

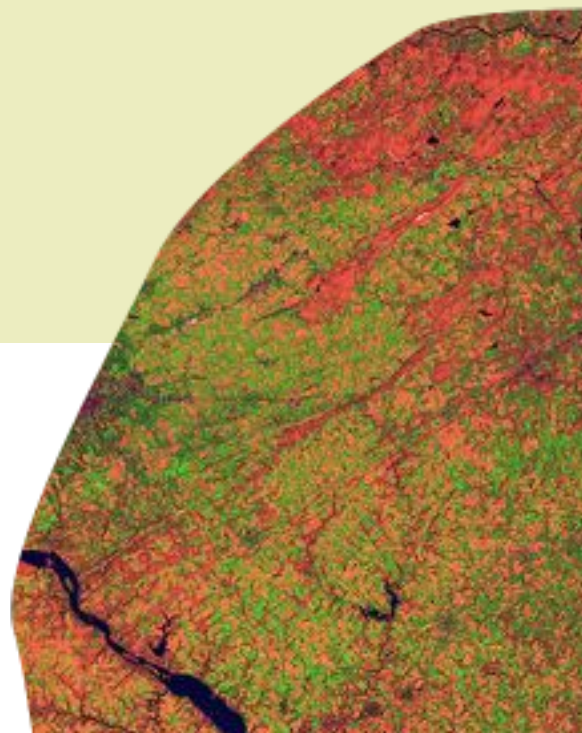
Title: Foodthink: Building an epistemic ecological community through agroecological practices

Author:

**Occupy Climate
Change (OCC!)**
*Grassroots initiatives
entry*



FORMAS



**Foodthink: Building an epistemic ecological community
through agroecological practices**
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Where is this grassroots initiative implemented?

The initiative itself is difficult to confine within distinct boundaries, as it highlights the information and awareness efforts of FoodThink, an organization committed to promoting sustainable food system practices, conducting field research on the complex dynamics of the food supply chain, and popularizing issues related to its environmental and social dimensions. Food is rarely produced within cities, whose populations rely heavily on production in the surrounding municipal areas or rural regions of the country. Therefore, the impact of climate change on agriculture and food production, although not occurring directly within cities, significantly affects urban populations, linking center and periphery in a lasting bond (Woods, 2020).

Based in Beijing, many of FoodThink's offline activities and projects take place within this municipality in the People's Republic of China. Closely connected to the Beijing Farmers' Market Association, its activities and projects are often hosted in the association's retail shops located in the Chaoyang and Haidian districts. Meanwhile, FoodThink's online activities (mainly promoted through their WeChat channel) and broader collaboration networks extend across the entire country and beyond.



*One of the community shop in Sanyuanqiao district, Beijing
(picture by Chiara Bartoletti).*

Who are the promoters?

The promoter of the initiative is FoodThink, a knowledge and information platform dedicated to the promotion of awareness around environmental and social issues connected to food system dynamics, with a specific focus on China. Other than the people directly involved in knowledge production within the platform, FoodThink engages with a wider community of farmers, researchers, students, citizens, and consumers who are involved in a wide variety of online and offline activities, thus creating through their work an epistemic community. FoodThink also cooperates with research institutes and other NGOs to carry out projects on biodiversity conservation in agricultural spaces (Deutsch-Chinesisches Agrarzentrum [DCZ], 2024).

Who are the beneficiaries?

The main beneficiaries are at the two opposite ends of the food supply chain: farmers (based in rural areas) and consumers (living in the city). By connecting these two ends through farmers' markets, internship programs, on-site visits, and sharing sessions, FoodThink creates a bond between them. Farmers benefit from this connection by selling directly to consumers, allowing them a larger profit margin compared to selling through supermarkets or online

shops. This direct interaction also fosters trust, as consumers can learn where and how their food is grown. Additionally, farmers gain valuable knowledge and expertise from larger projects led by FoodThink and its network of collaborators, such as a recent initiative on biodiversity management and conservation that focuses on the preservation and exchange of traditional crop seeds (Deutsch-Chinesisches Agrarzentrum [DCZ], 2024).

Consumers, on the other hand, have direct access to fresh and safe food, a major concern in China since a series of food safety scandals emerged around 2007–2008 (Yan, 2012). Food produced on trusted farms and sold at farmers' market events carries social and environmental values that appeal to consumers who are more attentive to such issues, providing an ethical response to their demand for sustainable food.

How does this initiative engage with climate? Does it tackle mitigation, adaptation, both or other dimensions of climate change?

FoodThink mainly engages with climate change communication and education by increasing public awareness and understanding of how climate change impacts farmers and food production. Although food production happens outside the cities, when impacted by climate change, the consequences are visible at a broader spatial and social scale, as food availability and prices in urban areas highly depend on production amounts in rural areas. Urban citizens are therefore also affected, even if indirectly, by floods, droughts, pest and disease proliferation, and other climate-change related phenomena that impact agricultural production, thus subverting the 'spatial rift' existing between rural and urban areas (Saito, 2023). By bonding farmers and consumers through its projects and activities, FoodThink creates a community that builds on a virtuous circle of ecological knowledge, sustainable production, and consumption practices that are pivotal to address climate change.



Images from the weekend Beijing Farmers' Market from FoodThink Wechat

(with permission to use from the organization)

What are the main objectives? What are the main values?

The main objectives behind FoodThink's work are the push towards a sustainability transition of the Chinese food system, and to operate as an open platform of knowledge of collective contributions. As stated both on their website and on their WeChat channel, FoodThink aims "to spread knowledge and awareness among consumers, to create a fairer and more just market and society for ecological farmers, and thus creating a healthier, tastier and more sustainable food system" (FoodThink, n.d.). FoodThink brings together researchers and practitioners from China and beyond to jointly promote and advocate for more sustainable agriculture and food systems. Based on their statements and on a critical content analysis of their narratives, the main values can be identified with environmental and social sustainability, knowledge sharing, community building, and advocacy and awareness.

What is the timeline? Are there already visible effects?

FoodThink (originally named "Know Your Food" before later rebranding as "FoodThink") was founded in 2017 by two individuals involved in the ongoing organization of the Beijing Farmers' Market, which had begun in 2010. The Beijing Farmers' Market was launched in 2010 as an art project by a group of international artists living in Beijing. Over time, more local volunteers got involved, helping to establish and regularize the farmers' market. From the beginning, the market was more than just a place for buying and selling goods; it also served social purposes, such as raising awareness about agriculture and the environment, and advocating for local, fair, and healthy food. In this context, locally and sustainably grown food has acted as a boundary object, connecting different practices and social groups, by creating a shared space that bridges the urban center and the rural periphery.

The farmers' market concept was new in China, and sustaining operations and securing funding became challenging, especially in Beijing, facing the difficulty of allocating resources to purely public-interest initiatives. In 2017, Chang Tianle, the market's coordinator, launched the FoodThink project, a social enterprise model. Although FoodThink was incubated within the farmers' market, it aims to have a broader impact by focusing on the entire food system and supporting a national network of ecological agriculture. FoodThink has expanded on activities such as sharing sessions and books that were started within the Beijing Farmers' Market community and started supporting grassroots food and farming organizations with micro-grants, offering internship programs on eco-farms, engaging in policy advocacy, and conducting research on various issues related to sustainable food systems.

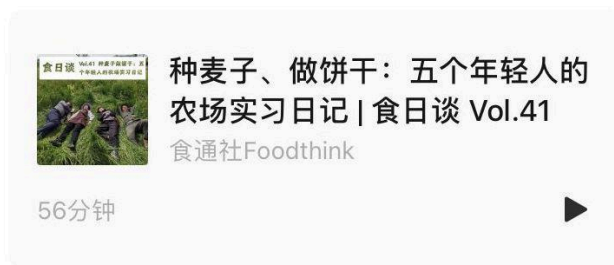
Since its launch in 2017, the platform has had numerous visible impacts: (a) the establishment of internship programs for urban citizens, particularly young graduates, who wish to experience and practice rural life and agricultural techniques. This program connects farmers with urban residents, fostering urban-rural relations and raising awareness about the crucial role of small ecological farmers in safe, sustainable food production. It also sensitizes participants to the challenges farmers face by allowing interns to live on farms for at least three months. This project is particularly valuable for urban citizens who are considering becoming "new peasants" (*xin nongren* 新农人) and starting their own farming projects, as it provides hands-on experience with farming life and practices; (b) the publication of reports and policy recommendations based on field research conducted by FoodThink's team members at small and medium-sized farms, some of which are part of the Beijing Farmers' Market network, while others are located in more remote regions. A current project supported

by Oxfam Hong Kong focuses on understanding how Chinese rural social organizations adapt to climate change, including the methods and pathways they employ, as well as the outcomes and challenges they face. Researchers at FoodThink are conducting digital surveys to gather data, which will be analyzed to generate aggregated insights. These findings will be used to develop scientifically-grounded strategies that can benefit the organizations themselves, as well as sponsors, local governments, communities, and academic researchers. Two more major projects focus on agrobiodiversity, examining conservation practices and strategies rooted in farmers' ecological knowledge. These findings, along with contributions from other NGOs focused on biodiversity and nature conservation, have informed policies and guidelines within the United Nations' Action Plan on Ecosystem Restoration (United Nations, 2023); (c) the development of a broad, stable network of multi-stakeholders—including community actors, farmers, NGOs, academic researchers, policymakers, media, and the public—promoting cross-disciplinary dialogue, critical knowledge exchange, and filling research gaps.

Although not overtly addressing climate-change related consequences within the urban spaces, FoodThink is leveraging knowledge and education (here intended from Dewey's pragmatist approach) as part of a wider conservation plan.



Images from on-farm internship (image from FoodThink WeChat channel, with permission to use from the FoodThink organization).



Podcast episode where five farm interns from the FoodThink's internship program shared their experiences (image from FoodThink WeChat channel, with permission to use from the FoodThink organization)

Who are the actors involved? What are their backgrounds?

Actors involved vary greatly. As mentioned above, there are researchers and activists (although this term might not be overtly used because of evident social and political restrictions within the Chinese context) with a social science/natural science/economic studies background, who are part of the FoodThink team or that collaborate with them and engage with their communication activities, such as book clubs, sharing sessions, online workshops, etc. Actors also include the farmers joining the Beijing Farmers' Market and the internship program. Their role in the epistemological creation of this community is pivotal as their farming practice is the embodiment of the agricultural and ecological knowledge that is shared with the urban actors and the broader audience. More institutionalized actors such as universities and publicly funded research centers are also part of the network, being represented by their researchers and professors in the activities promoted by FoodThink.

Which limits does it encounter?

Limits to the activities and projects implemented by FoodThink might arise from the strict sociopolitical constraints that China has been increasingly facing in the past decade. To circumnavigate such restrictions, social and cultural activities must be framed in such way that comply with and can be framed within official narratives (such as that of ‘Ecological Civilization’ or ‘Beautiful China’) and must not tackle too directly sensitive social and political issues. FoodThink promotes its activities as part of the ecological transition in the agricultural sector. Although the Chinese government has a more ecomodernist approach to sustainability transition, ecological agriculture is widely accepted at the academic and governmental level as a viable solution to environmental degradation caused by conventional agriculture (Luo and Gliessman, 2017). FoodThink’s approach on their media platform to social, environmental, and economic issues related to the agrifood system has been moderately critical, uncovering global and national unjust dynamics, while navigating the complexities of balancing advocacy with the need for cooperation with more institutional actors. Occasionally, certain articles criticizing more openly the government’s stance on, for example, farmers’ market, have been removed from some platforms.

Are any shortcomings or critical points visible? What other problematic issues can arise from its implementation?

The evaluation reveals only one minor limitation: the project is primarily designed to engage farmers and individuals with a certain level of education, which may limit its accessibility to a broader group of small-scale or less formally educated farmers. While this does not present a critical obstacle, it may slightly reduce the project’s reach among more modest farming communities.

How would it be potentially replicable in other settings?

Although many of their activities are not new in other contexts or countries, the systemic approach to addressing such a wide range of issues within a single grassroots organization is truly admirable and effective in connecting stakeholders at different levels. This creates both an epistemic community and a community of practice. After its beginnings in the Beijing community, FoodThink quickly expanded and is now a nationwide information platform with a large Chinese-speaking audience both in China and abroad. Its online activities are easily

replicable in other contexts, as demonstrated by the formation of knowledge-sharing networks and hands-on shared experiences, which are also common features of many other grassroots movements and organizations.

One highly replicable initiative is the Beijing Farmers' Market, whose model could be easily adapted to other cities. However, as one of the organizers pointed out, a key challenge lies in identifying individuals with the right skills, connections, and willingness to lead such a demanding project. It also requires securing suitable physical spaces within the city and developing a strong online presence to promote the initiative and build a local community, as was successfully done in Beijing.

Is this initiative conducive to broader changes (law, institutional arrangements, long-term sustainability or community preparedness, etc.)? If yes, which?

Yes, the initiative actively engages with long-term sustainability by acting on the economic, environmental, social and institutional elements of sustainability. It does so by providing an economic platform for farmers to sell their products, and by promoting ecological agricultural practices among consumers and potential new farmers. At the institutional level, FoodThink is working with another NGOs and universities on the Chinese action plan for ecosystem restoration within the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2023) to build a multi-stakeholder coordination mechanism for science, practice and policy on sustainable agricultural production and agrobiodiversity conservation in China.

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