li, & Rozelle, 2002). Into the 1990s, however, the limits of household-based farming became evident and attracted criticism for its lack of scale and coordination which prevented innovative change. Smallholder farmers encountered prohibitive transaction costs in contracting their own transportation, processing and marketing, and often lacked the capital, technology and access to information necessary for them to effectively engage with the market (Zhang & Donaldson, 2008).

Confronted with the dilemmas of 'small farmers vs. big market' (*xiao nonghu da shichang*), the Chinese government responded by promoting agricultural modernisation with an emphasis on scaling up operation through commercialisation, specialisation and internationalisation (Huang, 2011). The expansion of corporate agriculture was led by growing numbers of 'dragonhead enterprises', domestic agribusiness firms supported by the Chinese state to spearhead the country's agricultural industrialisation and engagement with global export markets (Schneider, 2017). The entry of capital into the countryside has been

described as the rise of ‘agrarian capitalism’ in China where the means of production increasingly fall under corporate control and producers must sell their labour for subsistence (Zhang & Donaldson, 2008). While the reforms have facilitated the growth of externally competitive agriculture, they have also set in place dynamics of accumulation where smallholder farmers are becoming ‘subsumed by capital’ (Yan & Chen, 2015).

Social economy as a social work practice framework

In view of these developments, there has been renewed attention in China concerning the sustainability of food and agricultural production. The recent years have seen the emergence of alternative food networks in the various forms of farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture and platforms for collective buying as organised by activists and consumers, which converge in part with the New Rural Reconstruction Movement in China (Si, Schumilas, & Scott 2015; Si & Scott 2016). In social work, despite it being a nascent field in China, scholars and rural practitioners have also responded to the challenges by drawing attention to the relevance of bridging sustainable food production and consumption with the social economy (Ku, 2011; Connelly, Markey, & Roseland, 2011; Wittman, Beckie, & Hergesheimer, 2012; Zhang, Yang, & Gu, 2008).

Social economy encompasses a broad range of organisations including cooperatives, mutual aids and voluntary associations that engage in ‘economic activity with a social remit’ (Smith, 2005, p. 276). In contrast to capitalist for-profit corporations and public sector bureaucracies, social economy organisations are ‘rooted in the capacity to mobilize people for cooperative, voluntary collective actions’ in attaining developmental outcomes that emphasise social justice, economic equity and democratic empowerment (Wright, 2006, p. 106; see also Amin, Cameron, & Hudson, 2002). In orientating organisations towards mutual communal interests and providing the social infrastructure for democratic participation, the social economy offers a promising venue for the development of green citizenship (Smith, 2005). In

food and agriculture, the social economy vision of people-centred, community-based development emphasises the linkages and interconnectedness between the well-being of different economic subjects, including producers, consumers, inhabitants of the local community, and more broadly with humankind in terms of impact on the cultural and environmental commons. In contrast with market economy, the principles of social economy uphold visions of a pluralistic society in which production is not for consumption but for servicing the needs of people (Wright, 2006) as well as the flora and fauna of planet earth (Dominelli, 2012).

In rural social work practice, social economy provides a framework for rethinking economic development and innovating alternatives to capitalism (Wright, 2006). The concept of 'social economy' has a clear vision 'to put the economy at the service of human beings, rather than putting human beings at the service of the economy' (Neamtan, 2010, p. 241), and emphasises social justice, democracy and collectivism, which are shared values of the social work profession. In giving attention to the linkage between humankind and the environmental commons, the social economy framework enables practitioners to understand the structural factors causing environmental problems and their significant social consequences. It also gives rural social workers insight into searching for emancipatory alternatives that can inform their practical strategies for social transformation.

At the level of practice, the social economy approach connects social work practice to the advocacy for environmental justice, which has also been championed by green social work in recent years (Dominelli, 2012). Dominelli's work on green social work (2012) advocates social and environmental justice and challenges capitalist models of industrialisation that treat the earth as a means to be exploited primarily to meet the goal of producing profits for the few. We echo these in our action research case study which we examine below. The rest of this article documents a rural social work project in China where the research team encouraged villagers to return to organic farming, using local resources for

urban green consumption while simultaneously helping local people in generating additional income, revitalising cultural identity and fostering community participation and cohesion while protecting soil and seeds.

Action research and the practice of social economy in China

Field site

In 2001, a research team led by the first author began a cross-disciplinary participatory action research project involving social work scholars from Hong Kong as well as local university staffs and students, agricultural specialists, natural scientists and social workers in Pingzhai, a village located in the northeastern region of Yunnan province in southwest China. Pingzhai is an ethnic minority village with a settlement history of over 300 years. Today, it is an administrative village comprising of eight natural hamlets and stretches over an area of 23 square kilometres. Its indigenous population consists mostly of members of the Zhuang ethnic minority group. According to a census carried out in 2000, the entire village consisted of 347 households with a population of approximately 1,500. There was only one tractor-ploughed road connecting it to nearby areas. Pingzhai was officially classified by the Chinese government as a 'poor' village because the villagers were unable to support themselves in meeting basic needs for food and clothing.

Methodology

The project team's chosen method was participatory action research (PAR), which has been used by community workers to strengthen and support the capacity of communities to grow and change (Zuber-Skerrit, 1996; McTaggart, 1996). The primary goal of PAR is to create a more just society through transformative social change (Park, 1993; Reason & Hilary, 2008; Small, 1995; Vickers, 2005). Research is not viewed solely as a means of creating knowledge; it is also treated as a process of education, development of consciousness and call to action

(Park, 1993; Reason & Hilary, 2008; Small, 1995). As Kesby (2000, p. 424) stated, the fundamental principles of PAR include: 1) participants are regarded as ‘knowers’ and their knowledge and experiences need to be respected; 2) researchers temper their own ‘expert’ status and do not presume to have a superior perspective, while not dismissing their own specialist skills; 3) the agency of participants is recognised and encouraged, and researchers and participants enter into a reciprocal relationship in the research process.

Guided by the PAR methodology, we raised the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges confronting Chinese farmers in the context of agrarian change in post-reform China?
2. What strategies can the research team adopt to help communities respond to these challenges? How can the farmers be empowered and encouraged to participate in rural cooperation and rural-urban partnership?
3. How does the project impact upon the livelihoods of farmers and enhance the autonomy of both producers and consumers in our case study?

In the following sections, we detail our practice in different action stages.

Poverty and food insecurity in Pingzhai Village

The first stage of our action research involved the identification of problems and the assessment of needs in understanding the challenges confronting farmers in the context of agrarian change in post-reform China. Using the oral history method, the research team came to identify the widespread problems of poverty and food insecurity in the village. Many villagers in Pingzhai lived in poverty and paid exorbitant interest rates to borrow money to buy food, pay school fees and build houses. Mr. Zigong Lu, a father of two children aged 24 and 28, respectively, at the time of the interview, said that he earned less than 4,000 *yuan* per year from planting rice.

We earned only a few thousand yuan from selling rice and did not have other sources of income, though we had to spend a lot on purchasing machines for farming. We could not afford our grandchildren's schools fees, we had to borrow from others. (Interview, August 4, 2012).

Although his children left Pingzhai to find work in urban areas, the money they sent home was insufficient to help the parents escape poverty. Aside from food, farming and fees, housing construction constituted a major expenditure item for villagers. The family of Mr. Wanghua Lu spent over 50,000 *yuan* to build their family house and was 30,000 *yuan* in debt (Interview, August 24, 2012). Father of two sons who were working in Jiangsu, Mr. Lu said that although the family made over 10,000 *yuan* per year, he needed to spend over 20,000 *yuan* on medical expenses due to his chronic illness. Poverty implied that many households suffered from periodic food shortages. More than 20 households in Pingzhai experienced shortage of food for four to six months every year. Sixty-two households, or about 285 villagers, had to rely on food donations to meet their nutritional needs.

To combat poverty and food insecurity, the local government had attempted to encourage agricultural modernisation through the promotion of high-tech commodity crops, year-round farming and other structural adjustment programmes. One of the most drastic changes in Pingzhai occurred when the government promoted the large-scale planting of ginger as part of its 'green revolution' initiatives in the mid-2000s. To achieve maximum production capacity, virgin forests were cleared for the planting of the crop, which caused substantial ecological damage. Even more problematically, the ginger market collapsed in the following years as there was an oversupply of the crop nationwide. Prices dropped dramatically to a level where farmers were unable to even recoup production costs, let alone generate sufficient income to pay for food and basic daily expenses.

The government's embrace of the modernisation approach also contributed to the gradual replacement of traditional seeds with commercial hybrid seeds and the loss of traditional farming techniques. The switch from traditional seeds to commercial hybrid seeds incurred additional production costs in terms of the need to purchase fertilizers and pesticides. The planting of hybrid seeds led to significant deterioration in soil quality in Pingzhai, which forced farmers to buy imported chemical fertilizers in order to maintain the fertility of their land. One villager said:

The soil quality is very poor now, it is not possible to farm without chemical fertilizers. At the beginning, we would stop using chemical fertilizers if we ran out of money to purchase them. But now fertilizers have to be used. Even if we don't have the money, we have to borrow to buy fertilizers. (Interview, September 2006).

For ginger production, farmers in Pingzhai needed to spend over 500 *yuan* on fertilizers imported from Belarus for every 400 kg of ginger farmed.

The use of hybrid seeds further demanded more intensive uses of pesticides. Mr. Siming Deng, a villager who had farmed in Pingzhai for over 30 years, pointed out how the switch to hybrid seeds brought new pest problems that required the use of chemical pesticides:

When I planted the traditional crop varieties 20 to 30 years ago, the issue of pest was not severe. After market reform and with rapid science and technology development, however, a large number of new crop varieties became available in the market. These new seeds led to serious pest issues that got worse every year (Interview, August 4, 2012).

All in all, the introduction of agricultural modernisation initiatives in Pingzhai increased villagers' reliance on the market to obtain high-yielding seeds and chemical products, which exposed them further to market fluctuations and risks. Environmentally, the intensive use of

hybrid seeds and chemicals exacerbated soil pollution while threatening both villagers' health and biodiversity. From a socio-cultural perspective, the push for modernisation contributed to the gradual loss of traditional farming skills and culture. The state-led programme of agricultural commodification and engagement with the market compelled farmers to give up traditional practices as they believed that their traditional values and life skills were no longer relevant in the market economy and could not guarantee a stable source of income. The loss of self-esteem and identity within the community paralleled the decline of traditional farming culture.

Community participation in rural cooperation

Social economy practices go beyond the logic of market capitalism and emphasise social justice, democracy and collectivism. The theory of social economy guided our action research in challenging the market-led model of agricultural production, which emphasises competitiveness, commodification and market demands at the expense of community needs. *The second stage of action research* was to encourage villagers to organise a producer cooperative with the aim of reviving organic farming.

In Pingzhai, a rural cooperative was organised following the democratic principles of social economy. The three key positions of director, deputy director and accountant were elected by members of the cooperative. The assembly of members also deliberated together on annual production plans and made decisions together on matters such as the area of farmland allocated for different kinds of crop production and the proportion of harvest used for retail. The cooperative retained 5% of the revenue from annual sales, of which 2% was retained by the local development organisation and 3% was retained as collective economic resources for the cooperative's development.

To encourage the return to organic farming, social workers organised meetings with villagers and held discussions on the value of organic farming and traditional agricultural

skills. In recent years, there has been growing concern over the need to conserve traditional crops in order to protect crop diversity. The need to secure 'seed sovereignty' has led to worldwide calls for the recovery of traditional seeds to regain peasants' freedom of access and right to reproduce seeds on their own (Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition, 2013; Kloppenburg, 2010, 2014; Mayet, 2015; Mullaney, 2014). Conserving traditional seeds allows farmers to decrease their reliance on chemicals, reduces their need to buy commercial seeds and enables the transfer and transmission of traditional peasant cultures (van Niekerk & Wynberg, 2017).

In Pingzhai, the widespread adoption of hybrid seeds since the advent of market reform and agricultural modernisation meant that the villagers have already lost access to traditional seed varieties. Teaming up with agricultural scientists, villagers and social workers made visits to remote villages in the mountains to recover traditional seeds. Twelve kinds of traditional seeds were found, including fragrant rice (*xiangmi*), eight-treasure rice (*babao*), red yeast rice (*hongmi*), black glutinous rice (*heinuomi*) and *hongyou* rice, which villagers certified to be traditional varieties farmed in Pingzhai. In 2007, one *mu* of farmland was used to experiment with organic rice farming. Initially, only three households were willing to try. They adopted traditional rice planting practices including seeding, irrigation, ploughing and harvesting. The use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides was replaced by the use of manure and natural pesticides.

The first year of the experiment was successful and all of the organic rice harvested was sold out within a month. In July 2009, the producer cooperative was formally registered and 14 households joined the cooperative. The cooperative further expanded to a membership of 50 households in 2014, and the total area of farming reached 150 *mu*. Young farmers interviewed and learnt from older members of the village on how to prevent and control pests without the use of chemicals. Natural pesticides were produced using a combination of herbal medicine and plants. Villagers also experimented with different forms of ecological

production, such as raising ducks in paddy fields. Ducks help prevent the infestation of pests and weeds, while their dung provides manure which can naturally fertilize the fields.

The establishment of the cooperative brought improvements in household income, the rural environment, as well as social relations in the village. In terms of income, the use of traditional seeds helped lower production costs as expenditure on chemical fertilizers and pesticides could be eliminated. Mr. Wangzong Chen, who joined the cooperative in 2010 planting *hongyou* and fragrant rice, pointed out that he used to spend a few thousand *yuan* every year to purchase fertilizers and pesticides while planting hybrid seeds (Interview, August 6, 2012). Mr. Zigong Lu similarly indicated that a pack of compound fertilizer and a pack of urea cost more than 50 *yuan* and 100 *yuan*, respectively. If the size of farmland is large, the costs of fertilizers and pesticides could go above 2000 *yuan* (Interview, August 4, 2012). The use of traditional seeds and organic farming helped lower costs. Traditional seeds with local origins were cheaper and could be conveniently stored and conserved. The higher selling price of traditional crops also constituted an additional economic incentive for villagers to switch to organic farming.

Aside from economic betterment, the return to organic farming also brought improvement in the village environment. As Mr. Fang Ji observed,

Most importantly, we can conserve our own seeds and also protect the ecology without the use of chemicals, and that is very good for our health (Interview, August 9, 2012).

After several years of organic farming, the research team found that the soil quality had improved significantly due to the long-term use of farmyard manure as natural fertilizers. Elder members of the village were pleased to discover that clovers had returned to the fields. According to these villagers, clovers used to grow on fertile farmland but had disappeared since the systematic use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Their reappearance was seen as a sign of the land's restored fertility.

The formation of the cooperative helped foster a spirit of cooperation and solidarity among members. The cooperative provided a platform for mutual help and aid. A villager stated that when they lacked manpower due to family issues or illnesses, cooperative members could help each other out with tasks such as harvesting crops (Zigong Lu, interview, August 4, 2012). Cooperation also built up a community network of rewards and sanctions which helped ensure collective interests and mutual profitability. Mr Yaoda Lu, one of the elder members of the cooperative, recounted his experience:

We keep a check on each other to make sure that fertilizers and pesticides are not used. Everyone is affected when someone breaks the rules, like last year when one household used fertilizers and it affected all of us. [...] Those who found traditional seeds were rewarded. Those who suffered from pest problems would receive collective support from the cooperative. All members would get together to discuss how we could help them (Interview, August 4, 2012).

All in all, the formation of the cooperative in Pingzhai offered villagers an alternative pathway to agricultural production through the revival of organic farming. Going beyond the modernisation approach, which emphasises an industrialised, exogenous model of development, the case of Pingzhai demonstrates the potential of rural cooperation in helping local farmers generate sustainable sources of income in a way that also conserves the environment and strengthen community ties.

Building rural–urban partnership

The third stage of action research was to support the local sale and distribution of farm products through the promotion of direct marketing between producers and consumers. In the Pingzhai case, social workers played an important role in building connections between rural producers and urban consumers. In encouraging urban consumers and civil society to

participate in sourcing and marketing locally produced agricultural products, the strengthening of rural–urban linkages enables the bridging of sustainable food production with the social economy.

In China, the structural shift in citizens' food consumption pattern provides fertile ground for the development and strengthening of rural–urban partnership. Higher levels of household income and the rise of the Chinese middle class have contributed to greater emphasis on food quality and nutritional well-being amongst consumers (Jussaume Jr., 2001; Huang & Gale, 2015). Food scandals have further fuelled the demand for green, ecological and pollution-free agricultural products. In recent years, there has been an emergent trend of organic food consumption in urban areas and research has found that nearly half of Chinese consumers are willing to pay more for organic products (Hasimu, Marchesini, & Canavari, 2017; Li & Zhong, 2017; Yu, Gao, & Zeng, 2014).

For the Pingzhai project, rural–urban linkages were built through connecting rural producers with urban consumers in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan province. To help villagers in Pingzhai promote their organic products in urban areas, social workers played a pivotal role in coordinating events that provide a platform for interaction between producers and consumers. First, collaborating with a local university, public health talks were organised in housing estates where natural scientists and representatives from local NGOs were invited to give presentations on the harms caused by chemical residues in food. Furthermore, urban residents interested in purchasing Pingzhai products were invited to visit the village and the land that produced the rice that they consumed. Social workers helped coordinate the first visit made by urban residents to Pingzhai in 2009. After an eight-hour drive from Kunming, urban residents were welcomed by villagers and invited to participate in the annual harvest festival organised by the rural cooperative. They were shown first-hand the organic farming process used to produce the different varieties of organic rice.

To create a fair trade relationship, exchange meetings for price-setting were held between villagers and the urban residents. Mediated by social workers, urban residents were invited to taste the organic rice and negotiate the price directly with farmers. Following the principle of fair trade, the pricing of produce should be fair to the producers. At the beginning, when Kunming consumers found out that the price of organic rice was tripled that of non-organic rice purchased at supermarkets, they showed their disagreement. Social workers invited representatives from the cooperative to introduce to consumers the labour-intensive process of organic rice farming and to explain how the price was calculated based on farmers' actual labour input in the production process. Upon gaining insight into the process, some older urban residents offered their support to the villagers. These residents had participated in the 'Down to the Countryside Movement' during the Mao era, a policy instituted during the late 1960s and early 1970s in which urban youth were sent to villages in the rural hinterlands to learn the ways of the peasants. Recounting their farming experience during the Movement, the older residents supported the price proposed by Pingzhai villagers and convinced other urban consumers of the fairness of the price.

In 2010, social workers met with representatives of the property management company and the homeowners' committee of a middle-class housing estate in Kunming. A ground-floor space was rented to set up a retail store for farm products produced in Pingzhai and surrounding villages. The setting up of a retail store in Kunming city provides a stable outlet for agricultural produce farmed in Pingzhai. This has a positive effect in attracting more villagers to adopt organic farming. By 2014, the cooperative expanded to a membership of 50 households. The improvement in income for some of the newly joined members of the cooperative reflected the material incentives of villagers in switching to organic farming. Table 1 shows the changes in annual income for 11 households before joining the cooperative in 2014 and after joining the cooperative in 2017. Almost all villagers saw their household income doubled after joining the cooperative except for those whose crops had been partially

affected by natural disasters in 2017. The higher price fetched by organic products has thus enabled villagers to improve their economic conditions.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

Aside from selling products, the store also provides a platform for fostering a consumers' network to promote and sustain green consumption. One of the criticisms of the corporate food regime is the lack of connections between producers and consumers (Robbins, 2015). By marketing locally and acquainting consumers directly with the producers and production methods, the disconnection between production and consumption can be ameliorated. Direct price negotiation also enables a transparent and democratic decision-making process within the social economy. The annual harvest festival at Pingzhai constitutes a platform for rural villagers and urban consumers to establish long-term relationships. Engagement with urban customers has been identified as instrumental to rural producers' innovation and entrepreneurship (Hinrichs, Gulespie, & Feenstra, 2004). In the present case, interaction allows urban residents to become the quality controllers of rice production as they frequently visited the village. This creates the basis for a rural–urban partnership that protects the interests of both groups: giving producers a sustainable source of income and a means to maintain their traditional agricultural skills while guaranteeing food safety and health for consumers.

Conclusion

This article shows how the practice of social economy through rural social work constitutes a local, bottom-up response to challenges faced by village communities in contemporary China. Based on action research in Yunnan, the article has examined the possibility of rural social work in responding to the agrarian and environmental issues in the Chinese countryside. Instead of allowing capital to intrude freely into rural society, commodifying farmland and dispossessing farmers from their means of production and livelihoods, a bottom-up approach

that takes into account the realities of rural areas and builds upon the foundations of rural society can be promoted and implemented in developing the rural economy. Specifically, the case of Pingzhai shows how sustainable food production and consumption can bridge with the social economy to prioritise the developmental needs of communities and individuals while respecting the environment. In supporting the development of a producer cooperative as well as the marketing of rural products to urban consumers, this study also highlights the importance of rural–urban alliance created by rural social work in supporting sustainable transformation.

Going forward, the sustainable development of the Pingzhai project will depend on overcoming several challenges. The fact that not all farmers in the village have joined the cooperative and switched to organic farming means that the farmland for organic production is not contiguous. Members of the cooperative pointed out that without contiguous farmland, the pollen from farmland using hybrid seeds could spread easily to farmland using organic methods. Hybrid seeds require a large amount of chemicals to plant, and these chemicals could leak and pollute the soil of neighbouring organic farmland. Further encouraging participation in rural cooperation within the village community could ameliorate these issues. It would also allow villagers to devise better division of labour between households and make more resources available for the collective purchase of farm equipment.

While its ongoing development provides empirical material for further research, the Pingzhai experience thus far has useful implications for rural social work both within and outside China. Going beyond a corporate-led growth model that is often built on the commodification of land and labour, the practice of social economy in the Chinese countryside demonstrates an alternative model of rural social work that embeds the economy within social relations while fostering environmentally sustainable practices. As a guiding notion for social work practice, social economy integrates people and their socio-cultural, economic and physical environments within an egalitarian framework that has the potential to

address prevailing structural inequalities and unequal distribution of power and resources. It is pluralistic, bottom-up, democratic, non-monopolistic, and it prioritises the needs of local communities. This social work approach offers useful insights for addressing agrarian challenges and building toward sustainable rural development.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Li and Fung Foundation's financial support for our social economy research in mainland China, as well as support provided by the Department of Applied Social Sciences, Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Project No. 1-ZE7E). The literature research described in this paper was supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No. PolyU 15601818). Special acknowledgement is given to the research team, including colleague Yeung Sik Chung, local research partner Zhang Heqing, local social workers and the villagers of Pingzhai.

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