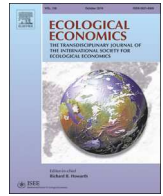




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Analysis

The New Rural Reconstruction Movement: A Chinese degrowth style movement?

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates a grassroots Chinese movement called the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM). Drawing on field visits, surveys, interviews and social media posts regarding a NRRM project and relevant literature I link the NRRM to the degrowth movement. This is likely the first research analysing a Chinese grassroots movement from a degrowth theoretical perspective. This link is designed to bring greater awareness of the NRRM to western environmentalists and greater awareness of degrowth to Chinese scholars, in the expectation that the two movements will find it beneficial to engage in collaborative research. This paper demonstrates similar progressive environmental based arguments are being debated in places with different geographical and socio-political contexts. It suggests there is the possibility that the NRRM and degrowth could work together to help achieve shared goals.

1. Introduction

Engaging with China is important for the degrowth and the Environmental Justice (EJ) movements.² Firstly, as Gerth (2010) puts it, ‘As China goes so goes the world’. Radical and progressive movements should not ignore what is happening on the ground in China especially as more established commentators concentrate on Chinese ‘high politics’. Secondly, degrowth, in order to have legitimacy and to avoid denigration as a colonising movement,³ needs to understand and learn from wider social movements, something Gabriel & Bond (this issue) argue degrowth has, so far, largely failed to achieve. Connecting to movements in the ‘developing’ world is especially important due to its relative neglect in the degrowth literature⁴ (Cosme et al., 2017: 331). Thirdly the environmental injustices experienced between rural and urban China⁵ should be a concern of the wider EJ movement along with injustices experienced by China through the global economic system.

This paper aims to confront degrowth's lack of connection with

wider social movements – thesis IV of this special issue – by focussing on the NRRM,⁶ suggesting that it provides a valuable vehicle through which the degrowth and EJ movements can engage with China. The NRRM is designed to “regenerate” China's countryside through “integrating with grassroots and local culture”⁷ as well as through academic scholarship. Through a comparison of NRRM and degrowth theories and by drawing on a case study of a particular NRRM grassroots project I suggest that there is sufficient overlap with degrowth theory and practice to place the NRRM within the broad umbrella of degrowth. My aim is neither to suggest that the NRRM can be fully explained by degrowth theory nor to argue that the NRRM should be subsumed within the degrowth movement. Rural reconstruction has a long and vibrant history in China in its own right; however the global environmental crisis necessitates collaboration and alliances beyond borders.

The research for this paper was conducted from 2015 to 2017. It includes findings from a one month period of participant observation at my field site, “Shared Harvest” (分享收获) farm (SHF), in 2016, a

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² Degrowth scholars define degrowth as a ‘movement’ (Demaria et al., 2013, p.194), EJ scholars similarly define EJ as a ‘movement’ (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016).

³ For an examination of how degrowth ought to interact with the global south see Dengler & Seebacher (this issue).

⁴ A gap Carrasco et al. (this issue) help to fill in their study on Mexico.

⁵ See Lora-Wainwright (2017).

⁶ Scott and Si (2016) argue the NRRM is a “grassroots “counter movement”” (p.1089).

⁷ China Development Brief, <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/directory/rural-reconstruction-centre-of-renmin-university/> (Accessed 16/06/18).

17 day visit in 2017 when I shadowed a researcher interviewing ‘old’⁸ and ‘new’⁹ farmers, members of the surrounding village and guests at the new tourism project, an in-depth interview in 2015 of SHF’s founder, Shi Yan (石嫣), and a number of questionnaires given to workers. The research includes observations from the two day 7th China Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Conference in October 2015, co-organised by Shi and Wen Tiejun (温铁军)¹⁰ and information from SHF’s social media accounts and handbook.

The 2015 interview was a semi-structured interview conducted prior to constructing the theoretical argument of the connections between the NRRM and degrowth. The questionnaires were designed to understand the values and daily practice of the organisation according to workers. Seven were returned, out of 20 workers.¹¹ Questionnaires were only filled in by the ‘new farmers’ or volunteers¹² and not the ‘old farmers’.¹³

The first section of this paper will review the literature on the NRRM and briefly describe its origin. The second section draws on Demaria et al. (2013) to structure a comparison of degrowth and NRRM theories. The third draws on field work carried out at a NRRM linked CSA peri-urban farm on the outskirts of Beijing. This section uses SHF as a case study to argue that it provides both practical evidence of NRRM theory and potential links with degrowth. My fourth section briefly articulates future challenges for the NRRM. In my conclusion I argue that there is progressive potential in an alliance between the NRRM and degrowth movements.

2. The New Rural Reconstruction Movement

The NRRM is a movement of often loosely connected projects and people (Hale, 2013: 53), considered to have emerged in the 1990s (Day, 2008) with the publication of Wen’s thesis on the “three dimensional problem of rural China” or “三农问题” (Wen, 2001, 2013).¹⁴

Those dimensions are village sustainability, agricultural security, and farmers’ rights (Wen, 2001, 2013; He et al., 2014). In 2003 the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the State Council officially gave Wen’s thesis high priority (He et al., 2014: 102). Despite this, Wen and others argue that the NRRM continues to be ignored by “...the mainstream ideology of China...” (Ibid: 101).

For Wen and other NRRM scholars, the NRRM is connected to, and shares core aims with, the earlier Rural Reconstruction Movement (RRM) which originated in the late 1920s (He et al., 2014: 118). However the NRRM emphasizes the Chinese ecological crisis (Jia’en and Jie, 2011a: 454).

James Yen, a Chinese Christian educated in the USA was one of the key figures in the RRM (Hayford, 1990: 31).¹⁵ His work was supported financially by US organisations¹⁶ that wanted to bring western

⁸ ‘Old farmers’ refers to farmers that farmed before SHF was set up and have rights to farm the land as they are members of the village collective.

⁹ ‘New farmers’ refers to farmers that started to farm when SHF was set up, often urban residents or students.

¹⁰ One of the leading NRRM intellectuals.

¹¹ Including volunteers but excluding ‘old farmers’.

¹² Although they are called volunteers in Mandarin, they receive a monthly wage and may be seen as interns.

¹³ This was due to time constraints. However I was especially interested in why people leave an urban lifestyle for a rural one. Therefore volunteers and new farmers’ voices were primary. This urban return to the countryside phenomenon is important for degrowth as explained below.

¹⁴ Wen has held numerous positions at Renmin University. He has served on government advisory bodies and has won a number of awards. Renmin University Biography, <http://www.ruc.edu.cn/archives/18630> (Accessed 15/03/16).

This paper uses Wen and his school as the focal point. Other key scholars of NRRM include He Xuefeng and his school, see Day and Hale (2007).

¹⁵ See further Qiu (2007: 80–84).

¹⁶ Including the Rockefeller Foundation (Hayford, 1990: 176–177, 193, 195)

influences, including perhaps liberal democracy, to China (Hayford, 1990: 199). NRRM scholars’ decision to make an explicit link¹⁷ with Yen’s RRM is surprising as Yen’s political and religious influences are unlikely to be seen positively by contemporary Chinese authorities. Other key figures in the early 20th century RRM with explicit connections to the NRRM¹⁸ include Liang Shuming, a Confucian who hoped to establish “a completely new democratic-socialist order” (Alitto, 1979: 216). These historical connections introduce the NRRM to the public in an engaging way that demonstrates a historical process.

The NRRM can be understood in the current global context through similarities with other rural movements. Day (2013) for instance argues that the NRRM can be connected with the Zapatistas in Mexico (p.162). There are theoretical connections, for instance they share a critique of neoliberal capitalism and a desire to organise alternatives (Burbach, 2001: 110), but linking the two may be unhelpful in a Chinese context. The Zapatistas took up arms through the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in 1994 and briefly controlled a number of cities in Mexico in protest at free trade agreements and indigenous farmer rights (Tucker, 2014). The NRRM has never suggested direct action against the state nor proposed national liberation of rural peasants. I argue that the NRRM can be better linked to the degrowth movement as both degrowth and NRRM scholars and activists work within the state in an attempt to change policies and outside of it in an attempt to demonstrate practical alternatives whilst continuously adapting theory and practice (Martinez-Alier et al., 2010: 1745, Day, 2008: 51).

3. The NRRM as a degrowth movement?

There is little degrowth scholarship concerned with China – a surprising gap as China is one of the world’s most populous countries with an increasing number of its citizens consuming above the global average. Xue et al. (2012) suggest their paper is probably the first Chinese contribution to the degrowth debate in an international academic setting (p.87). They argue that degrowth is relevant to China as there is evidence that whilst economic growth in China has increased purchasing power this has not translated to well-being due to issues of inequality (Ibid: 94). They also point to growth-promoting policies leading to unsafe food (Ibid: 104). They argue the Chinese political structure may be better at creating a degrowth system as it is more able to intervene in the economy to distribute wealth (Ibid: 101). Xue (2016) argues that China should develop towards an “ecosocialist” economic structure. Xue (2016) defines ecosocialism as where “Ecological rationality, rather than market rationality, becomes the principle of socio-economic organisation...” which “...acknowledges ecological limits to growth” (p.619). Xue (2016) argues ecosocialism and degrowth “converge in many aspects” although ecosocialism puts greater emphasis on the state in the restructuring of the economic system (p.621). Xue’s work does not explore contemporary Chinese grassroots examples of ecosocialist or degrowth alternatives demonstrating a gap in degrowth literature, one which can begin to be addressed by degrowth scholars who engage with the NRRM.

I explore the theoretical links between NRRM and degrowth by drawing on Demaria et al. (2013) who describe six “sources” of degrowth – ecology, critiques of development, meaning of life and well-being, bioeconomics, democracy, and justice. These sources represent “...streams of ecological and social thought...” which help create the “...thematic backbone...” of degrowth (p.195). If these sources are

(footnote continued)

and support and influence from the international Young Men’s Christian Association (Ibid: 25, 38–42).

¹⁷ This explicit link includes, in 2003, naming the first Rural Reconstruction Institute after James Yen (Qiu, 2007).

¹⁸ The Liang Shuming Rural Reconstruction Center was founded in 2004 (Yan and Chen, 2013: 964).

present within NRRM theory we can conclude that on the theoretical level the NRRM can be classified as a type of degrowth movement.

3.1. Ecology

Degrowth scholars argue that degrowth is ecologically necessary because resources are finite and there are negative externalities of growth especially for the environment (Kallis et al., 2015). Schneider et al. (2010) define degrowth as “an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term” (p.512).

The NRRM also puts the environment at its heart. Wen et al. (2012) argue that “...the future of China...is more ecological than economic”. One of the principles of the NRRM includes achieving “security in ecological terms” (He et al., 2014: 103). This principle is described by NRRM scholars as moving towards “ecological civilization” (生态文明) (Wen, 2015; Wen et al., 2012).

Ecological civilization is a phrase adopted in the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012 as a priority (Wen et al., 2012: 116). One concern raised by Wen is that central government's notion of ecological civilization is “top-down” (自上而下) and not “bottom-up” (自下而上) (Wen, 2015). For the NRRM, peasants¹⁹ are the most important people for regenerating the countryside. Wen is also concerned that certain interest groups will use ecological civilization as a way to let the interests of capital take over rural industry (Wen, 2015).²⁰

NRRM scholars argue that through its practice the movement has advanced “ecological civilization” citing village cooperatives, organic farming²¹ and eco-architecture as the main ways this is promoted (Wen et al., 2012). The emphasis on rural peasant cooperatives resonates with the idea of “res communis” or communal ownership articulated by Demaria et al. (2013) and with the theoretical importance of cooperatives (Sempere and Garcia, 2014) and organic food (Amate and Molina, 2013) for degrowth as a whole.

3.2. Critiques of development

The second source of degrowth is “critiques of development and praise for anti-utilitarianism” (Demaria et al., 2013). This is explained as the “...critique of the uniformisation of cultures due to the widespread adoption of particular technologies and consumption and production models experienced in the global North” (*Ibid*: 196).

Rist and Camiller (2014) argue that degrowth theory challenges the hegemonic development project *i.e.* economic growth as progress. For them, degrowth's lack of wider appeal “...has to do with the fact that it clashes with a belief deeply rooted in our economic imaginary” (p.269). Schneider et al. (2010) comment that some degrowth proponents are critics of globalization or “...the imposition of western models of development in the rest of the world” (p.511).

Degrowth scholars further argue that utilitarianism and utility maximisation should not be seen as the ultimate driving force of human behaviour. Degrowth scholars emphasize “...human relations instead of market relations...” (Schneider et al., 2010: 511). Demaria et al. (2013) point to several economists including Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]) as

¹⁹ Peasants, translated from ‘农民’ are people who have the contractual right to farm land but do not own that land.

²⁰ Chinese rural land is owned by the village collective (CPGPRC, 2005). It is therefore protected to an extent from market forces. Wen fears the trajectory of rural China is towards increased marketisation of this land.

²¹ ‘Organic’ farming initiatives set up by the NRRM are unlikely to have official Chinese organic certification as according to Shi et al. (2018) formal certification is “cost-prohibitive” for small farms and is not well trusted by the public. Organic farming for NRRM projects normally refers to agro-ecological techniques of reducing artificial fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides.

theorists who have constructed diverging ideas on how human economic and social behaviour works. Martínez-Alier (2012) similarly includes Polanyi as an important influence on degrowth. This influence can be seen in Carrasco et al. (this issue). I return to Polanyi below.

The NRRM is similarly critical of globalization, and neoliberal capitalism. Day (2008) connects the NRRM with other peasant movements around the world concerned that globalization and neoliberalism do not benefit peasant communities (p.73). Jia'en and Jie (2011a) describe the NRRM as “...an alternative to mainstream modernization, capitalism, and the Western development model...” (p.452). Wen's work provides a strong criticism of current capitalism. His thesis is that Modernization Theory which led to prosperity for Europe is unsuitable for China and has large social and environmental costs, especially as rural communities are exploited in order to industrialise urban areas (Wen, 2007, 2013; Wen and Lau, 2008; Wen et al., 2012). This has clear links with EJ theories, in which the global north is argued to have exploited the global south to industrialise (Martínez-Alier, 2012).

Wen et al. (2012) are critical of “global capitalism”. They also criticise China's current economic system, arguing that its agricultural problems stem from “...the rush to participate in the system of global capital...” and the adoption of a western style of agriculture that concentrates on the profits of capital rather than social and environmental protections. This represents a critique of China adopting models from the global North, and can be understood as a critique of “uniformisation” as Demaria et al. (2013) would put it. It is clear that Wen and other NRRM scholars believe they are fighting against the prevailing capitalist and developmentalist agendas in China. Scholars including Wen argue that “...the mainstream ideology of China, which has long been under the influence of developmentalism, has continued to ignore the experience of the [NRR] movement” (He et al., 2014: 101).

The NRRM are refuting mainstream thought in ways which echo the theoretical arguments of degrowth. One difference is that the NRRM concentrates on reconstructing the rural and does not yet argue for a similar retreat of urban global capitalism. It is hard to discern whether this is due to theoretical reasons or practical constraints. Cooperation between the rural and urban is however emerging in some NRRM thinking. Zhou (2013)²² argues that urban and rural cooperation needs to be fostered to re-gain “social co-protection” from the market and only then can food production be safe for peasants, urban consumers and the environment. Perhaps in this way NRRM theories can spread into urban areas.

Zhou (2013) uses Polanyi (2001 [1944])'s countermovement framework. Polanyi is a scholar who has influenced a number of NRRM thinkers²³ (Hale, 2013: 60). Day (2008) for instance points out that Wen agrees with Polanyi that land and labour are “fictitious commodities” meaning if they become freely exchangeable on the market this is destructive for society and the environment. For Wen land is a critical resource for peasant survival which must be distributed to for this purpose. Narrow economic efficiency therefore is not the primary concern (p.55). Day (2013) argues Wen and other NRRM scholars “...express a profound anxiety about the ability of global capitalism, particularly in its neo-liberal mode, to include the majority...” and that they see that “...utopian attempts at the marketization of social life...” are contested by “...diverse social protective movements similar to those described by Karl Polanyi...” (p.185). The fact that both degrowth and the NRRM take inspiration from Polanyi²⁴ provides further evidence that these two movements have strong theoretical links.

²² Zhou Li is a professor at Renmin University in the same department as Wen and attended the 6th International and 7th China CSA Conference co-organised by Wen. For this article I regard Zhou as a NRRM scholar.

²³ See Pan and Wen (2016)'s explicit reference to Polyanian concepts such as social self-protection and embedding.

²⁴ See also Quilley (2012).

3.3. Meaning of life and well-being

The argument here is that modern societies must reconsider what gives meaning to people. [Schneider et al. \(2010\)](#) explain this source as “...emphasizing spirituality, non-violence, art or voluntary simplicity” (p.512).

NRRM scholars understand the need to foster culture, community and the arts and to protect traditional knowledge and customs. They argue that Chinese development has meant farmers leaving the land to travel to cities to find work; this results in a loss of able bodied adults in rural communities ([He et al., 2014](#): 110). This increases the use of chemicals to save labour resulting in environmental degradation (*Ibid*) and reduces traditional farming knowledge and traditional rural culture (p.111). One of the NRRM's principles²⁵ set out by volunteers in 2005 is to protect “people's cultural diversity” to achieve “sovereignty in community resources” and “solidarity” (p.103).

[Renard and Guo \(2013\)](#) argue that the NRRM is community-based and often starts the regeneration process through constructing cultural and social organisations such as women's organisations or senior citizen organisations. They argue that the NRRM's primary concern is to work with Chinese atomised rural society to re-create community. [Jia'en and Jie \(2011b\)](#) argue, from their experience of reconstruction, problems in rural areas that superficially look economic are often derived from social and cultural issues. Using Polanyian logic, they suggest “‘social economy’ is needed to re-embed the economic into its social context” (p.280). It seems clear that social and cultural regeneration must form the basis of rural regeneration for NRRM scholars. [Wen and Lau \(2008\)](#) argues that only when peasants revive their agricultural tradition can environmental protection be achieved (p.502).

[He \(2007\)](#)'s work provides the clearest link between degrowth ideas of “Meaning of Life and Well-being” and the NRRM. [He \(2007\)](#) seeks to construct rural life as one “...with “low consumption and high benefit,” one that is different from the consumer culture.” This almost perfectly represents [Demaria et al. \(2013\)](#)'s description of this source of degrowth as “...a critique of life-styles based on the mantras of working more, earning more, selling more and buying more” (p.197). [He \(2007\)](#) argues that there is a need for sports, cultural activities and arts in rural areas and that these may be able to reduce the negative effects of the consumer culture (p.36). [Knight and Gunatilaka \(2010\)](#)'s study of rural-urban inequality in rural China suggests “...that people who derive their satisfaction with life more from personal relationships and less with material goods and services are happier” (p.530).

Spirituality is an important aspect of well-being for degrowth scholars ([Schneider et al., 2010](#): 512). [He \(2007\)](#) argues that a strengthening of Chinese traditions can give meaning to people at the same time as helping to protect the environment. [Wen and Lau \(2008\)](#) agrees that spiritual beliefs, such as Taoism and Confucianism, are important to foster (p.504) as these are traditions that have grown within a peasant culture and have strong elements of environmental harmony and protection. [He \(2007\)](#) argues that traditional Chinese culture promotes the idea that “happiness is contentment” which seems to be the antithesis of consumerism. [He \(2007\)](#) concludes that NRR “... could undergo a creative transformation in pursuit of a new state of harmony between man and nature as well as a great renaissance of traditional Chinese civilization” (p.38).

3.4. Bioeconomics

Bioeconomics originates from [Georgescu-Roegen \(1975\)](#)'s thesis which brings theories of thermodynamics and entropy to the economic

²⁵ The three basic principles set out in 2005 were “representing people's livelihood, people's solidarity in social institution, and people's cultural diversity” to achieve “sovereignty in community resources, solidarity, and security in ecological terms” ([He et al., 2014](#): 103).

sphere. His argument is that economic growth creates lost energy which can never be used again – most obviously heat energy (p.352). The First Law of Thermodynamics demonstrates perpetual motion is impossible and [Georgescu-Roegen](#) argues thermodynamics can be used in economics to demonstrate that perpetual economic growth is also impossible.

Bioeconomics is not a specific theme in the NRRM. Whilst NRRM argues that the rural environment is being destroyed by capitalist growth it does not use the terminology of thermodynamics and entropy. This source of degrowth may be an area where degrowth scholars and NRRM scholars could collaborate to bring awareness of these ideas to a larger number of Chinese environmentalists. However many of the conclusions of [Georgescu-Roegen](#) and the NRRM are shared. For example organic agriculture is important to [Georgescu-Roegen](#) because modern agriculture techniques – increased mechanisation and chemical inputs – are contradictory to basic bioeconomics ([Georgescu-Roegen, 1975](#): 373).

3.5. Democracy

Degrowth scholars argue degrowth requires deeper democracy ([Demaria et al., 2013](#): 199, [Schneider et al., 2010](#): 511). How this is to be achieved is debated. Some argue democratic societies should reform current democratic institutions whilst others argue for new institutions ([Demaria et al., 2013](#): 199). In terms of agricultural degrowth [Boillat et al. \(2012\)](#) argue the Cuban agricultural system is well suited to a shift to a degrowth system. Whilst Cuba's democratic deficit is an issue for this potential shift [Boillat et al. \(2012\)](#) argue that agricultural co-operatives can increase democracy and that this “...kind of realistic economic democracy...is best suited for a large-scale degrowth transition” (p.601).

Cuba is useful to compare with China as Cuba has a large number of small-scale farmers that depend on use rights to farm ([Palma et al., 2015](#)) and neither Cuba nor China are multi-party democracies as most westerners would define it.²⁶ People publicly demanding a multi-party system in China are likely to be charged with trying to undermine China's security.²⁷ However in rural areas there are elections for village level government.²⁸

[Hook \(2007\)](#) argues that ‘New-Left’ scholars, including [Wen](#) (p.11), advocate a “deeper democracy” (p.13). Rural cooperatives are a vehicle through which this democracy can be achieved. For example [Day \(2008\)](#) mentions two cooperatives set up by the NRRM which are different from government rural cooperatives which are top-down organisations “...with no democratic management...”. In contrast, NRRM cooperatives “...are voluntary...” and “...democratically run...” by rural peasants (p.63). It is fair to argue that NRRM scholars believe in a type of economic democracy achieved through rural cooperatives similar to [Boillat et al. \(2012\)](#) and due to similarities between Cuban and Chinese land it is possible to argue Chinese land democratically structured in accordance with NRRM theory would be similarly well suited for a large-scale degrowth transition.

According to [He et al. \(2014\)](#) the NRRM “...is an alternative public democracy experiment” which differs from “...living under an elite dictatorship” (p.117). The use of the term democracy to describe the NRRM demonstrates its importance. Although not referring to a liberal-democratic western idea of multi-party democracy, the NRRM can still be connected to degrowth as many degrowth scholars are also arguing for similar grass-roots democracy and economic democracy.

²⁶ Although there is more than one political party in China ([Economist, 2017](#)).

²⁷ For example the Jasmine protests ([Ramzy, 2011](#)).

²⁸ See [O'Brien and Han \(2009\)](#).

3.6. Justice

Demaria et al. (2013) argue that degrowth scholars do not simply assume that degrowth will create justice but “...explores ways to make justice and sustainability compatible” (p.199). They define justice as a concern for “...fair distribution of economic, social and environmental goods and bads...” taking into account past, present and future generations. This includes the idea of “ecological debt” where the “Global North” pays for past exploitation of the “Global South” (p.200).

The NRRM can be argued to follow similar ideas of justice. Wen et al. (2012) argue traditional rural culture includes “...resource sharing, income parity, cooperative solidarity, [and] social justice...” and this culture must be protected. These norms are almost identical to the ideas Demaria et al. (2013) argue degrowth explore in connection with fostering justice and sustainability (p.199).

Further to this, in NRRM theory the dichotomy of poor rural and rich urban China is a key concern. Wen (2013) argues there has been a ‘rural-urban binary systemic conflict’ in China. His argument is that China has industrialised because of the surplus gained from rural China which has been invested in urbanisation. This has led to a rural-urban inequality ratio of 1:3 in 2013.²⁹ This situation is similar to the situation described by degrowth and EJ scholars in terms of the ‘global north’ exploiting the ‘global south’ (Martínez-Alier, 2012). Rees & Westra (2012) suggest that in global terms consumption by the rich is causing ecological violence on the poor, in China the urban rich can be argued to be causing ecological violence on the rural poor.

Wen (2013) argues that this mode of modernisation may have been necessary for China to catch up economically in global terms, but now the unequal divide is a fundamental issue that NRRM is trying to address. Justice in terms of rural-urban inequality in China is an important aspect of the NRRM, where inequality does not mean simply income inequality but inequality in well-being. This economic inequality in China often means disproportionate pollution being forced onto disadvantaged rural groups (Smith, 2010) in the same way that the EJ movement describes in other parts of the world (Martínez-Alier, 2012). It can be argued that there is a moral/social/ecological (and perhaps economic) debt that urban China owes to rural China due to the historic two tiered social structure and its lasting consequences that parallels the debt that degrowth and EJ scholars argue is owed by the global north to the global south. NRRM also aims at defending farmers’ “right to place” by resisting marketisation of land. The “right to place” is a “fundamental” pillar of EJ (Anguelovski, 2015).

4. Shared harvest farm: a NRRM project and an agricultural model of degrowth?

In order to analyse whether the practice of the NRRM is similarly connected to degrowth theory and practice I take a practical NRRM project as a case study. SHF is a peri-urban Beijing CSA farm that has connections with, and is self-identified as, part of the NRRM. It was set up as an organic farm by Shi in 2012 with two locations in Beijing, one in Shun Yi district (顺义区) and another location working in cooperation with a farm in Tong Zhou district (通州区). The farm provides around 600 members with 50 weeks of produce. To become a member a family or individual must pay an upfront fee of 3000RMB³⁰ or 8000RMB for a share of the harvest, each week’s delivery is notionally deducted from the initial fee – although the upfront money is already invested in the farming process. SHF also delivers produce to a buying club each week, and sells at a farmers’ market.³¹ The farm has been the

subject of domestic media attention including a Guangdong TV (2016) “Insider Insights” program³² as well as international coverage (Yu, 2015; Gottlieb and Ng, 2017: 162–164).

SHF was chosen for my research for a number of reasons. Firstly SHF is a well-known project that is a model for other NRRM CSA farm projects in China. Secondly the founder was a student of Wen and has published articles with him,³³ she has also been elected co-president of Urgencia – the international network of CSA – increasing SHF’s influence.³⁴

4.1. Environment and ecology

“We regard the land under our feet as a part of our body.”
“我们把我们脚下的土地当做自己身体的一部分。”³⁵

The SHF survey results cite numerous ways the farm helps the environment including using biogas from food waste for energy and to make natural fertilizer, and using natural cleaning methods. When asked about the main purpose of SHF responses included “to protect the environment” and “promoting health, being closer to nature and creating a more natural way of life”. Shi explained the environment “... is maybe the first reason...” to set-up SHF. She argued a number of features demonstrate the importance of the environment. For example they don’t use any synthetic fertilizer or pesticides, in addition leftover vegetables are fed to livestock. She explained that educating consumers over social network platforms that “ugly” and “beautiful” vegetables are the same means “...maybe 90% of our vegetables can be delivered and [sold]...”. She believes this is in contrast to more conventional farms which sell to supermarkets and estimates “...maybe only half of their production can go to...the table...”.

This echoes agricultural degrowth’s concern with protecting the environment by reducing waste, reducing inputs, localisation and promoting seasonal produce (Amate and Molina, 2013: 32). In addition organic agricultural techniques are argued to have the potential to protect the environment and increase biodiversity (Bengtsson et al., 2005) and also push against prevailing industrial agriculture and “uniformisation” of the food process that is critiqued by degrowth.

4.2. Back-to-the-landers

Shi argued a main goal of SHF was to help “...more young farmers reconnect with the land [and] the rural village...” echoing a degrowth theme of ‘Back-to-the-landers’. Back-to-the-landers’ are argued to be part of “...a critique of materialist mainstream culture, modern farming practices, and the globalization of the agri-food systems...” (Calvário and Otero, 2015). A quote posted on social media by one of the ‘new farmers’ of SHF links modern farming practices with a loss of culture and environmental issues;

“So-called modern cultivation—which is industrialized and chemical-dependent— is gradually replacing China’s centuries-old agrarian culture...More and more, we do not recognize the importance of the Earth’s life-sustaining resources: clean air, water, and soil... During this modernization process, the farmers who provide our food do not make enough money to maintain a dignified livelihood...we cannot use a purely economic lens to evaluate our

(footnote continued)

conference-in-china/ (Accessed 08/08/17) (Henderson, 2015).

³² SHF is put in the context of food safety issues in China.

³³ For example Shi et al. (2011).

³⁴ <https://urgenci.net/7236-2/>.

³⁵ Taken from SHF social media; https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/?_biz=MjM5MTE5ODg2MA==&mid=2650413056&idx=2&sn=5e6f5db9f2b76c05fb1ebc21a2b10f34&chksm=beb783e389c00af583a37adcd5ff493f44af72a5e12e7bc27432f3be119fd8254f70e92bcf2&scene=0#rd (Accessed 30/06/18).

²⁹ National Bureau of Statistics China (2014).

³⁰ \$440 and \$1170 respectively (Sep. 2018 exchange rate).

³¹ This details the farm visits that were held in conjunction with The 6th International and 7th China CSA conference <https://thepryingmantis.wordpress.com/2016/02/17/rural-regeneration-the-urgenci-international-csa->

agricultural system; its significance vastly exceeds its strictly “economic” attributes, as it provides the very basis of healthy human existence”

(Quoted in Shi et al., 2018).

SHF is not simply an environmentally aware organisation but openly critical of modern farming practices, economic principles and the modernisation of Chinese farming, all themes important to degrowth. According to four of the seven surveys keeping young people on the land was an important part of SHF's purpose. Further, five diagnose the problems of rural out-migration on China's countryside and believe SHF is part of a process to change this phenomenon.

However Calvário and Otero (2015) describe the tensions in the back-to-the-land movement arguing participants may create new ways of ‘commodifying’ the countryside leading to rural gentrification. Rural land in China is already becoming more commodified understood as markets reaching “...into aspects of life traditionally governed by nonmarket values...” (Gómez-Baggethun, 2015: 94). This tension is clear in the CSA movement in China as according to a survey of CSA members at four CSA farms in Beijing (not including SHF) the main reason for joining a CSA was food safety and members of the CSAs were higher income groups (Shi et al., 2011). Environmental protection was the second most cited reason for being a member of a CSA.

It could be argued that CSAs ‘commodify’ the rural by seeing it as a place wealthy people can buy safety from the problems of industrial agriculture and urban pollution. However what I argue SHF aims to achieve is a Polanyian re-embedding of markets within proper social and ecological boundaries (Gómez-Baggethun, 2015) aiming to reverse the hollowing-out of the countryside (Yan and Chen, 2013: 964), so farmers may return to the land and challenge the disembedding project of state led marketisation. This links SHF to EJ ideas of ‘defence of place’ and, by using agro-ecological methods reduces ‘environmental bads’ for the less powerful peasant (Anguelovski, 2015). However the SHF model rents the farmland from the village collective and makes peasants wage labourers at the CSA. This could be seen as commodification of land and people. Shi argues that this is the system peasants prefer as they have a wage and gain rent from SHF, therefore they bear less risk than if they were to set up the CSA themselves. Due to China's rural land policies SHF cannot buy the land from the village community (CPGPRC, 2005). This protects the farmers from becoming fully dependent on wage labour as the village gains rent from SHF which is spent on collective goods or redistributed to villagers, many of whom work for SHF.

When asked the main purpose of SHF no survey response mentioned profit and as of mid-2018 Shi states none of the original ‘investors’ have received any dividends.³⁶ As profit is unimportant for SHF it is harder to argue SHF is commodifying the rural.

Shi argued that it is not just safe food that SHF members joined the farm for, as there are other cheaper organic farms in Beijing. Many members wanted to support the SHF “project” and see more students going back to the land and a transition to more organic farming in China. If members are supporting students going back to the land and students are articulating an overt critique of modern agricultural practices and economic ideas it can be argued that SHF is a space to “...resist and subvert capitalism's ideological hegemony” (Calvário and Otero, 2015: 173). According to Calvário and Otero (2015) “This view allows us to look at back-to-the-landers’ experiences and projects as ways of building imaginaries of a degrowth (post-capitalist) society” (p.173). Of course there remains the constant danger that SHF may constrain its critique of the current system and become more consumerist. To help avoid this Calvário and Otero (2015) argue that “strategic alliances with other actors towards emancipation from capitalist social relations seem crucial” (p.173). An alliance with

degrowth, as well as other actors, may therefore be an important way to avoid SHF being co-opted into profit driven commodification.

4.3. Rural-urban connections

“We treat our neighbours, producers and consumers as one family.”
“我们把身边的邻居、生产者与消费者当成一家人看待。”

According to SHF's website³⁷ one of its core goals is to strengthen the relationship between urban citizens and farmers. Training new farmers to go back-to-the-land is one way this is done. Shi argues SHF also does this by bringing urban consumers and ‘old farmers’ together. Directly connecting with rural citizens may help urban citizens understand environmental injustices that the current and past economic system has perpetrated on the rural (Chan, 1992). Shi explained that the relationship between ‘new farmers’ and ‘old farmers’ is “...not very close...”. From return trips to SHF my observation is that the integration of the ‘old farmers’ with the ‘new farmers’ and with members is lacking. The farm tasks are split between ‘old farmers’ who mainly look after field work and ‘new farmers’ who manage social media accounts and members' orders and queries. This may be a pragmatic decision, but it demonstrates a lack of integration and a missed opportunity.

SHF is located within a village but there seems a lack of interaction between the non-employees in the village and SHF. There is more work to do to break down these social barriers. SHF has recently set up an eco-tourism initiative which will bring more members to the farm. Whilst this could help integrate members with ‘old farmers’ it could also exacerbate social tensions if ‘old farmers’ are seen as simply serving the wealthy urban CSA members.³⁸

4.4. Voluntary simplicity

Shi explained that another reason for setting up SHF was that she believed living in the countryside was a lifestyle choice that could help protect the environment. This can be seen as the degrowth idea of ‘voluntary simplicity’ (Alexander, 2015: 162) “a way of life that involves consciously minimizing wasteful and resource-intensive consumption... [and] reimagining ‘the good life’...” (Ibid). This belief in the superiority of rural simplicity influenced a number of activities at SHF. Most notably the farming summer camp that is part of the ‘Children of the Earth College’ project.³⁹ Activities that were publicised on social media of the summer camp included experiencing farming, lessons about soil, learning about animals found on the farm, cooking, and washing their own clothes etc. These demonstrate values of simplicity, frugality⁴⁰ and connecting to nature which degrowth also promotes. Comments used by SHF to promote their summer camp included a parent mentioning that their child used to be scared of smells, dirt and insects but is not anymore thanks to the summer camp.

³⁷ Farm; Introduction, 2017 <http://sharedharvest.cn/aboutuszh/2017/10/01/%E5%86%9C%E5%9C%BA%E7%AE%80%E4%BB%8B/> (Accessed, 10/06/18).

³⁸ One risk is that a tourism initiative may promote the hegemonic discourse of growth and consumerism, discussed with regards to Barcelona by Iserlohn (this issue).

³⁹ 2017 summer camp; https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?_biz=MzA5OTU2OTM3NA==&mid=2649949123&idx=1&sn=4b264b6c067ec866c12ce965e4b8b5de&chksm=8887f872bf0716446c4be691a205ae8265531681adb61f39d16070cc20b66de716908abf64d&mpshare=1&scene=1&srcid=0611Sm6JlzGPoyrb4YR1wEDT#rd (Accessed 16/06/18).

⁴⁰ The 2018 Summer Camp advertisement mentions one aim is to give children a feeling of ‘simple and pure happiness’. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?_biz=MjM5MTE5ODg2MA==&mid=2650413056&idx=2&sn=5e6f5db9f2b76c05fb1ebc21a2b10f34&chksm=beb783e389c00af583a37adcd5ff493f44af72a5e12e7bc27432f3be119fd8254f70e92bcf2&scene=0#rd (Accessed 30/06/18).

³⁶ Personal correspondence 10/06/18.

4.5. Money and finance

Degrowth scholars pay attention to finance and the monetary system.⁴¹ Some argue that money, created as debt, means the economy is inherently unstable and geared towards growth (Mellor, 2015). Douthwaite (2011) argues the importance of issuing non-debt based money for ensuring degrowth theory can work (p.5).

I argue that for SHF to be seen as a viable model of degrowth it needs to break from current ideas of money and debt. Although SHF is not able to issue money, it does issue credit in a particular sense and to deal with a particular problem. Farming has high upfront costs at the beginning of the growing season and farmers often need loans for small scale investments or to adjust their seasonal incomes (Zhou and Takeuchi, 2010: 303). Traditional ways of formal borrowing – banks – charge interest on loans. This entails a risk as the farmer has the extra cost of financing the loan. SHF, like many CSAs, bypasses the need for bank lending whilst at the same time securing upfront money. It asks for a year's "share" to be paid at the beginning of the growing season. The member receives an IOU (I owe you) and SHF receives money to give to farmers. This helps farmers buy seed and organic fertilizer at the beginning of the growing season and helps with more expensive capital projects. For instance SHF gave a "free loan" to build four greenhouses at the Tong Zhou location which is separately managed by local farmers. Giving a non-interest loan not secured against an individual's assets differentiates SHF from the prevailing economic discourse of capital accumulation and formal lending practices.

4.6. Shared harvest as a practical example of degrowth

"As a member of the Earth we are responsible for Mother Earth."
"我们作为地球上的一员，对大地母亲负责。"

Whilst the NRRM do not explicitly argue for degrowth, they are critical of capitalist expansion and growth⁴² as the overriding value driving society and argue for degrowth like ideas – such as de-industrialising food production as well as emphasizing simplicity, traditional culture and environmental protection. Their ideas, if expanded, would arguably create a degrowth situation in rural China where agriculture resource and energy throughput was reduced compared to industrialised agriculture systems, and consumption reduced by re-imagining the 'good-life'.

The rejection of the hegemonic structures of prevailing food systems places both SHF and degrowth into a sphere counter to marketisation of society and the prevailing capitalist discourse both in China and abroad. The practices of SHF help link it to the sources of degrowth described by Demaria et al. (2013) and demonstrates that not only the theory of NRRM is linked to degrowth but also its practice.

The small, but significant, alternative financing projects further links SHF to degrowth. However the Chinese context has meant co-operation between urban residents and 'new farmers', and the 'old farmers' is less close than may be desired in terms of the degrowth or EJ movements. Social gaps between the richer urban citizens and poorer rural citizens are likely to take a long time to break down. Therefore I reach a different conclusion from Bloemmen et al. (2015) who suggested, following their investigation of a CSA in Belgium, that it is the relationship between the farmer and the community of consumers that is the most important factor in constituting a CSA as a particular form of sustainable degrowth. At SHF, it is the critique of modern agriculture, the re-imagining of the 'good-life' and ecological and microeconomic activities that run contrary to the prevailing capitalist discourse that are most significant. In these terms we can recognize Shi and SHF as "Degrowth actors...engaged in the production of alternative and

contentious meanings which differ from the ones defended by the mainstream" (Demaria et al., 2013: 194).

4.7. Future challenges

Practical agricultural degrowth-like projects have potential to spread in China as its system of peasant farming is not yet fully marketised. However China's agricultural policy is at a point of flux. It is a moment when there is a push to create more capital accumulation based on marketisation of assets (including the family right to cultivate land, the home and/or government guaranteed income for tree planting (Zhang, 2013)). This is designed to enable formal investment in agriculture to increase competition in world markets. The NRRM creates the possibility of a more equitable future by creating a vibrant environment in which cash is less important than cultural, social activities, and public goods.⁴³

Strengthening the current collective system together with an increase in cooperation and agro-ecology would mean rural China has the potential to become the largest example of "agroecological degrowth" (Boillat et al., 2012: 601) in the world. However one constraint Shi points out is that for small-scale farms "...there are currently no government-sponsored programs to support...learning best practices in organic farming, nor to purchase or implement new sustainable technologies" (Shi et al., 2018: 77).⁴⁴ Furthermore Day and Schneider (2017) lament the increasing marketisation of rural China, arguing it has constrained the NRRM and lead them to concentrate on more market based solutions to rural problems.⁴⁵ Schneider (2015) also argues that in her view state policies seem to point towards the eventual abandonment of self-sufficient agriculture in China (p.340). A further issue, introducing degrowth to urban China, is even more challenging, as urban China has enthusiastically embraced consumer capitalism (Xue, 2016).

5. Conclusion

I have argued that the links between the sources of degrowth and NRRM theory as well as how that theory is put into practice mean that the NRRM can be seen as a type of degrowth movement. It could be said that this paper is too western-centric trying to fit a Chinese movement into a western theoretical framework. However the purpose of my comparison is distinct. I draw attention to the possibilities for radical knowledge production by encouraging scholarship that enables the two theories to interact as well as providing a vehicle for degrowth to make productive alliances "at eye level" (Dengler & Seebacher, this issue), which are sensitive to the specifics of different countries and localities whilst avoiding the imposition of ideas from above. Research on and in collaboration with the NRRM in China has the potential to influence degrowth theories as well as to introduce more Chinese people to degrowth ideas. Introducing theories of Bioeconomics – a degrowth source not explicitly articulated within NRRM scholarship – to a Chinese context could be fruitful for NRRM scholarship. Similarly introducing NRRM theories on the history of the rural-urban divide to EJ scholars could expand EJ scholarship in China. I suggest there is space within the degrowth movement for a Chinese specific degrowth model, created and practiced by Chinese scholars and citizens, sensitive to local conditions. If degrowth scholars believe the best chance of achieving a

⁴³ For example He Xuefeng an important NRRM scholar argues NRR "...is about constructing a way of life with 'low consumption and high benefit,' one that is different from that of consumer culture. A way of life thus constructed could help improve peasant satisfaction without money being the major criterion for value of life." (He, 2007: 35).

⁴⁴ See also Cheng & Shi (2014:142).

⁴⁵ On the contradictions between 'capitalism' and 'alternative' approaches in NRRM projects see Hale (2013).

⁴¹ See: <http://www.degrowth.org/financial-dimension> (Accessed 09/12/15).

⁴² See Qiu (2007: 84-85), Wen and Lau (2008) and Wen et al. (2012).

stable global environment and socioenvironmental justice is through a degrowth transition, Chinese citizens must be a large part of that global transformation.

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