



Food, Culture & Society

An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN: 1552-8014 (Print) 1751-7443 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rffc20>

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To cite this article: Hao-Tzu Ho (2020) Cosmopolitan locavorism: global local-food movements in postcolonial Hong Kong, *Food, Culture & Society*, 23:2, 137-154, DOI: [10.1080/15528014.2019.1682886](https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2019.1682886)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2019.1682886>



Published online: 20 Nov 2019.



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Cosmopolitan locavorism: global local-food movements in postcolonial Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT


This ethnographic study examines how “locavorism,” or food localism, is articulated in the under-studied context of Hong Kong. Influences from diverse cultures and social systems brought about by colonization and transnational financial activities have created a mosaic of “Western” and “Eastern” traditions in this land-starved metropolis, rendering it an unlikely setting to preach about “eating locally” and going “back-to-the-land.” However, localism and the discourse of reviving agriculture began to burgeon a few years after the 1997 handover. Against the backdrop of this oxymoron, this research investigates and compares ideas of young urban farmers and food activists to other interpretations of localness. By examining multi-voicing, this paper engages with debates surrounding cosmopolitanism and conceptualizes an analytical perspective, which I refer to here as *cosmopolitan locavorism*. This concept is proposed to argue that locavorism in Hong Kong is distinct from defensive localism, the cultural consumption of globetrotting elites, or an urban fascination with rural lifestyles. It simultaneously signifies trans-local connections and human-land bonds, mobilizing a cultural critique of local neoliberal governmentality rather than allying with anti-globalization or “anti-China” sentiments. In this context, “local food” embodies *place-based* experiences instead of a *place-bounded* state of mind.

KEYWORDS

Urban anthropology; local food; localism; cosmopolitanism; agriculture movement; postcolonial society

Introduction

“Local” is a slippery concept everywhere, but it is a particularly problematic notion in Hong Kong where “global influences are so pervasive that ‘local’ is a matter of degree” (Merry and Stern 2005, 400). In such settings where contacts with non-homogenous foreign communities and trans-local ideas and materials occurs regularly, however, *buntou*¹ (local or localness, literally “native-soil” or “original land”) has become the most frequently discussed post-handover discourse in Hong Kong. A recent proliferation of literature focusing on *buntou* has examined the term from a top-down and conceptual approach (cf. Lam and Cooper 2018; Wong 2017; Veg 2017; Kwong 2016; Kwan 2016; Chung 2015; Fung 2001; Ortman 2016). This paper, on the other hand, takes a bottom-up position. I build upon long-term ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2016 and

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2017 in Hong Kong, where I conducted document analysis, multi-sited participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with farmers, activists, and other practitioners.

This paper takes local food movements as an entry point to investigate the shifting meanings of localness. The concept of “local food” is ideal rather than a reality since food on a plate often blends imported elements and mixed scales of production, distribution, and preparation (Wilk 2006). A bite of food could involve production and consumption that happen thousands of miles away (Mintz 1986; Nützenadel and Trentmann 2008). However, given the fuzziness of ideas about what it means to be “local,” trans-local and industrialized food has triggered anxieties and stimulated people’s longing for food that is thought to be socially-embedded (Mintz 2006; Wilk 2008a). Various values attached to localness lead to a growing interest in producing and consuming local food. Such preferences are usually not politically neutral, but sometimes colored by the reinvention of locality (Marsden and Franklin 2013; Moore 2010) and even nationalism (Chan 2016; Hui 2014; Winter 2003). This paper compares local-food movements in Hong Kong to the global trends of “eating locally” and going “back-to-the-land” to explore the subtle interplay between localism, nationalism, and globalism. In the context of this paper, local food is defined as food that is locally grown, not just locally processed, cooked, or branded.

This paper suggests that local food activism in Hong Kong exemplifies what I theorize as *cosmopolitan locavorism*—a particular kind of food localism which is based on cosmopolitanism. Since the 1990s, cosmopolitanism – a concept that dates back to ancient Greece – has regained momentum when globalization became widely studied and was said to create new spatial possibilities and dialectical relationships between the local and non-local (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Giddens 1990; Hannerz 1996; Ong and Collier 2005; Tsing 2005). With the arrival of the internet, revolutionary development of communication technologies (Delanty 2012), and the dominance of English as a global language (Held 2002), cosmopolitanism has a new relevance to the contemporary world, characterized by the “penetrability of boundaries” (Massey 1994, 165) and “horizontal integration” (Kearney 2004).

I coined the term *cosmopolitan locavorism* to describe a set of ideas and practices that are simultaneously underpinned by international alliances and rooted in land, soil, and vernacular life. It entails narratives about human-land attachment mediated by farming activities and food. In this regard, cosmopolitan locavorism is different from “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Cohen 1992) or “cosmopolitan patriotism” (Appiah 1998) that focus more on cultural roots, national identity, and citizenship. At the same time, distinguished from other food localisms that assemble farmers and activists to resist transnational food systems, the locavorism that emerged in Hong Kong is not anti-globalization. It does not involve “defensive localism” (Winter 2003) that implies prejudice against non-local elements and a reluctance to have boundary-crossing interactions.

Cosmopolitan locavorism is proposed to analyze a mentality distinct from one that looks with starry eyes at the local – viewing the local as unquestionably ethical, progressive, and high-quality, while the non-local as polluting, untrustworthy, and poor-quality. It emphasizes connection and inclusion as opposed to separation and exclusion. I suggest that local-food movements in Hong Kong are taken neither as resistance to the global nor the Chinese, but as a cultural critique to neoliberalism, developmentalism, and consumerism in a costly city. Agriculture is seen as an all-in-one formula, intended not only to revamp the food system but to work around social norms that favor the politically and economically privileged groups.

A new foodscape in a land-starved city

The “post-handover generations”

Over the last decade, various forms of farms, activities, philosophies, and a wide demographic of participants have co-created a new foodscape (Adema 2009) in Hong Kong. Rooftops on skyscrapers have been repurposed for planting herbs and vegetables, teaching and learning agricultural knowledge and skills, and socializing with farming lovers. Also, urbanites have become interested in growing food on farmland in outlying areas. By 2016, there were around 45 rooftop farms (Pryor 2016) and 139 leisure farms (Vegetable Marketing Organization 2017). Numerous NGOs, social enterprises, and consultancies have been set up to work on farming-related matters. Regular farmers' markets and organic shops are spreading city-wide.

My fieldwork involves diverse groups of people: fulltime farmers, farm administrators, volunteers, cooks, organic/handmade products retailers, NGO workers, farm visitors and farmers' market customers, “hobby” or “holiday” farmers, entrepreneur farmers (who regard managing a farm as a business model), young farmers, senior farmers, artists, researchers, teachers, writers, journalists, and participants in and instructors of agriculture- and food-related workshops, courses, festivals, or film fora. There are individual/group differences in terms of motivations and expectations. Among young farmers and activists, some regard farming more as an approach for self-growth and self-help, while others see it as a means of social reform. Some only grow food for their own households, friends, and relatives, whereas others strive to produce food for the public and rely on farming as their livelihood.

Despite the heterogeneity, they share the aim of carving out alternative forms of living that will lead to a better-quality life. Other than young farmers and activists, other farming-related groups represented diverse concerns and agendas. For example, gardening and consuming local food are taken as personal lifestyle choices rather than social campaigns. Some farming practitioners expressed concerns over food safety, the environmental costs of urban lifestyles, or the exploitation of food growers worldwide, but do not associate these concerns with the lack of local agriculture. To avoid sacrificing the depth of ethnography or generalizing multiple voices, this paper is focused on young farmers and activists who were consumers, but now have become producers.

The “post-handover generations” who were born between 1970 and 1990 have played a central role in the changing foodscape. They are well-educated and from non-agricultural background, but they choose to become farmers despite the physically demanding work and low financial rewards. They advocate the revitalization of agriculture by incorporating foreign ideas and establishing international partnerships when only two percent of the food supply is produced locally in Hong Kong. They seek to challenge the existing system dominated by powerful corporations and land developers (cf. Poon 2011). They reflect on local superiority and undifferentiated prejudice against newcomers and strangers – an opinion that has been explicitly expressed through the choice of food.

Distrust of imported food

Discussions of global food crises tend to tackle issues of poverty, hunger, and food insecurity (Lin 2017). These topics, however, are not echoed in urban China as much

as “food safety,” such as concerns about regulations, pesticide residue, excessive use of additives, “fake food” made from harmful chemical substances, and general unhygienic processes of preparing, distributing, and selling food (e.g. Bongiorno 2007; Klein 2015; Shi et al. 2011; Zhang 2018). Likewise, food safety is prioritized by Hong Kong consumers (Yip and Janssen 2015), and is the most frequently mentioned reason that consumers become food-growers or agricultural activists (Ho 2018).

In Hong Kong, both the panic over food safety and the hardship of small farmers are associated with agri-products dumped from mainland China, which provide over 90 percent of the food supply. In such a climate, local food is elevated to a superior rank, and the “local” label significantly raises the price. Sometimes food imported from prestigious sources worldwide can be sold at good prices, while food from mainland China will only be the choice of price-conscious consumers. In the search for cheaper land, some farms formerly in Hong Kong have been relocated to mainland China. These farms use a new label indicating that the food was produced in “Hongkongese-managed farms” so as to win back customer trust. Mainland-imported food with this badge still enjoys a higher price. The higher value of food grown in Hongkongese-managed farms, regardless of the location, reveals that distrust is stimulated not only by the place where the food is produced but also the person who produced it.

Beneath these periodic episodes of distrust are post-handover social conflicts manifested in localism discourses. Cooper (2007) uses the term “indigenous” to describe an urge amongst Europeans to document plants and geologic traits when encountering the influx of “exotic” elements from overseas colonies. Cooper argues that the invention of “the indigenous” serves purposes of compartmentalizing the outlandish and the native, claiming territoriality and fostering local identity. Discourses of *buntou* in Hong Kong evoke similar anxieties about dealing with outsiders and post-handover newcomers.

Are cosmopolitanism and localism always in conflict?

Despite the positive social, cultural, economic, and environmental implications, global local food initiatives can involve “defensive localism,” “unreflexive localism,” or “food neophobia.” In contrast with food localism, cosmopolitanism has been criticized as a Western ideology that wealthy globetrotting elites hold to justify their consumption or enforce a politically-uncommitted stance. This section reviews the relevant debates and introduces how might food activism in Hong Kong manifest a type of localism fostered alongside cosmopolitanism.

Politics of local food on a global scale

Transnational food systems invoke concerns of “contamination, cultural homogenization, and exploitation,” and “tradition,” “authenticity,” and “home” persist as essential elements of local food (Wilk 2006, 15–17). Localness becomes a standard of good quality (Guthman 2004). Discourses of empowering the local are employed by grassroots groups as a weapon, demanding control over resources and articulating resistance to the food system controlled by global capitalism (Ayres and Bosia 2014; Changfoot 2007; Feagan 2007; Huey 2005; Norberg-Hodge, Merrifield, and Gorelick 2002). Burgeoning enthusiasm for farmers’ markets and regional food brands places the localization of food

systems in reaction to the human and environmental consequences of long-distance food transportation (Renting, Marsden, and Banks 2003).

The North American model of Community Supported Agriculture, for instance, stands in contrast to industrial and chemical monocultures and emphasizes social embeddedness (Galt 2013; Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, and Stevenson 1996). “Locavore” eating habits in the US and Vandana Shiva’s Navdanya in India foreground multiple values of local food, ranging from social solidarity, urban-rural integration, an appreciation of reciprocity instead of profit-making, and democratic and community-based participation in decisions about food systems and environmental governance (Andrée et al. 2014; Menser 2008). The Fair Trade initiative aims to create markets that safeguard justice, autonomy, and sustainability by avoiding intermediaries that exploit small food producers (Lyon 2006; Zerbe 2014; Linton, Liou, and Shaw 2004). The Slow Food movement reacts against industrial food chains and fast food consumption, calling for the preservation of traditional artisan practices, local trattoria, and brasseries (Miele and Murdoch 2002).

Although local food is seen as socially embedded, culturally appropriate, and symbolic of environmental and moral ethics, it simultaneously entails the exclusion of non-local elements (Brunori 2007). Such an attitude has been conceptualized as “food neophobia” (Capiola and Raudenbush 2012; Wilk 2008b), referring to an uncritical reluctance to consume foreign food. In radical cases, food localism is mingled with hometown bias and in-group favoritism (Reich, Beck, and Price 2018), and risks evoking xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, and other exclusionary arguments (Heise 2008; Stănescu 2010). DuPuis and Goodman (2005) point out that “unreflexive localism” might be implied in local food agendas and leads to a purified and taken-for-granted image of the “local,” which is nevertheless often the site of inequality and uneven power dynamics. Winter (2003) also argues that “defensive localism” casts a shadow on support for local farming in England and Wales. Likewise, local food movements in Iowa have created a regional identity that is elitist, reactionary, and full of nativist sentiments to protect the local from the non-local (Hinrichs 2003). Simultaneously, however, Hinrichs points out that the process of localizing food systems fosters a fluid notion of localness, which involves not only exclusion but also diversity and reflexivity about food identities. Hinrichs’s accounts of local food movements reveal that the food activists in Hong Kong and the US – two cases that appear similar – are very different. This paper adopts the framework of cosmopolitanism to map out how the Hong Kong case might enhance our understanding of urban farming, food activism, and locavorism.

“Genuine” cosmopolitanism and “lifestyle” cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is a concept that has both general and specific meanings. In a looser sense, it is interpreted as an ethical response to globalization (Beck 2006). Globalization describes the free movement of capital and the spread of goods and ideas, while cosmopolitanism implies empathy and respect for differences in culture and value (Werbner 2008). Cosmopolitanism manifests world citizenship that transcends kinship or national bonds (Cheah 2006). Citizenship in this way is not bound to a single government or ruling power, but rather respect for humanity (Nussbaum 1996).

In a more specific sense, however, cosmopolitanism has been criticized as a Western ideology invented to legitimize Western authority over other places or peoples

(Kirtsoglou 2010). It is taken as the privilege of globetrotting elites who possess the resources to travel, learn languages, and understand other cultures (Vertovec and Cohen 2002; Delanty 2012). This view describes the image of the “transnational capitalist class” (Sklair 2001) as involving predominantly Westerners (Tomlinson 1999) who deem cosmopolitanism as a “taste” (Szerszynski and Urry 2002) and a class consciousness (Calhoun 2002), fetishizing exotic products or tourism to unfamiliar places (Vertovec and Cohen 2002).

However, such “lifestyle cosmopolitanism” of keeping up with international fashion trends (van Hooft 2009) is distinguished from “critical cosmopolitanism” that “engage[s] with other cultures on a self-critical level, reflecting the limitations or shortcomings of their own cultures and nation-states” (He and Brown 2012, 428). “Lifestyle cosmopolitanism” is also distinct from “genuine cosmopolitanism,” which Hannerz (1990, 239) describes as “an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other.” Micklethwait and Wooldridge (2000, 230) emphasize that cosmopolites are defined by attitudes rather than their “bank accounts.” In line with this, “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Werbner 2008) refers to cosmopolites who do not have the privileges of traveling or residing beyond their cultural and national roots. “Glocalized cosmopolitanism” or “ethical globalism” (Tomlinson 1999, 198) signifies a mind-set that are open to the globalizing world while simultaneously rooted in one’s original context.

In several Asian cities that share a history of colonization, most evidently Hong Kong and Singapore, inhabitants are increasingly cosmopolitan and think beyond the local (He and Brown 2012). “Postcolonial cosmopolitanism” (Go 2013) portrays a worldwide community consisting of the colonial and the colonized who are part of each other’s history; the local is the platform for a global vision instead of something left behind or a replacement for the global. “Banal cosmopolitanism” (Beck 2002), on the other hand, describes a process in which individuals are integrated into global processes on a daily basis. Likewise, “everyday cosmopolitanism” (Hiebert 2002) epitomizes circumstances in which people from disparate ethnicities, nationalities, cultures, or language backgrounds fabricate a social space in which diversity is accepted and considered ordinary. The younger generation in Hong Kong is surrounded by miscellaneous gateways of cross-cultural encounters. It is the trans-local metropolitan environment that is “local” for them. The local-food movements have evolved against this background of routine exposure to the broader world beyond a single locality.

Cosmopolitan locavorism

Growing up in this highly urbanized, commercialized, and internationalized milieu, it was the mosaic of uprooted and cross-cultural experience that filled Hong Kong young farmers’ and activists’ memories of their childhood. Their search for localness develops based on trans-local interactions from which they have been introduced to the idea of negotiating localness through farming. They are convinced that society will not benefit from prejudice, discrimination, or the rejection of interaction with the outside world. This openness includes welcoming food imported from mainland China.

Although young farmers and activists share the concern over food safety with regard to mainland-imported foodstuffs, they believe that as long as the product is produced with environmental- and human-friendly methods, mainland-imported items are not

always untrustworthy. Once at an on-farm farmers' market, there was rice from Jiangxi (a province in Southeast China) grown by a young "eco-farmer." A farm staff member was trying to persuade customers that the product was produced by suppliers known to the farm, and thus the product was reliable. Collaborations between Hong Kong young farmers and agricultural communities in mainland China do exist, but only a handful of my fieldwork interlocutors admitted this.²

Collaborations between farmers in Hong Kong and their global counterparts in Taiwan, Japan, Southeast Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America are more visible. People from these places frequently visit young farmers in Hong Kong to share their experiences, such as participating in workshops on building "earth ovens" using soil and clay – a common practice in "green living" circles in the English-speaking world. Hong Kong young farmers also incorporate ideas for alternative farming approaches and food networks – e.g. "permaculture" from Australia, "Natural Farming" from Japan, "Bio-dynamic Farming" from Europe, and "Friendly Farming" from Taiwan, plus local food initiatives mentioned earlier in this paper – to formulate new models of farming and living in the city as opposed to bringing back a pre-industrial peasant lifestyle.³

Young farmers and activists conceive agriculture localization as a future-oriented agenda to create structural changes. They establish multi-functional farms on rented farmland or rooftops and share income generated by selling farm products (vegetables, homemade pickles, and processed organic products from worldwide) and organizing farm activities (e.g. workshops for cooking or handicraft skills, farming courses, guided tours, film screenings, and yoga). They believe that only when one masters the skills of producing everyday necessities and healing oneself, can one be self-sufficient and have control over one's life. They also organize weekly on-farm farmers' markets at which foreign products labeled organic, fairly traded, or artisanal are juxtaposed with commodities considered local and traditional. Farmers' market customers, farm visitors, and participants of farm events tend to be middle-class due to the generally high prices of commodities sold in these spaces, but the products are also accessible to less privileged groups. Many of the less privileged consumers are young farmers who consume the crops they themselves produce or barter vegetables for labor.

From the perspective of young farmers and activists, the merits of local food lie in its ability to connect humans to the land and soil. This connection between soil and quality is different from the concept of *terroir* (Parker 2015; Trubek 2008; West 2013) which defines the quality and taste of food by its geographical/national origin and associates food culture with "the soul of the country" (Guy 2002, 34; see also Pratt 2007). Young farmers have never asserted that food grown in Hong Kong's soil is better; what they wish for is "a taste of our own." A farmer once said to me, "we eat Italian food in Italy, French food in France, and still eat world food in Hong Kong because we do not have local food to represent the taste of Hong Kong." He sees this as an important reason to revive an agricultural system of the city's own. Meanwhile, young farmers prefer international cuisines when they travel outside Hong Kong and perceive such food as tastier, safer, fresher, healthier, and more culturally appropriate. For example, they favor food grown in Japan when they are in Japan. For them, local food means the food that is produced and consumed in the same locale.

In this regard, the cosmopolitan locavorism that this paper conceptualizes is distinct from "culinary cosmopolitanism" (Cappeliez and Johnston 2013), "culinary tourism"

(Molz 2007), or “foodie” discourses such as “omnivorousness” in the US (Johnston and Baumann 2007, 2009). Johnston and Baumann (2007, 200) suggest that the omnivorous consumption pattern seeks to negotiate tensions between status-seeking and democratic ideologies (openness, inclusion, and equality) to respond to the ethnic diversity in the US and distance itself from the pursuit of status-based exclusion such as “snobbish French-food elitism.” Nevertheless, the narrative reinforces rather than challenges cultural consumption by wealthy, educated, American, and Caucasian groups because it still includes subtle class-status distinctions by highlighting “authenticity” and “exoticism” (Johnston and Baumann 2009, 98). Johnston and Baumann argue that omnivorous discourses perpetuate taste hierarchies and entail similarities to cosmopolitanism that they associate with middle- and upper-class lifestyles. Along similar lines, Molz (2007) studies round-the-world travelers who publish online their traveling stories, including eating experiences. Molz identifies the traveling experiences centered on food as “culinary tourism” and suggests that the practices of engaging with unfamiliar foodways symbolize global travelers’ performances of cosmopolitanism. She emphasizes, however, that such performances are not necessarily about encountering and learning about alien places and cultures, but rather “using food to perform a sense of adventure, curiosity, adaptability, and openness to any other culture” (p. 79). Cappeliez and Johnston (2013), on the other hand, point out that there are different modes of engagement with culinary cosmopolitanism and cultural omnivorousness. They argue that expressing cosmopolitanism and experiencing transnational cultural flows are accessible to people at different social classes, not just elites. Having said this, they agree that cosmopolitanism serves as a taste or preference that reproduces class distinctions in more complicated and large-scale ways. This social stratification, however, is not entirely applicable in the Hong Kong setting.

Despite good education, young farmers and activists are the “graduates with no future” (L. Cooper and Lam 2018) who face downward social mobility and struggle to make ends meet because of escalating costs of living vis-à-vis insufficient income. The working culture and living costs in Hong Kong create pervasive anxieties afflicting a whole generation. As a result, young farmers do not place themselves among the middle classes. Some even described themselves as “extremely poor.” This situation challenges the assumption that urban farming is exclusive for wealthier groups. In what follows, I review the historical formation and contestation of *buntou*, and analyze the social configuration that makes educated young people the “graduates with no future.”

Multiple localism: the “local” as a process and a battlefield

Contestation over *buntou* has persisted from colonial times, as the city is “learning to belong to a nation” (Mathews, Ma, and Lui 2008). The removal of barriers between Hong Kong and mainland China and constant border-crossing have nevertheless provoked controversies over localism and “anti-China” sentiments directed against mainland Chinese tourists, migrants, and products, including foodstuffs (Downes 2018; Kwong 2016; Lam and Cooper 2018; Xu 2015). Young farmers and activists, on the other hand, are concerned with the actual quality of imported food and the political-economic structure behind social predicaments. They do not blanketly reject mainland-imported goods nor blame individual mainland immigrants or tourists for causing the hazards.

Colonial legacies: historical formation of localness

As a British colony, during the postwar era there was no such thing as a “Hongkongese” culture. Culture in Hong Kong was “the product of its liminality vis-a-vis the PRC [People’s Republic of China], the ROC [Taiwan], and Western mainstreams” (Chun 1996, 120). “Hong Kong identity” did not start to take shape until the Cultural Revolution and left-wing thought reached Hong Kong in the mid-1960s amidst Cold War tensions (So 2016). Worrying that the city would fall under Communist control, the British-Hong Kong government crafted a new identity by promoting economic growth and utilitarianism to dissolve nationalist sentiment toward the Chinese state (So 2016; Chun 1996). From then on, Hong Kong culture has been underpinned by unrestrained capitalism fostered by colonialism (Chun 1996, 121).

The “Hong Kong identity” has cosmopolitan roots due to its colonial history (Mathews 1997; Y. Hui 2002). “Local people” are a composite group of residents who have spent time abroad as tourists or expatriates, along with Hong Kong passport holders, many of whom no longer reside in Hong Kong (S. C. Chan 2001; Chun 1996). The identity of *Heunggongyahn* (“Hongkongese”), characterized by prosperity, consumerism, and Cantonese pop culture, flourished after rapid economic growth from 1970 onwards (Vickers 2003; Ma 1999), described as “Chineseness plus” (Mathews 1997; Hui 2002).

Identity politics continued to take center stage after the handover. The image of prosperous and progressive Hong Kong is compared to backward and authoritarian mainland China (Lam 2018). Several high-profile civil groups are convinced that mainland tourists, migrants, and “red capital” are responsible for social and economic problems in today’s Hong Kong. They claim to guard *buntou* and protect the interests of locals and Hong Kong ways of life (So 2016). Nevertheless, they are depicted by scholars as xenophobic and parochial nativists (e.g. Veg 2017; Lam 2018; Cooper 2018) because they explicitly express inhospitality and endorse violence toward newcomers (Law 2018). They object to Mandarin substitutes for Cantonese, which they think of as a “purer” form of the Chinese language (Veg 2017, 330). They regard communist China as incapable of preserving traditional Chinese culture, while Hong Kong managed to sustain and advance an authentic Chinese cultural legacy. Despite propagating their agendas as counter-hegemonic against Chinese nationalism, they created “Hong Kong nationalism” (Lam 2018), a term first seen in a local university student journal (Editorial Board of Undergrad (HKUSU) 2015). This “nationalism” entails patriotism toward Hong Kong in its own right (Ma 2007; So 2016; Ortmann 2018) and perceives the PRC as foreign (Kit 2014; Lam 2018).

Despite the separatism, these groups have not included the development of local agriculture in their agenda. In fact, some of them agree with converting farmland to construction land as agriculture contributes less to economic growth. Moreover, they are convinced that Hong Kong needs more space for residential blocks and modern infrastructure, while food can be easily imported from elsewhere. Although young farmers and activists share similar concerns over the Chinese government’s attitude toward Hong Kong’s future and the intense post-handover socioeconomic climate, they seek to build *buntou* through localizing the food system, rather than only preaching about identity politics.

Introspective localism

Young farmers and activists tend to believe that the causal relationship between the downturn of Hong Kong society and the arrival of cross-border populations needs further scrutiny. From their point of view, those issues are the aftermath of a complicated process in which different economic and political powers, rather than individual mainland Chinese tourists and immigrants, play determinant roles. They argue that the crux of the problem lies in developmentalism and neoliberal governance of the city according to which the government and business elites, instead of ordinary residents, are in charge.

This is in line with the opinion of Leo Goodstadt (2013, 2005), a former Head of the Central Policy Unit of Hong Kong. He points out that from the colonial period until now, the partnership between the government and local business elites has created an unequal distribution of wealth and sustained a friendly environment for private profits at the expense of public interests and social equality. Goodstadt suggests that the *laissez-faire* doctrine brings about stagnated income, longer hours of work, and less certain job prospects, while costs in terms of housing, medical services, and education soar. Today, residents in Hong Kong not only face the world's highest levels of income inequality, the powerful influence of business interests, and high-consumption lifestyles, but also environmental crises caused by large amounts of household rubbish, low levels of waste recycling, air and water pollution, and intensive development of farmland and country parks (Harris 2012).

Even young farmers and food movement activists who received an excellent education still struggle with high living expenses, low income, and low quality of life. As mentioned elsewhere (Ho 2018), young farmers and activists feel trapped in a vicious cycle: accepting physically- and mentally- damaging jobs for the sake of salaries, which they spend on exorbitant housing, food, and other everyday needs such as healing physical or mental damages caused by the intense work culture. Young farmers and activists “want to see if there are alternatives” and feel that “[t]he life of being a farmer is more meaningful.” A young farmer said, “as a farmer, I have more freedom and autonomy.” Some of them who entered the business world after graduation but then changed their mind described the work culture as “sitting in air-conditioned offices doing meaningless work which is bad for my health and making me feel unbalanced just for the sake of money.”⁴ They believe that introspective thinking about domestic problems is not in conflict with localism because they are convinced that rather than adhering to social norms, *buntou* is cultivated in the soil. The following section discusses *self-sustainability* to distinguish *cosmopolitan locavorism* in Hong Kong from gastronomic cosmopolitanism and defensive localism.

“Self-sustainability”: contesting *buntou* over food and farming

A farmer who used to be an active figure in rallies appealing to stop urban renewal or other land development projects now believes that returning to the land and growing food to feed the city is the best way to make positive changes in both his personal life and wider society. From young farmers' and activists' point of view, it is impossible to uphold localism without growing food locally because food is a fundamental element of a city's self-sufficiency. In their opinion, being able to grow food and produce daily necessities

are essential skills to disrupt the cycle of working for salaries while still accepting costly and poor-quality living conditions.

Agriculture as an assemblage of land disputes, food, working culture, and *buntou* politics became the starting point from which young people formulate plans of more desirable ways of living. Several farmers and activists summarized their vision of alternative living using a term, *ji-jyu-sang-wut*, which literally means “independent living.” One activist, who was born and bred in Britain but now settled in Hong Kong translated this term as “self-sustainability.” He has become an active figure promoting local agriculture, street culture, and sustainable lifestyle. “Self-sustainability” describes breaking loose from financial insecurity and worries about quality of life. This idea advocates taking back control over one’s own life through the hands-on production of food, home groceries, and more. Same as other residents in Hong Kong, young farmers and activists have to depend on the cash economy to satisfy basic needs. Nevertheless, they strive to minimize the dependence. When people accept undesirable jobs for high wages in order to afford safe and fresh vegetables, they work directly for high-quality food. “Self-sustainability” embodies a sense of security and confidence in being an independent person who has the agency to determine what food to eat, what job to take, and what life goals to pursue.

Conclusion

This paper examined a particular kind of food localism, *cosmopolitan locavorism*, that emerged in an urban and postcolonial setting where hybridity and multicultural encounters complicate the meaning of localness. This research finds that connotations of the “local” is not only negotiated within dialectical local-global dynamics, but conditioned by geopolitics and colonial legacies. By revealing the complexity of locavore discourses and social relations surrounding it, this paper adds to scholarly conversations on food and globalization in three ways.

Firstly, research to date tends to recognize local food campaigns as local resistance to the global. However, the Hong Kong case shows a new way in which the local relates to the global: from the young farmers’ and activists’ point of view, the global/non-local is not seen as the enemy but a potential partner, and globalization is not regarded as threatening or hegemonic, but rather useful as a way to access foreign thoughts, come up with transformative ideas, and collaborate with global counterparts. The merits of local food lie in its freshness, nutritional values, safety, unique taste, and suitability for the human body, and not the “innate” qualities of the local.

Secondly, this paper distinguishes localism from nationalism, pointing out that young farmers and activists in Hong Kong are not motivated by anti-China sentiments. Some localists are suspicious of imported food but also do not think that growing food locally is necessary. Young farmers and activists, on the other hand, view the local not as a geographical territory or pre-determined form of citizenry, but a quality grounded in devoting more care to the land and ordinary people beyond political and business elites. In this vein, *cosmopolitan locavorism* differs from defensive localism. It attends to the bond between humans and the land in order to criticize the commodification of farmland. This contrast highlights that ideas of local food emerging in the Asia-Pacific region are multi-faceted, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory, rather than showing a uniform understanding of local food or a consensus to grow food in one’s own community.

These complexities lead to a third point: the Hong Kong case challenges connotations that have been associated with global food and sustainable agendas. On one hand, it is often believed that these movements are motivated by urban fascinations with a green or rural lifestyle. However, young farmers in Hong Kong appreciate what urban life has to offer, such as access to international information and events, convenient transportation, and modern technology. Their farming projects are not a continuation of the traditional and rural peasant lifestyle, but an approach that incorporates foreign ideas to transform current ways of living. The example discussed in this paper, the narrative of “self-sustainability,” embodies the younger generation’s pursuit of becoming an independent person able to escape the loop of chasing after money and exhausting savings to survive, while still accepting a poor quality of life. Local food movements serve as a critique of neoliberal governmentality, which young farmers and activists identify as a local condition rather than an external force.

On the other hand, urban farming is often taken as a middle-class privilege and a personal lifestyle choice. However, young farmers and activists who participated in my research were motivated by everyday struggles concern financial insecurity and low quality of life. After realizing that devoting their energies to money-making in the hope of achieving a better quality of life might only be false hope, they shifted their attention to the kinds of work that directly contribute to improving their living conditions. In this regard, cosmopolitan locavorism is distinct from culinary cosmopolitanism, which indicates the consumption preferences and moral stances of urban elites.

To sum up, local food activism in Hong Kong is part of the younger generation’s project to establish a more resilient way of living. While it may appear to be reminiscent of urban farming initiatives or culinary cosmopolitanism in the Global North, the activism cultivated in this city’s peculiar political-economic setting has evolved into new approaches to face the challenges of contemporary big-city living and engage with the widely articulated idea of “sustainable living.”

Notes

1. Cantonese words in this paper are in italics and Romanized using the Yale system.
2. I appreciate an anonymous reviewer’s suggestion on discussing China-wide collaboration of new farmers to clarify the contrast between cosmopolitan and defensive views of *buntou*. However, based on my fieldwork data, except for an NGO that works on rural development with disadvantaged and marginalized groups in the south-west of China, and a few personal connections with young farmers in Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai, by the time I conducted fieldwork, there was no other regular or established collaborations between farmers in Hong Kong and mainland China. I expect more to occur in the future.
3. They explicitly told me that they have no desire to go back to the old days in agricultural villages where peasants lived a subsistence lifestyle, with limited life chances.
4. Conversations were in Cantonese. English translations are mine.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Marvin Joseph Montefrio and the other participants at the workshop on Transecting “Healthy” and “Sustainable” Food in the Asia-Pacific (Yale-NUS College, Singapore, July, 2018) for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I am grateful for anonymous reviewers’ insightful suggestions about the ideas developed in this paper. Sincere

appreciation also goes to the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Hong Kong for their support for my fieldwork. This paper is supported by the Ministry of Education of Taiwan (R.O.C.), the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, and the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA)/Radcliffe-Brown Trust Award.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of Taiwan (R.O.C.); the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation; Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA)/Radcliffe-Brown Trust Award

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