

The public perception and social trust in alternative food networks: The role of certification systems - A comparison between Brazil and China

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Alternative food networks (AFNs) are generally regarded as more sustainable agri-food systems compared to their conventional counterpart; however, its definition remains ambiguous and contested. As certification systems provide a series of standards and inspections in practice to ensure that the production and processing process of the product has met certain qualifications, their roles as gatekeepers in the food provisioning are indeed important. However, without universal criteria to date, certification systems, distinct from each other, may bring about different impacts on the ways of shaping people's perceptions and bridging the relationships between producer and consumer in the agri-food system. To study the emerging issues in respect of the role of certification systems, this proposed research draws a comparison between Brazil and China to shed light on how public perception and trust are constructed based on different certification systems, and to what extent that contributes to the development and consolidation of AFNs.

In Brazil, the food certification for organic, agroecological and other alternative food networks attributes can be done in two main ways, by certifying companies and by participatory certification. The certifying companies are a third party which is responsible for overseeing the production process, input and other conditions and guarantee certain qualities for the consumers. Certifying companies are paid by producers and are not economically viable for many smallholders, in this sense the participatory certification was created in order to make certification viable for this group of producers. The participative certification is based on the collaborative work between farmers with collaborative norms and practices in which one is responsible to supervise each other's production. This kind of certification is substantially more accessible for lower-income producers because the necessary technical

support and analysis to certify the attributes agreed among the farmers are contracted and paid collectively. The participative model is accepted by the state due to a long-term negotiation and by the consumers due to long-term ties of confidence. The certification allows farmers to access long-distance markets, going beyond the short-circuit of commercialization where sales very often do not require certification, relying exclusively on trust between producer and consumer. However, as consumer interest in AFNs products advances, attempts - sometimes very successful attempts - are being made by companies to offer products that take on AFNs attributes. Conventional products are “greenish” from strategies as the adoption of organic production, even on a large scale and along the lines of conventional production, and the valorisation of regional products, even not effectively contributing to the expansion or preservation of biodiversity.

China is a country with economic transformation but not yet political change (Ho and Edmonds, 2008), and thus, its AFNs have grown distinctness embedded in the socio-economic context, so does the certification systems. Specifically, notes are needed on the state-dominated characters in relation to the standards of food safety and certification system. Resulting from the public awareness after the outbreak of food-safety crises as well as the development of living standards, the demand for organic and/or quality food has increased rapidly in recent decades (organic agriculture and the market for organic food in China are booming at the rate of 30% per annum), which also drives the rising amount of AFNs. However, since the China National Organic Product Standard and The Rule in Implementation of Organic Products Certification were introduced nationwide in 2005, the distrust of the government that reflects on public attitude towards certified food is identified. In accordance with Mol’s work (2014), the state-led certification systems in China appear to lack of consideration of consumers’ demands and participation, and the transparency of information and operation system, which show the fundamental difference compared to Brazil model. As Zhang et al. (2016) differentiate consumer’s trust into “personalised trust” based on interpersonal relationships with farmers from short supply chains, and “institutionalised trust”, which applies with science-based, government regulations, and argue the synergies of both forms of trust require further scrutiny.

This work aims to explore the role of certification systems through the lens of perception and trust, in order to relate it to the development of alternative food networks. The preliminary conclusions include, on the one hand, a perception that in China people's trust in

labels/certification is weaker than in Brazil, and that mainly due to the openness for participation (both producer and consumer) and the transparency of the operation of the certification systems. On the other hand, as trust in certifications is higher in Brazil there is a greater "risk" of consumers being deceived by “greening” strategies.